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A Critical Realism Epistemological Informed Case Study: Special Education Teacher Retention in Urban and Suburban School Districts in Minnesota

Jill Bachmann Dr
jbachmann0104@gmail.com

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A Dissertation

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Jill Bachmann

Dr. John Braun, Chair

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Dedication

To the dedicated special education teachers who continue to tirelessly serve students with compassion, resilience, and unwavering dedication. Your impact extends far beyond the classroom, shaping the lives of students in so many ways.

To those special education teachers who have chosen a different path, your time in the field has left a lasting mark on the lives of countless students. Although your journey may have taken you elsewhere, your time in special education has not gone unnoticed.

Abstract

Special education teachers play a pivotal role in school districts across the country. Special education students benefit from teachers who are knowledgeable in their practice, dedicated, and able to meet their needs, regardless of their abilities. High turnover rates among special education teachers have significant implications for the quality of education provided to students in special education and the overall functioning of schools. Despite decades of research in the area, retention of special education teachers continues to plague districts.

Utilizing a critical realism epistemological approach, this qualitative research study provides an overview of the challenges associated with special education teacher retention. Drawing on existing research and literature, the paper explored various strategies and interventions to address these challenges in three areas: post-secondary education, student teaching, and administrative and mentoring support. The research was drawn from interviews conducted with eight former special education teachers. Participants spoke of their experiences as special education teachers, their level of preparedness when they entered the field, and their reasons for leaving the profession. Lastly, recommendations for future research, practices, and policies were offered to increase retention rates.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

Special education is an ever-changing field due to modernized best practices, technology, federal and state laws reauthorization, and numerous other factors (Department of Education, 2023). The Individuals with Disabilities Act is a law that federally dictates how special education is implemented within the public education system (Department of Education, 2023). In addition, state laws vary from state-to-state, and district policies differ from one district to another, further dictating special education practices within their jurisdictions. With these laws and practices being mandated, one could assume special education is accomplishing what it is intended to: providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities. However, with multiple practices in place and decades between reauthorization, special education has become confusing and anxiety-ridden for educators trying to navigate the system, leading to teacher retention concerns (Department of Education, 2023). These factors have led to concerns about whether special education reform is needed and, if so, how we complete that process.

Special education teachers are an integral part of the education process and retaining them is integral to student success. “Special education teacher shortages have existed in the United States at least since 1975 when PL 94-142 (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) was first passed” (Billingsley, 2019, p. 697). Bonnie Billingsley has conducted extensive research in special education retention, workplace conditions, and the induction of new teachers. At the time of this study, she was a faculty member and subject matter expert in special education at Virginia Tech University, where she taught for 15 years in learning disabilities, emotional disorders, and the administration and supervision of special education (Billingsley, 2023). Studies have continued to show, for the last 20 years, 25% of special education teachers

have left the field within the first five years of entering it (Billingsley, 2019; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). In my experience, when teachers leave the field, the effects are not only felt amongst the district but also, and more importantly, amongst what some people consider the most critical asset, the students they serve. When teachers are unavailable to serve those students, substitutes are utilized to fulfill those duties, leading to inconsistency and even more disruption for students, straining district fiscal resources, student achievement, and overall teacher involvement. Ronfeldt et al. (2013) noted, "… attrition negatively affects student achievement by reducing the aggregated effectiveness of teachers in a school, and disrupting collaborative relationships, resulting in a negative effect on the effectiveness of teachers who remain."

Teacher retention, in general, is problematic for all students. However, it could be argued that special education teacher retention is even more critical due to the demands and consistency needed for special education students. Special education teachers bring a unique perspective regarding specialized instruction, accommodation abilities, and expertise within disability areas (Billingsley, 2004). When these teachers are constantly new to the profession or building and are struggling, achieving the necessary standards and expectations of a district and all the stakeholders involved could be difficult. Thus, students continue to struggle (Billingsley, 2004).

Many factors have been attributed to teacher retention over the years. These include personal reasons, lack of administrative support, district socioeconomic factors, work overload, lack of proper training, etc. (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Administration at both the district and building levels should work with special education teachers and post-secondary learning programs to establish where gaps are occurring and areas each stakeholder deems as needing improvement. "A holistic view of teachers' work conditions is needed to sustain special educators' commitment to their work" (Billingsley, 2004, p. 375). I intended to identify common

themes related to retention to fully understand and attempt to devise solutions to keep qualified special education teachers in the field and within the same districts and buildings for a longer period. Thus, working towards stabilizing learning environments for our special education students.

This research study examined special education teacher retention by looking at the effectiveness of preservice programs, student teaching programs, and administrative and mentoring support once a special education teacher has been placed. It focused on these three specific areas versus other studies that have included personal factors, district socioeconomic factors, individual characteristics, and other factors mentioned throughout the literature review.

Research into special education teacher retention has been an ongoing topic for decades. This qualitative study was intended to add to the current research and possibly identify other factors that can increase special education teacher retention among districts. This positively affects all stakeholders, lessens district fiscal responsibilities, and increases student achievement and overall teacher satisfaction.

