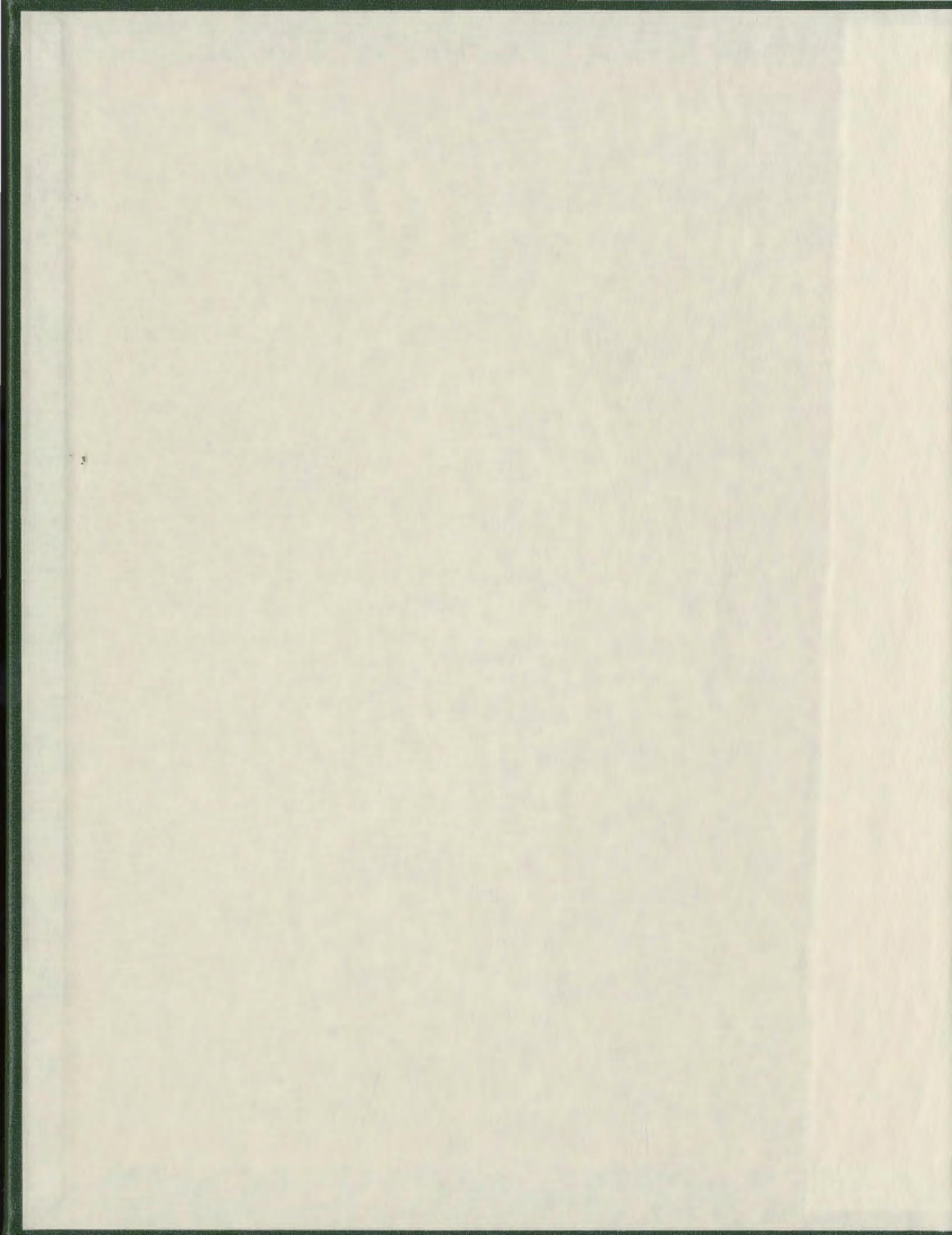# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO CHOOSE TO CHANGE CAREERS

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A phenomenological study of the experiences of

special education teachers who choose to change careers

by

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Abstract

Research has shown that job satisfaction of special education teachers is defined by a number of factors including: administrative and colleague support, workload, training, student discipline problems, excessive paperwork, and stress. Collectively these factors determine the degree to which teachers recognize satisfaction with their work. This paper demonstrates that while these factors are not unique to the field of special education it indicates a more global concern in the field of education in the school system. The paper also outlines that the primary causes of job dissatisfaction for special education teachers lies, not in the instructional duties but the non-instructional duties of special education teachers. While these factors are not unique to the area of special education there are certain aspects of the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers that affect job satisfaction that are unique to the field of education.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background

Introduction

This phenomenological study explores why special education teachers exit the field of special education for other career choices. More specifically, it seeks to identify the role that job satisfaction/dissatisfaction played in their choosing to exit their positions, whether job satisfaction is affected by internal and/or external factors, and the impact of internal and external factors on teachers' decisions to change careers. The study further explores supports that are necessary to reduce job dissatisfaction and increase retention of special education teachers.

The intent of the study is to provide insight via phenomenological methodology, into the experiences of a group of eight special education teachers who choose to transfer from special education positions into either regular classroom positions or district office assignments. Participants have been identified through a "snowball effect" and using the following criteria: have taught in special education positions for at least five years, were teaching in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) schools, and have left the field for other career choices.

The phenomenon

Recent research has paid significant attention to teacher job satisfaction/dissatisfaction on a global scale with increased focus on issues related to paperwork, administrative/colleague support, and personal fulfillment, just to name a few. However, little emphasis has been placed on investigating the daily challenges faced by special education teachers worldwide. Most recently, Dibbon(2001/2004) and

Philpott (2007) raised concerns for teacher supply and demand and the impact of workload on teachers that recognized conflicting results. Dibbon (2001) reports "attrition rates for special education teachers are higher than for all other teachers" (p.14). Furthermore, Dibbon (2004) states that almost 50% of new teachers are considering leaving their current position. However, Philpott (2007) reports that 72.3% of special education teachers are not looking to change assignments. While Dibbon refers to all teachers and Philpott isolates a specific group, the statistics still indicate a contradiction in the data. The remaining 27.7% of special education teachers, Philpott reports, are seeking a move from special education to regular classroom positions. While he acknowledges this statistic as not overly significant, the experiences of this group may be quite significant since it is almost one third of the special education teacher population. Subsequent to this group is the group who has already left the field either for regular classroom positions or district office positions. Hence the study of the representative sample in this research and the investigation into why they have left the field was pursued.

While Dibbon (2001/2004) and Philpott (2007) offer a local context to job satisfaction, research by Bridley, Fleege, and Graves (2000), Darling-Hammond (1999), Payne (2005) and others offer a global perspective. Emerging from this literature is the importance of factors such as adequate training, professional confidence, and job satisfaction in supporting teachers to stay in their careers. This study will build on that literature by exploring the experiences of a group of special education teachers in NLwho choose to change their career path.

Research question and method

Phenomenology allows one to delve into the personal and actual experiences of individuals and as such affords an appropriate approach for my question. As a researcher, I am keenly interested in exploring aspects of special education resulting in discontentment of special educators and, ultimately, their decision to make career changes. Following a minimum of six years of 'specialized' university training, what factors lead to such dissatisfaction in a career that one has worked so diligently to attain? Why did they choose to leave their chosen profession?

This study responds to the call for increased research in the area of special education and builds on previous studies of such researchers as: Dworkin, 1980; Brownell et al, 1995; Anderson, 2000; Dibbon 2001/2004; and Philpott, 2007. While literature supports high attrition rates of classroom and special education teachers this study will adopt a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of special education teachers in NL that lead to this attrition. If our university training programs are preparing special education teachers for the various aspects of the profession, what is causing the negative experiences leading to high levels of dissatisfaction?

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover and understand the experiences causing job dissatisfaction in special education teachers in NL. At this stage of the research the factors causing job dissatisfaction will be generally defined as challenges with job assignments of special education teachers (Creswell, 1998).

My study will highlight the actual experiences of eight special education teachers and their personal vulnerability with respect to current government and district policies related to their assignments. It is my intention to raise awareness of the day-to-day challenges facing special education teachers that result in levels of job dissatisfaction so significant that they leave the field in pursuit of other careers.

Researchers context

Central to a phenomenological study is the bracketing experience, defined by Ratcliff (2002) as a situation where the researcher must remove oneself out and enter into the other person's perspective and experience. Also, Lauer (1958) notes that 'bracketing out' (or epoche) is necessary to help the researcher to remain neutral in the investigative process. This is where the researcher discloses why he/she is interested in this phenomena and why he/she is interested in pursuing it. As a special education teacher this phenomenon of teachers exiting the field of special education is of particular interest to me because of my background, current assignment, and daily experiences.

Since graduating from Memorial University of Newfoundland with a B.A.(Ed) degree twenty-nine years ago I have acquired countless experiences in teaching at various levels and teaching areas. The first twenty years of my career saw me substitute teaching and in replacement positions for extended periods of time. During that time I observed the practices of teachers from kindergarten to grade twelve at many different schools and in several different subject and specialized areas. I also witnessed the behaviors of children in the same variety of environments. My attention was always peaked by the child who just didn't 'fit in' the regular stream. Why were some children continuously

challenged, both academically and socially? What was the education system doing to help these children?

In the late 1990's I decided to embark on acquiring a degree in special education. I felt the desire to become an integral part of the special education world where I aspired to make a difference in the lives of children with learning challenges. Acquiring training and, ultimately a position in the area, would enable me to delve into the theory and practice of dealing with the children that I was so passionately concerned about.

After acquiring my Bachelor of Special Education degree in 2000 I spent three years in an alternate school setting and for the past three years have been in a Criteria 'C' unit at the senior high school level. During these years I had many opportunities to communicate and interact with both classroom and special education teachers. These experiences uncovered some issues I had not been aware of before. Some classroom teachers reported feeling anxious about dealing with children with exceptionalities because they felt they lacked the education and the necessary pedagogical preparation for such a task. Some special education teachers, while having the university credentials for dealing with children with exceptionalities, indicated job dissatisfaction relating to such factors as: adequate training, administrative/colleague support, workload, paperwork, parental involvement,

My experiences in the education system have made me aware of many questions related to job satisfaction among special education teachers. Why are teachers leaving the field when there is already a shortage of trained teachers to fill the positions, and what can society do to make the necessary changes to ensure retention of qualified personnel to

teach our children? My personal involvement in, and familiarity with, special education over the past three decades has led me to question practices and issues related to why special education teachers are becoming so frustrated in their assignments and deciding to leave the field.

The population

Special education is an extensive field with a diverse population of students with varying degrees of need. Addressing these individual needs requires extensive training, patience, dedication, understanding, and support. Consequently, teaching/learning environments must be conducive to these qualities in order for individuals to be prepared, at least minimally, for the assignment at hand. Often special education teachers enter the realm of special education after completing university training to find that they are only nominally prepared for the position for which they have been hired. As a result of their perceived disillusionment, they find themselves in a situation for which they feel unprepared resulting in discontentment and often a reevaluation of their career goals. A representative sample of eight such teachers from rural and urban Newfoundland and Labrador was selected for this study.

