THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO HAVE TRANSFERRED SCHOOLS, RESULTING FROM A PERCEIVED LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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The lived experiences of special education teachers who have transferred schools, resulting from a perceived lack of administrative support: A phenomenological study

by

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Abstract

Special education teacher attrition has been well documented since the 1980s, along with the stressful workplace variables associated with this phenomenon. These variables include: role problems, excessive paperwork, uncooperative colleagues, inadequate teaching materials, and unsupportive administrators. While several studies involve participants who have left or have planned to leave the field, very few have included participants who have remained in the field. This study sought to explore the experiences of special education teachers who transferred to a different school because of stressful workplace variables and a perceived lack of administrative support. While relatively small in scope, the data does identify that administrators serve a critical role in helping ensure that special educators feel supported in their duties. As such, the study provides an opportunity for those engaged in this phenomenon, whether policymaker, administrator, or special educator, to reflect on their experiences and practices.

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This study is dedicated to June Pollard, the most influential teacher I have ever had, and one of the few people who understood and gave willingly the support I needed throughout the years.

I would like to thank special education teachers who participated in this study and shared their personal experiences with me. I firmly believe all of you have provided new insight into this phenomenon.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Introduction

This study explored the phenomenon of special education teachers who decided to transfer schools because of a perceived lack of administrative support. Unlike other studies that have examined special education teacher attrition, this study involved participants who remained in the special education field. All of the participants were drawn from Canada, with three different provinces being represented. This not only allowed for increased assurances of anonymity, but also for a more diverse range of experiences to be presented and described. The special education teachers were asked to reflect upon the teaching experiences they found the most and the least stressful, to articulate the most influential variables they perceived that contributed to their experiences, and to describe how they arrived at their decision to transfer to a different school instead of leaving the field of special education entirely.

A phenomenological method was used to analyze the data in order to provide a rich articulation of the meaning the participants derived from their shared experiences within the field. As such, it affords the opportunity for other special education teachers engaged in similar processes and experiences to reflect on their own circumstances, and for administrators to examine the school climate they foster and maintain. By developing a greater awareness and understanding of the variables that have the greatest impact on special education teachers perceiving a lack of administrative support and ultimately deciding to transfer to a different school, we will have the ability to address this phenomenon in a practical and effective manner.

The Phenomenon

Since the early 1980s, researchers have consistently identified a shortage of special education teachers, within the field, which exceeds that of regular classroom teachers. Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, and Weber (1997) suggested that the increase in teacher turnover "has long been of concern in both special education and general education because it represents instability in the teaching force and raises the prospect of shortages of qualified replacement teachers" (p. 390). Additionally, Müller and Markowitz (2003) further explained how special education teachers continue to be "more likely than general educators" (p. 2) to leave the teaching profession entirely.

Researchers have determined that workplace variables have the greatest impact on a special educator's decision to leave the field. Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) concluded that "specific environmental variables are more powerful predictors of career decisions than most teacher and demographic variables" (Discussion, para. 4). Workplace variables not only affect special education teachers' decisions to leave the field, but they are "also important to teachers' job satisfaction and subsequent career decisions" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 44).

An excess of bureaucratic paperwork is one of the most frequently cited workplace variables in studies involving special education teachers who have decided to leave the field. Additionally, researchers have also established how "burdensome paperwork" (Wasburn-Moses, 2005, p. 36) is significantly related to special education teacher attrition. Regrettably, paperwork is frequently a central and unavoidable component of a special education teacher's daily routine.

Another workplace variable that has been determined to create a significant amount of stress and attrition for special education teachers is dealing with difficult parents, students, and colleagues. Zabel and Zabel (2001) replicated their earlier study and found their participants were still expressing concerns with "working with challenging students, dealing with difficult family situations, and a lack of support from colleagues" (p. 138). With the rapid changes toward inclusion, inclusive practices continue to be implemented within the classrooms while these workplace variables that cause the most stress for special education teachers continue to remain unaddressed.

Even though inclusion brings with it several positive changes, the special educator must now address a new set of role problems within the school environment. From the literature, Billingsley (2004a) summarized these role problems into four categories: *role ambiguity*, *role conflict*, *role dissonance*, and *role overload*. Role ambiguity develops when special education teachers do not receive the information they require in order to fulfill their job requirements on a daily basis. Role conflict occurs when a special education teacher receives conflicting messages regarding the duties and responsibilities of a special educator. Special education teachers experience role dissonance when their perception of what their job entails is different from the general educator's perception of what the role of the special education teacher is in providing support. Role overload develops when the special educator is assigned additional duties and responsibilities that are perceived to be excessive or unreasonable. The literature has demonstrated how workplace variables are influential not only in a special education teacher's decision to leave the field, but also in the level of job satisfaction he or she derives while in the school environment.

While examining the workplace variables that have an impact on a special educator's experiences of stress and attrition, it is also important to include administrators in this analysis because workplace variables such as "excessive paperwork, disagreement with special education policies/practices, lack of teaching materials and resources, and lack of support from central and building office personnel are often under the control of administrators" (Billingsley & Cross, 1991, p. 501). Administrators are responsible for establishing the school climate and for determining the special education teacher's role within the school environment.

Additionally, the literature has also suggested how a lack of administrative support is frequently cited by special education teachers who had left or who were planning to leave the field. For example, Kaff (2004) found that "57% of those considering leaving the field reported that support for their work is not forthcoming" (p. 12) from their administrator. Brownell, Smith, McNellis, and Miller (1997) concluded from their research that many special education teachers who considered leaving the field would remain in special education if workplace conditions improved. Their participants explained how they would "return to special education if they received more administrative support and instructional assistance in the classroom" (p. 153), because they felt that "building administrators did not support their efforts to discipline or educate their students" (p. 153). Unfortunately, the special education content within administrator preparation programs remains minimal.

Cooner, Tochterman, and Garrison-Wade (2005) explained how the leadership role of administrators is "crucial for improved education for students with disabilities, yet in recent years states have moved away from mandating preparation programs to include

coursework on special education policy, procedures, laws, and practice" (p. 1), and as a result of this trend, "many schools will be led by inexperienced leaders without any legal or practical expertise when it comes to special education" (p. 1). With this lack of special education content and knowledge, the phenomenon of special education teachers transferring schools as the result of a perceived lack of administrative support ontinues to be a significant issue within the field.

Research Question and Method

To explore special education teachers' perspectives of administrative support from a special educator's perspective, the methodology used in this study was directed by the research illustrated in the literature surrounding this phenomenon. Researchers have clearly established how specific workplace variables have created the elevated stress and attrition levels among special education teachers. For example, Billingsley (2004b) concluded from her review of the literature that "workplace environments are important to teachers' job satisfaction and subsequent career decisions" (p. 44). However, she also explained how "many attrition researchers attempt to separate various work-related influences" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 45), but this process is difficult because "these influences are inextricably linked" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 45). This study addressed this concern by asking the participants to define the workplace variables that contribute to a special education teacher's experiences of stress and support within the workplace.

Billingsley (2004b) suggested that "although administrators clearly play important roles in supporting teachers" (p. 46), it is also important to take into account the "reciprocity of support among special and general educators, administrators, parents, paraprofessionals, and other service providers" (p. 46). In order to clarify who provides

support, the participants were asked, "In your experience, who provides support to the special educators within the school?," and "Describe your typical relationships with colleagues, with students, and with parents during the time you were in that teaching position."

Several researchers have emphasized the strong correlation between administrative support and teacher attrition. Zabel and Zabel (2002) concluded from their study that "teachers who believe they receive insufficient support from supervisors . . . are more likely to suffer the effects of professional burnout—diminished performance and attrition from the field" (p. 32), and they suggested that "additional study is needed to determine exactly what special education teachers consider to be support" (p. 32) from their administrators. Unlike other researchers, this study provided a contrast between unsupportive and supportive administrators by asking the participants to describe their relationship with their administrator during their least stressful and most stressful teaching positions, and by asking the question, "In your opinion, what can administrators do to better support special educators?"

Most notably, Billingsley (2004a) described her experiences with beginning special education teachers, and how they frequently "began their career with a great deal of optimism; they decided to make a difference in their students' lives, and they eagerly anticipated the first day of school" (p. 371), and she emphasized how "many special educators do not survive the path from hopeful beginner to highly qualified, experienced teacher" (p. 371). Several researchers have examined this phenomenon from the perspective of special education teachers who have left, or who planned to leave the field, but very few studies have involved special education teachers who remained in the field.

As such, this study included the questions, "Why did you decide to become a special education teacher?," and "Why did you decide to remain in special education?"

The data collected from the one-to-one interviews was analyzed using a qualitative approach. Prior to the collection of data, Letters of Introduction/Consent were emailed to all potential participants explaining that participation in the research was voluntary, and every precaution to assure anonymity could not be given as it was possible for someone to guess their identity, however unlikely. Through a word-of-mouth sampling technique, four participants emerged and provided their informed consent to participate in this study. All of the semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone, digitally audio taped with the participant's consent, and were approximately 45 minutes in length. After transcribing each interview, each participant was provided with a transcript of the interview and asked to read for accuracy or for an opportunity to expand on her thoughts.

Researcher's Context

In keeping with a sound phenomenological framework, it is imperative that I disclose why this question is important to me. According to Van Manen (1997), if we try to ignore or forget what we already know, we may find "that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections" (p. 47), and he explained how it is "better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories" (p. 47). Phenomenology seeks to draw the researcher into a deeper understanding of a shared experience by using the participants as co-researchers in the study.

Ever since I can remember, I have always wanted to become a teacher. When I first attended Kindergarten, I wanted to become a teacher so I could write on the chalkboard all day. Around the age of 12 my reason for becoming a teacher changed because I wanted to 'boss' other people around. As a high school student, I found my experiences with tutoring students who had language and mathematics difficulties personally rewarding, so I decided to become a teacher in order to continue helping students who struggled with their academics. I feel very fortunate that I knew my career path from an early age because this kept me focused throughout my secondary and post-secondary academic career. During these years I endured several personal challenges and adversities, but the goal of becoming a teacher provided me with the determination and perseverance to overcome these obstacles with excellence and integrity. As a result, I value my role as a special educator and I have an intense passion for the teaching profession.

I began my teaching career as an intermediate classroom teacher. During these early years, while I was able to address and meet the majority of my students' academic and behavior needs, I quickly realized that I always had a few students who struggled with learning new concepts, retaining new information, or even being able to attend to the lesson without causing disruptions. I decided to complete all the requisite courses in my province that would allow me to attain a specialist in special education and to shift my focus to providing additional support to the students who required my specialized knowledge and training. Since then, the majority of my teaching career has consisted of educating students with a variety of learning, behavior, and social disabilities.

Throughout my special educator's career, I have had the opportunity to work with administrators who have had a diverse range of experiences and academic backgrounds. In my short career thus far, the majority of the interactions I have had with my administrators have been positive. However, I have had administrators whom I felt did not provide me with the support I required in order to fulfill the responsibilities of my special educator's position. During these years, I frequently solicited feedback regarding their expectations of my special educator's role, accepted the feedback they provided, and integrated a variety of new strategies into my programming. Even after articulating to my administrator the support I needed from him, I continued to feel that I was not receiving the support I required in order to be an effective special education teacher. I became frustrated with the lack of control over my changing circumstances, and I decided to transfer to a different school in order to alleviate my feelings of frustration and stress with the limited support I felt I was receiving.

From my early experiences as a special education teacher with unsupportive administrators, I developed the perception that I was not an effective teacher because I was not able to develop and maintain a positive relationship with my administrator. I struggled to determine the personal and professional characteristics that would allow me to receive the support I needed to be an effective teacher, but after making several changes, the situation remained the same. After a year of experiencing high levels of stress and burnout, I decided to transfer schools because I did not feel like I was an effective teacher. After transferring to a different school, I quickly experienced similar circumstances and a lack of support with my new administrator. While struggling with the additional stress this lack of support created, I considered the possibility that perhaps

administrators are not able to manage special and general educators in the same manner because of the differences between the two positions. Special education teachers have roles, duties, responsibilities, and even paperwork that are significantly different from those of the general educator. This realization allowed me to be less critical of myself, but it did not resolve my feelings of stress and frustration because I did not have the ability to change or influence my administrator.

When I began the literature review for my research, it was with the intention to prove to everyone (and to myself) that administrators resented special education teachers because of the additional responsibilities students with disabilities added to an administrator's day. During this process, my perspective significantly shifted and changed as I became more familiar with the phenomenon of special education teacher attrition. I have experienced relief from the realization that I am not the only special educator who has felt they received a lack of support from administration, and that this phenomenon has been prevalent and ongoing since the 1980s. I feel vindicated with the research indicating that while some administrators are unwilling to support special education teachers, most are inexperienced in special education policies and procedures. Near the end of my research, I began to feel distressed because this phenomenon has been prevalent and ongoing since the 1980s, and even with all the recent changes toward an inclusive teaching environment, the trend of frustrated special education teachers continues. After completing my literature review, I believe that both administrators and special education teachers have a role in resolving this phenomenon. The goal of my research is to give special education teachers who have experienced a perceived lack of

administrative support, including myself, a vehicle through which to share their experiences and to give them a voice.

The Research Participants

The participants for this study were qualified special education teachers, who had been teaching for a minimum of five years, with a permanent teaching certificate. Participants were drawn from three Canadian provinces and these provinces were not identified at any point during the research. All the participants were in a full-time special educator's position before they transferred to another school (regular classroom or special education assignment) due to a perceived lack of administrative support. Initially, the anticipated sample size for the study was approximately 10 participants; however, during the year that lapsed in the search for participants, only four emerged.

Significance of the Study

The special education teacher shortage has been, and continues to be, a consistently documented phenomenon (Billingsley, 2004a; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997; Zabel & Zabel, 2001). Researchers have frequently examined the special education teacher attrition by surveying special education teachers who had left, or who were planning to leave the field. First year special educators are the most susceptible to leaving the field or transferring to a different school because they frequently have "high perceptions of stress and a poor school climate" (Miller et al., 1999, Abstract, para. 1). Additionally, researchers such as Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) discovered how some dissatisfied teachers decided not to resign from their position, but remained in the field and became less effective in their duties and responsibilities. From the literature, it became evident that while many studies have surveyed special education

teachers who have experienced job dissatisfaction to the point where they have decided to leave the field, very few have examined circumstances in which special education teachers have transferred to a different school but remained in the teaching profession.

Researchers have demonstrated how a lack of administrative support has had a major contributing factor in special education teachers experiencing job-related stress and burnout, and as a result, established how administrators are also a part of this phenomenon. With the rapid changes toward inclusion, administrators are required to become more familiar with special education policies and procedures in order to manage inclusive learning environments successfully. With a continued lack of special education content in administrator preparation programs, and with the additional resources needed to recruit new special education teachers, the students with disabilities are ultimately the ones who experience the most negative impact of this phenomenon.

This research project initially set out to address the gap in how administrators can provide the most effective support to special education teachers and to assist policymakers in considering these workplace variables when developing special education workshops and training programs for administrators. However, with such a low sample size, caution is given on generalizing the findings beyond the immediate experience of these participants. However, phenomenology does not set out to create or prove theory, but rather it seeks to illuminate common experiences and shared perspectives, and in doing so, provides an opportunity for reflection. By engaging in such reflection and listening to the experiences of these participants, administrators could learn how to better support special education teachers and programs. Additionally, by providing special education teachers with the support they require, administrators will not

only decrease the costs associated with hiring and training new special education teachers, but also help maintain the continuity of programming for students with disabilities.

Overview of the Study

Chapter one of this thesis presents an introduction into the phenomenon, the rationale for examining it, and an outline of the researcher's personal and professional background and how her research interests developed as a result of these experiences. This chapter also contains introductory information into the site and the participants involved in this study.

Chapter two provides a review of the literature as it relates to the special education teacher burnout and attrition phenomenon. Several aspects are highlighted and discussed within this chapter, beginning with establishing how the burnout and attrition of special education teachers has reached crisis levels, and that recent policy changes towards inclusion have not addressed or rectified this phenomenon. Workplace variables contributing to these experiences of stress and attrition, along with the role of administration in controlling the workplace variables that impact special educators, are also examined.