Statement of the Problem

Special education teacher retention is prevalent throughout the country. Lack of retention of special education teachers, the individuals who work with special education students, can significantly impact a school district's overall success. Research has historically shown a shortage of special education teachers, and 25% leave the field within the first five years of entering it (Billingsley, 2019; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). More recent research has shown unique job requirements and demands can be attributed to the retention of special education teachers, who view their workloads as unmanageable (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2020). Previous and current research on special education teacher retention has spanned multiple themes

and causes, thus possibly broadening the research to the point that it is challenging to attempt to solve the problem due to too many factors being analyzed. Theobald et al. (2021) stated, “But overall, the existing research on special education preparation has been criticized as ‘limited and unfocused,’ partially because so little of this research uses specific measures of both preparation and outcomes” (p. 2). This dissertation examined three possible causes of the lack of retention of special education teachers: Preparation programs, student teaching programs, and administrative and mentoring support.

Understanding the concerns of special education teachers is essential in attempting to solve the shortage of special education teachers and their retention in the workplace. Previous research has shown multiple factors special education teachers have cited as reasons for moving within or leaving the field. Sohn et al. (2020) stated research may be more effective if we “Leverage preparation programs and existing state data to better understand the characteristics of effective teacher education experiences and transition into the classroom” (p. 39). In addition, it is suggested that school districts offer “intensive and specific professional development activities when teachers’ licenses and experiences do not match the positions to which they have been assigned” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 371). Lastly, “University and district partnerships can be particularly valuable in providing support to beginning teachers, because both university and district personnel have special expertise that can be tapped yet few models for such support systems exist in special education” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 371). When there is continuous turnover within districts, it becomes a financial and time-consuming strain on districts to replace special education teachers. Often, when there are shortages, substitute teachers will be utilized to fill in the gaps but are often not as qualified or do not have a personal investment as a permanent

teacher would, thus leaving special education students with resources that are not fulfilling all their needs, ultimately affecting student achievement (Loeb et al., 2013).

Even with decades of continued research, there has been a never-ending teacher retention problem within special education. Much of the research conducted over the decades continuously shows retention rates have stagnated, with multiple solutions to the problem being offered. However, it has done little to change the actual outcome. In order to rectify the problem, research could be focused on the preservice programs in conjunction with district support, possibly lessening the adverse effects that ultimately lead to special education teachers moving within or leaving the profession altogether.

Study Purpose

This qualitative-based research study aimed to analyze the role preservice, student teaching, administrative, and mentoring support have on special education teacher retention. The study's findings were gathered from information from former special education teachers to assist in providing information to educational institutions—both preservice programs and districts—views of special education teachers to increase teacher retention rates within special education. To complete this process, I used information obtained from in-depth interviews with former special education teachers who have left the profession or moved out of special education but were still employed within a district within the first six years of their careers. These individuals were from Minnesota urban and suburban school districts, and the special education teachers have held licenses in the following areas: Emotional Behavioral Disorder, Specific Learning Disabilities, Developmental Cognitive Delays, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Academic and Behavioral Strategist Licenses. I then analyzed themes from their

interviews to understand their experiences better and to increase special education teacher retention within districts.

Significance of the Study

Emphasis on special education teacher retention has been an increasing priority in the United States over the years. There is a critical shortage of qualified special education teachers because many leave the field within the first five years. Complex factors that influence special education teacher retention are constantly being examined due to the strain the lack of qualified special education teachers can have on district costs, student achievement, and academic growth. When examined further, role overload is one of the leading problems in special education teacher retention. General educators were significantly less likely to indicate routine duties and paperwork interfered with their teaching (Billingsley, 2004). New special education teachers find the administrative parts of their job (i.e., attending IEP meetings, testing, writing reports, scheduling, and keeping up with paperwork) all lead to stress, job dissatisfaction, and, for some, eventually leaving the profession.

The shortage of special education teachers continues to be a problem in Minnesota. The state has attempted to alleviate the shortage by licensing teachers outside their field or allowing alternative pathways to licensing (Education Minnesota, 2021). According to Hawkins (2024), "84% of Minnesota school systems report not being able to hire enough of these teachers, particularly those specializing in autism spectrum disorder, emotional behavioral disorder, and learning disabilities" (p. 4). In addition, districts that have struggled to hire and retain special education teachers in Minnesota have started offering prospective applicants financial incentives (Hawkins, 2024). My dissertation research sought to explore further the disconnect between the

perceived job of Minnesota Special Education Teachers vs. the reality of their day-to-day responsibilities in an attempt to ameliorate the crisis of special education teacher retention.

Leadership Mission, Values, and Vision

When I analyze my role as not only a researcher but also a leader and potential administrator, this quote by Vince Lombardi embodies what I feel is necessary to utilize the information I am gaining and then apply in my day-to-day role: “It is essential to understand that battles are primarily won in the heart … (people) respond to leadership in a most remarkable way and once you have won (their) heart, (they) will follow you anywhere” (Svoboda, 2021, p. 1).