Significance of study

This study has been influenced by literature reviews on global perspectives on job satisfaction in the field of special education. For example, my research topic is based on the theoretical perspectives of researchers from many parts of the world including:

Antoniou, Polychroni & Walters (2000) from Greece, Brownell, Smith & Miller (1995) from Washington, D.C., Dibbon (2001) from Newfoundland and Labrador, Michaelowa (2002) from Africa, and many others. Previous research has defined job satisfaction/dissatisfaction in special education teachers as being a result of many factors both internal and external. Darling-Hammond (1999) and Payne (2005) question the training programs of special education teachers in preparing them for the diverse group of students that they will encounter in their careers. It also examines the presence and necessity of ongoing professional development in the area of special education. Furthermore, the literature of Singh and Billingsley (1996),Younghusband, Garlie, and Church (2003), and Piotrowski (2006) discern that many of the challenges experienced by special education teachers have created undue stress levels which in and of itself brings about its' own problems. Previous studies have suggested that attrition rates of special education teachers are high and have proposed changes in various areas of concern. The literature of Brownell, Smith, McNellis and Lenk (1995) as well as Fore, Martin, and Carter (2002) have however illustrated that the challenges facing these teachers are global in nature. The energy from this literature calls for a need to expand on the experiences of special education teachers. Of particular interest is factors that lead to career changes.

While previous research has focused on many of the issues surrounding the retention of special education teachers, there are few policies addressing them. The information acquired from my research could provide a fundamental basis for current and future policy makers in that having evidence to support reasons why special education

teachers are leaving the field, new policies can be implemented to prevent such high attrition rates. The findings from my research project will help form the basis for improving special education policies relating to training, mentoring programs, and increased administrative support for special education teachers.

Overview of study

This first chapter introduces the phenomenon under research and the rationale for studying it. My background and interest in the phenomena is introduced, as well as how it gives rise to the research question. The research participants are presented and the site for the study is introduced.

Chapter two provides a review of the literature as it pertains to job satisfaction/dissatisfaction of special education teachers. The literature will be reviewed with a particular focus on previous research relating to professional development, special education preparation, factors relating to job satisfaction, administrative and colleague support, impact of work environment, demographics, excessive paperwork, parental involvement, teacher absenteeism, effects of stress, retention of special education teachers, and mentoring. It further references factors leading to attrition of special education teachers and suggestions for improvement of job conditions.

Chapter three introduces the methodology for this study and provides a rationale for using a phenomenological approach. Issues of research design, participant selection, data analysis, researcher's role, and ethical considerations are detailed. It also includes a discussion on the researcher's intentions and the data gathering and analysis processes.

Particular attention will be given to issues of data analysis and hermeneutic interpretation as outlined by Wilson & Hutchinson (1991), Moustakas (1994), and van Manen (2002).

Chapter four offers a phenomenological deliverance of the experiences of the participants, as accumulated from interviews and observations. These experiences are presented, with diligence, in the language and manner in which they were expressed. Where appropriate, descriptions of often cogent, non-verbal language are included.

Chapter five concludes the document with a reflection on the common themes that emerge. Discussion on methodology as well as implications for programming planners and policy makers is presented in this final chapter. The document concludes with implications for teacher training, continued professional development, and ongoing support as well as suggestions for supplementary study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

People generally pursue a career in teaching as a result of a passion for helping children and assisting in making them successful, contributing members of society. More specifically, those who choose a career in special education do so because they enjoy working with children with disabilities and feel a sense of personal accomplishment in planning and administering individualized programs. Regardless of the demographics, people enter the field of special education with genuine aspirations of making a difference in the lives of those they touch. All go through an extensive teacher training program, which entails the completion of courses in specific areas ie. learning disabilities, exceptionalities, mental retardation, behavior management, etc. Why then do special education teachers experience high levels of job dissatisfaction? Research has shown, as will be evidenced throughout this paper, that one of the primary reasons is the lack of preparation for what really lies ahead once an individual enters school, as a teacher.

This study reviews global concerns surrounding the field of education and, more specifically, special education. It investigates professional development, training programs, factors relating to job satisfaction, administrative and colleague support, work environment, demographics, paperwork, parental involvement, teacher absenteeism, effects of stress, retention of special education teachers, and mentoring programs.

Professional Development

Brindley, Fleege, and Graves (2000) suggest that preservice teacher education programs assume some responsibility for future professional development of graduates. They further imply that schools need to provide a post learning environment for teachers. This would allow teachers to continuously re-evaluate each role of their position as a teacher. The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning in California (2005), posits that professional development should be mandatory for both general and special education teachers in order to improve the academic achievement of special education students. The article states that while the majority of California teachers have special education students in their classrooms, many teachers report that they have inadequate training and support required to address the needs of the children they have in their classrooms.

The Honourable Lyle Oberg, Minister of Alberta Learning, in a paper titled *Teacher Education/Educator Training: Current Trends and Future Directions*, stated at the 2001 Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda Symposium, that, due to lack of sufficient training teachers are unaware of how to provide services such that students with special needs will reach their maximum learning potential. He added that "it is imperative that deans of education address this issue in order for Canadian schools to become a place where special needs students have the opportunity to learn and are not simply ignored in the classroom because teachers do not know what to do" (p.8).

Dibbon (2001), in a paper addressing teacher supply and demand, argued that attrition rates for special education teachers are higher than for all other teachers. The

reason for this, Dibbon highlights, may be due to the fact that special education is a post-degree program and that teachers use this degree to acquire employment and within a short time transfer to the regular classroom. Such movement results in a further shortage of special education teachers in the field and, consequently, an increased number of teachers are employed in special education positions without sufficient training. This was further validated by Philpott (2007) as he reported that 40% of special education teachers in NL do not have a degree in special education.

Special education teacher preparation

Brindley, Fleege, and Graves (2000) state that the challenges of a career in teaching often begins when a teacher leaves the university setting – they often feel isolated once they enter the profession. Payne (2005) notes that special education programs in the United States are inadequate for preparing special education teachers for all the responsibilities that the job encompasses. Consequently, this lack of preparation often leads to burnout and disillusionment in teaching students with special needs. Payne (2005) further posits that there is a lack of leadership qualities in special educators. While this is evident in many areas of teaching, it is especially prevalent in the field of special education. The program requirements for acquiring a special education degree in the province of NL involves completing fifty courses in various subject areas with a major and minor area and an additional twelve courses in specific areas of special education. However, there are no required courses in leadership or the many non-instructional roles and responsibilities of a special education teacher.

A further example of special education teacher training include a report that training for Spanish special education teachers consists of a three year university course after which individuals receive a Diploma in Teaching (Pereya, Servilla, and Castillo, n.d.). The Centerview Insight and Analysis on California Education Policy (2005) reports "many teachers report that they do not have the training and support they need to meet the needs of the students with special needs" (p.1). How then, does one become prepared for the astronomical responsibilities and liabilities one faces once entering the school system? As Payne (2005) suggests "special education teachers have one of the hardest and most complicated jobs in the field of education" (p.89). Furthermore, Payne proposes that the tasks of special education teachers would be less difficult given appropriate supports and training. Darling-Hammond (1999) posits,

If teachers are well-prepared in both content and pedagogy, it makes an enormous difference not only to their effectiveness in the classroom, but also whether they're likely to enter and remain teaching...better preparation increases career longevity... it is more expensive to under-prepare people, and then let them spin out again, than it is to prepare people more effectively and keep them in the profession (p.17).

The Directorate for Education in the Netherlands (2004) report that career-based systems in which initial entry is based on academic credentials and/or a civil service entry examination, is active in France, Japan, Korea, and Spain. Such systems are qualitative and teacher education is not necessarily well connected to school needs. The authors also note the existence of position-based systems that are active in Canada, Sweden,

Switzerland, and in the United Kingdom which involve the selection of teachers based on

suitability. While in Canada, there are course/degree requirements for teaching in the area

of special education, due to an insufficient supply of trained teachers, quite often

people are placed in special education teaching positions without the training they need to

adequately address the needs of the individuals in their care. In addition to the definition

of the position-based system for our province, The Provincial Collective Agreement for

teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador (1998) states in section 6.03 that "the basis

criteria for the selection of teachers shall be competence, suitability and qualifications as

assessed by the board" (p.5). There is still evidence that the Collective Agreement is not

binding in that suitability alone can be the deciding factor for job placements. Contrary to

this, when advertising vacant positions in the field of special education, school boards in

Newfoundland and Labrador are required (according to the Department of Education)

to fill the positions with applicants with special education degrees if they are available

before considering competence and suitability.

Factors related to job satisfaction

Research indicates that job dissatisfaction among both general and special

education teachers is a result of many factors. Ingersoll (2001) completed a study on

teachers from high-poverty, urban public schools and small private schools in the United

States. The investigation utilized results from a survey conducted by the National Center

for Educational Statistics. Ingersoll reported that the major reasons for job dissatisfaction

in teachers in both settings include: low salaries, lack of administrative support, student

discipline problems, lack of teacher influence over decision-making, and pursuit of other career opportunities. Other, less serious factors, Ingersoll claims, include: large class sizes, classroom time interruptions, insufficient planning time, lack of community support, and teaching interferences.

Fore, Martin, and Carter (2002) discuss teacher burnout as a result of poor teacher working conditions, especially for special education teachers. They note that special education teachers (in the United States) left the field due to insufficient certification and perceptions of poor school climate (Miller, Brownell and Smith, 1999). Furthermore, a study by Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff and Harniss (2001) noted a number of critical factors that could lead to attrition of special education teachers including job design and lack of principal's support. Gersten et al further emphasized the importance of the relationship between the principal and teachers in enhancing job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity. They also noted that reasons for job dissatisfaction were found in what special education teachers believed to be the realities of their jobs such as burdensome paperwork, extensive time spent in meetings, limited opportunities for planning, and huge ranges in student performance levels. Such factors lead to high levels of stress and low job satisfaction.

Payne (2005) recognizes the shortage of special education teachers and attributes this to factors such as: lack of respect, lack of preparation, lack of support, and the high expectations that are placed on special education teachers to find a one size fits all plan for all students. Payne reiterates Gersten et al (2001) when he notes reasons for job dissatisfaction of special education teachers as extraordinary amounts of paperwork,

supervision of meetings, lack of appropriate resources, insufficient time to teach individualized plans and feelings of lack of empowerment.

Brownell, Smith, and Miller (1995) state that the primary reasons for special education teachers leaving the field were: "they felt overwhelmed, unsupported, unprepared and/or disempowered…no paraprofessionals to assist in the classroom, multiple disabilities, behavior problems, and lack of resources" (p.4). Consequently, overall job dissatisfaction lead to job shifts. They found that while special education teachers remained in the field of education, many moved to general education positions.

Eripek (2001) and Ataman (2001) who state that some of the major contributors to job dissatisfaction of special school principals and teachers in Turkey are workload, low salaries, lack of self-esteem, lack of professional development opportunities, and time restraints. Sari also found some demographic variables that lead to job dissatisfaction including marital status, age, and gender.

Administrative and colleague support

Cross and Billingsley (1994) note the importance of principal's support and increasing leadership roles. Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff & Harniss (2001) imply that support of the "principal and fellow teachers can help make a seemingly unmanageable job manageable" (p.8). Research by Billingsley (2004) further supports the importance of administrative support. She posits that special education teachers and general teachers with high levels of administrative support reported less stress and were more satisfied with their job situations. Billingsley's research also demonstrated that urban teachers were more dissatisfied with central office administrators than they were with principals.