Chapter three outlines the methodology that was used for this study, beginning with the rationale for the qualitative methods that were selected. The process for locating participants is also discussed in detail, along with the data collection method of one-to-one phone interviews with all of the special education teachers. Analysis of the data, the researcher's bracketing process and her role as a researcher are established and

maintained, throughout the study. In doing so, this ensured that all ethical concerns and the trustworthiness of the research were not compromised.

Chapter four offers a phenomenological presentation and analysis of the experiences the participants of this study described during the interview process. These experiences are presented in the language and manner in which they were articulated in order to ensure the essence of the experience was preserved and conveyed accurately.

Chapter five is the concluding chapter where the researcher discusses the common themes that emerged from the interviews. Implications for special education teachers and for administrators are also presented. The chapter concludes with implications for special education teacher and administrator training, ongoing support, as well as suggestions for further study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The educational system over the past twenty years has been in a constant state of transition and change. Policymakers have introduced and implemented inclusion theories in an attempt to provide students with disabilities with an education that is equitable to their peers. Klingner and Vaghn (2002) expressed concerns with this practice because policymakers have very few precedents to provide them with direction as classrooms become more inclusive. With a significant number of special education teachers deciding to leave the field, the potential to provide quality programming is at risk despite the fact that the role of special educators in delivering appropriate programming to students with disabilities is becoming increasingly essential within a collaborative teaching framework. By examining the workplace variables that cause special education teachers stress from their perspective, we will be able to achieve a greater understanding of this phenomenon. This newly acquired knowledge will allow policymakers to make the necessary amendments to existing training programs for both special education teachers and administrators, will allow administrators to achieve a greater understanding of how best to support a special educator, and will allow special education teachers to have an active voice in this process.

The Special Educator Shortage

The special education teacher shortage has been a consistently documented phenomenon since the early 1980s (Billingsley, 2004a; Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997; Brownell et al., 1997; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Embich, 2001; Gersten et al.,

2001; Kaff, 2004; Müller & Markowitz, 2003; Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002; Otto & Arnold, 2005; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997; Zabel & Zabel, 2002). Researchers such as Miller et al. (1999) noted how the "provision of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities is dependent upon the retention of qualified special education teachers" (Abstract, para. 2), and how "the ability of public schools, however, to retain qualified special education teachers is questionable. For over a decade, educators have voiced concerns about higher teacher attrition rates in special education as compared to general education" (Abstract, para. 2).

Other researchers have also consistently demonstrated how the attrition rate for special education teachers exceeds the attrition rate for general education teachers. Whitaker (2000) asserted that "regardless of the methods employed, the definition of attrition that is used, or the populations that are sampled, the attrition rate reported for special education teachers is consistently higher than the attrition rate reported for general education teachers" (para. 2). This assertion supported earlier findings of substantially higher attrition rates for special education teachers in comparison to general educators. For example, Boe et al. (1997) discovered a "higher annual turnover for special education teachers (SETs) than for general education teachers (GETs), in terms of both attrition from public school teaching (SETs = 8%: GETs = 6%) and transfer among public schools (SETs = 13%: GETs = 7%)" (p. 371).

Conversely, it is also important to note that not all dissatisfied special education teachers decided to resign from their position, but remained in the field and simply lowered their expectations and efficiency. Yee (1990) discovered that many teachers who are dissatisfied with their job do not physically leave the field, but instead they "withdraw

emotionally and psychologically, effectively retiring on the job" (p. 120). More recently, Gersten et al. (2001) also demonstrated how teachers lower expectations for students and "reduce their overall involvement and effort" (p. 552). Because of this, they concluded from their study that increasing teacher recruitment is not the answer, and highlighted Merrow's (1999) belief that we're "misdiagnosing the problem as 'recruitment' when it's really 'retention'. Simply put, we train teachers poorly and then treat them badly – and so they leave in droves" (as cited in Gersten et al., 2001, p. 549).

While research has been conducted since the 1980s on the special education teacher shortage phenomenon, few policy changes have been implemented to address high attrition levels. Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) discovered that even though there is considerable research examining the variables that impact a special educator's decision to leave, this large body of research "has not prompted fundamental changes within the profession" (p. 327). Müller and Markowitz (2003) highlighted data indicating that there "is a severe and chronic shortage of special education teachers" (p. 1), and that this trend will continue to get worse. Additionally, they also explained how "trends suggest that the need for new teachers will continue to grow at a rapid pace over the next ten years and will likely increase the teacher shortage" (Müller and Markowitz, 2003, p. 1). Unfortunately, as Billingsley and McLeskey (2004) noted that it is "only recently that this shortage has received significant attention from policymakers" (p. 2), indicating that the necessary policy changes to address this special education teacher shortage have not been made.

Stress and Burnout of Special Educators

Stress and burnout are primary reasons special educators decide to leave the field, and as a result, the literature is replete with studies examining the workplace variables that create stress for special education teachers. Zabel and Zabel (2001) asserted that it is essential to fully understand the impact burnout and attrition have on special education teachers because they possess "commonalities with other human service professionals such as nurses, physicians, police officers, and social workers whose work requires intense involvement with persons who have psychological, social, or physical problems" (p. 129). When examining the stress and burnout levels of special education teachers, researchers have frequently used the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), developed by Schaufeli, Maslach, and Marek (1993). This inventory uses an *emotional exhaustion* scale, *depersonalization* scale, and *reduced feelings of accomplishment* scale to measure these levels. Emotional exhaustion occurs when teachers feel like they are depleted of their own emotional resources or they are being emotionally overextended. Teachers experience depersonalization when they maintain a sense of detachment from colleagues or respond to them in an extremely negative manner. The reduced feelings of accomplishment scale measures the decrease in a teacher's positive interpretation of his or her personal achievements and accomplishments. This inventory has uncovered the underlying effects of the special educator's elevated levels of workplace stress and burnout. From their review of the literature, Fore, Martin, and Bender (2002) discovered how "large-scale surveys of general and special education teachers, as well as smaller interview/questionnaire studies involving special education teachers who had left the classroom, indicate the same general causal factors related to burnout in special

education" (p. 39). The literature surrounding this phenomenon has consistently demonstrated that workplace variables have created the most stress and caused the most burnout among special education teachers.

Stressful Workplace Variables for Special Educators

For at least two decades, researchers have documented the effects of workplace stress on special education teachers, and have demonstrated how specific environmental variables are "more powerful predictors of career decisions" (Miller et al., 1999, Discussion, para. 4) than most demographic and teacher variables. Gersten et al. (2001) confirmed this assertion by demonstrating through path analysis how teachers withdraw and eventually leave the teaching field because of a poorly designed job. It is essential for policymakers and administrators to address the role workplace variables have in creating stress for special education teachers because "job design has been shifting so radically in recent years with the move toward inclusive classrooms and greater collaborative efforts between general and special education teachers" (p. 553).

In an attempt to explain how the different workplace variables are related to and affect a special education teacher's decision to leave the field, researchers have proposed a variety of conceptual models. Billingsley (1993) developed a schematic representation which included three broad categories: *external factors* (economic, institutional, societal), *employment factors* (working conditions, commitment to school), and *personal factors* (maternity leave, retirement). Miller et al. (1999) based their research on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) model of four interrelated systems: the *microsystem* (the teacher's immediate setting), the *mesosystem* (interrelations such as administration and collegial support), the *exosystem* (informal and formal social structures), and the

macrosystem (beliefs of the dominant culture). Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) organized these environmental variables into four domains: "*organizational*, *interpersonal interactions*, *training*, and *instructional assignments and arrangements* [italics added]" (p. 330).

When examining the workplace variables associated with special education teacher attrition and burnout, several themes are repeated throughout the literature. Billingsley and Cross (1991) found that excessive paperwork, disagreements with special education practices and policies, the stress of dealing with students with extreme disabilities, a lack of teaching resources, and a lack of support from colleagues and administration were frequently cited reasons for leaving the special education field. Zabel and Zabel (2001) replicated their study conducted twenty years earlier that examined special educators' experiences of burnout. They concluded that significant job-related stressors are still present for special educators, including "concerns about working with challenging students, dealing with difficult family situations, and a lack of support from colleagues and administrators" (Zabel & Zabel, 2001, p. 138). When they were asked why they decided to leave the field, Wasburn-Moses (2005) explained that special education teachers frequently cited reasons such as "large caseloads; burdensome paperwork; problems with behavior management; and difficulties relating to their general education colleagues, administrators, and parents" (p. 36). The importance of focusing on these workplace variables that cause the greatest stress for special education teachers can be summarized by the findings of Brownell et al. (1997). They discovered from their research that many of their participants would either remain in or return to special education if conditions in the workplace improved, and they concluded that district and

school personnel should "focus on improving the working conditions of classrooms and schools" instead of focusing on recruiting new teachers (p. 153).

Role problems.

Role problems are one of the consistently documented workplace variables that predominantly contribute to a special educator's experience of stress and burnout. Billingsley (2004a) noted that as more school systems adapt an inclusion model, special education teachers are often required to address the challenges of their roles changing and their responsibilities increasing, often without the support of colleagues or administration. She also explained how conflicting or excessive responsibilities can decrease the effectiveness of a special educator, and how "poor role design stymies their efforts" (Billingsley, 2004a, p. 372) by preventing them from applying their specialized skills and training. Billingsley (2004a) summarized these role problems in four categories: role ambiguity (when necessary information about a position is not provided); role conflict (when differing and conflicting expectations are placed on the special educator); role dissonance (when the special educator's perception of his/her role differs from the perspective other teachers have of his/her role); and role overload (when special education teachers have additional duties and responsibilities that are at unreasonable levels). She further emphasized that "additional focus must be given to special educators' roles to help special education teachers develop clarity about what they are to do and to ensure that they have the conditions necessary to use validated practices" (Billingsley, 2004a, p. 372).

While many researchers have demonstrated how an inclusion model frequently creates role conflict and ambiguity for special education teachers, the reasons special

education teachers are more likely to experience stress and burnout as the result of the inclusion model remains unclear. Lortie (1975) believed that teachers obtain different rewards from teaching and categorized these rewards into three different categories. He defined *extrinsic rewards* as the earnings a teacher derives from a position such as title, income, and prestige. Characteristics of a job that people find satisfactory, such as working regularly scheduled hours are considered *ancillary rewards*, while *psychic rewards* are the subjective valuations a person makes while performing a specific job. His research findings indicated that almost 77% of teachers chose psychic rewards whereas almost 12% chose extrinsic rewards and approximately 12% selected ancillary rewards. Rosenholtz (1989) also believed teachers achieve psychic rewards from successful teaching experiences, and suggested that special education teachers are less likely to obtain psychic rewards because of the administrative and paperwork requirements of the job, resulting in dissatisfied and often decision to leave the profession. She explained that in order to "enhance workplace commitment, people must also experience personal responsibility for the outcomes of work, believing that their performance is attributable directly to their own efforts" (p. 423). From the research, it becomes obvious that educators who fill one of the most important roles in teaching students with disabilities often feel excluded from this teaching process, and as a result, are more likely to experience burnout and attrition from role conflicts and ambiguity. In order to achieve a complete and thorough understanding of the impact role problems have on the special education teacher shortage, it is necessary to discuss each of the four role problems identified by Billingsley (2004a) individually and in greater depth.

Role ambiguity.

With recent policy changes towards a more inclusive classroom, special education teachers are required to play a more diverse role in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Zabel and Zabel (2001) observed how over the past two decades, there have been several changes within the special education field, including new professional standards, revised federal legislation, and an increase in inclusive teaching practices. Embich (2001) further supported this assertion by noting that rapid organizational changes towards higher standards, new curricula and teaching practices, and evolving roles are the "result of mandates for restructuring and the inclusion movement" (p. 65). Unfortunately, many special education teachers are unsure as to how to proceed with these changes because the guidelines they are provided with are often minimal. As one participant explained in Klingner and Vaughn's (2002) study, "I understand we are supposed to kind of like be team teachers in a way. But I'd like to know, what really am I supposed to do?" (p. 25).

According to Farber (1991), role ambiguity develops when teachers do not have a definitive understanding about their roles, responsibilities, rights, accountability, or status as a teacher. Gersten, Gillman, Morvant, and Billingsley (1995) discovered how many special education teachers often disagreed with the policies and procedures their school board developed and implemented. For example, in one district, over 50% of the special education teachers reported that they "had to follow policies and procedures that were in conflict with their best professional judgment" (Gersten et al., 1995, p. 1-2), and in two other districts, almost 50% of the special education teachers surveyed "disagreed with district goals and objectives for improving special education programs" (Gersten et al., p.

1-2). Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, and Blake (1995) reported that special education teachers wanted to spend more time providing direct instruction to students with disabilities and less time co-teaching with regular classroom teachers because they felt like they were the 'case managers' of the students' programs and schedules. One participant described her experience with inclusion as

> an idealistic situation, and I can't see it working. If I have children from three different classrooms and two different grades, they can come together and form a group. And I can work with them in a short period of time and accomplish something. But now, with [inclusion] I am supposed to go to these individual rooms. Now where in an hour can I go to three different rooms and accomplish anything?" (p. 3-13)

Embich (2001) reported that for approximately 65% of the special education teachers surveyed, role ambiguity made a significant contribution to their experiences of stress and burnout. She explained how special education teachers who co-teach with regular classroom teachers often experience a reduction of "their sense of personal accomplishment" (Embich, 2001, p. 65), and an increase in "feelings of emotional exhaustion" (Embich, 2001, p. 65). Billingsley (2004b) also noted that "special educators who find it difficult to implement an inclusive program because of inadequate support systems or resistance from general educators may also find their work unfulfilling and look elsewhere" (p. 49).

Role conflict.

The literature has not only established how workplace variables have significantly impacted the level of stress and burnout special educators experience, but also the control

administrators exert over these variables. According to Farber (1991), role conflict develops when inappropriate, inconsistent, or incompatible demands are placed on the special education teacher. As early as the 1980s, researchers such as Lawrenson and McKinnon (1982) reported conflicts with administrators as one of the leading causes of special education teacher attrition. Billingsley and Cross (1991) also found that a lack of support from administration and disagreements with special education procedures were among the reasons most frequently cited for burnout and attrition. Brownell et al. (1997) discovered that special education teachers who had left the field because they "felt that building administrators did not support their efforts to discipline or educate their students" (p. 153), would "return to special education if they received more administrative support and instructional assistance in the classroom" (p. 153). Kaff (2004) cited lack of administrative support as the most cited reason for 57% of special education teachers considering leaving the special education field. Again, these rapid changes toward inclusion are not resolving the special education teacher attrition phenomenon, but are necessitating administrators to become more educated and motivated to provide the necessary support special education teachers require within the workplace environment.

Role dissonance.

Stakeholders in support of inclusion frequently highlight research that demonstrates how collaboration is a necessary and essential component of an inclusive classroom. Porter (2008) asserted how it is

> past time for educational leaders and policy makers to bite the bullet and purge our educational system of segregation and discrimination based on a diagnosis or

> clinically-based label. Exceptions to inclusion will occur from time to time, but they are currently much too common in many parts of Canada. (p. 62)

Billingsley (2004b) suggested that in order for inclusion to be successful, "reciprocity of support among special and general educators" (p. 46) needs to occur. Hines (2008) also identified collaboration between general and special education teachers as essential for successful inclusion of all students. With the transition of many educational systems towards inclusion, collaboration continues to maintain its importance as an influential variable in a special educator's experience of attrition and burnout. While researchers have illustrated since the 1990s the importance of general educators providing support to special education teachers, many special education teachers continue to feel isolated and excluded from the school environment. Hansen (2007) explained how in many cases, "special education teachers are painfully isolated" (p. 38) and must "rely upon themselves to understand and solve their own problems" (p. 38).

Billingsley, Gersten, Gillman, and Morvant (1995) also found that while there is considerable emphasis on developing inclusive learning environments, "an appreciable proportion of special education teachers feel isolated, and attempts to collaborate with other teachers in the school are likely to be extremely difficult" (p. ii). Embich (2001) concluded that special education teachers who team teach are "often placed in situations where they must learn to deal with philosophical differences regarding instructional approach, and where they must establish a strong working relationship with an individual who may not seek to share teaching responsibilities" (p. 65). Billingsley's (2004b) research further supported this assertion when she observed difficulties of special education teachers in implementing inclusive programming because of "inadequate

support systems or resistance" (p. 49) from general education teachers. Various reasons have been proposed for general educators' resistance to collaborate with special educators. Embich (2001) suggested this tenuous relationship between general and special educators could be the result of "personality and misconceptions, fears about team teaching and students with disabilities" (p. 67).