Through these in-depth interviews and qualitative research methods, I analyzed emerging themes that could potentially increase preservice and district support, which could improve retention rates of special education teachers. This was important to me due to my experiences as a special education teacher for 18 years and my understanding of why others move on after a short time. While I have chosen to move out of districts for personal reasons throughout my tenure, I have decided to stay in the profession. During those 18 years, specifically even more since beginning my doctoral journey, I have questioned why I have stayed, what was different for me in my preservice, student teaching, administrative, and mentoring experiences than those who have chosen to leave the field? Do I possess personal qualities that have made staying easier, or did I receive adequate training and support to keep me in the field? It has been essential to question myself because, in addition to spending 18 years in the field, I have mentored four new special education teachers and hosted a student teacher during my tenure in my current district. I formerly held a position as a due process coach in the building where I was teaching, which entailed being in a leadership position in the special education department. I will eventually pursue a tenure in administration. I hope my research can be utilized to support,

create, and facilitate teaching and mentoring programs at the building level, specifically for special education teachers, to bridge the gap between their preservice experience and their first years in the profession like I undoubtedly received and has assisted in my continued presence in the field.

Research Questions

After working in special education for 18 years and watching the constant turnover of special education teachers leaving the profession or being unhappy, I was intrigued to focus my research on why they are unhappy and leaving. Based on my experiences, I can theorize most individuals had a perceived overview, passion, and excitement for the profession they are entering; however, a high percentage of them choose to leave after a short time once in a district. Taking this information into consideration, this study then sought to gain insight into the following questions:

1. What is the disconnect, if any, between the perceived job of Minnesota Special Education Teachers vs. the reality of their day-to-day responsibilities?
2. What training, experiences, or support do Minnesota Special Education Teachers who have left the profession perceive as increasing the likelihood of them continuing in the profession?
3. What recommendations do Minnesota Special Education Teachers who have left the profession have to support beginning teachers in an attempt to increase special education teacher retention?

Research Site/Context and Participants

My study was conducted with former Minnesota Special Education Teachers who have either left the profession entirely or have moved out of special education but are still employed in

the education field. I recruited eight participants for the study. I completed one-on-one, in-depth interviews with these individuals in an attempt to gain insight into their personal experiences and struggles within the field. These interviews were conducted via Zoom. I chose to conduct this study with former special education teachers from across the state of Minnesota. Retention rates are lower for special education teachers who have been working in the field for less than five years and have fewer years of preservice education (Billingsley, 2019); however, I utilized former special education teachers with one to six years of experience and educational backgrounds in my research. While there is a nationwide retention problem, I chose to focus my research in Minnesota because each state has different protocols, policies, etc., in relation to preservice and student teaching programs, due process laws, etc. I hoped utilizing special education teachers with one to six years of experience, educational backgrounds, and from across the State of Minnesota will increase the perspectives of the study while still focusing on the three previously mentioned variables.

As stated previously, research in this area has spanned multiple decades. It has included various areas of focus that consider a broad range of reasons special education teachers leave the field. However, this study focused on the preservice programs in conjunction with district support throughout Minnesota. In-depth interview questions focused on preservice and student teaching programs and administrative and mentoring support former special education teachers received. If program support is not in place and continuing to prepare special education teachers in the same manner and support them as others who have left the profession, the cycle of low retention rates will continue to manifest itself.

Overview of Previous Research

Chapter Two of this study focuses on three bodies of literature. The first body of literature, preservice programming, focuses on how effective preservice programs are in preparing special education teachers for their roles in education. It is important to understand this body of literature as a first step in narrowing the focus of general education teachers' preservice programs vs. special education teachers. Previous research in this area is limited in that it does not necessarily examine preservice programs specifically. Instead, it examines different models available to incoming educators to receive certification and how those models and multiple other variables could affect retention rates. However, even with limited research, conclusions were able to be drawn from the available research, including training methods, pedagogy, competency in complete role expectations, and benefits of alternative pathways to licensure (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; DeAngelis et al., 2013; Morewood & Condo, 2012; Vagi et al., 2019).

The second body of literature, student teaching programming, expands on preservice programs yet offers specific insight into the role student teaching practices play in preparing special education teachers for their teaching roles, including their administrative tasks. Even with limited research available that looks specifically at student teaching practices versus studies pairing both preservice programs and student teaching together, some conclusions were able to be made, including analyzing student teaching programs for their effectiveness towards retention.

Finally, the third body of literature, administrative and mentoring support, is necessary to examine the continued need for support once special education teachers actively teach and attempt to manage the day-to-day logistics of their roles. This research appears to be the most extensive when analyzing the retention of special education teachers. It also appears to be the

most influential regarding retention. Teachers and, more specifically, novice special education teachers enter districts with perceptions of their day-to-day responsibilities and a need to balance them with their reasons for teaching. When adequate support is put into place via administrative and/or mentoring, it appears individuals are more apt to stay put not only within a building or district but also within the profession as a whole (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Billingsley, 2019; Cobb, 2014; Otto & Arnold, 2005; Parker, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

The epistemological approach I utilized in this study is critical realism phenomenologically informed case study. Critical realism is "a branch of philosophy that distinguishes between the 'real' world and the 'observable' world. According to critical realists, unobservable structures cause observable events, and the social world can be understood only if people understand the structures that generate events" (Samuels, 2020). This approach works with qualitative studies, which I used for my research. It focuses on the use of existing theories yet allows for the knowledge and experience of the participants to fuel the research. In addition, I focused my study on using a phenomenologically informed case study approach. A phenomenologically informed case study approach "emphasizes experiential, lived aspects of a particular construct–that is, how the phenomenon is experienced at the time it occurred" (Nelson, 2011). The actions of special education teachers are influenced by events that have happened to them via training, administrative support, etc. This is part of the theory and how it is applied. There are observable differences and events generated by mechanisms in place in an organization, and those mechanisms then generate the actual events that influence the decisions of the special education teachers.