This revelation by Billingsley indicates that because of the control of district offices, principals are limited in the support they can provide in terms of resources. District offices control schools and provincial or federal governments in turn, govern district offices. Consequently, as Antoniou, Polychroni and Walters (2000) revealed, special education teachers in Greece felt that government support was important in that without its' support there would be inadequate resources and lack of support staff.

Singh and Billingsley (1996) suggest that administrative support is the key job satisfaction for special education teachers in that they can provide feedback, encourage teachers, and involve teachers in decision-making. Their research has shown that this is particularly important for teachers of students with emotional disorders. Singh and Billingsley report that when principals communicate the roles and responsibilities of teachers directly to them they help alleviate problems with role conflict, ambiguity and overload. Brownell et al (1995), in their research reiterate that the lack of principal support results in job dissatisfaction among special education teachers.

A report by the International Labour Organization (2000) at the Joint Meeting on Lifelong Learning in the Twenty-first Century: The Changing Roles of Educational Personnel outlines the importance of the role of principals in Mexico in a providing a satisfying environment in which to work. The authors note the changes in the roles of principals that have taken them out of schools and participating in activities that have interfered with their in school duties of providing leadership for teachers and students. This indirectly impacts on teachers and their perception of their roles and responsibilities often causing discontentment.

Dworkin (1980) references the importance of the perception of the role of principals. He states that, "the greater the discrepancy between a teacher's perception of the preferred role of a principal and his or her own principal's perception of that role, the greater the likelihood that the teacher will experience burnout" (p.155).

School improvement initiatives have recognized a shift in power and responsibilities from government to districts to schools. With the reduction in the number of school districts in NL, much of the responsibility of managing schools has been transferred to the school administrators. Anderson (2000) presents an outline for political actions and heightened accountability, finance, and curriculum as key factors of the reform driven agenda. These factors include but are not limited to such things as: education costs, shifts in funding from regional to local sources, school councils, reduction of school districts, mandatory school improvement plans, federal funding programs, and changes in curriculum. This indicated necessary adjustments that would lead to improving the learning/teaching environment.

Impact of work environment

Billingsley (2004) notes that research of special education teacher attrition and retention indicates that teachers' job satisfaction and subsequent career decisions are dependent on work environments. Those who report a positive school climate are more likely to stay in the field.

Robson (1998) states that in order for teachers to feel valued in society, they need respect and to be respected for their skills. The success of the teacher, Robson writes, is contingent on appropriate technical, physical infrastructure, mentoring, and professional

development. Other suggestions for a sound environment include: reduced teaching loads, smaller class sizes, and induction of beginning teachers. These things in place would ensure job satisfaction for teachers and, consequently, reduce teacher attrition rates. Nickson and Kritsonis (2006) note, the more favorable the job conditions, the more satisfied teachers will be in their positions.

Gilbert, LeTouze, Theriault, and Laundry (2004) discuss the challenges of teaching in minority settings. They voice the concerns of teachers who view working conditions as difficult because of learning and behavioral difficulties and diversity of student population. They argue that the education system is experiencing many changes that challenge a person's ability to teach. The lack of training to support these changes makes teaching even more difficult.

The Directorate for Education in the Netherlands (2004) implies that the environment in which teachers work has a major impact on job satisfaction in that teachers will not reach their potential if the teaching environment lacks sufficient support.

Demographics

Singh and Billingsley (1996) found that gender, race, education level, and experience had no effect on job satisfaction. However, later the research by Billingsley (2004) indicates some inconsistencies in attrition rates due to gender. Billingsley further notes that age is the only demographic variable that is consistently linked to attrition of special education teachers – younger teachers are more likely to leave than older teachers. A study by Dworkin (1980) posits that white teachers were more likely to leave urban teaching positions than black or Hispanic teachers. He states that "the more a teacher is

racially isolated from the student body of a school, the greater the likelihood that a teacher will experience burnout" (p.155).

Billingsley (2004) found other inconsistencies in personal factors that affect job satisfaction and eventual attrition of special educators. For example, one study indicated that special educators who were primary breadwinners were more likely to stay whereas another study indicated that there were no differences. Billingsley's research did indicate however, that a significant number of special education teachers left due to personal reasons such as family move, pregnancy, health and retirement. This does not conclude dissatisfaction with teaching roles and therefore such statistics may be misleading when determining attrition rates.

Michaelowa (2002), in a paper that discusses job satisfaction among teachers in Africa, conveys the effects of gender and family status on job satisfaction. She posits that male teachers are less satisfied than female teachers and teachers (male or female) who were living alone are less satisfied than those living with a family. Antonio, Polychroni and Walters (2000) however, note no statistically significant differences in males and females.

Brownell et al (1995) posited that special education teachers who switched to general education or to other positions but who enjoyed teaching special education did so because of "external factors such as other job opportunities, certification requirements, family influences, retirement, position not reoffered, and inadequate pay" (p.6). They also noted that other outside influences like raising a family increased their dissatisfaction with teaching in the field of special education. Finally, they stated that one teacher used

having a baby as an excuse to get out of her teaching situation. This implies that while teachers demonstrate dissatisfaction with their working situation, they feel they need a valid 'excuse' to leave.

Excessive paperwork

Globally, special education teachers indicate that vast amounts of paperwork cause them considerable job dissatisfaction. Billingsley (2004) notes that special education teachers in Virginia spend 5 hours a week completing forms and doing administrative paperwork. This is more time than they reported doing lesson plans. Billingsley further adds that special education teachers reported that routine duties and paperwork were a major interference in their teaching. She states "Special educators view paperwork as overwhelming, unnecessary, redundant, and intimidating" (p.48). By comparison, she indicated that general educators didn't view paperwork as such a problem. Brownell et al (1995) further note that special education teachers in Florida report an inability to cope with extensive amounts of paperwork. Antoniou, Polychroni, and Walters (2000) further reiterate the problem of excessive paperwork requirements for special education teachers in Greece. They indicate that the demands lead to emotional exhaustion for teachers.

While Cook and Hall (2003) acknowledge that paperwork cannot be eliminated from the role of special education, they make suggestions for making it more manageable: focus on the student, use one source of information for communication, keep informal records, understand formal paperwork requirements, and encourage student participation in planning. Ironically, some of their proposals can become

problematic due to other challenges special education teachers encounter like student discipline and sufficient support and resources.

Parental involvement

Michaelowa (2002) notes that a sample of "voluntary" teachers (teachers who work on private contracts paid by the school or directly by parents) from Camaroon didn't necessarily effect high job satisfaction but rather the effect of direct control and direct responsibility. Teachers, Michaelowa states, are also intimidated by active parent-teacher organizations. This, she implies, may be due to teachers' perceived lack of control of parents. There wasn't significant research to support these findings indicating that this may be an issue exclusive to private schools in that teachers may feel uncomfortable with the amount of parent participation and involvement in the schools.

Teacher absenteeism

Michaelowa (2002) in a study of Sub-Saharan Africa identified that absenteeism is a direct result and indicator of dissatisfaction of teachers in Francophone Africa. She reported that, on average, teachers miss their classes half a week per month. The statistics recognized that the highest rates of absenteeism were reported in Senegal at 4.72 days/month and the lowest rates of 1.28 days per month in Cote d'Ivoire. In addition to these statistics, the study indicated that teachers in Senegal demonstrated lower rates of job satisfaction than any other country, this resulting in an assumed correlation between absenteeism and job satisfaction.

Effects of stress

Seyle (1956) defines stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (p.5). He further defines the term by adapting the terms eustress (positive stress) and distress (negative stress). Both, Seyle posits, are experienced the same physiologically. For discussion purposes in this document emphasis will be placed on negative stress (distress) as is evidenced by the negative effects of stress in the workplace as experienced by special education teachers.

Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, and Blake (1995) indicated that almost 80% of those who planned to leave special education said they felt much stress on a weekly basis. Some reasons they gave were: "range of student needs and abilities, bureaucratic requirements, and conflicting expectations, goals and directives" (p.49). Singh and Billingsley (1996) claim that attrition is a result of stress, burnout and job dissatisfaction. As a result of these variables teachers experience fewer rewards and therefore leave special education. They also state that teachers often try to identify their sources of dissatisfaction, communicate them to principals or supervisors and colleagues and consequently find solutions to role-related problems. This will reduce stress and result in more job satisfaction. When teachers cannot resolve their challenges in their current positions they often explore other options before leaving special education teaching. For example, a teacher may consider moving to another area of special education or to another class or group of students or even a new school.

Piotrowski (2006) states that "special education teachers are more vulnerable to stress or professional burnout than other human service professionals, this has contributed

to feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and has threatened the special education teachers' sense of personal accomplishment" (p.1). Piotrowski adds that the stress that special education teachers experience is similar to that of nurses, physicians, and police officers. This is due to the clientele they encounter on a daily basis such as those with physical, emotional and social difficulties.

In discussing job satisfaction among special education teachers, Stempien and Loeb (2002) note the connection between job dissatisfaction and the tendency to leave the field. Evidence of students that are less successful, students with emotional disturbances, such as the unique challenges of individual students, are associated with causes for teacher stress and, ultimately, with dissatisfied teachers. The challenges of special education teachers were found to be highly correlated with low job satisfaction.

A study by Antiniou, Polychroni, and Walters (2000) revealed that the most prominent sources of stress for special education teachers in Greece are: lack of pupil progress, limited pupil interest, heavy workload, lack of help from government, lack of resources and equipment, increased number of pupils, lack of support staff, facing 'difficult' pupils, special attention to individual students, and lack of cooperation with colleagues. While the ranking in terms of importance varied between male and female special education teachers, the sources were the same. Antiniou et al reveal that the stress levels among men and women equal. Their study indicated that special education teachers suffered higher levels of emotional exhaustion and were overextended by their work more than regular classroom teachers. The authors suggest that this may be due to the complex needs of their students.

Younghusband, Garlie, and Church (2003) discuss stress among teachers resulting in job dissatisfaction and burnout. They note the increasing stress levels in teachers in general, due to expectations placed on them. Burnout happened as a result of continuing changes in teacher roles. This results in declining physical and mental health of teachers. They conclude that the major sources of stress are: change (assigned duties with no training), culture of negativity in which teachers work, impact of workplace stress, stigma of stress, work overload, student behavior, disillusionment, and lack of administrative support. These findings compare to those factors noted globally by the various researchers previously acknowledged.

Retention of special education teachers

The findings of a study by Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff and Harniss (2001) indicate that in order to retain special education teachers, districts need to address issues of job design. Billington (2004) emphasizes that beginning special education teachers report concerns with "managing paperwork, making accommodations for instruction, and testing, developing and monitoring IEPs, scheduling events, and collaborating with teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and related services personnel" (p.46). Billington also noted that role overload is also strongly linked to special education attrition. Tied to role overload is role conflict and ambiguity. "Paperwork is a major contributor to role overload and conflict" (p.47). These issues compounded with other challenges that general educators face lead to job dissatisfaction and subsequent attrition. Billington suggests that the complexity of many of these issues can be reduced with supported

inclusion programs, mentoring, and availability of professional development. Nickson and Kritsonis (2006) echo these suggestions in stating that factors including administrative support, job satisfaction, school climate and mentor programs influence teacher retention.