Approximately half of Kaff's (2004) respondents felt that general educators needed more knowledge about the duties and responsibilities of special education teachers. One of her respondents explained how most general education teachers "think that because we have only a fraction of the normal class that we only do a fraction of the work" (p. 14). From their examination of a variety of teacher preparation programs and earlier research, DiPaola et al. (2004) concluded that "few university training programs adequately prepare teachers to work with other adults" (p. 5), and "highly qualified context specialists often lack the interpersonal skills needed to collaborate effectively with colleagues" (p. 5). Unfortunately, these perspectives not only affect the special education teacher's ability to provide appropriate programming, but also the services children with disabilities need to receive in order to be successful within an academic setting.

Role overload.

The requirements of an inclusive classroom necessitate that special education teachers spend more time on paperwork, collaborate with general education teachers, and perform other administrative duties which decrease the time they are able to spend directly servicing students with disabilities. Special education teachers experience role

overload when they feel they are unable to manage the additional demands of their job because of a lack of time or a lack of resources.

Paperwork associated with special education is one of the significant causes of insufficient time and increased levels of stress. According to Farber (1991), special education teachers often consider the quantity of required paperwork to be intrusive, trivial, or unnecessary. Zabel and Zabel (2001) found that the paperwork needed to fulfill legal and regulatory requirements was the most frequently cited cause for a special educator's high levels of stress. Fifty-two percent of Kaff's (2004) respondents reported that they had to complete an overwhelming amount of documentation and 40% felt it necessary to decrease the amount of paperwork they were required to complete. Billingsley (2004b) highlighted findings from the Paperwork in Special Education (2002) study, and concluded that paperwork issues were "significantly related" (p. 48) to a special educator's decision to leave the field, with more than 50% of special education teachers reporting that paperwork interfered with their ability to teach to a "great extent" (p. 48), while general educators were "significantly less likely" (p. 48) to state that paperwork interfered with their ability to teach.

Even administrators are aware of the fact that special education teachers experience greater paperwork demands. Half of the administrators who participated in Zaretsky, Moreau, and Faircloth's (2008) study expressed concerns about the "current shortage of qualified and competent personnel in special education" (p. 168) due to the excessive paperwork. Ironically, Embich (2001) suggested that if special education teachers "continue to spend all their planning time writing [Individual Education Plans]; setting up conferences; serving as hall and lunchroom monitors; completing special

documentation and other school forms . . . little time will remain for co-planning which is an integral part of the team teaching process" (p. 67). This conclusion supports the earlier observation made by Billingsley and Cross (1991) who suggested that "the problem may not be the paperwork itself, but what the paperwork prevents teachers from doing" (p. 507) that motivates special education teachers to leave the field.

Another aspect of role overload that has a significant impact on a special education teacher's decision to leave the field is the lack of time and resources available to special education teachers. In their examination of sources of stress for urban and rural teachers, Abel and Sewell (1999) found that poor working conditions involving a "shortage of educational supplies . . . and sparsely distributed educational funds" (p. 292) were the "best predictors of burnout for both urban and rural teachers" (p. 292). From her research with administrators, Kaff (2004) noted that 47% "of the respondents believed that special education teachers are expected to perform multiple roles without adequate resources" (p. 12). Kaufhold, Alverez, and Arnold (2006) also explored the frustration caused by a lack of teaching materials, and half of their respondents reported that "they 'strongly agreed' that they lacked sufficient school supplies, materials and resources in order to do their job properly" (p. 160), and "no teacher surveyed claimed that they did have adequate supplies" (p. 160). They concluded by stating that "one valid and fairly simple solution to the high attrition rate of special education teachers would be to urge administrators to channel allotted funds to these teachers and to ensure that they have the necessary resources and administrative support" (Kaufhold et al., 2006, p. 161). Brownell et al. (1997) also reported that "disgruntled leavers indicated that they were unable to appropriately educate large, diverse classes of students without appropriate

materials" (p. 153), and suggested that "any retention efforts by district and school personnel should focus on improving the working conditions of classrooms and schools" (p. 153).

Other issues that have surfaced in the literature as contributing to role overload for special education teachers include interactions with difficult students and a lack of professional development opportunities for special educators.

Diverse and Difficult Students.

One of the most familiar and self-evident variables that impacts the work environment for special education teachers is the diversity and severity of the disabilities of students they are required to teach and to interact with on a daily basis. Lashley (2007) explained how "regular educators looked at us as outsiders and expressed how happy they were not to be dealing with the problems we dealt with daily" (pp. 179-180). Gersten et al. (1995) found that in one district, "25% of the special education faculty are dissatisfied with the extent to which their principals understand what they do in their classroom" (p. 11), and in another district, "almost one third of the teachers surveyed did not feel that they could count on their principal to provide appropriate assistance when a student's behavior required it" (p. 11). One participant from Billingsley et al.'s (1995) study explained how it seemed like the administrator "did not have time to be bothered about what I called severe classroom problems, such as bringing weapons to school, students hitting teachers, and other students. The discipline was not consistent, nor was any discipline carried out" (pp. 6-7).

Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) also concluded that special education teachers of "students with emotional or behavioral difficulties reported higher rates of occupational

stress, job-related distress, and attrition" (p. 336). Rosenholtz (1989) suggested that for "new tasks to be highly motivating . . . people must have confidence that they possess the ability and skills to accommodate increased work challenges" (p. 425), and highlighted Ashton and Webb's (1986) research examining high- and low- efficacy teachers. She explained how "efficacious teachers were less likely to appear threatened by behavior problems and handled them quietly and directly, without public embarrassment of students or classroom dismissal" (p. 435), whereas "low-efficacy teachers experienced far more instances of student misbehavior overall" (p. 435).

It is important to note that it is not just the severity of the behavioral and emotional needs of the students special education teachers teach, but also the extreme diversity of students with disabilities within their classrooms. Billingsley (2004b) concluded that it "may be not simply the number of students but, rather, the diversity of caseloads that is problematic for teachers" (p. 49). Brownell at al. (1997) found that special education teachers frequently stated that "high, diverse student caseloads and no paraprofessionals to assist in the classroom lead to frustration" (p. 149). One participant explained how she would return to the field if she had "more personal control over her situation" (p. 149), suggesting that it was often beyond a special education teacher's control to decide what was best for the students and how many students should be included in the class. Kaff's (2004) study of special education teachers further supported these conclusions, in which 57% "indicated that the number of students and the range of disabilities assigned to their caseload made it difficult for them to meet the needs of their students" (p. 13).

Lack of Professional Development for Special Educators.

Another factor frequently cited by special education teachers as contributing to them leaving the field is a lack of professional development opportunities. Gersten et al. (2001) concluded that "it is important that special education teachers feel that—regardless of their years of experience—they continue to learn on the job" (p. 560). Fore et al. (2002) also highlighted how "another concern for educators was the opportunities to observe how others within the field set up programs for inclusion and other practices in the field" (p. 40).

While special education teachers have expressed a desire to participate in professional development opportunities, several studies have revealed that the lack of these opportunities contributes to a special educator's experience of stress and burnout (Billingsley, 2004a; Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Fore et al., 2002; Gersten et al., 2001; Otto & Arnold, 2005). For example, Nichols and Sosnowsky (2002) found that "dissatisfaction with both professional development opportunities and university preparation statistically increased levels of emotional exhaustion" (p. 80). The researchers suggested that special education teachers "did not feel college adequately prepared them for their actual assignment nor were professional development opportunities provided, available or paid for to support their teaching assignment, resulting in emotional exhaustion" (Nichols and Sosnowsky, 2002, pp. 80-81).

The Importance of Addressing Special Educator Attrition

One of the most significant impacts of the attrition and ongoing burnout of special education teachers is the "provision of appropriate educational services to students with disabilities" by qualified special education teachers (Fore et al., 2002, p 36). Because of

this shortage, several states have granted emergency endorsements, allowing "persons without preparation as special education teachers, and in some instances as general educators, to teach students with disabilities" (Zabel & Zabel, 2002, p. 27). Billingsley (2004b) also believed that the special education teacher shortage has "serious and far-reaching implications for students with disabilities" (p. 39). While students with behavior and emotional issues are in most need of programs that are consistent in "philosophy and implementation (Brownell et al., 1997, p. 143), they explained that the high turnover for special education teachers "can have a devastating effect on establishing high-quality programs for [all] students with disabilities" (p. 143).

The first years of a special educator's teaching career can have a negative impact on his or her decision to remain in the field. Whitaker (2000) highlighted descriptions of the first year of one of her special education participants as "tak[ing] so much out of you. I had all these grand plans, but it's so hard. I love teaching, but it's really difficult" (para. 1). Billingsley (2004b) asserted the importance of teachers "obtain[ing] support during the early stages of their careers, when they are most likely to leave" (p. 46). Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler (2005) found that problematic interactions "between principals and beginning educators has been cited as an ongoing issue that is both critical and unaddressed" (p. 37). Again, administrators play a key role in retaining qualified special education teachers, especially during the first five years of a special educator's career.

It has been suggested that the changes associated with the inclusion teaching model will naturally rectify the special education teacher shortage, thereby making additional research into this phenomenon unnecessary. Unfortunately, research has demonstrated that implementation of the inclusion model may not only leave the special

education teacher shortage unresolved, but also continue to perpetuate this phenomenon. For example, Fore et al. (2002) provided a summary of research published since 1995 which illustrated "the evolving nature of special education, such as the recent expectations for inclusive instruction, the changes in disciplinary tactics . . . and the ever-increasing paperwork load on special education teachers" (p. 37). Zabel and Zabel's (2001) replication of a study they had conducted almost twenty years earlier found a significant number of participants who still "expressed concerns about working with challenging students, dealing with difficult family situations, and lack of support from colleagues and administrators" (p. 138). The noted "increased 'paperwork' associated with legal and regulatory requirements in special education" (p. 138) as the most frequently cited reason for job dissatisfaction. Clearly, even with all the recent policy changes towards inclusion, research has continued to substantiate the prevalence of workplace variables that have caused attrition and burnout among special education teachers.

One of the most practical and perhaps the most urgent reason to address the special education teacher shortage is the financial implications of constant hiring and training of new staff. Miller et al. (1999) concluded from their research that there is a "considerable financial expense of hiring and training new special education teachers" (Conclusions, para. 1). Boe et al. (1997) suggested that "administrators might consider investing more effort and resources in retaining experienced [special education] teachers and investing less in the training and recruiting of replacements" (p. 382). Again, it is important to note that students with disabilities are the ones who suffer the most when the

funds that could be used to provide appropriate services are being used to continually hire and train new special education teachers.

The Impact of Administrative Support on Special Education

Researchers have highlighted key workplace variables that have a negative impact on a special education teacher's career, including overwhelming amounts of paperwork, difficult general classroom teachers, diverse and challenging students, and unsupportive administrators. In particular, the impact of administrators on special education has been identified as central to an inclusive learning environment. Crockett (2002) highlighted how the professional literature in both special education and educational leadership "intersect" (p. 158), illustrating the strong interrelationship between administrators and special education teachers.

Some researchers such as Gersten et al. (2001) have asserted that it might be "more useful to conceptualize building level support as the cumulative impact of the building principal, assistant principal, and fellow teachers at the school than to separately examine support from the building principal" (p. 563). However, other researchers such as Lashley (2007) have argued how administrators "can play a key role by furthering attempts in their schools to provoke changes" (p. 178). More specifically, DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) highlighted the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium's (ISLLC) standards for administrators. Their discussion includes Standard 2, which is based on research that has demonstrated how "effective management, supervision, and encouragement helps ensure that teachers and specialists work together to implement effective instructional programs, manage classroom behavior, and monitor student performance continually" (p. 17). In other words, it is important to remember that

while the administrator is part of the administrative team, she or he is ultimately responsible for establishing the school climate and for ensuring that all staff members collaborate in order to achieve a successful inclusive learning environment for all students.

Administrators are influential in retaining qualified special education teachers necessary for the successful implementation of special education programs. Billingsley (2004a) highlighted her earlier research where it was discovered that special education teachers "who stay in their positions are almost four times more likely than teachers who leave to strongly perceive administrators' behavior as supportive and encouraging" (p. 374). She also proposed that administrators can "support special educators by facilitating positive school climates, fostering collegial environments, and ensuring that teachers have the supports needed for their work" (p. 374). Conversely, Goor, Schwenn, and Boyer (1997) cautioned that when administrators "delegate most or all special education roles . . . they are abdicating their leadership function. For special programs to be successful, principals must believe in the significance of their involvement and take responsibility for the outcomes" (Essential Beliefs, para. 5).

Types of Administrative Support

While researchers are in agreement over the multidimensional nature of support administrators provide, several frameworks have been suggested to illustrate the various components of support. House (1981) developed four definitions of support, including emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. House's framework is one of the most frequently cited within the literature examining special education teacher attrition.

Emotional support.

According to House (1981), *emotional support* involves "providing empathy, caring, love, and trust" (p. 24) to others, and appears to be the most important type of support because its "impact on stress and health is clearly documented" (p. 24). Littrell, Billingsley, and Cross (1994) believed administrators can provide emotional support by showing special educators that "they are esteemed, trusted professionals and worthy of concern by such practices as maintaining open communication, showing appreciation, taking an interest in teachers' work, and considering teachers' ideas" (Principal Support Defined, para. 2). From their research, they also concluded that emotional support is the most important for both general and special education teachers. Unfortunately, as the result of inclusive teaching practices, special education teachers are often isolated from their colleagues and frequently have to "rely upon themselves to understand and solve their own problems" (Hansen, 2007, p. 38).

Instrumental support.

House (1981) explained how people provide *instrumental support* when "they help other people do their work, take care of them, or help them pay their bills" (p. 25). More specifically, administrators provide instrumental support by helping special education teachers with "work-related tasks, such as providing necessary materials, space, and resources, ensuring adequate time for teaching and nonteaching duties, and helping with managerial-type concerns" (Littrell et al, 1994, Principal Support Defined, para. 3). Müller and Markowitz (2003) also found that "instructional support (e.g. ensuring adequate time for teaching and non-teaching duties; providing needed materials, space and resources) has a significant impact on a special educator's job satisfaction and level

of commitment" (p. 4). Research has also indicated that administrators are aware of the lack of support they provide to special education teachers. When asked about the average percentages of time they spend on general and special education, administrators responded that "79% . . . of their time was spent on regular education and 21% . . . was spent on special education" (Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006, p. 575).

Informational support.

House (1981) defined *informational support* as "providing a person with information that the person can use in coping with personal and environmental problems" (p. 25) and it "helps people to help themselves" (p. 25). Littrell et al. (1994) believed that administrators are providing informational support when they can offer special education teachers practical information that can be used to improve their teaching practices. Unfortunately, researchers such as Gersten et al. (1995) reported that many special education teachers continue to explain how their "administrators tended to focus on *monitoring their work* or unilaterally implementing quick-fix solutions to problems rather than on *proactively providing assistance* or coaching to help them successfully accomplish their work" (p. 4).

Appraisal support.

As the leader of the school, the administrator has the responsibility of providing special education teachers with *appraisal support* such as "frequent and constructive feedback about their work, information about what constitutes effective teaching, and clear guidelines regarding job responsibilities" (Littrell et al., 1994, Principal Support Defined, para. 4). House (1981) also asserted that feedback can be communicated directly to the teacher, or indirectly by establishing standards that allow teachers to

determine their performance on an individual basis. Littrell et al. (1994) described appraisal support as the second most important type of support an administrator could provide. Special education teachers wanted their administrator to "trust their judgment in making classroom decisions and to show confidence in their actions" (Specific Dimensions of Support, para. 5). Additionally, Gersten et al. (2001) found that when "special educators engage in meaningful substantive conversations with administrators . . . about their jobs, role dissonance and stress is reduced" (p. 560).