Definition of Terms

Administration: Building level supports that oversee the day-to-day duties of teachers, that have the ability to critique, make recommendations for advancement and replacement of other positions within a school building (Black, 2022).

Administrative Duties: Work duties special education teachers perform outside of teaching students within a classroom (Meier, 2018). These can include meetings, due process paperwork, lesson planning, parent and colleague communication, etc.

Administrative Support: Support that includes but is not limited to instructional/behavior practices, curriculum and subject content, obtaining resources, special education paperwork analysis, etc. provided by an individual in administration (Parker, 2010).

Advanced Degree: Any schooling or degree beyond a standard four-year degree, bachelor of arts, or bachelor of science, in a chosen field (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

Attrition: The rate at which special education teachers leave the field (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

District Onboarding: Professional development a district provides for new, incoming employees to establish district protocols and expectations of their role (Shrm, 2021).

Due Process: Policies, procedures, and paperwork that special education teachers complete for each of their students to remain in compliance with federal, state, and local district mandates (Logsdon, 2020).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): "The provision of education services, general and special education, for a student with a disability who is eligible to receive

special education services as outlined in the student's IEP at the public's expense so that the student may receive educational benefit" (Sheldrake, 2014, p. 10).

General Education Teacher: A teacher who works in a district who does not oversee a caseload of students defined under federal law as special education students (Global, 2023).

IDEA: Federal law that mandates that all public schools educate students, regardless of special education status (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Mentor: An individual who districts assign to assist new teachers in their day-to-day role completion. This can include overseeing paperwork, administering advice or suggestions to increase work performance, supporting them on district policies, etc (Koki, 2023).

Mentoring Support: Support that includes but is not limited to instructional/behavior practices, curriculum and subject content, obtaining resources, special education paperwork analysis, etc. (Parker, 2010).

Preservice Programs: Post-secondary education programs individuals attend to gain the knowledge and pedagogy to be licensed in the field of education (Brown, 2019). This can include alternative programs, as defined in the literature, universities, and colleges.

Teacher Retention: For the purposes of this study, the rate at which special education teachers stay employed in the education field for one to six years (Vagi et al., 2019).

Special Education Teacher: A teacher licensed in these areas of special education: Emotional Behavioral Disorder, Specific Learning Disabilities, Developmental Cognitive Delays, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Academic and Behavioral Strategist Licenses, that left the profession within, one to six years, who maintains a special education

caseload of students within a district (Riser-Kositsky, 2022). This does not include paraprofessionals or other non-licensed special education support.

Student Teaching Programs: "When a candidate enrolled in an initial licensure program assumes teacher responsibilities while working with a cooperating teacher and a supervisor to practice and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become a teacher" (*Minnesota's State Portal,* 2020, p. 4).

Conclusion

With continued concerns regarding special education teacher retention, now more than ever, this study comes at an opportune time. By continuing to build on previous research and experiences of special education teachers and focusing on specific preservice programs, this dissertation sought to advance those programs and supports to increase retention and adequately serve those students with the most significant needs. Districts and their stakeholders not only need but also deserve to have the practices in place to support new special education teachers so they feel equipped to complete the day-to-day responsibilities of their positions and enjoy why they became teachers; to teach.

In this chapter, I detailed why there is a continued need to analyze why special education teachers are leaving the profession at a high rate. Keeping special education teachers in the profession is essential to keeping districts' spending costs down, keeping student achievement high, and increasing overall academic success for special education students. "With concentrated efforts aimed at thorough preparation of teachers along with improvements in the work environment, severe shortages of highly qualified and satisfied special education teachers may be avoided" (Stempien & Loeb, 2002, p. 266).

Chapter Two of this dissertation reviews previous research in the field and outlines recommendations on how previous and future research could impact special education teacher retention. It provides a background into why districts continue to struggle to keep special education teachers, especially novice ones, and how the lack of retention can negatively affect our special education students. Lastly, it focuses on why the retention of special education teachers still exists and has unfortunately been maintained at the rate it has. It also examines how improving programs and supports can positively increase retention rates.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter further explores the perspectives of teachers related to job retention, in an attempt to ameliorate the crisis of special education teacher retention. It explores literature and attempts to answer the question: What scholarship helps us understand how the current system of teacher development can better support special education teacher retention? In order to address this concern, it was important to review literature that highlights special education teacher retention over the years and the impact it has on district costs, student achievement, and academic growth. Legislation and policies at the federal, state, and local levels continue to impact the day-to-day responsibilities of special education teachers and their ability to perform their jobs in an effective, efficient, and meaningful way. Are there current practices impeding special education teachers from performing their jobs? Are there areas of improvement where we can support special education teachers to attain better retention?