Brownell, Smith, McNellis and Lenk (1995) report that in the United States the attrition rate for special education teachers with less than five years experience was up to 43% in 1993. They further state that many teachers feel disempowered and become frustrated over their lack of input in the decision making process. The article notes that new teacher training continues when pre-service training ends. Because teachers become overwhelmed with their responsibilities, they need support, especially from experienced teachers through a mentoring program.

Garnes, Menlove and Adams (2000, 2001) discuss the retention of special education teachers in rural settings in the United States. Their findings indicate that one of the main reasons why special educators transfer to regular education is because they want to teach more and avoid the frustrations of paperwork. They added that special education teachers in Utah were often dissatisfied with other non-instructional aspects of their jobs like student discipline, support from others, class size, student placements, meetings, and legal issues. The respondents in their study indicated that they were very satisfied with their instructional duties.

Fore, Martin, and Carter (2002) propose recommendations to reduce teacher burnout in special education and, ultimately, result in higher retention rates. Their recommendations include but are not limited to: "smaller class sizes and smaller

workloads, more support and interaction from colleagues, administrators and special education coordinators, observing other special education teachers for professional development, mentoring programs, assisting novice teachers with discipline and classroom management." (p.4). They also propose options that they consider 'politically risky'. These include: providing a higher salary for special education teachers, hiring fully certified master level teachers, making reasonable demands on the beginning teacher, and providing secretarial assistance for special educators. While these suggestions may attract more special education teachers to the field, in a time when such teachers are scarce, these may be unattainable propositions. To say they are 'politically risky' suggestions is an understatement. For example, currently, recruiting sufficient special education teachers with an undergraduate degree in special education can be quite challenging.

Mentoring

Many researchers express the importance of a mentoring program. Singh and Billingsley (1996) note that teacher education for new teachers is a key component in successful transition into a teaching career. Through a mentoring program experienced teachers can provide guidance in assisting new teachers with supportive work situations, identifying possible support sources and preparing them for possible challenges they may face. Experienced teachers can also assist new teachers with school routines and teacher expectations of any particular school thus reducing anxiety and stress related to role expectations. As Nickson and Kritsonis (2006) report, mentors can be helpful in transitioning new teachers into the field. They add that mentors can provide novice

teachers with instructional strategies, feedback, and guidelines as related to special education.

Brindley, Fleege, and Graves (2000) describe mentoring as "the relationship between a learned, skilled professional and a novice" (p.2). Mentoring programs, they suggest, can be beneficial to both parties – novice teachers benefit from the support and experienced teachers benefit from sharing their skills. They described a mentorship program that was established in the United States in 1998. This paradigm included both professional and social activities where new teachers would gather together and gain from the support. To increase accessibility by all participants an internet site was established to support activities. This site included "a calendar of area professional events, a monthly synthesis of research chat rooms (with posted topics), a list of possible on-line graduate courses, closed looped E-mail, and SOS (help messages)" (p.3). The goal of this project was, not only to provide a mentorship program for the current participants but also to instill the importance of mentors in creating job satisfaction and thus retaining teachers. The current participants would, consequently, become mentors to other beginning teachers. While theoretically this may appear to be a worthwhile project, there was no documented evidence of the success of the project or to what degree success was measured.

Inclusion

Paradigm shifts from segregation of students with exceptionalities to one of inclusion has created many challenges for classroom teachers and special teachers alike. Billingsley (2004) states that some special educators struggle with changing roles and

changes in responsibilities with the movement towards inclusion. She adds that lack of time for collaboration with classroom teachers and setting up student schedules and programs, create challenges for the success of inclusion. Billingsley also notes the problems special education teachers face in implementing inclusionary practices. She highlights the lack of adequate supports and resistance from general educators. Depending on the complexity of the challenges, special education teachers experience burnout and look elsewhere for employment.

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) noted the importance of adequate administrative and specialist support in successfully including students with disabilities in general education settings. Positive attitudes towards inclusive education are a result of collaboration between general and special educators. Subsequently, all educators are satisfied with the ensuing process. Antoniou, Polychroni, and Walters (2000) further note the challenges that special education teachers in Greece have faced since inclusive education has been introduced. Furthermore, they reference the passing of a law for the equal priority of children with special educational needs. They note that this law resulted in the practice of special classes in addition to the integration of these students into the regular classroom. This change for special education children left teachers feeling inadequately trained for such a challenging role. This, combined with factors previously mentioned, lead to high levels of stress and, consequently, job dissatisfaction. They state that the biggest issue has been lack of specific training in preparation for implementing the inclusive programs. They particularly noted the increasing demands on special education teachers.

Summary

General trends in research on job satisfaction in special education teachers on a global scale have expressed some universal factors resulting in job dissatisfaction on a global scale. Such factors include but are not limited to: the importance of administrative support, the presence of support staff, availability of adequate resources, vast amounts of paperwork, and lack of adequate training. Contrary to the agreements in the research there are also some disagreements as to why special education teachers exhibit job dissatisfaction. Demographics play different roles in different locations as illustrated by Singh and Billingsley (1996), Antonio, Polychroni, and Walters (2000), Michaelowa (2002), and Billingsley (2004). The resulting contradictions in the research indicate a call for more research specifically in the area of special education.

Job satisfaction, firstly among classroom teachers and special education teachers has been a topic of research for many decades. So too has the implications of finding appropriate methods and environments in which to teach children with exceptionalities. Job dissatisfaction is prevalent on the agenda for researchers. The research investigated for this paper revealed some commonalities in factors that result in job dissatisfaction among teachers on a global scale. Paramount are concerns related to sufficient and appropriate training, administrative and colleague support, demographics, stress, role clarity, and paperwork.

With reference to training, the Philpott (2007) study on the ISSP and Pathways model indicates that "approximately 45.76% of classroom teachers, administrators, counselors, and special education teachers report not having training in ISSPs, and

47.26% report no training in relation to Pathways" (p.111). The study further
acknowledges a lack of pre-service training in special education and a pronounced lack of
training among leaders in special education. The report indicates a call by teachers for
more training in order to understand and accommodate the diverse learning needs of
students.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This study attempts to add to previous research and facilitate revisions to current practices in the field of special education in our school system. This chapter will recognize, in detail, the rationale for the research design, the approach used to collect and analyze data, my role as researcher, and ethical considerations in administering this project. I begin with a rationalization for choosing qualitative research in the form of phenomenology to accomplish this task. In doing so I support Patton (2001) who states, "Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as real world settings where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomena of interest" (p.39). Patton adds that qualitative research produces findings arrived from real world settings where the "phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally" (p.39). This was attained through in-depth interviews, follow-up telephone interviews as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2007), and field notes as suggested by Groenewald (2004).

Crotty (1996) and Schulz (1994) note that certain experiences of the researcher may be shared with those of the research participants within the bounds of the proposed research objectives and may become significant to the data. The phenomenological method allowed me to utilize this approach. Hence resulting is my obligation, as the researcher, to separate any past knowledge or experience from what the participants reveal in the study. Such issues of my personal views and background experiences in analyzing the data are covered in the bracketing section.

Rationale for research design

As defined by McCleod (2001), qualitative research aims to understand how the world is constructed by its' participants. Hancock (2002) reiterates this by stating, "qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena in that it aims to help us to understand the world in which we live and why things are the way they are" (p.2). Hancock further explains phenomenology as a way of describing events, situations, experiences or concepts as part of the world in which we live. This study focuses on a phenomenological study of the experiences of special education teachers who choose to change careers. More specifically it concentrates on special education teachers in central NL. The study allows participants to define their experiences and explores how they interpret them.

While there is currently a wealth of literature on the subject of job satisfaction among teachers there is very little pertaining to special education teachers. There also seems to be a gap between justification for job dissatisfaction and solutions/programs to address them. As a special education teacher, this research is closely linked to my work and I feel that many of the issues facing my teaching assignment and that of my colleagues have not been thoroughly investigated. This study will build on current research literature. It can prove useful to government departments, school district staff, school administrators, and university personnel. It can also assist in program planning at the university level. Furthermore, this research can facilitate in establishing job descriptions and ultimately in providing the necessary supports for special education teachers.

Selection Procedures

According to Hycner (1999), "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants" (p.156). A purposeful sample of eight was chosen for this study as the most important kind of non-probability sampling to identify the primary participants. The group consists of special education teachers in central Newfoundland who have been teaching in the area of special education in the school system but, due to a variety of factors, have made other career choices. This sample was chosen because they are representative of special education teachers in urban schools (Gander) and rural schools (Ramea, Fogo, Lewisporte, etc.). In relation to the LeCompte and Preissle (1993) and Patton (1990) techniques, the group was selected based on quota or maximum variation since the individuals are representative of the special education teacher population in the geographical area noted. Initially I thought I might have difficulty finding enough participants. Nevertheless as a result of the network, or snowball technique several potential participants were quickly identified. While additional subjects were also identified by participants none were selected for inclusion. Finally, convenience was important in that, as researcher, the participants' location and proximity made for easy accessibility for the interview/focus group process. Participants granted their informed consent before research began.

Data collection methods

Hancock (2002) states, "qualitative approaches to data collection usually involve direct interaction with individuals on a one to one basis or in a group setting" (p.9). She also suggests individual interviews, focus groups, and observation as the main methods of

collecting qualitative data. Marshall and Rossman (2006) also propose combining several data collection methods including focus groups, interviewing, and observation.

Fink (2000) supports the use of an interview guide made by the researcher outlining the themes to be covered during the interview utilizing open-ended questions that encourage participants to give elaborate answers. The purpose of this loosely structured phenomenological interview, as described by Pollio, Henley, & Thompson (1997) is "to attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience, with the course of dialogue largely set by the respondent, the interview begins with few prespecified questions concerning the topic. All questions flow from the dialogue as it unfolds rather than having been predetermined in advance" (p.30). The interview took the form of a hermeneutic interview as described by van Manen (2002) in that the interview allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences in order to provide more in-depth meaning to their experiences. The interview also created what Moustakas (1994) refers to as noema (that which is experienced) and noesis (the way in which it is experienced) in that it permitted the participants the flexibility to express their actual experiences. The focus of the interview questions was on factors including but not limited to: adequate training, administrative/colleague support, workload, paperwork, parental involvement and job satisfaction/dissatisfaction that have caused special education teachers to leave the field in search of other careers. Fink (2000) further suggests recording the interview on tape or video. The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. Follow-up telephone conversations were administered to acquire further clarity.

The use of a focus group remained optional depending on the outcome of the interview process. It was to consist of those interviewed and its purpose was to discuss the analysis of information acquired in the interview process. Any new information would have been added to the data and further analyzed. As noted by Boeree (1998), as researcher, I was aware of the pitfalls in the focus group process. For example: groups dominated by strong personalities or individuals having difficulty seeing others' points of view. These points were considered during the process. However due to scheduling limitations the focus group was not utilized. Also two of the eight participants voiced significant concern regarding confidentiality issues with respect to engaging in a focus group. Therefore clarification of issues was acquired through emails and follow-up telephone conversations on an individual basis with participants.

In addition to the interview and focus group the researcher took field notes utilizing three of four types suggested by Groenewald (2004): observational notes, theoretical notes, methodological notes. These notes were taken during and after the interview as a supplement to recordings. These notes enabled me to observe non-verbal as well as verbal information procured throughout the process.