Variables Affecting Administrative Support

Since the 1980s, researchers have demonstrated how administrators indirectly affect special educators' level of burnout and attrition through the previously identified workplace variables over which they exert control. Additionally, the literature has also substantiated how administrators have directly contributed to the special education teacher shortage by not providing special education teachers with the support they need. However, the question remains, why are administrators still not providing this support to special education teachers?

Negative perception of special education.

Some researchers have asserted that this lack of administrative support is the result of the administrator's negative attitude towards students with disabilities. Goor and Schwenn (1995) found that administrators felt resentment towards students requiring special services because they demanded a significant amount of time and specialized resources. Lashley (2007) also discovered that many administrators believed students with disabilities "[brought] a number of problems to school with them—problems of poverty, discrimination, behavior" (p. 179). Zaretsky et al. (2008) explained how

negative perceptions of administrators have been allowed to continue because policymakers have not made any major changes to encourage administrators to explore the "theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural understandings" (p. 163) of special education and students with disabilities. Anderson (1999) found that administrators were often resistant towards inclusion because of a lack of training rather than negative attitudes or perceptions towards the special education department, and he identified the importance of evaluating the training programs of administrators.

Lack of special education content in training programs.

For almost two decades, administrators have expressed concerns with feeling inadequately prepared to provide the guidance and support special education teachers require from them. Breton and Donaldson (1991) revealed that many administrators received minimal or no training in how to supervise special education teachers, and as a result, did not feel they were doing an adequate job as an administrator. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) asserted that "to be considered competent, principals should have fundamental knowledge of special education as well as knowledge of current issues in special education" (p. 154). Powell and Hyle (1997) discovered that even though there were well-established federal guidelines, administrators reported different perceptions of what a *least restrictive environment* involved, and as a result, they either had an oversimplified or an illegal implementation of inclusion. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) concluded that administrators may "unintentionally thwart" (p. 11) a special education teacher's efforts to provide support to a student with disabilities because they do not understand how best to support a special education teacher. Lowe and Brigham (2000) suggested that school administrators "who directly supervise the

instruction of special education teachers, must also, as professionals, be able to clinically evaluate the varied instructional practices of the specialists on their faculties to ensure that best practice methodologies are being employed" (p. 6). Wakeman et al. (2006) explained how "many principals are receiving little to no formal preservice or inservice training" (p. 154) in special education, and how this lack of special education content in administrator training programs will continue to undermine the successful implementation of inclusion and the delivery of special education services. Lowe and Brigham (2000) concluded that if we believe that administrators are the leaders of the school, then we cannot exclude special education from their training programs. Regrettably, their findings have illustrated that "many administrative preparatory programs have done just that" (Lowe and Brigham, 2000, p. 13). Earlier researchers such as Monteith (1998) also found that even though 75% of participants did not have any formal special education training, 90% replied that formal special education training was required to be an effective administrator.

The responsibilities and duties of administrators have significantly increased with the implementation of inclusion, thus requiring them to become increasingly familiar with special education policies and procedures in order to successfully manage an inclusive learning environment. Zaretsky et al. (2008) reviewed Canadian and American administrator preparation programs and found that special education is still not given adequate treatment. For example, Ontario's qualification courses for administrators do not address special education as a separate component, but integrates it as components of human resources, curriculum, and legal issues. They also discovered that while the Ontario Principals Council (OPC) does offer administrators one-day workshops in special

education, "there is no requirement that aspiring or practicing administrators be certified in special education" (p. 162).

Summary

Otto and Arnold (2005) explained how occupations that are well respected, well paid, and provide excellent working conditions "rarely have difficulty with recruitment or retention" (para. 7). Unfortunately, Miller et al. (1999) revealed that for over a decade, "educators have voiced concerns about high teacher attrition rates in special education as compared to general education" (Abstract, para. 2), and how the retention of qualified special education teachers is doubtful. Gersten et al. (2001) highlighted how earlier research "initiated a profound revolution by arguing that in order to increase student learning, we need to understand and then improve the conditions in which teachers work" (p. 550). Researchers agree that workplace variables have the most impact on the special education teacher shortage, and that administrators play a significant role in this crisis because many of these workplace variables are within their control.

With the rapid shift towards inclusion, there have been significant changes to the duties and responsibilities of administrators. Bateman and Bateman (2001) noted that inclusion practices have not only changed the role of the administrator, but have also required administrators to become more familiar with special education policies and procedures. However, almost no state requires administrators to participate in formal special education training. This lack of special education knowledge and formal special education training results in many administrators not being familiar with, or comfortable in, supporting special education teachers to create an inclusive environment (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001).

Billingsley (2004b) concluded from her review of the literature that "policymakers and administrators interested in reducing attrition must facilitate the development of better work environments for special educators" (p. 53). While addressing the workplace variables that contribute to a special education teacher's stress and burnout, she acknowledged that "focusing on one or two aspects of teachers' work lives will probably be insufficient to substantially reduce attrition" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 54), and suggested a "holistic look at creating positive work environments [to] not only reduce attrition behavior but also help sustain special educators' involvement in and commitment to their work" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 54). A review of the literature has revealed that while several of these workplace variables have been examined from the perspective of special education teachers who have left, or were planning to leave the field, very few studies have surveyed participants who have remained in the special education field. This gap in the literature will continue to undermine any attempts to holistically resolve this phenomenon of special education teacher burnout and attrition.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Hammersley (1992) believed that the goal of research is to "provide information that is not only true" (p. 85) but also "of relevance to issues of human concern" (p. 85). The goals of this study were not only to contribute to the existing literature examining special education teacher attrition, but also to encourage administrators and policymakers to reflect on how to support special education teachers in the most effective manner prior to their decision to leave the special education field. According to Van Manen (1997), researchers within the field of phenomenology know that the essence of a phenomenon is highly complex, and it is "not a single, fixed property by which we know something; rather, it is meaning constituted by a complex array of aspects, properties, and qualities" (p. xv). He also explained how research is a caring act because we strive to know the very essence of a phenomenon, and in doing so, "we will not only learn much about life, we also will come face to face with its mystery" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 6). Such a methodology seemed fitting to examine the phenomenon of special education teachers who have felt unsupported by their administrators, and eventually transferred to a different school.

The rationale for selecting a phenomenological research design, the methods used to locate special education participants, and the methods implemented during the data collection and analysis will be described thoroughly within this chapter. Additionally, the role of the researcher and all potential ethical concerns are also outlined. In doing so, this study has produced findings derived from a real world setting, the location in which the "phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally" (Patton, 2001, p. 39).

Rationale for Research Design

A qualitative model was selected for this study because of its difference from other scientific research designs that "focus on the creation of knowledge in a contained and event-oriented manner" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 5). In particular, Van Manen (1997) asserted that phenomenological research maintains a focus on meaning, whereas other human and social sciences rely on "statistical relationships among variables, on the predominance of social opinions, or on the occurrence or frequency of certain behaviors" (p. 11). He also explained how phenomenology differs from other disciplines because it

> does not aim to explicate meaning specific to particular cultures (ethnography), to certain social groups (sociology), to historical periods (history), to mental types (psychology), or to an individual's personal life history (biography). Rather, phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 11)

Other theorists including LeCompte and Preissle (1993) further acknowledged how theories that explain an individual phenomenon cannot be used to predict the cause of a different kind of phenomenon; however, they "can be used in a comparative fashion to alert researchers to themes or events which might be common to similar phenomena under different conditions" (p. 119). In keeping with these assertions, special education teachers who were still within the field, had experienced a lack of administrative support, and made the decision to transfer to a different school were interviewed for this study. This created research that was not only in alignment with the phenomenological

perspective, but was also able to uncover themes within this phenomenon that could be of interest to those involved in the special education field.

The interpretivist paradigm was selected for this study because it emphasizes social interactions as providing the basis of knowledge, and this knowledge is "constructed by mutual negotiation and it is specific to the situation being investigated" (O'Donoghue, 2007, p. 10). Patton (2002) also acknowledged that the "descriptions of experience and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one" (p. 106), and interpretation "is essential to an understanding of experience and the experience includes the interpretation" (p. 106). Smith and Lovatt (1991) suggested that the only way researchers can demonstrate their understanding of a phenomenon is to paraphrase the meaning gained from the data provided by participants. Chenitz and Swanson (1986) defined interpretivists as being concerned with "how people define events or reality" (p. 4), and how they "act in relation to their beliefs" (p. 4).

Researchers have frequently surveyed, and sometimes interviewed, special education teachers who have decided to leave the teaching field as the result of extreme stress and burnout. However, very few studies have examined the circumstances in which special education teachers have perceived a lack of administrative support, but have merely transferred schools instead of leaving the field altogether. Because special education teacher attrition has been established and continues to maintain its presence within the literature, this research project not only contributes to the previously established research, but it also uncovers potential underlying themes that have remained unaddressed. In doing so, special education teachers and administrators are now better able to define their evolving roles within an inclusion model, and policymakers are more

aware of the necessity of implementing overdue changes within both special education and administrator training programs.

Selection Procedures

The focus of qualitative research is to achieve a rich description of a specific phenomenon, and in order to accomplish this, a specific group of participants was interviewed. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) believed that a snowball or referral method is useful when the nature of the topic being researched is of a sensitive nature and for "sampling a population where access is difficult" (p. 116). Kvale (1996) maintained that there is not a specific number of participants a researcher needs to strive towards obtaining, and suggested that researchers interview "as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (p. 101).

The participants were all special education teachers who had special education qualifications and who were teaching full-time within Canada for a minimum of five years with a permanent teaching certificate at the time of the interviews. Participants emerged from three different Canadian provinces, none of which were identified at any point during the research. All the participants indicated that they were employed in a full-time special education teaching position prior to transferring to a different school as the result of aversive workplace variables and a perceived lack of administrative support.

Prior to commencing the research, the target population size was approximately 10 participants. At one point during the participant referral process, six special education teachers were contacted; however, two participants declined from participating in the study for personal reasons. After a full year of searching for other participants, the final

project was conducted with only four special education teachers. The significance of this small population is discussed in Chapter five.

Individual, one-to-one interviews were conducted over the telephone with the remaining four participants. While this number is less than the anticipated size, several key themes emerged from the interactions with the participants. The special education teachers brought with them a diverse range of teaching experiences, cultural backgrounds, personal circumstances, and ages of students they had taught. Additionally, they collectively spoke from three different Canadian provinces, and from approximately 70 years of experience within the special education field. Nonetheless, this is a limited study of four special education teachers' perceptions of their shared experiences.

Data Collection Methods

A semi-structured, one-to-one interview with the participants was selected as the data collection method because it allowed access to "people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than the words of the researcher" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). With one-to-one interviews, the researcher used the participants as the starting point for the data collection process because it is assumed they have "unique and important knowledge" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 119) that they can verbally communicate to the researcher. Phenomenological interviews not only combine the personal experiences of the researchers and the participants, but also focus on the "deep, lived meanings" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 105) that these events have for each of the special education teachers in this study. This study was based on the assertions of Spradley (1979) who believed that the researcher should attempt to understand the phenomenon from the participant's point of view, to know what the participants know in the way they

know it, and to achieve a greater understanding of the meaning the participants attribute to their experiences. This data collection method enabled the researcher to "describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 104).

According to Patton (2002), triangulation is integral in strengthening a study because of the combination of data collection and analysis methods. He also emphasized that the purposes of triangulation should not be to demonstrate or illustrate how different sources of data or approaches of inquiry reveal similar results, but rather to "*test for* such consistency" (p. 248). Denzin (1978) suggested four basic types of triangulation: (1) *methodological triangulation* (when the researcher uses multiple methods); (2) *investigator triangulation* (when more than one researcher is used); (3) *data triangulation* (using data from a variety of sources), and (4) *theory triangulation* (using a variety of perspectives to interpret the research. Recently, Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) suggested that *descriptive triangulation* can also be employed because it encourages consistency between the participant and the researcher. When the researcher shows the "findings and/or interpretations to the participants for assessment of accuracy" (p. 575), this process can increase both "the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings" (p. 575).

This study used several measures to help ensure descriptive triangulation within the data collection and analysis. Subsequent to each interview, the conversation was transcribed directly from the digital audio recording using each participant's exact language and descriptions of their experiences. Each transcription was emailed to each participant in order to afford them the opportunity to read, edit, delete, and/or make any necessary changes to the information contained within the interview transcript. Finally,

once transcription was completed, each participant was given another copy and asked if it was an accurate articulation of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Bracketing.

Bracketing was one of the data analysis strategies employed during this study. This strategy encourages researchers to approach the phenomenon as if they are unaware of what it means, and to study it in order to "find out what is actually taken for granted" (Bogden & Biklen, 2007, p. 25). Hatch (2002) also asserted how bracketing involves the researcher to separate "impressions, feelings, and early interpretations during qualitative data collection" (p. 86). Van Manen (1997) encouraged researchers to be strong in their orientation to the phenomenon being studied, but also cautioned against "becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away" (p. 20) by preconceptions. He further explained how subjectivity and objectivity are not mutually exclusive in the human sciences, and how researchers can achieve objectivity by remaining oriented and true to the phenomenon. In other words, the researcher defends and guards the essential nature of the phenomenon, while striving to "show it, describe it," and "interpret it while remaining faithful to it" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 20).

In order for the participants' data to be successfully analysed, the researcher needs to become aware of the perspectives and opinions she holds regarding this phenomenon, and then to "put them aside – to bracket them – in order to be open and receptive" (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991, p. 50) to the phenomenon being studied. As outlined in Chapter one, the researcher described her own process of becoming a teacher, then a special educator. During her career as a special education teacher, she

personally experienced stressful workplaces and encountered administrators who were either unwilling or unable to provide the support necessary for her to be an effective special educator. During the bracketing process, the researcher discovered that her desire for retribution against administrators decreased while her concern for other special education teachers who experienced similar circumstances increased. Most importantly, this concern developed out of a sincere desire to improve the special education programming students with disabilities rely on and require in order to achieve personal and academic success.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

Hermeneutic phenomenology involves combining interpretive/hermeneutic methods and interpretive/phenomenological methods when examining the data the participants have provided. In other words, "phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the 'texts' of life" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 4). Wolcott (1994) further asserted that the data can be analyzed, described, or interpreted, and in qualitative research, all three are present to some degree.

Analysis.

Cohen et al. (2007) explained how qualitative data analysis involves the researcher organizing and explaining the data while making sense of it "in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, and irregularities" (p. 461). While they suggested that there is no correct or incorrect method to analyse or interpret the data, they maintained that researchers should practice *fitness for purpose*. This process entails the researcher having a clear understanding about what the data analysis should do because it will "determine the kind of analysis performed on the data"

(Cohen et al., 2007, p. 461). Van Manen (1997) also explained how researchers who remain aware of their own experiences with the phenomenon can effectively orient themselves not only to the phenomenon, but to "all the other stages of phenomenological research" (p. 57).

The goal of data analysis in this study was to reveal the influential variables in a special education teacher's decision to transfer to a different school instead of leaving the field entirely. Several studies have involved special education teachers who have left the field because of stress and burnout, but very few have addressed why some special education teachers who also encounter a lack of administrative support and stressful workplace environments remain in the field. In order to address this gap in the literature, the experiences and variables associated with a stressful workplace environment were contrasted with school environments that special education teachers perceived as supportive. Additionally, grouping the responses of the participants according to the interview questions allowed patterns and themes to emerge.

Description.

Wolcott (1994) suggested that it is impossible for qualitative researchers to present pure descriptions because they receive the data through their own interpretive lens and subsequently decide which data to include and exclude from the study. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) stated that a qualitative study, regardless of how theoretical it is, should contain data that is rich and descriptive because the researchers are attempting to "give readers a feeling of 'walking in the informants' shoes' – and seeing things from their point of view'" (p. 135). Additionally, Lewins (1992) explained that descriptions are never just *mere* descriptions because when researchers describe anything, "we describe it

with the categories and concepts of our major preoccupation in mind" (p. 26). Van Manen (1997) believed that the essence of a phenomenon has been adequately described if the language reveals the "significance of the experience in a fuller and deeper manner" (p. 10).

Describing the data was the most important component of the data analysis for this study. One of the fundamental goals of this research was to give the participants a voice, while another was to preserve as much of their viewpoints as possible within the findings without compromising the essence of their experiences. The most effective method for allowing the reader to experience the successes and frustrations of the participants was to use their unique personal descriptions of their lived experiences. Hence, direct quotations from the one-to-one interview transcripts were included while the descriptive language of their shared experiences was minimized. This process ensured special education participants have a voice – not only within this research, but within the literature surrounding this phenomenon as well.