The following review of literature focuses on three areas: Preservice programs, student teaching programs, and administration and mentoring support; all of which scholars have identified as areas of explanation for the lack of retention in special education, specifically related to the balance of teaching and administrative responsibilities. These areas of literature include a look at preservice programs and their effectiveness in preparing special education teachers for their roles in education. Secondly, how the effectiveness of student teaching programs plays in preparing special education teachers. Finally, with the addition of the third group of scholars, this literature review focuses on the administrative and mentoring support provided in districts, which is necessary for support once special education teachers are actively teaching. The three bodies of literature that are the focus of this literature review address

concerns within the realm of special education teacher retention. Each section focuses on a specific aspect I view as not only relevant but also pivotal in increasing the retention of special education teachers so as to impact then the other aforementioned issues associated with retention concerns.

Historical Background

Emphasis on special education teacher retention has been an increasing priority over the years in the United States. According to research, special education teacher shortages have existed since 1975, when the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was first passed (Billingsley, 2019). Complex factors that influence special education teacher retention, such as training programs, administrative support, district onboarding practices, etc. are constantly being examined due to the strain the lack of qualified special education teachers can have on district costs, student achievement, and academic growth. When there is a shortage of qualified special education teachers, districts are forced to make decisions to fill the void the shortage leaves, potentially resulting in reduced services to students with disabilities and increased class sizes, both of which are detrimental to special education students (Billingsley, 2004). New special education teachers find the administrative parts of their job, for example, attending IEP meetings, testing, writing reports, scheduling, and keeping up with paperwork all lead to stress, job dissatisfaction, and, for some, eventually leaving the profession (Billingsley, 2004).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a law that federally dictates how special education is implemented in the public education system (Riser-Kositsky, 2022). In addition, there are state laws that vary from state-to-state that even further dictate special education practices within their jurisdictions. Special education services were put into place for all students to receive a “Free Appropriate Public Education,” which is defined as “Part B of

IDEA requires participating states to ensure that a free appropriate public education [FAPE] is made available to eligible children with disabilities in mandatory age ranges residing in the state" (Duncan, 2010, p. 4). Federal law, IDEA, mandates states and school districts to provide services to individuals regardless of their disabilities. Over the years, special education has become a daunting process for districts, specifically for special education teachers. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) stated, "Special education teacher shortages have existed in the United States at least since 1975, when PL 94-142 (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) was first passed" (p. 697). The longevity of a special education teacher is approximately five years. The profession has a high turnover rate due to burnout. Some data show, on average, 24% of teachers who have left the profession have left due to burnout (Samuels, 2019).

Special education teachers attend and participate in preservice programs and student teaching programs just like their general education peers. However, researchers found some special educators felt their workload, time to complete their work, and conflicting goals, expectations, and directives to be a frequent source of stress (Billingsley, 2004). The question arises as to how effective preservice programs and student teaching programs are in preparing special education teachers. Along with bachelor's and/or master's degrees, teachers currently spend approximately 12 weeks enrolled in student teaching programs, in the state of Minnesota, to receive their teaching license (Licensure requirements, 2019). While special education teachers do complete additional practicum hours for licensure, they are not required to complete additional years of preservice programs or additional weeks of student teaching beyond those of general education teachers; however, they have duties in addition to those of general education teachers.

Currently, in the state of Minnesota, student teaching requirements are established in state law and rule by the legislature and governor. In addition, the MN Professional Educators Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) role is to license teachers and oversee preparation programs. They are the governing body that sets, revises, and ultimately certifies whether special education teacher candidates have met the necessary requirements to become licensed in the field. Once an individual has obtained a BA, ideally in education, they are required to complete 12 weeks of student teaching as a capstone to their preservice program along with competency tests that are issued by the state, in their area/s of licensure (Office of the Revisor of Statutes, 2021). Currently, there are licenses in four tiers the state of Minnesota issues. Which license you are able to apply for is dependent on your level of certification and preservice work completion.

Previously, Minnesota licensed special education teachers in nine disability areas (Minnesota Teacher and Related Services Licensure Fields, 2021). In 2012, Minnesota also started issuing an Academic and Behavioral Strategist license, which licensed teachers in five different disability areas—autism spectrum disorders (ASD), developmental cognitive disability (DCD), emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD), other health disabilities (OHD), and specific learning disability (SLD)—versus having a targeted license in each area. This path was created to give districts more flexibility when hiring special education teachers, which could allow for higher retention rates for districts and possibly give relief to districts from seeking personal variances or out-of-field permissions for general education teachers (Frequently Asked Questions about the Academic and Behavioral Strategist (ABS) License, 2021).

Teachers who come from out-of-state and are looking to obtain teaching licenses in Minnesota often find the process daunting, costly, and frustrating (Minncan, 2021). This is especially true when looking at alternatives to licensure program applicants. Other states also do

not have as stringent of standards to obtain teaching licenses. “While most states (39) set a minimum length for student teaching …, only about half require that student teaching last at least 10 weeks” (Greenberg et al., 2011). In addition, other states may or may not mandate additional proficiency exams to attain licensure in their states.

With the varying degree of licensure requirements, specifically student teaching mandates across the United States, there can be speculation that it helps contribute to the varying retention and attrition rates of special education teachers. Research has shown teachers who retain residency in the state they attended college have a higher retention rate than those who choose to relocate once they attended their preservice programs (Billingsley, 2019). This could be due to teachers having all the requirements in one state, to gain certification, without the added expenses and possible additional preservice program and student teaching requirements if they were to relocate to another state.