Data analysis strategy

Bracketing.

Phenomenology acknowledges that the researcher chooses a topic of personal interest and one that already holds personal meaning. As stated by van Manen (1997) "phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience or the life world" (Laverty, 2003). Polkinghorne (1983) notes that the aim is to understand or comprehend meanings

of human experience as it is lived. Laverty posits that the study of these phenomena intends to return and re-examine taken for granted experiences and possibly uncover new and or forgotten meanings. While this perception facilitates the collecting of the views of others in their lived world, a concern exists for it influencing the findings. Therefore, as Lauer (1958) notes 'bracketing out' (or epoche) must be present where the researcher takes no position either for or against and his/her own meanings and interpretations or theoretical concepts do not enter the world of the informant/participant. Osborne (1994) described bracketing as identifying one's presuppositions about the nature of the phenomena and then attempting to set them aside to see the phenomena as it really is. As Ratcliff (2002) notes, the researcher must try to "bracket self out and enter into the other person's perspective and experience" (p.4) or as Moustakas (1994) refers to the process as 'the epoche'. "This way of perceiving life calls for looking, noticing, becoming aware, without imposing our prejudgment on what we see, think, imagine or feel" (p.86).

Consequently, as researcher, I adopted this theory and set aside my personal beliefs and experiences (as outlined in chapter 1). This was established by noting my personal interest and meaning of the topic in the previous section. I have indicated a genuine interest in aspects of teaching in the field of special education that cause many teachers so much dissatisfaction that they leave the field which is contrary to my own personal experiences.

Hermeneutic phenomenology.

Given that I am asking a phenomenological question on the nature of shared experiences this is a hermeneutic phenomenology study. As Laverty reports, Wilson &

Hutchinson (1991) defines hermeneutic phenomenology as "the focus being toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding" (p.7). This approach allowed the participants to 'tell it like it is' in that they would highlight their experiences and note details that may not have been recognized in any other research method.

During and after the interviews I made notes on key concepts and observations of participants' body language as well as their verbalizations when describing their experiences. This enabled me to get a 'feel' for what they were communicating and to follow up via telephone for clarification. It also encouraged me to question until the phenomena was clearly described. The notes were analyzed and compared to those from previous interviews. Many similarities emanated from the teachers, which lead to the emergence of themes.

Once the data was collected and transcribed in the form of a full script of the interview, as Marshall & Rossman (2006) suggests the researcher discovered categories, themes or patterns in the data. A typology of coding as outlined by Bogdan & Biklen (1998) was then employed. More specifically, the codes were defined in terms of families: setting/context codes, definition of the situation codes, perspectives held by subjects codes, subjects ways to thinking about people and objects codes, activity codes, event codes, strategy codes, relationship and social structure codes and, method codes as deemed appropriate based on the data. As Fink (2000) poses, the resulting analysis involved connecting the codes in a web of meanings, which was constituted by the

researcher. A system of highlighting by color, various areas of common interest thus a system of coding the information by commonality was employed.

Finally, once the analysis of the information was complete I electronically forwarded a copy of it to each participant individually for evaluation. Sending copies individually ensured anonymity of participants. Any information they thought significant was added and any questions answered.

Role of researcher

As researcher, subjectivity is evidenced through my experiences as a classroom and special education teacher. Observations of teachers in both the regular classroom and special education classroom environments have raised concerns regarding factors that affect job satisfaction in special education teachers. As Finney (2000) notes her confusion on the definition of success with graduate students, so too, as researcher, I note my confusion as to why so many special education teachers experience excessive job dissatisfaction.

This study recognizes the researcher as instrument in the role of interviewer. The interview was of an in-depth yet informal, interactive nature. Reciprocity was acknowledged as described by Groenewald (2004) in that the interview allowed both researcher and participant to be engaged in the dialogue. The participants were accessed through familiarity to the researcher in that they have all been colleagues at some point during the past 20 years or were recommended by colleagues. Consequently, as Fink (2000) notes, the researcher inevitably formed a relationship with the respondents. As a

result, the researcher was empathic to make the respondents feel more at ease and more willing to tell their story.

Ethical considerations

To ensure ethical research, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador (2006) poses three areas of potential harms to participants that must be addressed: assessing harms and benefits, informed consent, and privacy and confidentiality. Oberle (2004) suggests addressing these issues by using specific information pertaining to same be included in the Letter of Introduction/Consent. Ensuring informed, written consent establishes trust between participants and researcher. Written permission was received from participants. This informed consent established trust with the participants and created a relationship as symmetrical as possible. Participants were also informed of guaranteed confidentiality and assured that their names would not be used in recording or reporting information. Direct quotes were not coded to specific individuals. In the Introduction section of the letter the participants were provided information on the researcher and proposed study. Open-ended questions permitted interviewees to answer in ways with which they were comfortable. As a result of familiarity with the participants, I assumed a relaxed tone that was marked with respect and attention both on the part of the interviewer and interviewee.

Trustworthiness

Groenewald (2004), emphasizes the importance of the truth-value of qualitative research. By bracketing myself during the interviews and transcribing the tape

recordings, I gained a better understanding of the perspectives of the participants. This further contributed to the truth. Triangulation was prevalent as described by Marshall and Rossman (2006) through the use of multiple data collection methods as previously noted. Based on suggestions by Hycner (1999) each interview was validated and modified. I conducted a 'validity check ' by administering follow up interviews by telephone to ensure the essence of the initial interview had been correctly captured. I also communicated via email with the participants. Modifications were completed accordingly.

Summary

I chose phenomenology as the method to identify the experiences of special education teachers experiencing challenges in the school system because I felt that this approach would best express the nature of their experiences and illustrate how they derive meaning from this process. Hancock's (2002) collection of qualitative data approach and van Manen's (2002) hermeneutic interview reflection approach ensure that conclusions would contribute to improved pedagogy in the field of education.

Although special education teachers report much dissatisfaction with their jobs it is important to note that the issues of concern are primarily due to non-instructional tasks. A large majority of special educators indicate their enthusiasm for their instructional duties, associated directly with working with the children. The implications for the future and changes that are constantly occurring in the field of special education are administrative in nature. Governments, district offices, and school administrators need to provide the necessary training and supports for special education teachers that will enable

them to administer the appropriate programs to meet the individual needs of the children they teach. Maybe the 'new' school development policies will address and alleviate many of the concerns expressed by special educators. As Payne (2005) suggests, all stakeholders need to collaboratively and creatively re-design special education in order that special education teachers come to value their jobs once again and regain job satisfaction. Teachers need to feel that their work conditions are positive and that their schools are good places to work.

Chapter Four: Articulating the Experiences

Introduction

It is against a backdrop of global research on job dissatisfaction among special education teachers and local concern for the realities of their work that a phenomenological method is used to explore the experiences of a small group of NL teachers. Here we enter into the world of eight dedicated special education teachers from both urban and rural NL where job conditions have become so challenging and job dissatisfaction so great that they felt a need to change careers. Here too, philosophy, theory, and practice in conjunction with educational policies manifest themselves through these experiences. What impact do internal and external factors have on job satisfaction/dissatisfaction? What impact do internal and external factors have on a special education teacher's decision to change careers? What supports are necessary to reduce job dissatisfaction and increase retention of special education teachers? In exploring these questions special education teachers, who have exited the field, serve as guides and assist us in understanding their working world with articulate and emotional language. Their experiences provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the challenges facing special education teachers of today.

These teachers, both male and female, were both articulate and eager to share their stories. However, they needed reassurance of the confidentiality of their statements and anonymity of their identities before vocalizing their experiences. Even though the letter of consent stated that anonymity was ensured and that the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial had approved the research

proposal, the participants still sought clarity on the anonymity of the names of schools where they had worked, as well as the identities of their colleagues and administrators. Once accomplished, they discussed, without hesitation, their experiences and described what it was like to be a special education teacher in a world with many uncontrollable variables. Dialogue flowed with ease, offering insight into factors that created challenges in their day-to-day experiences. They spoke with conviction and intensity about the issues that interfered with their job satisfaction in the field of special education. These teachers walked me through the subtle, yet subliminal, changes in their careers that led to an erosion of the enthusiasm with which they entered into their chosen profession and eventually which lead to a change in careers. They spoke with intensity and very lucid voices. They were forthright about their experiences and the challenges they faced in trying to accomplish their assigned duties.

In listening to, and observing, these teachers as they told their stories, I quickly discovered many commonalities in their experiences. Where possible, the words of these teachers are selected (and italicized) as thematic representations of their actual experiences. Coded identities are not used in order to facilitate confidentiality. In attempting to understand the realization of these experiences about this shared phenomenon, themes emerged in three areas   erosion of professional identity, bureaucracy over caring, and professional distress. Each of these areas is prevalent throughout the text, providing insight into the experiences of special education teachers in their daily activities.

This chapter explores the perceptions of this study's participants as to their concerns pertaining to their professional identity. These special education teachers recount the intricacies (though sometimes subtle), concerning comments and actions of their colleagues and administrators in relation to their understanding of the responsibilities and duties of a special education teacher. Next, these teachers walk me through their career journey and identify feelings on how bureaucracy impedes the relationship with the children assigned to their care.

In recounting their experiences, these teachers 'spoke' with clear, unequivocal non-verbal language. They demonstrated uneasiness through waving of hands, raised and shaky voices, and fidgeting, as the stories and experiences were expressed. A dramatic change in non-verbal cues was noted when the teachers spoke of their current positions in that they spoke calmly, with excitement, and in soft voices.

Finally, the many other aspects surrounding the challenges of these teachers are addressed in a section on professional distress. These educators confer about issues regarding the impact of pressure placed on them in the workplace and its effect on their health and overall well-being.

Erosion of professional identity

In NL, at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, special education teachers are required to complete an undergraduate degree in education before completing the course requirements for a special education degree. Therefore, in order to become a special education teacher one must acquire two undergraduate degrees. However, in NL, 40% of special education teachers do not have their special education

degrees completed (Philpott, 2007). However, seven of the eight participants in this study had completed both degree programs before entering into their positions as special education teachers. The eighth participant had a few courses remaining to complete her B.Sp.Ed. program. As a result all participants felt they had a clear vision of the professional expectations and demands of their roles as special education teachers. This being said, six of the eight research participants state commonalities in their feelings regarding the lack of understanding on the part of colleagues/administrators relating to the importance of and qualifications for his/her position. These teachers voiced disappointment that so many of their supervisors had little to no understanding of the jobs for which they were trained and hired.

When discussing views on qualifications one teacher who taught in the area of special education for more than ten years, reported that when she requested a move from special education to the regular classroom her administrator said,

You're not qualified to be a classroom teacher because you're a special education teacher. My argument was always that if I'm a special education teacher I should be more equipped for the regular class, more than qualified as opposed to a regular classroom teacher and really what you're (administrator) basically saying is because I have a special education degree I'm not going to get out of special education.

When asked to elaborate on how she thought her special education degree had equipped her for the regular classroom she went on to justify her feelings by validating her training and experiences.