Interpretation.

Wolcott (1994) encouraged researchers to move beyond the "factual data and cautious analysis" (p. 36) and probe deeper into the meaning of the data. Hatch (2002) also believed that the "plausibility of interpretations comes from the researcher's ability to use the data to make a case for his or her interpretations" (p. 58). It has been suggested that the interpretation of data is characterized by a *hermeneutical circle* or 'spiral' where the meaning of the data is coherent and "free of inner contradictions" (Kvale, 1987, p. 62). Eichelberger (1989) acknowledged that the interpretations hermeneutists have constructed are based on the responses of each participant. More specifically, he noted

that other researchers would have developed different types of reactions or scenarios, or focused on different aspects of the phenomenon because of their different backgrounds, different research methods used, or different purposes for conducting their research.

From the data collection and analysis methods, several key themes emerged from the one-to-one interactions with the participants. As a special education teacher, the significance of the data and how policymakers, administrators, and other special education teachers should proceed is explained. By preserving each special education teacher's voice within the data, interpretations are constructed based on their authentic insights and rich descriptions within their responses. Additionally, because the researcher has experienced similar circumstances within her own teaching career, she was able to ensure that the interpretations are free from inherent contradictions and inconsistencies, and that the validity and reliability of the data is further increased.

Role of the Researcher

Patton (2002) believed phenomenological research should focus on "descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (p. 107). He also emphasized the importance of the researcher being *reflexive*, a process that involves "an ongoing examination of *what I know* and *how I know it*" (Patton, 2002, p. 64). Most importantly, Patton explained the importance of reflexivity by stating that it does not take "great self-awareness or self-confidence to report on a statistically significant test with confidence intervals based on a formula and calculations easily replicated and confirmed" (p. 66). Conversely, he suggested that it takes "considerable self-awareness and confidence to report: I coded these 40 interviews, these are the themes I found, here is what I think they mean, and here is the process I undertook to arrive at

those meanings" (Patton, 2002, p. 66). Therefore, it is essential that the experiences described during the one-to-one interactions with the participants to be communicated accurately by the researcher.

The researcher's own experiences as a certified special education teacher has enabled her to develop a keen understanding of the issues special education teachers face and the challenges they are required to address on a daily basis. This understanding provided her with the ability to authentically communicate the themes and patterns uncovered during the interviews with the participants. The researcher's role was not to prove a superior perspective or approach, but rather, to give the special education participants a voice. Clearly, because this phenomenon has not been resolved throughout the years, an element or a fragment of experience had yet to be heard. The goal was to afford an opportunity for policymakers and administrators to finally hear and reflect on what special education teachers are experiencing from stressful workplace variables and a lack of administrative support.

Ethical Considerations

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) asserted that it is important for researchers to know their own ethical standpoint because it is "an important internal guide as to how to proceed in your research" (p.107). Approval was received from Memorial University's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) prior to the commencement of the interviews.

All the participants in this study received a Letter of Introduction and Consent for them to read and sign before the data collection process. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could terminate participation at any point

throughout the research process. All participants were made aware that while every effort to ensure their anonymity was maintained, there was the possibility that their identity could be guessed by former colleagues or administrators, and as such, anonymity could not be fully guaranteed. However, it was also outlined that no identifying information, such as the name of their province, the school at which they taught, the community in which they lived, the grade level of the students they taught, or their age would be used at any point during the study.

It was also important to take into consideration how ethical procedures do not exist in a vacuum. King, Henderson, and Stein (1999) explained that while "the ethics of human subjects research may be universal but is at the same time deeply particularized, so that what autonomy or informed consent or confidentiality or even benefit and harm *means* depends on the circumstances" (p. 213). The minimal number of harms and risks to the participants associated with this study were addressed. For example, while remembering and disclosing some stressful circumstances, participants could have experienced emotional distress, and processes were in place to refer them to their primary health care provider and/or community mental health services for follow-up support. It should be noted that no participants required any such support or referral at any point during the research. Additionally, during the data collection and reporting process, several precautions were taken to address the potential barriers to anonymity. Participants were drawn from three different provinces in Canada. Names, places, and schools were not recorded in the interview transcripts. Within the final thesis report, pseudonyms were not used because of the small number of participants, and participant quotes were used in various orders throughout Chapter four so that there would be no

discernable pattern. All data was stored in an unmarked portable memory device that will be kept in a secure location for a period of five years and then permanently destroyed.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1999) suggested that trustworthiness is essentially concerned with how well researchers were able to persuade their audience that the research findings are "worth paying attention to" (p. 398). By incorporating trustworthiness, the researcher can "broaden, thicken, and deepen the interpretive base" (Denzin, 1989, p. 247) of the study. Many special education teachers who have already decided to leave the field because the stress and lack of support associated with the position have a significant impact on their levels of job satisfaction. At this point, it is too late for them because irreparable damage has been done to their perspective regarding special education in general and administrators in particular. Learning why some special education teachers decide to remain in special education instead of leaving could provide insight into what is lacking in preparatory programs, decrease the costs associated with frequent special education teacher turnover, and help ensure that students with disabilities will receive consistent supports and programming.

Summary

Phenomenology is a method of qualitative research that systematically attempts to reveal and describe the underlying processes and the meaning of these underlying processes. Van Manen (1997) cautioned that the meaning of a phenomenon is never "simple or one-dimensional" (p. 78), but rather "multi-dimensional and multi-layered" (p. 78). Hatch (2002) believed that researchers had to "begin with particular pieces of evidence, then pull them together into a meaningful whole" (p. 161), to search for

meaningful patterns in the data so that "general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (p. 161).

This study will have different meaning for different members of its audience. For policymakers, the results will further highlight the workplace variables that should be considered when developing special education workshops and training programs for both special education teachers and administrators. For administrators, the study could encourage increased support for special education teachers they supervise by developing and maintaining a more supportive workplace environment. For special educators who have also experienced a lack of administrative support and stressful educational settings, the research could give them a cathartic opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and perhaps motivate them to either remain in, or return to, the special education field. But most importantly, this study allows the aforementioned goals to be accomplished by giving the participants a voice, and the opportunity for special educators to finally be heard.

Chapter 4: Articulating the Experience

Introduction

During the interviews, the participants openly discussed and revealed the workplace variables that contributed to their personal and professional levels of stress, and the reasons why they perceived their administrator to be unsupportive of the special education department in general, and their professional efforts in particular.

All the participants in this study appeared comfortable with sharing their personal stories of being a special education teacher within stressful and supportive school environments. Prior to conducting any interviews, each participant was reminded that as stated in the Letter of Introduction/Consent, approval from the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University does not assure complete anonymity. The special education teachers who participated all explained that they were aware of the possibility of identification and were not concerned with this aspect of the research. They indicated that the events and circumstances they described and referred to during the interviews took place years earlier, and as a result, all of them are now teaching in different provinces or with a different school board. Each interview was comfortable and informal, and offered new insights into the variables that would motivate a special education teacher to either experience a sense of accomplishment or a sense of frustration within a particular school environment. During the data compilation and analysis, all of the participants were very cooperative and were willing to clarify answers, respond to additional questions, and offer further insight that may contribute to a deeper understanding of how we can more effectively address the increased levels of

stress and attrition special education teachers experience from a lack of perceived support from administrators.

During the one-to-one phone interviews and the transcript review process, several common themes emerged from their diverse experiences, particularly regarding the role of administrators in providing support to special education teachers. Whenever possible, the experiences of the participants were presented as they were described during the interview process. In order to increase assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, they will only be referred to as *participants*, *special education teachers*, or *special educators*. This chapter will begin by revealing each participant's personal motivation for entering the teaching profession and ultimately the special education field, before examining the workplace variables and characteristics of an administrator associated with a least stressful teaching position. Next, the participants' descriptions of their most stressful workplace environments, including the nature of their interactions with parents, colleagues, and administrator will be presented. After contrasting supportive workplace environments with workplace environments that were perceived by the participants as unsupportive, the variables the participants suggested as essential for contributing to the support a special education teacher receives, and how administrators can provide the most effective support to special education teachers will be highlighted. In closing, the reasons participants decided to remain within the special education profession instead of leaving the field will be described.

Special Educators

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked how they arrived at their decision to become a special education teacher. Interestingly, all of them indicated that this was an *easy* question to answer.

One participant explained how she had been always interested in the teaching profession, but could not decide in which area of education she wanted to teach. One year her son began struggling in school with his literacy skills, so she discussed her concerns regarding her son's progress with his teacher. The teacher provided her with extra materials to help him at home after school, and as she worked with him, she witnessed her son "*improving with the extra help, and I quickly realized that this was something that a lot of children would need help with, so I started to make enquires about what special education resources and services were available*." After she began her training as a teacher, she realized she "*wanted to specialize in special education because I truly believed I could make a difference*." She also believed that a lot of the time, "*these are the children who fall through the cracks, who feel bad about themselves, and who have low self-esteem. I really wanted to make a difference in their lives*."

Another special education teacher began her teaching career in a learning centre, teaching students who had both "*emotional and behavioral issues that impacted their academic performance in the classroom*." Over time, she began to see "*the difference the small group instruction made on the children's reading and math scores, as well as their confidence and self-esteem,*" and she decided she wanted to become a special education teacher to help other students who were also experiencing these same challenges in the classroom.

Another participant entered the special education field because she wanted to address the learning and academic gaps she was noticing between the native and the non-native students she taught. She explained how it was "*mostly the reading aspect of it at first, because where I come from, a lot of native students had problems with reading, and my curiosity was about why native students had problems reading.*" She wondered if native students were having a more difficult time learning literacy skills because "*native language uses different symbols than English or French,*" and as a native special education teacher, she could address this difference between the languages.

For one participant, it was a more personal decision. While she was growing up, she had a favourite aunt who required specialized and ongoing care for her disabilities. She explained how she didn't see her aunt as 'different' when she was younger, but around the age of 12, she joined a youth organization that planned a trip to visit the people institutionalized for a variety of disabilities. She described how she was

> *really excited to go visit my aunt with the other teens . . . but I became sick and I wasn't able to go. On Monday when I went to school, the other students who had visited the 'shut-ins' were teasing me about my aunt. I was confused about the teasing and asked them 'What are you talking about?' They told me that she did this 'funny little dance' for us and were making fun of it. I decided right then and there that I wanted to be a teacher and to address some of these prejudices against people with disabilities.*

From this initial question, the underlying message in each participant's response became clear. While the personal circumstances varied, they all decided to pursue a career in special education so they could have a positive impact on the lives of students

who experience a variety of challenges within the academic system. Throughout the interview process, all the participants continued to articulate their passion for and commitment to the special education field.

The next question the participants were asked was the number of years they have been a certified special education teacher. Collectively, the participants were speaking from approximately 70 years of special education teaching experience attained through a variety of family structures, cultures, ages, provincial training programs, school structures, school boards, and educational models, demonstrating a strong basis for the data collected from the interviews.

Least Stressful Workplace Environments

The next series of questions involved the participants reflecting on their previous teaching positions and the associated workplace variables that they perceived to be the least stressful for them. One participant claimed that while teaching in her self-contained classroom, highlighted how being in her own self-contained classroom was the least stressful because "*it was led by me, it was taught by me, and I knew the needs of my students there in the classroom.*" She also enjoyed not having anyone "*breathing down my neck and checking on what I was doing*," and she "*only had to answer to my administrators who would come into my classroom to see how my program was coming along.*"

Another participant also highlighted how her self-contained classroom was her least stressful teaching position because of the small student-to-teacher ratio and her control over the programming she could implement within her classroom.

Interestingly, all of the participants referenced how the support from their administrator was present during this teaching experience. While teaching in her self-contained classroom, her administrator was "*always willing to assist me in implementing new teaching strategies to help my students acquire and master a variety of life skills and academic tasks.*" She also explained how this support from her administrator was beneficial because it "*helped me to grow professionally. I learned how to locate and access materials and resources online*," and she was frequently participating in special education professional development workshops.

Another participant, after establishing her self-contained classroom and programming at the beginning of the year, quickly realized she needed support from her administrator. Some of the general classroom teachers in her division had

> *wanted me to take their students who had reading, writing, and math problems, but I would explain to them that this program was only for my students, and I needed to 'nip it in the bud' before it became a larger problem. I approached my administrator and explained to her that there were teachers who wanted to dump their students into my classroom instead of taking the initiative of working with their own students themselves. I don't need that extra load of students because my priority is helping the students in my own classroom.*

She noted that she was able to prevent this situation from recurring during the remainder of the school year because she had her administrator's support.

After spending several years at the same school, one participant found the few years spent under the direction of one particular administrator to be the least stressful for

her because of his extensive knowledge in special education. She explained how he knew a lot about special education, and he

> *knew what it could do for the students, and he knew what it could do for the school as a whole. He was very supportive of me and of the special education program. He was very supportive of what I was trying to accomplish. He was the type of administrator who allowed me to do as much as I possibly could to as many as I possibly could, and he supported me in everything that I was trying to do. With that type of support how could I possibly be stressed out?*

Once this special education teacher had the support of her administrator, there was a "*good attitude towards special education*" because he was able to communicate this attitude to the general classroom teachers. The support from both administration and her colleagues, "*it made my job that much easier. It made me feel like I was accomplishing something, that I was contributing, and it also made me feel that this is the way to do things -- as part of a team.*"

One special education teacher explained how "*one of the most stressful workplace environments I've ever had became the least stressful for me in terms of administrative support.*" She described how she was working in a city school that was experiencing frequent thefts, and as a result, the teachers on staff distrusted one another and were often confrontational with her. However, she explained how

> *administrative support was fantastic. They would frequently leave notes in my mailbox to let me know that they thought I was doing a great job and that they knew I was under a great deal of stress, and to let them know if there was*

anything they could do to help me. They also gave me certificates and called me into their offices to give me a 'pat on the back'.

The police investigated and it was discovered that one of the teachers on staff was responsible for the thefts. The special education teacher concluded by reiterating how it was the support from her administrators during this time that helped her get through the year.

Interactions with colleagues, parents, and students.

Colleagues.

The next question was more specific, requiring each special educator to describe their relationship with colleagues, parents, and students during less stressful teaching positions. While all of the participants indicated that they had positive interactions with their colleagues, some of these relationships were more gradual in developing than others. For example, even though one participant was receiving administrative support, she explained how many of the relationships she had with the general classroom teachers were difficult at the beginning of the school year. She recalled

walking into a junior classroom on the first day of school, and the teacher handed me a large pile of photocopying to do, so I had to tell her that I was not responsible for doing her photocopying. She went to administration to complain, but administration told her that I was not responsible for doing her photocopying. This was how the general classroom teachers had used the special education teacher before I arrived at the school.

At the beginning of the year this special education teacher focussed on completing the necessary paperwork for additional funding, and she noted how the classroom

teachers "*felt like I wasn't doing anything to help them because I was in my office all day. But once I started putting more resources into the classrooms and providing additional supports, many of them warmed up to me.*"

Other participants had a less difficult time establishing a positive relationship with their colleagues. One special education teacher described how the general education teachers would ask me about "*how they could go about helping their students who needed extra help in literacy and mathematics. I would give them suggestions and help, and I would recommend certain workbooks or strategies they could use.*"

Another participant emphasized the collaboration she had with her classroom teachers and described the benefits that students with disabilities reaped as the result of this positive relationship:

> *If the teacher is teaching one thing a certain way, and the special education teacher is approaching it in an entirely different way, this is confusing to the students, and it just adds to their problems. But if we're both working together and approaching things in the same way, it's easier for the student - they're more cooperative, and the student makes that much more progress more quickly.*

One participant was even willing to invite the general education teachers into her classroom because of their specialized knowledge in a particular area. For example, "*if I needed someone to teach a different subject I didn't know how to teach very well, I would invite them into my class to teach their specialty while I went into their class and taught the students literacy and math skills*," the subjects that are her specialties.

Parents.