Scholars have argued that well-prepared teachers are more likely to be effective in their classrooms as well as staying in the profession (Billingsley, 2004). During their student teaching experience, the majority of a special education teacher’s time is spent planning, preparing, and teaching lessons. Depending on the cooperating teacher, and the requirements of each individual preservice program, there can be little time spent or mandated on the administrative role of their position. While there was no research found as to the specifics of this, there can be assumptions made that point to an emphasis on building classroom teaching skills during that time versus administrative duties that can potentially be focused on outside of student-teacher contact opportunities. This has the potential to significantly impact the role overload special education teachers face during their first few years in the field. According to Paperwork in Special Education (2002), “more than half of the special educators reported that routine duties and

paperwork interfered with their teaching to a ‘great extent.’ General educators were significantly less likely to indicate that routine duties and paperwork interfered with their teaching” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 48).

Once teachers are hired by districts, the district onboarding and mentoring services vary from place-to-place (Shrm, 2021). In addition, continued administrative support can vary from district-to-district and even building-to-building, within the district. Mentoring support can be provided by school internal mentors or on a district level. Studies have shown the use of an internal mentor, with experienced teachers, has been more effective than district-assigned mentors. This is due to the access they have to their mentors on a daily basis and the ability to form effective relationships with them (Brindley & Parker, 2010). Along with the effectiveness of mentoring support, Cross and Billingsley (1994) focused on the importance of administrative support and determined special education teachers who had a positive perception of administrative support had an overall higher job satisfaction; consequently, the teacher was more committed to remaining in the teaching profession.

Throughout the historical perspectives reviewed, an overview of federal, state, and local law and policies has provided context around preservice programs, student teaching practices and administrative and mentoring support within districts. At this point, the focus of the literature review centers on these specific concerns that have been associated with the lack of special education teacher retention by school districts.

Preservice Programs

As special education teachers make their way through preservice programs, it is vital they receive adequate training, in many areas, to become an effective teacher who feels prepared to take on the day-to-day duties of their job. When teachers fail to stay in districts it becomes a

costly loss for districts, not only financially but also in terms of equity as well. Current research has shown the financial loss of a teacher to a district can amount to between $4,000-$18,000 depending on the district (Vagi et al., 2019). In addition, research has shown, “High-poverty schools bear the brunt of high turnover, reducing the likelihood that students with disabilities who live in poverty will be taught by highly qualified special educators” (Billingsley, 2019, p. 698). While there are multiple routes individuals are able to take to become a special education teacher, the overarching goal should be to prepare them for all aspects of their job, not just the instructional or pedagogy aspects of it. “Overall, the evidence tends to show higher retention rates for teachers with more formal or comprehensive preservice preparation” (DeAngelis et al., 2013, p. 339). In addition, DeAngelis et al. (2013) stated,

> Specifically, teachers in our study who were less satisfied with the quality of their preservice preparation were significantly more likely to intend to change schools or leave and more likely to actually leave teaching than those who were more satisfied. (p. 351)

Research in the effectiveness of preservice programs on teacher retention is limited. When analyzing research in this area, it is often coupled with characteristics of individuals and their effectiveness on teaching, rather than on the preservice programs themselves (Vagi et al., 2019). In addition, research-based solely on preservice programs without the addition of student teaching factors is limited.

Currently, to become a special education teacher in the state of Minnesota, individuals need, at minimum, a bachelor’s degree and a teaching license in the area of teaching (Examine, 2021). However, there are multiple states that do not require a bachelor's degree and allow alternative programs to licensure. Special education teachers are able to hold multiple licenses in different categorical areas. Each of these areas requires additional classes to obtain licenses.

Special education teachers are able to then also attain master's degrees, doctorate degrees, and administrative licenses if they choose to advance their careers. While the studies and information going forward are based on national data, it is important to note what specifically applies to special education teachers in Minnesota for the purposes of eventual recommendations in this study. Lastly, it should be noted that certification programs vary considerably in the United States from state-to-state, university-to-university, and with the addition of alternative programs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Past and current research has shown, "a direct association between new teachers' perceptions of preservice preparation quality and their intentions to remain in their current school and in the profession" (DeAngelis et al., 2013, p. 351). When teachers do not feel prepared to take on the day-to-day responsibilities of their job, they may become dissatisfied, may not be able to perform the required conditions of their job and could eventually leave the profession or are forced out of their jobs by poor job performance.

Preservice programs focus on many aspects of the job that include: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge, and special education due process knowledge (Morewood & Condo, 2012). Due to the many aspects preservice programs have to cover, limited amounts of time are being spent on all aspects of the job duties. Preservice programs spend large amounts of time on pedagogical, content, and curricular knowledge; however, they truncate due process knowledge, which is an integral part of a special education teacher's job (Morewood & Condo, 2012). Burstein et al. (2009) noted, "Common concerns regarding teacher preparation include an emphasis on theory over practice, weak linkages between coursework and fieldwork" (p. 26). By limiting the amount of time they spend on this integral part of the job, it does not prepare special education teachers to take on a significant portion of their day-to-day

responsibilities, thus failing to bridge the gap between the perceived duties of a special education teacher's job versus the reality of them.