> *Because of the experience I have had with special education I feel that I am able*
> *to detect problems and I have a fairly good idea of whether it's developmental or*
> *a learning disability and the things you can do with these kids to bring them up to*
> *where they need to be (academically) or whether or not they're going to be able*
> *to follow along the regular program. I feel that my special education background*
> *definitely equips me in the classroom.*

There was obvious disappointment in her voice with respect to her principal's
perception of her qualifications and she felt, as an administrator, he should have
recognized her training as an asset to her classroom teaching abilities, not a limitation to
her career aspirations. This lack of administration's understanding, support, and
validation was common to many who reported things such as:

> *Lack of understanding sometimes leads to lack of support from teachers on staff*
> *and/or administrators. If they don't have any training or experience themselves in*
> *that area (special education) it could perhaps interfere with communication with*
> *the district.*

A third participant stated:

> *I had 3 kids in my classroom with no student assistant. My classroom joined*
> *another one. The other had 2 kids. One day one of the kids from the classroom*
> *next door ran outside. One of my kids saw him and followed. The first boy had his*
> *hand on the chain of a bike. The little boy from my class was fascinated with*
> *bikes, the spokes, and turning the pedals on the bikes and he grabbed the pedal*

and twirled it right around and drove the spoke right down through the other little

boys hand. Again, like I said, it was only me in the classroom.

This teacher went on to say that no one (administrators or teachers) seemed to understand

the challenges of her position. The disappointment of not being able to control the

situation due to lack of supports was evident in the emotional telling of her story.

One teacher who had dedicated 12 years to special education, stated that her

colleagues have said to her:

You're not a real teacher. Also, *teachers often resent the* fact *that you are*

working with one to five children during a period but they have 30 all day and not

all teachers are receptive to you going into their classroom.

She culminated her thoughts by adding:

co-workers didn't understand my role (as a special education teacher).

It was obvious in the tone of her voice that this aspect of her teaching in special education

was very disturbing.

When asked what was dissatisfying about her assignment as a special education

teacher, one participant with 15 years experience in special education, expressed feelings

of alienation from the remaining school teaching population and her discernment the

view of others concerning her role and responsibilities. She notes,

I felt like I was totally isolated a majority of the time. I also felt that I was viewed

as someone who helped with testing such as reading the questions orally or giving

them (the students) more time to write the test, and that was it, that was my job. I

didn't have to make up the test or correct the test or anything; teachers just got

you to read the test. I'd come in in the morning and they (classroom teachers)

would come at me and say, "such and such got a test today" I didn't know

anything about it until that day. Where I felt that I should have been helping to

prepare (the children) for the test they (classroom teachers) saw me as someone

who was going to help them write the test in another situation so they (classroom

teachers) didn't have to deal with it.

Her declining enthusiasm was evidenced through her body language. She tossed

up her hands when talking about trying to organize meetings with teachers that

sometimes seemed to be an impossible task. She implied that they (other teachers) always

seemed to have something else to do that kept them from meetings regarding special

education students and such meetings weren't a priority, just a burden for them.

Contributing to these comments a teacher who had been teaching in special education for

only five years added,

Lack of understanding by other professionals in the education field of what your

responsibility and role is and the importance of special education teachers to

students in the classroom. Regular classroom teachers don't understand what it

means for special education teachers to provide support with children's

programming.

She communicated with much conviction and expressed anger with the situation

as she articulated her thoughts. Her whole body became tense, her voice loud, and her

posture became more rigid. These comments seemed quite significant coming from such

a young teacher in that she acknowledged these feelings had developed within the first two years of her teaching career.

Another subject suggested that due to a lack of understanding of his duties, what he was accomplishing with his students wasn't good enough for school board officials. He further qualified his statements by saying that board directives were passed down from the Department of Education, which left the board with limited authority in the decision making process. Other comments included: *My co-workers didn't understand my role.*

All participants voiced concerns regarding preservice training as a contributing factor. They felt that classroom teachers have acquired little or no background preparation for teaching children with special needs and therefore don't comprehend the responsibilities of special education teachers. One teacher posits that university training of teachers is *inadequate to appropriately address the role of the special education teacher.* She also adds that she feels induction programs are inadequate and that there is a disconnect between training at the university level and teaching. Others offered insights into the inadequacies of teacher training.

> *When you're in university there's never any courses taught to introduce teachers*
> *to what they're going to face when they go into the classroom. When you do your*
> *education degree there's no special education courses and there's no mention of*
> *what you might have to deal with with these criteria children, these behavior kids,*

> *learning disabilities. None of that's included in your program. An internship program is the best way to go as opposed to the practicum, which is only a snap shot view.*

One teacher noted:

> *As a special education teacher, I am frequently required to work in areas where my teaching methodology is awkward and inadequate, yet my Special Education degree and familiarity with the procedural paperwork 'qualify' me to well fill any assignment in this area.*

The participants' frustrations, on lack of professional identity, are clear. Few classroom teachers and administrators understand the complexity of the training and the diverse responsibilities of special education teachers. Too there is a perception of the limitations of holding a special education degree with respect to opportunities for professional growth. As a result, special education teachers often feel they have no alternative to dealing with the issues of their corroded professional identity but to exit the profession.

The constant erosion of professional identity, the continuous failure to recognize worth, and the feeling of non-appreciation, builds to a point where you wonder why you chose the profession in the beginning. There occurs a continuous wearing down and wearing out of individuals as evidenced through comments and activities that are not isolated by individual participants but common to all.

Bureaucracy over caring

An absence of the appreciation for the professional roles was exasperated by the policies and procedures, which often made the teachers, feel like bureaucrats versus teachers of vulnerable children. The disconnect between specialized teaching and recognition of value was aggravated by meaningless work that made one question oneself as well as the roles of district and department (of Education) personnel. As one teacher noted,

> *It was decided by the school board that what we (special education teachers) were doing wasn't good enough but this was being passed down by the Department of Education. For example, they (school board personnel) were just downloading what they were being told. I saw no relief from the things I was unhappy with so I agreed to disagree on policies and left special education. I would have resigned if I had to stay in special education.*

The participants in this study reported they entered the field with training to teach children with special learning challenges but found themselves placed in situations in which they felt they had little control and/or expertise. Early in their teaching careers they began to suspect a difference in what is articulated in training and what is actually envisaged as their responsibilities.

Without exception, all participants communicated a genuine interest in building a positive rapport and working relationship with the children they teach. They explicate the teaching process as one that encourages a caring relationship with the children yet fails to provide the time, support and resources to do so in a manner of ones choice and/or

ability. The participants further emphasized the positive connection they have recognized with the children's parents.

They report that the breakdown in enthusiasm and job satisfaction occurs primarily as a result of the bureaucracy surrounding non-instructional responsibilities. Special education teachers soon discover that endless meetings and astronomical amounts of paperwork prevent them from doing the job for which they had understood they had been hired. Teachers must budget their time and energies to help the children while keeping up with the bureaucratic demands of the system. The obvious frustration is evident as they voice concerns questioning the necessity of much of the paperwork. In rationalizing its existence, some suggest that, to a great extent, they felt the paperwork was done primarily in case of litigation and had no connection to the children or their programming. One teacher communicated that he had been teaching in Toronto in 1988 where he experienced mountains of paperwork that he felt would follow in NL schools - a reality he soon recognized when he returned to NL the following year. He voiced his concerns for the abundance of paperwork and the reasons why such was required, leaving a feeling that it was a useless waste of time.

> *I felt that a lot of paperwork was put in front of me more to be covering myself for litigation and I felt that there was so much of it that it took away from my time to prepare or even be with the students that I was working with. Paperwork was increasing every year. I was being told that there was a lot more coming and I could see that was true.*

The consensus among all participants was a feeling of endless amounts of paperwork that caused them to deviate from what they really wanted to do – teach the children. One teacher referred to the paperwork required for students to access Pathway Two programming. She stated:

What I am hearing from educators at all levels is that the provision of Pathway Two supports is simply good, effective teaching. Yet, this good, effective teaching requires two ISSP meetings per year in addition to regular parent/teacher interviews and regular communication that frequently takes place between home and school. The regular stream teacher within his or her classroom delivers Pathways One and Two. If we truly believe that the latter is good, effective teaching, then why the excessive paperwork? Why the excessive meetings?

Attention was also given to bureaucracy within the school related to procedures for referrals and documentation. There is often questionable consistency related to policies surrounding providing supports for children with diagnosed learning challenges. A story by one teacher whose husband was also a teacher relays a very controversial situation.

Time allotted for children was not always based on need. Family status often played a role. For example, my own child was diagnosed with a learning disability and was immediately given space in the learning center above all those who were waiting. There is no doubt that this was because both her father and I were teachers.

The bureaucracy involved in planning for and accessing student assistants was also named as problematic. The role of unions was noted, especially in their placement of student assistants. Student assistants are positioned based solely on seniority without the consideration of suitability or qualifications for a specific position. Furthermore, as a result of the addition of extra student assistant hours, they may change assignments several times within a school year. Often this has a negative, traumatic effect on both students and teachers. One teacher divulged that, due to reassignments, she had five different student assistants with her group in one school year. This situation was disturbing and disrupting for both students and teacher. What was more frustrating was a complete inability to affect change in the bureaucracy that this involved.

The "meaninglessness" of bureaucracy in the school was matched by bureaucracy of the boards. Some participants speculate that district offices are often in a position of helplessness in that they are following directives handed down by the Department of Education. As one teacher expressed, *they (school boards) were just downloading what they were being told (by the department).* Others also note a perceived disconnect between school board personnel and the schools. The question is how aware they are of what is actually happening in the classroom.

This "meaninglessness" did not stop at the boards but extended to the Department of Education itself with concerns being expressed regarding the connection it has with the 'real' teaching world. Participants question the strength of the relationship between the staff at the Department of Education and that of the district offices. There is a growing

concern about whether the former has been away from the classroom so long that they have forgotten what it's like to be there.

The meaningless bureaucracy in addition to a recognized lack of meaning to their roles left special education teachers feeling helpless, unappreciated, and not clearly understood in their roles and responsibilities. It also left them questioning the roles and responsibilities of the policy makers, namely the district offices and the Department of Education.

Professional distress

Seyle's (1956) articulation of the difference between eustress (positive stress) and distress (negative stress) has been recognized by special education teachers in this study. These teachers felt that they all entered into the profession with an accurate understanding of the demands and the stress that it would carry. They felt prepared to handle heavy workloads, challenging students, demanding parents, and long hours. They felt prepared to meet the expectations that accompany such a demanding role. What they weren't prepared to handle was the distress that comes from a pronounced lack of appreciation of such meaningless bureaucratic tasks.

The eustress the participants discerned in terms of the positive demands placed upon them in executing their instructional responsibilities were overridden by distress from the negative pressures in trying to carry out their non-instructional duties. Many reveal excessive levels of negative stress resulting from factors including but not limited to: lack of measurable success in students, feelings of being 'stuck' in special education with no way out, declining personal satisfaction, and pressures of paperwork.

One participant revealed a decline in his health due to professional stress.

> *As a result of the heavy workload and my passion for organization and having things done created additional stress. I would spend endless hours at paperwork to have it all completed on time. I've got to have everything done and I'll kill myself doing it. If I don't get it done I'll beat myself up over it. I was starting to have medical problems because of the stress I was under.*

This participant communicated that he was *married to his job* in that, in order to get everything done and done right, that's what was required. Consequently, his dedication to keeping up with the pressures of his job resulted in medical complications, including physical exhaustion and mental fatigue.