During their least stressful special education teaching experience, all of the participants described positive relationships with the parents of the students they taught. One participant invited the parents into her classroom during her after school literacy program so they could interact with their children. She explained how the parents would "*participate by playing literacy games with their children, go on the computer with their children and spell words, or have their children read to them. It was good for the children because they were able to spend quality time with their parents.*" At the end of each month she would have a certificate ceremony and invite the parents so their children could "*show off*" their newly developed language skills.

Another participant explained how the parents were willing to support her by "*using the same strategies that I used with their children at home that I used at school. They were willing to listen to me and to try any suggestions I made that I thought would benefit their child.*"

After spending the first few months testing and completing paperwork for additional funding, one special education teacher highlighted how both parents and administration "*were very happy with me because we could put additional supports and resources into the classroom.*"

One participant emphasized how her positive relationships with the general classroom teachers had an impact on the type of relationship she developed with the parents of the students she taught. She stated that when there was a collaborative relationship between teachers,

the parents could see that we had a united front, that we were working together as a team, and that we were working together to help their child. This is the best thing that could happen for a parent, especially when they know that their child has a learning problem or a difficulty that needs to be overcome or assisted. For a parent to see different teachers working together as a team to do this, it's an amazing thing.

As a parent of a child who required additional supports in school, she explained how she understood the importance of parents seeing their children who have disabilities making progress in school.

Students.

When the participants were asked to describe the type of interactions they had with their students during this time, all of them described having a positive relationship with their students, and emphasized the benefits this type of relationship had on the student's progress. One participant stated that she had "*an open relationship with my students. Not only were they easy to get along with, but they were also willing to try the new activities I suggested to them.*"

One participant explained how "*it was so much easier to work with the students because they knew of the collaboration between me and their classroom teacher,*" while another special education teacher simply stated how her relationship with her students was "*great, and as far as I could tell there weren't any problems.*"

Interactions with administrators.

When the participants were asked about their working relationship with their administrator, all of them emphasized the importance of being able to approach

administration throughout the school day. One participant described how she valued the opportunity to go to her administrator because she knew

> *he was knowledgeable, supportive, caring, concerned, and he truly wanted what was best for the students. And he was always there for me, his door was always open. I could always go and walk in and ask 'Got a minute?' and sometimes that minute turned into an hour. But it was worth it because all of the stressful events or circumstances I had experienced throughout the day were alleviated because I had the opportunity to sit down with someone who was knowledgeable, supportive, and caring.*

Another participant also found both her administrator and her 'open door' policy helpful because she knew she

> *could go to her with any questions and concerns and she would listen to me and suggest possible solutions to the problem. I found these interactions with my administrator beneficial because I was able to tell her what was on my mind, and it helped me to get along better with the other teachers.*

She also indicated that she was just as comfortable approaching her administrator with ideas and suggestions as her administrator was in providing her with new insights and information.

The general on-going support administrators provided to the special education programming or department was also highlighted by the participants as important. One participant explained how she told her administrators that she would "*like to include traditional teachings in her programming because I believe it is essential for me to*

implement and utilize the student's culture in the English and Math lessons," and they were "*extremely supportive and they encouraged it.*"

Another participant emphasized how her administrators "*leaned heavily*" on her in terms of the direction the special education department should take because they were unfamiliar with the new inclusive teaching model. She explained how they "*weren't used to the new collaborative approach because it was relatively new. Not just taking kids aside, but the special education teacher co-teaching and working with the children within the classroom.*"

One special educator considered her administrator to be supportive because of her extensive knowledge in special education and the input she could contribute to her special education curriculum. She explained that her administrator was

> *always conducting research around the needs of the students and always suggesting new strategies that we could try based on what she learned from her research. If a child was misbehaving and the behavior was beyond what one teacher could handle, she would come into our classroom and offer her support so that we could handle the situation in the best possible way. She would also offer suggestions about how we could handle the situation differently next times in order to get a different result.*

These informal interactions enabled the participant to acquire new knowledge and skills from her administrator that she still continues to incorporate into her current special education teaching position.

The responses also referenced how administrators provided support by encouraging all the teachers on staff to work as an educational team. One special

educator described her administrators as trying to "*embrace change*," and she believed "*they were really supportive of the changes and additional funding I was trying to bring to the special education program.*" However, several of the general classroom teachers on staff were resisting these changes, but the administrator

> *wouldn't accept the classroom teachers saying 'I don't want to do this.' She would tell these teachers that as classroom teachers, they were responsible for teaching all of the students in their class, including the ones with special needs. She would tell them that there were supports available, and that she needed them to work as part of a team with the special education teacher.*

Another participant emphasized that because a positive attitude towards special education was established from administration, her special education department was able to run smoothly because of this team support. She explained how this support for her special education program

> *made my job that much easier. It made me feel like I was accomplishing something, that I was contributing, and it also made me feel that this is the way to do things; this was the way to work, as a team, as part of a team.*

She concluded by stating that everyone, including administration, needs to be supportive of the special education department because "*if everyone is knowledgeable and know what the goals are, then this benefits all students.*"

Most Stressful Workplace Environments

When the participants were asked to describe their most stressful workplace environment, all of them emphasized how their negative interactions with their administrators contributed to a negative school climate and to their increased levels of

stress and burnout. For one special education teacher, her administrator would "*hunt me down and tell me about how the parents and the teachers weren't happy with the work I was doing, but I knew this wasn't true because I was in constant contact with them.*" When she asked the other teachers on staff why the administrator would behave in this way, they explained how he would "*find one person on staff and pick on them for the entire year, and that year it was me that he was targeting.*"

One participant described her administrator as a "*blocker*" who did not believe that special education was beneficial because it "*labels*" and "*coddles*" the children. As a result, her administrator would

> *block my programming, and as a result, blocked me from effectively helping the students involved. And that was stressful because I knew the child needed help, and I knew the type of help they needed, but I was blocked every which way I turned. It didn't matter what I tried, I was blocked. And when they stop you, they stop whatever help you're trying to give to the students.*

She continued by explaining how the teachers did not have any test results or Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for their students, and how it "*fell back on my shoulders and made me look like I was incompetent and not doing my job. And yet my hands were tied – literally – by administration.*"

The participants also identified their administrator's lack of knowledge regarding special education policies and procedures during these stressful teaching positions. One participant stated how her administrator

> *lacked knowledge regarding special education policies and procedures and he was not able to provide any support or meaningful feedback to the special*

education department. He clearly demonstrated that he was under-qualified because his suggestions were often inconsistent with the special education policy documents from the Ministry of Education.

As one participant further explained, "*if you have an administrator who is not knowledgeable in special education, and even considers special education a 'nuisance,' this attitude will filter down to the colleagues you're trying to work with on a daily basis.*"

Interactions with colleagues, parents, students.

Colleagues.

When asked about their relationships with colleagues, parents, and students, one participant described how the general classroom teachers were

upset with me because they felt like I was not doing my job or not doing my job properly. During this time, the teachers were not only frustrated, but they were angry and downright accusatory towards me because they were reflecting the information and the attitude coming down from the leadership. As a result, it made my job very difficult.

Another special education teacher also had difficulties providing the appropriate and necessary support the general classroom teachers needed. She explained how

there would be some problems with providing support to the general classroom teachers because the administrator would misinform them regarding my duties and responsibilities as a special education teacher. Again, this came from his lack of knowledge and experience with special education.

One participant described difficulties with her colleagues because they "*were thinking that I was 'sitting around doing nothing' because I was working on funding proposals in my office for the first 5-6 weeks of school.*" However, once the teachers began to see increased resources and materials in their classroom, they began to change their attitudes towards her and the special education department.

Parents.

During their stressful teaching experience, it also became more difficult for the special education teachers to establish positive interactions with the parents of the students they taught. Additionally, the majority of participants found that if the special education department was not supported by administration, it became more difficult to develop a positive relationship with parents. However, one participant was able to achieve this by demonstrating the positive contributions additional funding would make to the special education program. She explained how a few parents were "*hesitant at first because I had to be the one to bring them the bad news of a diagnosis, but after the initial contact they were happy that their child was finally receiving the needed support and extra attention.*"

One of the more experienced participants identified difficulty fostering positive relationships with the parents due to the parents' inability to see improvements on their child's report card. She explained that the parents would ask her,

> *Why isn't my child getting any support? Why isn't my child getting tested? Why isn't my child receiving alternative programming? And I'm limited in what I can say. I can't say administration will not allow me to do it. How do I explain to a parent why little Johnny isn't making progress without going against*

administration? So the parent is looking at me for answers, and I can't supply them, which only makes me look incompetent and like I can't do my job.

Another special educator noted a similar experience with parents not perceiving her to be a competent teacher due to her native origins. She described how one day after school,

a parent came in during a detention and asked me how dare I keep his daughter after school with a bunch of 'lower class' students, and used a few derogatory terms. I asked the parent to leave my classroom and I called my administrator for support, but she never showed up. So I had situations like that that flared up every once in awhile. Parents would try to create problems by bringing up the ethnicity of either myself or of my students.

One participant explained how she found it "*hard to comment on the relationship I had with the parents because they were not really involved with their child's education.*" She was unable to communicate with the parents because they had such a negative perspective of the special education department and avoided contact with the school.

Students.

The participants who were teaching in a self-contained classroom and who could demonstrate the positive impact of special education programming were able to overcome the stressful circumstances in the school and establish positive relationships with their students. One teacher explained how "*a few of the students tried to emulate their parents negative behavior, but in the end, I won out by treating all my students with respect.*"

Another special education teacher described how "*the kids were starting to come home and share stories with their parents about their day at school because it had*

become a positive experience for them." A third participant explained how she also had a "*great relationship with her students*" because she was in her own self-contained classroom. She believed that "*they knew I was their teacher, and that I would pay attention to them during an activity.*"

However, one special education teacher expressed frustration with trying to form a connection with the students she taught. She described how she was

> *limited in what I could do for them. Sometimes I just had to take my best 'educated guess' as to what their needs were because I wasn't allowed to conduct academic testing. As such, I could only provide limited amounts of materials and programming for them because I wasn't getting any cooperation from the classroom teachers.*

As a result of these circumstances, her students became frustrated because the activities she provided did not coincide with their ability levels or address their disabilities.

Interactions with administrators.

When the participants were asked about the types of interactions they had with their administrators, all of them indicated that it was either negative or nonexistent. For one participant, her administrator was not focused on addressing the needs of the students, but rather on making herself look successful. She explained how her administrator

> *created conflict among the teachers because of what she focused on, which was trying to keep the 'rich' parents satisfied all the time so that when it's time for fundraising, they would donate money and fundraising items to the school. We as*

> *a staff didn't think this was right, but we were afraid to say anything. At the end of that school year there was a high turnover because of the strife she created amongst the staff.*

Another special education teacher explained how there was "*virtually no relationship at all. The only interactions with administration occurred when he hauled me into his office to scream at me about something. That's pretty much it in a nutshell.*" She went on to say that there were "*limited interactions, minimal communication, absolutely no support whatsoever, a lot of blocking, and a lot of accusations.*"

One participant described her relationship with her administrator as being "*hostile*," and how it "*got to the point where I wanted to hide from him because he was so hostile.*" She went on to explain how other teachers on staff suggested that she avoid talking with him, but she stated that she

> *couldn't avoid him because as a special education teacher, I had to report to him on a regular basis. I always made sure everything I did was in writing and documented, and I forwarded all documents and forms to him. But nothing seemed to satisfy him, and he seemed to be a generally miserable person. I would often think things would be perfect if he left the school.*

When asked about her relationship with her administrator, another participant responded by asking,

> *What relationship? It was the type of relationship where he made it very clear that 'what he said — goes', even if it was not correct or if it contradicted the special education policy documents. It wasn't an open relationship and it was based on finding someone else to blame. If something went wrong, he would try*

> *to find a teacher to blame so he wouldn't have to take responsibility for addressing the situation.*

She concluded by explaining how she often felt like she had to rely on her own knowledge and skills and to solve her problems because she was not receiving any support from her administrator.

Reasons for Transferring

The effect stress had on their physical and emotional health was one variable that motivated some of the participants to transfer to a different school. One participant explained she transferred to a different school because the stress was impacting her "*medical health and wellbeing. A person can only put up with so much stress, and then it's going to start affecting you, it's going to start wearing you down.*" Another described how she

> *couldn't handle the stress: I wasn't sleeping, I lost weight, I felt I wasn't being a good mom with my kids, I was crying a lot. I was beating myself up -- 'why can't I find a common ground with this administrator? I felt sick all the time.*

A lack of support from their administrators was another variable that contributed to the participants transferring to a different school. One special education teacher explained that

> *the lack of administrative support was the most important factor in deciding to transfer schools. When I would ask him for advice or strategies for how to handle a particular situation, he would frequently tell me that he didn't have time to address that right now and that I wasn't to bother him with those things.*

Another participant also identified an absence of support from her administrator and explained how she "*didn't like to work for someone who focused so much on raising money. Administration didn't look at all the families equally, just the ones who had money, and this created a rift in the social fabric of the school.*"

One special education teacher even concerned with the impact this lack of support would have on her career as a special education teacher. She expressed how her administrator

> *just kept getting worse and worse. The lack of communication kept getting worse and worse. And there was no support whatsoever. I factored all of this in, and I realized that the day is done here and there isn't much more I could do here. I think he wanted to get rid of me, someone he knew was knowledgeable, so they could put someone else in there who would be less knowledgeable, but would follow his way of doing things.*

She also believed that if she had decided to stay at the school, her administrator would have "*systematically picked away at and possibly ruined my career.*"

Workplace Variables

Most stressful for special educators.

At this point in the interview, the participants were asked to highlight the workplace variables they considered to be the most stressful for special education teachers, and a number of variables were suggested. The most frequently raised variable was a lack of support from administration. One participant explained how it is "*not only a lack of administrative support, but administrators who are out to hijack you or prevent*

you from doing your job," while another also expressed "*a lack of support and understanding from administration.*"

One special education teacher emphasized the need for communication with and support from administration because "*communication is essential. But if there isn't communication, everything breaks down. Support is also important. You don't just need support from your administrator, but you also need support from your colleagues.*"

A lack of financial support or funding for the special education department also created a stressful workplace environment. One participant highlighted how

> *in rural areas there is a large group of students who need remediation. If we had special education services in native language and the government spent the same amount of money on these services as they do on English and French special education services, then students who speak a native language wouldn't be as far behind in literacy and numeracy skills as they are now.*

Another participant also described how a lack of funding can have a negative impact, especially

> *if there's not enough supplies to go around, or not enough of a particular type of textbook for the students. If you can't get enough Student Assistants to support your programming, this can really cause a problem, especially if you have children that really need the one-on-one support. If your program is not properly funded, you can't get the supplies or materials you need to teach.*

She also noted how special education teachers are often creative and innovative, so while this isn't an insurmountable issue, it can be minimized with the proper funding.

Least stressful for special educators.

After highlighting the variables they considered to be the most stressful, the participants were then asked to describe the variables that contributed the least amount of stress for special education teachers. Interestingly, all the participants suggested different variables, including the necessity for special education teachers to have a thorough knowledge in special education. One participant explained the importance of special education teachers to learn about "*the disabilities that need more focus from the special education teacher. For example, with the increase in Autism, it's difficult for a special education teacher to work with children with Autism unless they have specific training to deal with exceptionalities.*"

Another special education participant believed that it is important to have an administrator

> *who is informed about special education policies and procedures. What should a special education department look like? How should it be run? This would allow the administrator to best support a special education teacher because they would have an understanding as to how to best support you.*

She then provided an example of a special education teacher trying to help a student with behavioral needs, and the administrator needing special education knowledge in order to provide effective support.

One participant explained the importance of having adequate physical space and support for an effective special education department, because

> *sometimes you have children who need a quiet place to work, or they need to work one-on-one with a tutor or Teacher's Assistant. If you have a limited amount of*

physical space, this can create problems. I have been at a school where the tutors had to work with the student in the hallway, and you've got people coming and going, and there's all kinds of distractions, and this isn't really the best place where the student should be working.

Another special education teacher valued the support of Student Assistants to help address the needs of children, along with "*having the support of parents to help decrease the amount of stress a special education teacher experiences.*"

Supporting Special Educators

Workplace support.

When the participants of this study were asked where they draw personal support in the workplace, they provided different responses. One participant believed that "*the parents and the community*" provide support to special education teachers, suggesting a source external to the school. Conversely, the other three participants identified sources within the school environment.