One study suggested preservice programs that recruit a lower number of students and focus resources on fewer teacher candidates have a higher retention rate than those programs that recruit large numbers of teacher candidates to fill their programs (Vagi et al., 2019). This can be problematic for preservice programs due to programs appearing to not be fiscally responsible, due to a lower number of candidates and possibly not addressing the current teacher shortages. In order to accommodate for this, programs can outprice themselves, which can have an effect on enrollment. In either case, Vagi et al. (2019) stated, "higher quality preservice teachers are significantly more likely to remain in the profession during their first two years of teaching" (p. 125).

Level of Degrees Attained and Retention

Multiple studies point to questions that have arisen regarding special education teachers with advanced degrees (Burstein et al., 2009; Edgar & Pair, 2005; Kaiser, 2011). While the state of Minnesota requires at least a bachelor's degree to become a special education teacher, there are other states that do not and license teachers through alternative learning programs versus them attaining a bachelor's degree. Studies have been included in this literature review that are not exclusive to just the state of Minnesota. These studies have shown there is a correlation between special education teachers who receive less than a bachelor's degree versus advanced degrees (Burstein et al., 2009; Edgar & Pair, 2005; Kaiser, 2011). It should be noted, studies differ in the variables they utilize to attain retention and attrition rates. Studies have taken into account teacher characteristics, salaries of teachers, specific special education areas like emotional behavioral disorder, self-contained versus resource programs, work conditions,

professional development opportunities, and programs that include early childhood, amongst others as well. This is significant because data collected, while common in outcomes, are composed of different variables to determine retention and attrition.

In a longitudinal study completed by Kaiser (2011), 1,990 first-year public school teachers completed the Schools and Staffing Survey starting in the 2007-2008 school year with a 73% response rate. Data were continuously collected from the same group of teachers for two consecutive school years with 84% and 86% response rates, respectively. They found individuals with bachelor's and advanced degrees are more likely to return for a second year (91.4% and 89.1%), versus individuals with less than a bachelor's degree (67.6%). One could make the argument that increased levels of job competency will increase overall retention rates, no matter what profession one is in. However, there was an outlier in this study in that individuals with more than a master's degree actually had a lower retention rate of 52.2%. This should be noted because it identifies more advanced degrees, beyond an MA, could possibly reduce retention rates due to individuals being less tolerant of districts they do not feel are adequately educating students, are working with special education teachers, or valuing their expertise in the field. However, due to the variables in each study, it is difficult to determine exactly why they are leaving at a higher rate.

Edgar and Pair (2005) conducted a quantitative study at the University of Washington with 161 teaching graduates, from four different programs, who graduated during the 2001-2002 school year. Interviews were conducted with the 141 (87%) participants who were located. They found a retention rate of 78%, which was significantly higher than the national data they were comparing it to at a 40-50% attrition rate. In addition, they found the retention rate was higher from graduates of five-year programs versus four-year programs. These programs are master's

level programs, thus including additional coursework. This was comparable to a study they utilized by Andrews and Schwab (1995), which produced an 84% retention rate. This study included analyzing not only attrition rates (defined as individuals that actually quit teaching), but also included looking at retention rates that involve moving within the profession. This included moving special education programs voluntarily or due to staffing actions and moving to other education related work. They found 30% of the participants were individuals who actually left the profession versus 70% of individuals who moved within special education or to other education related work. This study is significant in that it makes strong assertions that special education teachers are possibly not leaving the field; however, they are mobile within the field due to personal factors unrelated to teaching. These mobility factors included leaving to start a family, retirement, spouse transfer, moving closer to home, travel, attending grad school, and dissatisfaction. However, whether they leave or are moved, it still affects retention rates for individual districts and schools. New special education teachers still need to be hired to replace the individuals who leave and still need to be trained which has the ability to impact district costs, student achievement, and academic growth.

Burstein et al. (2009), using a mixed methods study, analyzed data from The ACT Program, which was a combination of a shared school-university model, that focused on best practices for teachers in urban schools. This study was conducted via surveys, with 523 graduates of the program from the graduation years of 1999-2004. Of the 523 surveys sent out, 236 (45%) were returned (Burstein et al., 2009). They reported an overall retention rate of 74%, which is lower than other studies; however, comparable when looking at teachers with lesser degrees. This study looked at a partnership between the school and university focusing on best practices around recruiting, preparing, and retaining elementary, secondary, and special

education teachers for students in urban communities. This study focused on an urban district versus other studies that did not take this into account (Burstein et al., 2009). This is important because there is data to show that teachers in urban areas are more likely to leave a school or the profession due to other circumstances (high-poverty, lower funding, cultural understanding of students) not necessarily occurring in suburban or rural districts (Burstein et al., 2009). With lower retention rates taken into account in urban districts, this study still found retention rates were near other studies at 74%. This is significant because if urban districts have been found to have lower retention rates, what is this program or school doing differently that keeps their retention rate close to other districts that do not have problems with an urban district? The article suggested having a partnership between the school and university played an important role in retention overall. If that is the case, there could be an argument for increasing partnerships with schools and preservice programs to increase retention rates.