Another participant noted having to take on a parenting role for some of her students.

> *I often had to deal with personal problems I really didn't know how to deal with. Often I found discipline problems went hand in hand with learning disabilities so I found I was dealing with a lot of behavior problems and so I felt that I was dealing with a lot of behavior problems and after a while I wasn't making any headway with it (academics). This can often be stressful.*

A third participant stated:

> *One time when student assistants were on strike I was left in the classroom alone with 3 Criteria 'C' kids. While I was working with one child another went to the cupboard where I store buttons, beads, and balls that I used for sequencing, color coding, patterning, and things like that, and took out the beads (they looked like*

bubble gum). The next thing I heard her choking. I grabbed her and one bead popped out. She was still gagging, I grabbed her again, and another popped out. I did that 3 times, she had swallowed 3 of them. That was an issue of support – I never had support there. I felt proper supports in the classroom are lacking. Having multiple children with disabilities in your classroom without proper supports can be rather challenging. Allotment of student assistants, which is an administrative responsibility, is an ongoing concern.

While discussing this, the subject appeared angry, upset, disillusioned, and disappointed. Non-verbal cues were augmenting their words in affording greater texture to an understanding of their experiences. It was cueing me as observer/co-participant to listen attentively to glean an appreciation of the essence of the phenomena. The lack of professional appreciation was not unique to administrators but pervasive throughout the staff.

All eight of the special education teachers in this study reported diminished personal satisfaction for their assignment as their career progressed in the field of special education in the school system. As well, they expressed growing monotony, boredom, and lack of personal fulfillment in their day-to-day activities due to a lack of measurable progress and successes in their students. One teacher reported that she was heading for *burnout due to lack of personal satisfaction and personal challenge.* Another stated that she *became stagnant and felt I needed more for my mental stimulation. I felt I wasn't doing my job the way I would have liked to,* communicated another. Comments of another participant include:

Most dissatisfying was the boredom. Special education often required me to present material students struggled so desperately with that the pace was beyond slow. Teach, reteach, reteach, reteach. I sometimes joked that I could do a lesson plan in Math that would last me a month – except it wasn't funny. Not for me, not for the student. After Pathways was introduced there was the reading of tests – and more tests, and more tests. I knew I had more to offer.

This same teacher posited that, *…it's never really been about 'getting out' of special education so much as it's been about 'getting into' something else and therein lay my greatest frustration.* She indicated that her degree in special education was, for many years, limiting for her. Additional support for these feelings came from another teacher who noted that once you are in special education *there seems to be a lack of advancement and the feeling of being stuck.*

Feeling vulnerable and unable to express their concerns resulted in rising stress levels and escalating levels of job dissatisfaction. Consequently, with the realization that they had little control of the challenges they faced both within themselves and their profession, the only option was to seek a career change. All eight of the study's participants recognized the need for a career change within three to five years after beginning teaching in special education. Two had threatened to end their teaching careers if they weren't reassigned. Consequently, all participants were eventually transferred either into regular classroom, administrative or school board positions.

Summary

All participants reported loving and caring for the children in the special education environment and, despite being out of the field for varied numbers of years, they still missed the children and the connection they had with them. It was especially disappointing to hear that not one reported regretting leaving the field. When asked if they had any regrets, six of the eight participants answered with an emphatic, *No* or *None whatsoever.* One of the remaining two qualified her response by stating that while she had no regrets her current assignment at the district allows her to still have some connections to special education. She added, *I am now in a position where I have more freedom to speak my mind and voice my concerns.* The eighth participant added that she enjoyed the change.

Recommendations regarding pre and post training were prevalent in the comments of all participants. In countering the concern for lack of adequate training and continuous professional development some suggested,

> *I think there should be professional development depending on the types of kids you are dealing with in the classroom. Each year I think special education teachers should have to go to mandatory training to deal with certain kinds of kids because every year the kind of kid that you are dealing with is probably different. I also think student assistants should have to do the same training as the teachers they are working with.*

Two teachers proposed an internship program for special education teachers to give them hands on experiences in the field while another suggested exposure to special education as part of the internship program of regular teachers.

Ironically, despite their choice to exit the field, the teachers in this study, when asked what advice they would give to potential special education teachers communicated that the profession can be very rewarding. Five of the eight exhibited words of caution;

Be sure this is what you want to do, know what you're going into, go in there with an open mind, be aware of the variety of students involved in special education. The work can be emotionally draining, believe in yourself, stay focused on your job, and stay current with the new trends.

It is interesting to note that while future special education teachers would be advised to be aware of the possible experiences they may encounter in the field, the participants wouldn't discourage potential teachers from entering the field. This indicates that although many of their experiences were negative, with adequate pre and post training, one could find the profession very satisfying.

Through lengthy and passionate discussion on their experiences, the participants were always cognizant of confidentiality issues as reflected through the emergence of each of the themes. Their suppressed anger and fear as well as built up opinions were released as the comfort level rose. This was evidenced in the growing freedom of their expression as they told their stories and relayed their experiences and concerns regarding colleagues, administrators, school boards, and the Department of Education.

Chapter Five: Reflections on the Experiences

Introduction

Through reflection on the experiences of a select number of special education

teachers who faced challenges in their teaching placements that resulted in the ultimate

exit of their position of 'special education teacher' I will revisit the lessons that these

experiences have afforded on the three themes encompassing them: erosion of

professional identity, bureaucracy over caring, and professional distress framing each

within the context of the literature reviewed at the outset of the study. I will re-examine

the methodology that I used to explore this phenomenology and locate these themes.

Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the implications of this study for teachers,

university programs, school districts, and the Department of Education. In doing so I, like

the teachers in their telling of their experiences, return to the beginning and reflect on my

own experiences of entering into this lived-world.

My attempt to explore the experiences of special education teachers, which

resulted in career changes, began in chapter one which highlights an explanation of my

own beliefs, interests, experiences, and philosophy upon which I have based and built this

study. While my background has provided a basis for this research, it has served as a

means to delve deeper into how it has impacted on my beliefs and shaped the writing of

this project. My experiences first as a substitute teacher and second as a full time teacher

in the field of special education in NL sparked my interest in the experiences of other

teachers and what would have caused them to be so discontent with their job assignments

that they would ultimately leave the field. Although I had anticipated some of the

challenges faced by special education teachers, I was not prepared for the extent or degree of the dissatisfaction that was expressed by the participants in this study.

The process of bracketing taught me to remain on task during the course of the interview process and of reflecting on my role and responsibilities as a special education teacher today. Through my own poignant reactions to this research I have discovered a part of me that questions my own teaching placement. I recall my experiences in my first special education assignment and how, after three years, I felt I needed a change and more mental stimulation. Will I, as my career progresses, assume feelings for my assignment in special education, as have the participants in this study?

The second chapter focuses on the academics of the phenomenon that I would be investigating. While the general trends in research indicate common concerns on a global scale relating to factors resulting in job dissatisfaction in special education teachers, it also recognized some contradictions. For example, the level of training for special education teachers in Spain, as reported by Pereya, Servilla, and Castillo (n.d.), compared to training for special education teachers in other parts of the world, including this province, is quite different. Also, the correlation between job satisfaction and teacher absenteeism by Michaelowa (2002) recognized inconsistencies. Consequently, there is a call for further research in the area.

Chapter three discussed phenomenology as the qualitative research method of choice. As Hancock (2002) explains, phenomenology is a way of describing situations, experiences or concepts as part of the world in which we live. As such phenomenology best addresses, not only my background and interests but also that of the research

question. It allowed me, as researcher, to explore and the participants to express, the experiences in their lived-world.

Chapter four attends to the first hand accounts of the experiences of the special educators involved in this study. Through interviews, observations of participants as they spoke of their experiences and follow-up telephone conversations and email messages, I was able to deduce some commonalities in their experiences. I included several teachers' quotes to credit their practices and strengthen the message. My goal was to relay the messages of the research participants in such a way as to depict the nature of their lived experiences through their own voices. The themes that emanated serve as a basis for their concerns and are prevalent throughout their special education careers. Being an integral part of the world in which these teachers have lived enables me to appreciate and to be more cognizant of the challenges they have faced.

Reflections on methodology

This section re-examines and revisits the appropriateness of using the phenomenological method in studying the research questions. This review touches on issues of validity, thematic extraction, and writing.

Since my research question speaks to the experiences of special education teachers and how they interpret shared phenomena, the choice of phenomenology as a method of research appeared to be the most appropriate and applicable. As researcher, via a phenomenological question, my aim was to pursue meaning from a shared experience with which I was very accustomed. As Patton (2001) states of qualitative research, it produces findings arrived from real-world settings where the "phenomenon of interest

unfolds naturally" (p.39) so my research has attempted to naturally unfold the experiences of special education teachers.

My previous and current experiences with this phenomenon provided me with insight and enabled me to appreciate the challenges of others. However, I soon realized how ill prepared I was for what I would encounter. As a student, I had equipped myself with a meticulous literature review where I thoroughly examined the phenomenon and methodology. As a teacher, both part time and full time, my experiences provided me with familiarity with the situations they described. As researcher, I understood the communication of the participants, both verbal and non-verbal.

While the choice of phenomenology seemed the natural approach for this phenomenon, articulating the experiences in writing was often an emotional undertaking. Entering into the lived world of these teachers required the ability to experience it but separate from it in order to understand and describe it factually. The follow up telephone conversations and emails drew a closer emotional connection between researcher and participant in that the more communication I had with the teachers the more I felt their lived world could become my lived world. In some ways I experienced difficulty with my own disillusionment and in many ways, ignorance, with the practices and challenges with my own profession. I found myself feeling a part of their lived world while knowing the necessity of separation. The bracketing experience allowed me to remain focused and detach myself from the situation.

My choice of participation from one geographical area was a wise one. The geographical narrowing of area proved convenient in that it afforded me time to conduct

my research in a timely manner. Also, my goal was to select participants from central NL but pleasantly recognized a representative cross section of teachers with teaching experiences in urban and rural schools throughout NL, not exclusive to the central area.

The focus group as a method of collecting data proved fruitless due to a number of factors including, difficulty in scheduling and protection of confidentiality. Some participants were so uncomfortable with respect to anonymity that they displayed high levels of apprehension regarding getting together with their peers. Also, as Boeree (1998) noted, I feared the possibility of difficulties with personalities that may arise which led me to investigate through other means. While there were commonalities in the results, some of the participants felt threatened by the possibility of their identification surfacing since they are still employed, in positions including classroom teaching, administration, and district office, by a district enforcing policies and practices that resulted in their career changes.

The phenomenological method proved appropriate in its flexibility as well as the freedom it provided the participants in sharing their experiences. The hermeneutic interview, as described by Van Manen (2002) proved most effective in that it gave the teachers the opportunity to reflect on and express their individual experiences from their 'real' lived world. While other methodologies may have been helpful in examining the aspects of the teachers' experiences that caused career changes they may not have provided for the intense understanding of the experiences or the flexibility that the phenomenological approach afforded.

Reflections on the themes

I now revisit the themes within the context of the literature reviewed earlier. The themes, while firmly fixed in the description of the phenomenon, will now be outlined more clearly.