One special education teacher felt that administrators were the primary source of support because *"special education teachers frequently interact with them throughout the day."*

Another participant believed that a supportive relationship with colleagues is important, especially when

they have made themselves knowledgeable by taking courses in special education. Classroom teachers can be extremely supportive and they can offer to assist with programming ideas, or to come up with materials to help you. Sometimes you can talk with the administrator if he's knowledgeable and supportive, but it's really

nice to talk with a classroom teacher because they are in the classroom, they are on the 'front lines' and they see the needs of the students firsthand. And they can sit down with you and say 'what if we try this' or 'this might be a good idea,' and that's a wonderful thing.

Another participant explained how students can give special education teachers support by

responding positively to your programming, or when their parents come in and give you positive feedback about the impact you have on their child. Having support from your colleagues and having them trust you. And having your administrator's support is absolutely essential.

Administrative support.

When asked specifically about what administrators can do to support special education teachers, all the participants agreed that administrators should have knowledge in special education. One participant explained how important it is for an administrator to

become informed about special education issues, and not just taking a half-credit course. They need to take a university course, they need to attend workshops with their special education teachers, they need to attend the meetings the special education teachers have with the parents, and they need to participate in discussions with the experts regarding a child's disability. Administrators need to be involved so that they know what's going on, and are able to respond appropriately to the special education teacher and the parents. They need to be part of a team with the special education teacher.

Another participant further supported this perspective by explaining how administrators need to "*sit down with the special education teachers and listen to them when planning the programming, in order to get an understanding of what the students need from all the teachers involved.*" The special educator also believed that by increasing their knowledge, administrators will be "*better able to acknowledge the special education needs of the students in their school.*"

By increasing their knowledge in special education, a more positive and collaborative relationship can be developed between the special education teacher and the administrator. One participant explained how administrators

> *should have some training in special education because they really need to know what they are dealing with at the school level. This knowledge can help them when interacting with their special education teachers because they can sit down with them one-to-one and offer advice and support because they know the areas the special education teacher is trying to bring forth. If you have a particular question about how to approach something, the administrator can speak with knowledge and communicate properly with you, and help you come to some type of conclusion.*

Another participant felt that administrators should become more knowledgeable about special education policies, but she also thought administrators "*can help mentor special education teachers, especially if they are new. They can touch base with them on a regular basis and ask if there are any issues that need to be addressed or solved.*" In doing so, the "*special education teacher will know that the administrator is there to help them with any problems that may arise.*"

Remaining in the Special Education Field

The participants were asked to explain why they decided to remain in the special education instead of leaving the field, and all of them emphasized how they valued the contributions they could make to the special education program. For example, one participant remained in the field because she "*still liked teaching, still liked special education, and still believed in the value of special education, so I decided to transfer to a different school.*"

Another special education participant expressed her enjoyment of teaching students with disabilities, and

> *when the dust settled, I love what I do. I do it to help the children, I do it because I'm good at it, and I will continue to help children. And when I'm allowed to do my job, and when I'm given the support I need to accomplish my work, I can see results. And to me, this is more important than anything because when you look into a child's eyes and they light up because all of sudden they 'got it', that means the world to me.*

One participant acknowledged how she enjoyed "*teaching students with disabilities, and the stress I experienced during that year came from my administrator, not the children. I decided that I needed to find a different school with a different administrator.*"

Similarly, another participant stated she "*never decided to leave special education because it was just part of my teacher certification. I never considered working with special education students stressful, just the demands of the special education teacher's job.*"

Summary

This study examined, from the perspective of a special educator, the workplace variables that either increase or decrease the levels of stress a special educator experiences, and who either contributes to or diminishes the negative effects these variables have on a special education teacher. The stressful workplace variables highlighted from the interviews included: uncooperative general classroom teachers; communication barriers with colleagues; a lack of resources and teaching materials; inadequate classroom space; and administrators who were not knowledgeable in special education. Workplace variables that assisted in providing special educators with support included: professional development for special education teachers; positive relationships with colleagues and parents; feedback from students; and administrators who were approachable and knowledgeable about special education policies and procedures.

Additionally, questions addressing the reasons why participants became special education teachers and why they decided to remain in the field were also included. All the participants described personal experiences that motivated them to become special education teachers, including early interactions with people with disabilities. When the participants were asked why they remained in the field, they all expressed a strong desire to teach children who needed additional assistance at school and acknowledged that the students were not the source of the stress they experienced. It was clear that each participant had a passion for teaching in the special education field.

From the responses, several variables and ideas further substantiated what has already been discussed and examined in earlier research. Most importantly, the special education teachers explained how administrators have a key role in addressing this

phenomenon by providing special education teachers with support, and believed that an increased knowledge in special education policy and procedures would be beneficial.

Additionally, this study allowed several themes to be more thoroughly discussed. The participants revealed that they entered and stayed in the field because of strong personal reasons, including the desire to make a difference in a child's life. While the research has suggested administrators develop their knowledge in order to more successfully manage the variables that contribute to special educators' experiences with stress, this may only be part of the solution. Realistically, these variables are integral within a special education teacher's position and are not able to be eliminated or avoided. There will always be administrators who will not pursue additional special education training even if it is provided, general classroom teachers who do not want to collaborate with special education teachers, or parents who are unable to participate in a collaborative relationship with the special education teacher. Perhaps the special education teachers who have left the field were not intended to remain in special education because they considered the workplace variables insurmountable and unavoidable. Perhaps, in order to address this phenomenon effectively, we need to gain a better understanding of why special education teachers who experienced the same stressful workplace variables as those who left decided to remain in the field.

Chapter 5: Reflections on the Experience

Introduction

Stress and burnout not only affect a special education teachers' decisions' to leave the field entirely, but also affect their decision to transfer to a different school. The literature review illustrates how workplace variables, often under the administrator's control, are frequently the source of stress and other negative consequences for special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004b; Gersten et al., 2001; Miller et al., 1999). The themes uncovered from the one-to-one interviews with the special education participants, all of whom have transferred to a different school instead of leaving the field, will be discussed. The most predominant concern that participants expressed is the effect of administrative support on a special education department and on a special education teacher's career. The steps that policymakers, administrators, and special education teachers can take to address the phenomenon of special education teacher attrition will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will conclude with how this research can be used to help support the development of innovative and perhaps more effective solutions to this phenomenon.

In Chapter one the researcher expressed a desire to further explore the special education teacher attrition phenomenon from the perspective of special education teachers who, following conflict with their administrators, decided to remain in the field but transfer schools. After outlining the phenomenon, the researcher developed research questions that would be addressed during one-to-one interviews, and which would enable themes to be uncovered during the data analysis process. As a precursor to that, the bracketing process allowed the researcher to identify her own perspectives, to disclose

and set aside her potential bias, and to become reacquainted with her own personal and professional experiences as a special education teacher.

During the bracketing process, the researcher described how she had always wanted to become a teacher since elementary school. While the journey was particularly challenging and demanding during her secondary and post-secondary years, she was able to prevail over these potential obstacles because she was motivated to achieve her goal of becoming a certified teacher. After teaching as a general educator for the first two years of her career, she decided that she wanted to focus on teaching students who required additional support with developing learning, behavior, and social skills.

From her decade of teaching experience including eight years as a special education teacher, she has taught under the direction of administrators who had diverse experiences with and knowledge of special education policies and procedures. While most of her administrators have been supportive, she did experience a few who contributed to her experiences of stress and burnout as the result of not feeling supported in her efforts as a special educator. One administrator she had was so unsupportive of her programming and efforts, she questioned leaving the teaching profession altogether and transferring to a different career. Prior to conducting this study, she did not have any indication how important and key her personal experiences and interactions with administrators as a special educator would be in uncovering themes that have yet to be fully discussed within the literature examining this phenomenon.

The second chapter explored the literature surrounding this phenomenon, as well as the broader areas of special education teacher burnout and attrition. The special education teacher shortage which has been well established exceeds that of general

classroom teachers, and will continue because few teachers are entering the special education profession while many are leaving the field. Previous researchers have uncovered how workplace variables are most influential in a special education teacher's experience of stress and support. While the participants in this study all highlighted different workplace variables that contributed to their experiences of stress and burnout, they unanimously indicated that the most influential variable in motivating them to transfer to a different school was the lack of support they received from their administrator.

Interestingly, there are few studies which are specific to this phenomenon of why special education teachers decide to remain in the special education field but transfer to a different school as the result of stressful workplace environments and unsupportive administrators. All participants explained how leaving the field was not an option because they not only enjoyed teaching the students who required the most assistance, but they also found it personally rewarding to see the progress their students were making with their support and programming. After transcribing and reflecting on each of the interview transcripts, the researcher discovered how her personal and professional experiences are not as unique as she once believed, and may offer new insight into how to effectively address and potentially redirect the literature examining this phenomenon.

Prior to the study, the anticipated number of participants was 10; however, only four special education teachers were interviewed for this project. One reason for the limited number of participants was the strict criteria for selection, thereby significantly limiting the number of potential special education teachers who could participate in this study. However, the goal within phenomenological research is not to use the data in a

predictive fashion, but to use the data in a "comparative fashion to alert researchers to themes or events which might be common to similar phenomena under different conditions" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 119).

In Chapter three the rationale behind the selection of qualitative research methods is outlined and explained. Van Manen (1997) acknowledged how a phenomenon is a complex interaction of thoughts, perceptions, and interpretations, and how phenomenological research methods strive to "explicate meaning" (p. 11) from the everyday lived experience. He also explained that phenomenological research maintains a focus on meaning, whereas other human and social sciences rely on "statistical relationships among variables, on the predominance of social opinions, or on the occurrence or frequency of certain behaviors" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 11). The goals of this study were not only to contribute to the existing literature by supporting earlier findings, but also to give a voice to a significant though small group of special education teachers who have experienced the phenomenon of a lack of administrative support.

Chapter four is a documentation of the emergent data of each of the special education participants, who collectively spoke from approximately 70 years of special education teacher training and experience. Each participant spoke with emotion and conviction, and engaged the researcher in meaningful and insightful one-to-one interviews. In order for the participants to have a voice within the research and in the literature, it was crucial for many direct quotations from the interview transcripts to be included. The semi-structured interviews and the questions that were posed to each participant allowed the interaction to proceed naturally and with ease, permitting common

themes already established within the literature to be reaffirmed and while permitting for new themes to be more thoroughly discussed.

Reflection on Methodology

Overall, the success of this study is the direct result of the methodological parameters and guidelines that were incorporated into this phenomenological study, with the referral participant selection process, interviews, and data analysis conducted by a special educator to be the greatest strengths of this research project.

Participant selection process.

As previously stated in Chapter three, snowball and word-of-mouth methods were used to identify special education participants who had experienced stressful workplace environments and transferred to a different school. At one point during this process, the researcher had identified six participants. However, two participants, both residing in close proximity to the researcher, declined from participating for personal reasons. Out of the four special education teachers who participated in the study, three of them were known to the researcher prior to the commencement of this study. The other participant, whom the researcher met before the data collection phase, is a very experienced teacher, and she was able to form a connection with the researcher. As a result, all of the interviews where relaxed and a comfortable while an open tone was quickly established and maintained throughout the conversation.

While the initial anticipated sample size was 10 participants, only four participants emerged and participated in the study. In hindsight, the criteria for selecting participants for this project were too restrictive to allow for a larger group of participants. Perhaps a way to explore this phenomenon is to include these questions within a larger study of

both general and special education teachers who have experienced job dissatisfaction and who have decided to transfer to a different school as the result of a lack of administrative support.

Interviews.

All the interviews were one-to-one and conducted over the phone because each of the participants lived a considerable distance from the researcher, thus making face-to-face interviews an impractical option. Even though the researcher did not have the benefit of visual cues such as body language, she was able to pick up on verbal indicators of emotion during the actual interview and transcribing of conversations from the digital audio recording. Additionally, by conducting the interviews over the phone, this process allowed the participants to remain in a comfortable and familiar environment of their choosing while recollecting details of a potentially sensitive nature. The one-to-one telephone interviews also had the extra benefit of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, thereby allowing the participants to speak more candidly as even the researcher doesn't identify them. This process gives a sense of complete confidentiality and may have helped contribute to the richness of the data.

Data analysis.

As previously highlighted in Chapter three, Cohen et al. (2007) suggested how researchers should strive towards fitness for purpose, a process that involves the researcher having a clear understanding about what the data analysis should do because it will "determine the kind of analysis performed on the data" (p. 461). The researcher, who also experienced stressful workplace conditions and unsupportive administrators, analyzed the data from the perspective of a colleague instead of a disconnected expert,

allowing for a greater opportunity for the participants in the study to have a voice and for fitness of purpose.

While the number of participants is relatively small, the significance of this is minimal for two important reasons. Kvale (1996) suggested that researchers focus less on achieving a predetermined number of participants while focussing more on interviewing "as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (p. 101). First, the data obtained from the one-to-one interviews is cohesive on several key themes, indicating a level of saturation has been achieved. Second, it is important to remember how theories that explain an individual phenomenon cannot be used to predict the cause of a different kind of phenomenon; however, they "can be used in a comparative fashion to alert researchers to themes or events which might be common to similar phenomena under different conditions" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 119). Additionally, because the researcher has an intense passion for and strong familiarity with the special education field, themes that may have remained unaddressed are now more thoroughly described within this study's data analysis. This is reflective of what Lewins (1992) suggested, that a researcher unfamiliar with the phenomenon would produce a study with different results.

Overall, the qualitative research methods employed during this study allows the participants the freedom to explore their teaching experiences while providing other special education teachers the opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences with stressful workplace environments and unsupportive administrators. Unlike other methodologies, phenomenology involves rich descriptions of lived experiences instead of attempting to generalize findings. As a result, the researcher is able to move beyond the

"factual data and cautious analysis" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 36) and discuss the meanings associated with this phenomenon.

Reflections on Themes

Stress and special educators.

Most of the studies examining special education teacher attrition have involved participants who have either left the field, or were planning to leave the field, and have clearly illustrated the participants' experiences with stress and burnout. The special educators in this study also contributed to the literature by describing how their most stressful workplace environments and lack of administrative support negatively affected their physical and emotional health. One participant explained how she was losing weight and was not feeling like she was being a good mom to her young children, whereas another kept criticizing herself because she was not feeling that she was making progress with the children at school. While feelings of depersonalization and reduced feelings of accomplishment were mentioned by all the participants, it is interesting to note that all participants emphasized how the workplace stress they experienced had the greatest effect on their physical and emotional health.

Yee (1990) defined *good-fit* teachers as "those who entered the profession because of a positive attraction to teaching" (p. 9), and that "when they entered the profession, many . . . had known for many years that they wanted to become teachers and intended to stay in the profession for a long time" (p. 9). Additionally, she defined teachers who are highly involved with their jobs as having "a personal perception of efficacy or success" (p. 117), and as viewing their students as "the major source of intrinsic rewards" (p. 117). Conversely, Yee suggested that not all special education

teachers who are dissatisfied leave the field, but they remain in the profession and retire on the job by lowering their expectations and by emotionally withdrawing from others. None of the participants in this study responded to their stressful circumstances in such a manner, but demonstrated a more proactive approach by transferring to a different school without lowering their personal or professional expectations during the process.

The findings from this study further substantiate Lortie's (1975) findings of how the majority of teachers prefer to receive psychic rewards from their job, and Rosenholtz (1989) who suggested that when teachers who do not receive the psychic rewards they desire, they will leave the profession. The participants in this study also transferred to different schools in order to receive the psychic rewards they desired. Even though they endured stressful workplace environments and variables that would discourage most teachers, they remained in the field because they never lost sight of why they became special educators and were still passionate about the special education field and teaching students with disabilities.

Workplace variables and special educators.

While the literature has frequently demonstrated how workplace variables have the greatest impact on a special education teacher's decision to remain in or to leave the field, the literature is less consistent with identifying specific variables that contribute to their least or most stressful teaching assignment. For example, researchers such as Hines (2008) explained how special education teachers often feel isolated within the school environment. However, the participants who had taught in self-contained classrooms suggested that this teaching position was their least stressful, further substantiating Yee's (1990) assertions that highly involved teachers have a perceptions of efficacy and of their

students being a source of intrinsic rewards. Additionally, several extensive research studies have identified overwhelming amounts of paperwork as one of the primary reasons special education teachers leave the field, yet this did not emerge in the data of this study. Conversely, the only workplace variable that the participants consistently highlighted as a major influence on their levels of stress and burnout was the level of support their administrator provided. These findings further substantiate Billingsley's (2004b) assertion that resolving the high rates of special education teacher attrition requires a holistic approach instead trying to separate the different variables that impact a special education teacher's level of stress and burnout.

Many researchers have suggested either improving or eliminating aspects of the special educator's job that cause increased levels of stress and attrition. Unfortunately, most of the workplace variables identified in this study are inherent to the special educator's job and are unable to be modified or altered. There will always be paperwork to complete, difficult parents who require information, uncooperative general classroom teachers who do not support inclusion, students with severe behavior and emotional problems, and a lack of support from administrators. This study revealed that a person who had a strong personal desire to enter into the special education field, in combination with a supportive administrator who is familiar with special education policies and procedures, can overcome any workplace variable that others may perceive as stressful and remain in the field.

Administrators and special educators.

Researchers have also demonstrated how administrators are central in establishing a positive school climate and in supervising an effective special education department.

All the participants in this study identified administrative support as the most important reason they experienced a minimal amount of workplace stress and were able to achieve a variety of special education programming objectives. For one participant, her most stressful workplace environment was her least stressful teaching position because of the support she had received from her administrators. These findings are consistent with Littrell et al. (1994) who also found that administrators "who are emotionally supportive and provide informational support are more likely to have teachers who are satisfied with their work" (Summary and Discussion, para. 1). Additionally, this study further substantiates the impact an administrator can have on minimizing the stress a special education teacher experiences within the workplace.

Researchers such as Lawrenson and McKinnon (1982) discovered how conflict with administrators is one of the leading causes for special educators to experience increased levels of stress. Likewise, Billingsley and Cross (1991) noted a lack of support from administration as one of the most cited reasons for leaving the special education field. This study revealed that when the special education participants did not receive adequate support for their position or their department, not only were their personal levels of stress increased, but a hostile work environment was created. The responses further substantiate how administrators not only indirectly affect a special educator's level of stress by controlling workplace variables, they also directly affect these levels by either providing or withholding the support the special education teachers needed to fulfill their duties and responsibilities.

House (1981) has defined four different types of support: emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. All the participants in

this study emphasized how important it is for special education teachers to receive emotional support from the administrator. During their least stressful work environments, all the participants expressed the value of being able to approach their administrator at any time for advice and support, and emphasized how this support was noticeably absent during their most stressful teaching assignments. While the other three types of support were highlighted throughout the research, emotional support was the most frequently referenced. These responses are consistent with Littrell et al.'s (1994) suggestion that administrators "who are honest and straightforward, allow teachers input into decisions about school matters, show concern for their students and program, and promote a sense of importance are especially gratifying and reinforcing to teachers" (Specific Dimensions of Support, para. 3).

When the relationship a special educator has with his or her administrator is a considerable problem, Billingsley et al. (1995) discovered that "it is likely that the teacher will consider transferring to another school or district" (p. 3), and that the desire to have a more supportive administrator was one of the most frequently cited reasons for wanting to transfer to a different school. Interestingly, all the participants in this study believed that in order for administrators to provide appraisal, instrumental, and informational support effectively to special education teachers, they need to have knowledge in and experience with special education policies and procedures. All the participants explained how during their most stressful teaching position, their administrator was not familiar with special education policies and practices, and as a result, their administrator was not able to provide them with the support they needed during this time. These responses support researchers such as Gersten et al. (1995) who explained how their participants indicated

that their administrators "tended to focus on *monitoring their work* or unilaterally implementing quick-fix solutions to problems rather than on *proactively providing assistance* or coaching to help them successfully accomplish their work" (p. 1). Littrell et al. (1995) also explained how special education teachers want their administrators to "trust their judgement in making classroom decisions and to show confidence in their actions" (Specific Dimensions of Support, para. 5). Unfortunately, the participants in this research clearly indicated that these actions were not forthcoming from their administrator whom they perceived to be unsupportive, resulting in decisions to transfer to a different school.

The literature suggests three major reasons affecting why administrators fail to provide support to special education teachers, and the participants in this study further substantiated these theories. Some participants described administrators who displayed and articulated a negative perception of special education because they did not understand the value or necessity of teaching students with disabilities. One participant alluded to the fact that there is a lack of special education content in administrator training programs, but also noted a recent trend to improve this situation. However, all the participants emphasized how important it is for administrators to participate in ongoing special education workshops and coursework in addition to the content within administrator training programs. Participants expressed the connection between administrators' level of special education knowledge and their ability to provide support to special education teachers – an increase in knowledge was clearly associated with an increase in administrators' ability to provide effective support to special education teachers.

Implications

Policymakers.

Over the last decade, "the study of work-related factors has been central in special education attrition and retention research" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 42), and has demonstrated that "workplace environments are important to teachers' job satisfaction and subsequent career decisions" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 44). While the workplace variables that create stress for special education teachers remain constant throughout the literature, the importance or level of significance of each of them varies. For example, Billingsley (2004b) highlighted how "less attention has been given to the relationship between colleague support and attrition, and the findings from the research are mixed" (p. 46). Some studies consider paperwork to be the predominant factor in special education teachers choosing to leave the field. However, although excessive paperwork may be a problem for "many special educators, not all leavers view these responsibilities as contributing to their decision to leave. Why some teachers see paperwork as a major obstacle and others do not cannot be answered" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 48). Additionally, "no conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between teaching in a particular service-delivery model" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 48) and special education teacher attrition, whereas problems with "role overload and design have been strongly linked to special education teacher attrition" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 47). Billingsley also highlighted how "teacher attrition by disability area varied" (p. 49), with teachers of students with emotional disabilities being more likely to leave the field. She concluded from her literature review that policymakers who are interested in "reducing attrition must

facilitate the development of better work environments for special educators" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 53).

When developing special education and administrator training programs, it is important to recognize that different types of personalities are attracted to different positions within the educational field, and as a result, some individuals may be placed in roles that may not suit their personality or teaching style. For example, administrative positions necessitate a person to be decisive and assertive whereas a special education teacher is more likely to achieve success incorporating patience and flexibility when educating students with disabilities. This suggests that the solution may not be simply adding special education content to the training curriculum, but using it as the basis for teaching administrators how to best support special education teachers. At the same time, stress management should be stronger components in training for a profession where stress is well documented as a salient factor.

Administrators.

All the participants in this study stated how administrators who provided the most effective support were knowledgeable with special education policies and procedures, suggesting that in order to provide support, it is essential for administrators to have an accurate understanding of what special education entails on a daily basis. However, because many special education teachers continue to feel unsupported by their administrators, simply increasing the amount of special education content within administrator training programs will not effectively address this phenomenon. Therefore, the results of this study further assert how administrators need to learn *how* to provide the support special education teachers need. While the participants placed the

greatest value on receiving emotional support from their administrator, they also desired appraisal, instrumental, and informational support, which are developed when an administrator possesses a thorough knowledge of special education. In other words, familiarity with special education policies and practices will enable administrators to provide effective and necessary support to special education teachers on staff and to the special education department within their school.

Special educators.

While this study demonstrates how critical it is for administrators to increase their knowledge and understanding of how to best support special educators, it is equally important for special education teachers to be able to identify the type of support they need from their administrator. The literature frequently references House's (1981) definitions of support and asserts how emotional support is the most important. However, each participant highlighted different types of support that are the most important to them. For example, one special education teacher valued her administrator providing her with a special education budget to purchase needed teaching resources and materials, whereas another special educator required feedback about her programming. Just as important at learning how to identify the type of support needed, special education teachers need to able to ask for what they need from their administrator. Taking a more proactive approach is one step special education teachers can take in addressing a lack of administrative support. Likewise, special education teachers need to realize the need for them to be proactive in stress management and develop healthy approaches to supporting themselves in their profession. A part of this may well be realizing and accepting an

appreciation of the demands placed on school administrators and the limited support that might well characterize their interactions with their administrator.

Summary

Since the early 1980s, researchers have conducted several studies involving special education teachers who have either left the field, or were planning to leave the field. While workplace variables and their interconnectedness with supports administrators provide to special education teachers are consistently highlighted, this is where the consistency ends. Although it is in the best interest of everyone involved in teaching students with disabilities to resolve this phenomenon, not only is this phenomenon still present within the educational system, but some researchers even predict that the high rates of special education burnout and attrition will only become worse as more teachers leave the field and fewer special education teachers decide to enter the field. Müller and Markowitz (2003) reported "a severe and chronic shortage of special education teachers" (p. 1), and how this problem will only increase over the next few years. Additionally, they also explained that "trends suggest that the need for new teachers will continue to grow at a rapid pace over the next ten years and will likely increase the teacher shortage" (Müller & Markowitz, 2003, p. 1).

Billingsley (2004b) examined how researchers define "work environments in a range of different ways, use both broad and narrowly defined variables, define similarly named variables differently, and use a range of analytic approaches to investigate the relationships between work-related variables and attrition" (p. 45). She articulated how a "wide range of factors influence attrition" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 53), and that while most of the studies on attrition have focused on workplace variables, teacher qualifications and

characteristics have also been linked to attrition. From her review of the literature, she concluded that "focusing on one or two aspects of teachers' work lives will probably be insufficient to substantially reduce attrition" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 54). According to Boe et al. (1997), the "most troublesome component of turnover is exit attrition, because it represents a reduction in the teaching force, requiring a compensating inflow of replacement teachers" (p. 377). Since researchers frequently survey special education teachers who have left or were planning to leave the special education while ignoring special educators who transferred schools, the literature examining this phenomenon does not include an equitable representation of all perspectives, and as a result, will continue to undermine any solutions that policymakers or administrators implement in order to address this phenomenon.

This study, unlike several others, involved special education participants who remained in the field, but transferred to a different school because of a perceived lack of administrative support. While the workplace variables each participant found the most stressful differed, what remained consistent throughout the interviews was the importance of administrative support, and the motivation for each special educator to enter and remain in the special education field. All the participants articulated how they appreciated emotional support from their administrators and relied on them for appraisal, instructional, and instrumental support. Additionally, they all explained how teaching students with disabilities was their primary motivation for remaining in special education and how the stressful workplace variables did not overcome this perspective. For such a diverse yet small number of participants, perhaps the answer to resolving this phenomenon lies in the variables that the participants shared.

Billingsley and Cross (1991) asserted how it's not necessarily the paperwork that causes stress and attrition for special education teachers, but what it prevents them from doing. Perhaps the focus of future research should be on increasing the occurrence of variables that motivate special education teachers to remain in the profession instead of trying to decrease the occurrence of the variables that cause a special education teacher to leave the field. As one participant of this study noted, it takes a special person to be a special education teacher, so maybe the ones who have left were never meant to remain in the field. As part of a holistic approach, perhaps the answer to addressing this phenomenon is not to ask special education teachers why they *left*, but rather, to ask them why they decided to *stay* within the field.

At the same time, there is much to be said for trained and experienced special education teachers transferring into classroom positions, especially as systems become more inclusive in their models. Theoretically, a school where every classroom teacher is a qualified special education teacher can pride itself on diverse teaching strategies, strong awareness of learner needs, and collaborative approaches to planning. However, decisions to transfer out of special education should not be based on negative experiences. Special education teachers should have their confidence and esteem strengthened, not eroded by stressful workplace variables or a lack of administrative support.

This study offers a touchstone for reflection – to those who have experienced a similar phenomenon, for those who are currently in the profession, as well as those who are considering (or preparing) to enter the profession. Special education teachers and administrators, as well as those engaged in training programs, are given an opportunity to reflect on their own practice, by the voice that rises from these participants.

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Appendix A: Letter of Introduction/Consent

A Phenomenological Study of the Perceived Lack of Administrative Support Special Education Teachers Receive and Which Led Them to Change Schools

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Dear Teacher,

I would like to invite you to participate in my study that is part of my requirement of my M.Ed. program. I am investigating how special education teachers perceive a lack a support provided to them from their administrators, and the variables associated with special education teachers changing schools as the result of this lack of perceived support.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any other information given to you by the researcher.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in the research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Purpose of the Study

For at least twenty years, the educational system has experienced a higher attrition rate among special education teachers than general educators. Researchers agree that workplace variables have the most impact on the special education teacher shortage, and that administrators play a significant role in this crisis because many of these workplace variables are within their control. I am particularly interested in the experiences of special education teachers who experienced conflict and/or lack of support from their administrators and

eventually resulted in their asking to be transferred to another teaching position. I believe that insight into this phenomenon could result in significant change in our field.

I am hoping that you, as a special education teacher, can provide me with valuable information regarding how administrators can better support special education teachers within a school environment, in order for students with disabilities to receive the most effective support system within their learning environment.

What will you do in this study?

I would like you to participate in a 1:1 interview with me, lasting about 60-90 minutes. You will have the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview and to clarify any points you wish to make.

Possible Benefits

There are several benefits from the outcome of this research, including reducing the level of job dissatisfaction special educators experience, increasing the special education content in teacher and principal training programs, and maintaining consistent programming for students with disabilities by reducing the occurrence of special education teachers changing schools.

Possible Risks

I will take several measures in order to ensure your participation in my study is anonymous and confidential. This study will be presented as a national study and the participants were drawn from at least two Canadian provinces. In doing so, I am dramatically increasing the sampling pool, and decreasing the chances of people guessing your identity. I will not be including any details that may identify you in my thesis, including: the province in which you teach, your age, your gender, your nationality, the number of years you have been teaching, and the grade level of your students. However, even with these safeguards in place, there does exist the potential for people to guess your identity, though such will never be confirmed by the researcher.

Confidentiality

If you give me your consent for me to interview you, I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name. Only the researcher involved in this study will have access to your transcript, and I will provide you with a copy of your transcript to ensure clarity and accuracy of its content.

Anonymity

In order for me to ensure your anonymity, I will be storing the consent forms separately from the interview transcripts so that it will not be possible for anyone to determine which name is associated with any particular transcript.

Recording of Data

During our 1:1 interview, I will be audio taping our interview. At the beginning of our interview, I will ask you for your verbal consent for me to audiotape the interview.

Storage of Data

All audiotapes and transcripts that I collect will be stored in my residence in a locked cabinet for five years. At the end of five years, I will destroy all the information gathered during this study.

Reporting of Results

I will analyze and organize the information obtained from the interviews into themes and include the findings as part of my thesis paper. If you would like a copy of my findings from my study, you may call me at the number or email me at the above contact information.

Questions

If you have any questions regarding any aspect of this study, you may contact me at teacherlisa99@hotmail.com, or my Faculty of Education thesis supervisor, Dr. David Philpott, at philpott@mun.ca.

Ethical Concerns

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. 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.

Consent

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research
- You have been able to ask questions about this study
- You are satisfied with the answers to all of your questions
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights, and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form for your records.

Your Signature

"I have read and understood the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records."

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

Researcher's Signature

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

_____ _____

Signature of Researcher Date

Tel: (709) 765-1560
Email: teacherlisa99@hotmail.com

Appendix B: Interview Transcript/Guide

1. Why did you decide to become a special education teacher? What attracted you to the position?

2. How long have you been a special education teacher?

3. Describe the special education position that you have had that created the least amount of workplace stress for you. What aspects of that position contributed to the lack of stress you experienced?

4. Describe your typical relationships with colleagues, with students, and with parents during the time you were in that teaching position.

5. Describe the relationship you had with the administrator during that special education teaching position.

6. Describe the special education position that you have had that created the most amount of workplace stress for you. What aspects of that position contributed to the stress you experienced?

7. Describe your typical relationships with colleagues, with students, and with parents during the time you were in that teaching position.

8. Describe the relationship you had with the administrator during that special education teaching position.

9. Describe the variables that contributed to your decision to request a transfer to a different school. How did you arrive at your decision to make this request?

10. Why did you decide to remain in special education?

11. In your experience, what workplace variables create stress for special educators?

12. In your experience, what workplace variables lend support to special educators?

13. In your experience, where do special educators draw personal support in the work place? Who provides support to the special educators within the school?

14. In your opinion, what can administrators do to better support special educators?