Erosion of professional identity.

In reflecting upon the erosion of professional identity for these special education teachers I uncover much of what has been identified in the literature review: the questioning of the adequacy of special education programs and the importance of continued professional development (Brindley, Fleege, and Graves, 2000; Pereya, Servilla, and Castillo, n.d.; Payne, 2005; Fore, Martin, and Carter, 2002; Philpott, 2007); the many issues surrounding support from colleagues, administrators and sometimes, district personnel (Dworkin, 1980; Cross and Billingsley, 1994; Brownell, Smith, and Miller, 1995; Singh and Billingsley, 1996; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Billingsley, 2004); and the challenges related to the work environment (Robson, 1998; Gilbert, LeTouze, and Laundry, 2004).

This study goes beyond the studied world of special education teachers as observed by researchers globally to the particulars of the lived reality of special education teachers in a specified geographical area as told through their own voices. Many of the topics discussed may be generalized worldwide however this research concentrated on the actual experiences of a select number and very specific group of teachers and their perceptions of how their professional identity has become eroded.

Bureaucracy over caring.

Universities train individuals to be responsible for and to teach children with diverse needs. Courses and programs are designed and administered such that, once completed, one is hopefully prepared to face all the day-to-day challenges of the teaching world. This study realizes that while special education teachers soon realize that their training hasn't fully prepared them for what is expected of them, the biggest challenge is experienced in the bureaucracy of the non-instructional duties. Their struggles were visible in their passionate descriptions. Why do special education teachers feel so disillusioned by their training when they enter the 'real' teaching world? How can we better prepare special education teachers for the 'real' teaching world?

The development of caring relationships with students and parents were quite evident in both the verbal and non-verbal language expressed by the participants. The pleasure of watching the children grow and receiving positive feedback from parents who recognize their commitment to the children was rewarding to the teachers in this study. However, they expressed how time, support and resources prevented them from acquiring the level of involvement they would like to reach   all a result of various levels of bureaucracy. Where and when does this bureaucracy begin and does it ever end?

Chapter two demonstrates how the bureaucracy of the system has eroded the enthusiasm of special education teachers on a global basis. Excessive paperwork and the questionable necessity of it was a major area of concern (Brownell et al, 1995; Antiniou, Polychroni, and Walters, 2000; and Billingsley, 2004). Other factors that caused

dissatisfaction among teachers stem from the repercussions of excessive paperwork. (Gersten et al, 2001).

Professional distress.

The literature acknowledges results of high stress/distress levels in special education teachers (Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, and Blake, 1995; Seyle, 1956; Antiniou, Polychroni, and Walters, 2000; Loeb, 2002; Younghusband, Garlie, and Church, 2003; Pitrowski, 2006). Professional distress takes many forms and shows its' face in many areas as previous researchers have indicated. The literature discloses that negative stress or distress experienced by special education teachers contributed to a loss of personal satisfaction and fulfillment. The participants in this study further justify this previously conveyed research observations.

Implications

This final section recognizes a shift from reflection to an examination of the thoughts and feelings, from reflecting on past experiences to projecting to what lies ahead as a result of my findings. I examine how this new, acquired insight will modify and/or improve programs and practices in the field of special education. This study offers reasonable insights that can bring us closer to the lived world of those in the field. While this study was not intended to be generalized it does encourage us to visit the experiences of special education teachers and the daily challenges they face.

Suggestions from special education teachers for policy makers to become more involved and 'in touch' with their real lived world is an invited challenge. The teachers in

this study found themselves accepting factors leading to dissatisfaction in their profession as issues they couldn't change but that had changed them. This quiet acceptance left them discontent and often disillusioned with the education system. The realization that they were disempowered in bringing about change in their field of choice caused them to make other career choices. The three themes that emerged from this study affords special education teachers the opportunity to view their own experiences and voice concerns that they felt unable to do before. In doing so, the invitation rises to assist other special education teachers through approaches such as pre training and post training of all teachers thus eliminating many of the factors leading to dissatisfaction. Suggestions such as those by Philpott (2007) that "Memorial University amend the requirements for the undergraduate education degree programs to include a minimum of two courses in exceptionalities" also that, " the Department of Education amend teacher certification requirements for all new teachers to include a minimum of two courses in exceptionalities" would help facilitate change.

As a special education teacher, I hear and understand the concerns and the call for change as well. In my day-to-day experiences I recognize many of the issues highlighted in this research. A colleague, through discussions of this project, has identified the erosion of her professional identity in that she relayed a statement by a regular classroom teacher, *I can't believe you get paid the same as I do for what you do.* She expressed her growing concern for the lack of understanding and value of her role and responsibilities as a special education teacher. The results of this study identify a clear need for more intensive teacher training and continuous professional development for all teachers and

administrators, both as students in the Faculty of Education and as working teachers. Research has shown that due to lack of qualified teachers, many special education teaching positions are filled with non-degreed applicants thus compounding the challenges.

As Dibbon (2001) notes,

> To ensure a teaching force of quality, and that has to be the overriding goal of policy-makers, it is not acceptable to have teachers teaching students in areas for which they are not fully qualified. However, unless the Faculty of Education can attract students who have degrees in the areas of highest demand there will be a problem supplying teachers with these specialties.

The studies of Dibbon (2001) and Philpott (2007) illustrate the issues in the field of special education and challenge the field of education to action. The studies of researchers such as Brindley et al (2000), Payne (2005), and Darling-Hammond (1999) also call for action on a global scale.

As a researcher, this call for action holds many possibilities. The initial phenomenological question concerns the perspective of special education teachers. Other questions address the experiences of regular classroom teachers in working with special education students and teachers. What is their understanding of their role and responsibilities as well as that of their colleagues in the field of special education? Yet another area for future study would be the perspective of education students as to their training/study with respect to the area of special education.

As educators, this call raises some interesting questions for university personnel as they train potential classroom teachers and special education teachers. It also challenges policy makers as they set the guidelines for teaching in the field of special education. While Philpott (2007) in his report *Focusing on Students* has made many recommendations to address the issues of training, only time will tell how many of these recommendations are actually addressed. Furthermore, there is a call for more extensive research into the roles and responsibilities of other educators in the area of special education. Research regarding colleague and administrative support and the importance of it has been addressed by Younghusband (2005).

Department of Education, university personnel, and district personnel should be comforted by the love and caring relationships these special education teachers demonstrated towards their students. While they recognized and voiced their frustrations surrounding their teaching assignments they never lost sight of the importance of their roles and responsibilities. By accepting the call for change we are afforded greater insights into the daily challenges of special education teachers and in doing so can move towards improved training, understanding, and practice.

These teachers felt too intimidated by the education system to publicly voice their concerns. However, through this study, they acquired a comfort level that enabled them to articulate their experiences with anonymity. The result of this study indicates a call for more open discussion and phenomenological research to facilitate change for future generations of special education teachers.

Summary

Before accepting the challenge of this project I had been teaching in the area of special education for more than six years. I was very satisfied with my position and the roles and responsibilities that it entailed. I felt quite prepared for my assignment and the ongoing challenges that I encountered. As a result of completing this study I feel constant reminders of the challenges regarding my own professional identity, the bureaucracy surrounding my assignment, and the professional distress that I often find myself under.

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Appendix A: Letter of Introduction/Consent

Eunice Hatcher
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January 10, 2008

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a Graduate student at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am presently conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. David Philpott as part of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education (Special Education). I am writing to provide information regarding my research project **A phenomenological study of the experiences of special education teachers who choose to change careers** so as to help you decide whether you wish to participate.

I am exploring the following questions:

1. What role does job satisfaction/dissatisfaction among special education teachers play in their choosing to exit their positions?

2. In what way is job satisfaction/dissatisfaction affected by external factors?

3. In what way is job satisfaction/dissatisfaction affected by internal factors?

4. What is the impact of internal factors on special education teachers' decision to change careers?

5. What is the impact of external factors on special education teachers' decision to change careers?

6. What supports are necessary to reduce job dissatisfaction and increase retention of special education teachers?

The goal of the study is to highlight the actual experiences of special education teachers and their personal vulnerability with respect to current government and district policies related to their assignments. It is my intention that my study will raise awareness of the day-to-day challenges facing special education teachers that result in levels of job dissatisfaction so high that they leave the field in pursuit of other careers. I will gather perspectives from special education teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador. I believe that the information gathered in this study will facilitate a better understanding of the day-to-day assignments of special education teachers and the challenges they encounter.

This study will build on current research literature. I believe this study will prove useful to government departments, school district staff, school administrators, and university personnel. It will also assist in program planning at the university level. Furthermore, this research will facilitate in establishing job descriptions and ultimately in providing the necessary supports for special education teachers.

Research has indicated that, unlike regular classroom teachers, special education teachers feel the necessity to change careers due to such high levels of discontentment with their current assignments. More specifically, there has been very little research conducted on special education teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador, the challenges they face and proposals for change. Therefore, the resulting contradictions in previous studies from other parts of the world and lack of sufficient current research in Newfoundland and Labrador indicate a call for more research in the area of special education in this province.

Should you choose to participate in the study I will meet with you once for an interview. The interview will be electronically recorded (for ease of transcribing) and all information will be considered confidential. I will ask you questions regarding your decision to leave the field of special education for another career choice. Your participation in this study is voluntary and at no point will you be identified. You have the right to refuse to answer any question, stop the interview at any point and withdraw your consent to participate should you become uncomfortable.

If necessary I will meet with a focus group of all participants to establish clarity of information gathered through the interview process. Your participation in a possible focus group is also voluntary. You may choose to participate in the interview only or in both the interview and possible focus group.

Information will be collected in a way to insure anonymity. Each audiotape and transcribed notes will be coded with numbers and stored in a locked cabinet in a locked room. The coded information will be kept in a separate cabinet and all information will be destroyed two years after publication of the final report. While quotes from the interviews may be included in the final document no identifying information on you will be included. Should the findings of this study be published, either in print or presentation

format, no identifying information will be used and safeguards for anonymity will be rigidly adhered to. The final report will be available to you, free of charge, upon request.

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 737-8368.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have agreed to participate in this study and that you understand how information will be utilized. You will be contacted via telephone to schedule an interview. If you have any concerns or questions please feel free to contact me at 256-4100 (H) or 256-2581 (W) or my supervisor, Dr. David Philpott, 737-3506 at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Two copies of the consent form are provided. If you wish to participate please sign both, keep one for your records and return the other in the stamped envelope provided, as soon as possible.

Thank you for your co-operation.
Sincerely,

Eunice Hatcher

Participants Signature   (Interview)   Date

Participants Signature   (Focus group)   Date

Witness' Signature   Date

Appendix B: Interview Script/Guide

The following open-ended questions will be used to facilitate responses. This type of questioning was selected so as to ensure ease of participants to communicate their own experiences.

1. Looking back on your time teaching in special education, what was satisfying about your assignment?

2. What was dissatisfying about your assignment?

3. What factors lead to your decision to leave special education?

4. Was your decision to leave special education a good decision? Why or Why not?

5. Do you have any regrets in choosing to leave special education?

6. If you were asked your opinion on what supports you think are necessary to reduce job dissatisfaction in special education teachers, what would you say?

7. What advice would you give current special education teachers who are contemplating leaving the field?

8. What advice would you give potential special education teachers?

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