Preservice Perceptions versus Practicing Expectations

Perceptions of a special education teachers' roles and responsibilities can play a factor in job satisfaction and future choices to stay or leave the profession (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Special education teachers enter the field with certain daily and long-term expectations of their job. When those perceptions are in-line with practicing expectations it can lead to greater job satisfaction (Wasburn-Moses, 2009). Wasburn-Moses (2009) completed a comparison study of 184 preservice teachers and their perceptions of future expectations and 133 practicing teachers' roles and responsibilities. Both groups of participants completed surveys that were nearly identical to each other with the difference being the perceived expectations. The study found preservice special education teachers had predictions aligned with those of practicing special education teachers' roles and responsibilities. When there were differences in perceptions,

recommendations point to increased collaboration amongst preservice programs and K-12 institutions. The research is significant in that other studies point to teachers not being properly prepared, hence a lower retention rate of special education teachers (Kaiser, 2001; Lee et al., 2011). This study, however, identifies other factors, perceptions of the job, that could be intertwined with preservice requirements. Preservice programs could collaborate more closely with K-12 institutions to bridge the gap between perceptions versus realities of the job. As with other programs listed above, when teachers feel prepared and have greater educational concentration, they are more likely to stay in the profession and increase retention rates.

Barnatt et al. (2017) completed a qualitative study that focused on four teachers, who were employed at different schools but all with similar backgrounds in relation to demographics, attended the same master's-level teaching program, were licensed as highly-qualified as defined by the federal mandate, were assigned a mentor, and taught at schools that were similar or the same as their student teaching assignments and in a field that they held a license in. This study found the trajectory of their careers looked very different, even with all of the similarities before they took their positions. They also found each teacher's personal experiences and forethought before they entered the profession played a role in their decisions once they were teaching. Each had different expectations and understanding of themselves and the programs they chose to enter. The study concluded with three implications for the areas of teacher preparation, school administration, and education policy in general. These were: 1) Providing a foundation and awareness in preservice programs that include challenges, potential setbacks, failure, and social interactions and context can influence personal growth, the ability to address challenges and how to make thoughtful choices further professional growth; 2) Principals and administrators are critical to setting tone and expectations as well as determining levels of support needed and

provided; and 3) Improving the educational reforms and mandates that attempt to simplify and manage all elements of education. This study provides increased insight into teacher expectations versus the realities of their positions. Having the ability to be flexible and overcome obstacles within their day appears to be vital. However, being prepared with appropriate preservice needs, adequate administrative support, and supportive reforms and mandates appear to play a role in this as well. While the study followed only four teachers, it is beneficial in that it shows even when teachers feel prepared, in their own minds, factors outside of their control can play a significant role in their ability to stay in the profession.

Alternative Route to Licensure Programs

Due to the shortage in special education teachers, other routes states have approved for certification are labeled as alternative routes to licensure (ARL) programs (Brown, 2019). These programs are defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2015a) as: "ARL is a state-level, flexible form of teacher recruitment and preparation and as such, each state governs their own regulations around ARL." These programs differ in the prerequisites necessary to gain a teacher license, they do not negate the state regulated mandates for achieving licensure. These programs were developed to encourage and allow a path for individuals with a bachelor's degree, outside of education, to enroll in teacher certification programs towards licensure. This has allowed individuals who have chosen to take a different path from their original college degrees an easier and less expensive route to teacher certification (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). As of 2018, 49 states, with the exception of Alaska, have created alternative programs as a means of alleviating high special education teacher attrition rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Information regarding the retention rate of just special education teachers, in ARL programs, was not found; however, in studies of the retention rate of all teachers, there was no

distinction between areas of interest. While the following data are not specific to special education they still allow for comparison on a broader spectrum. Zhang and Zeller (2016) published a seven-year, mixed methods study conducted at East Carolina University starting in 2003-2004. In it, 20 doctoral students were required to interview three initially licensed teachers, one from each of the three preparation programs. They analyzed the retention rates for three licensure programs: regular teacher education program, lateral entry, and NC Teach, an ARL licensure program. The participants included 41 first-year teachers and 19 second-year teachers. The results of the study indicated the long-term retention rates in all three programs decline. This produced over seven years; other studies have shown results for shorter periods of time. This is significant in that even teachers with more experience are continuing to leave the profession, which makes one question if lack of preparedness is the cause of declining retention rates or are other personal factors such as: poor pay, amount of work outside of the standard workday, and poor relationships with colleagues or administration, are the cause.

A quantitative study conducted by Morris (2002) specifically analyzed the retention rate of three teacher certification programs in Mississippi. There were a total of 1,895 participants, 1,627 were certified through a traditional licensure program, 250 were certified through the standard alternate route, and 19 teachers were certified through the special alternate route. The two alternate route programs can be looked at as ARL programs because they differ from the traditional licensure program approved by the state. Based on the Morris (2002) study, they found the retention rate for individuals in traditional programs was 63%, standard alternate route was 44% and the special alternate route was 53%. Analysis also included looking at age. They found younger individuals were more likely to leave the profession versus older individuals in the study. This study aligns with other studies that have been mentioned. Those individuals who

acquire teaching licenses through traditional programs and have a higher educational concentration are more likely to stay in the profession versus those who acquire licensure through alternative programs. This could question the effectiveness of those programs. While still contributing to the teacher shortage, what are these programs possibly missing in preparing individuals, that they then leave the field at a higher level? These programs, depending on who sponsors them, have different requirements, thus allowing for standards to be more subjective and possibly decreasing their effectiveness.

Lee et al. (2011) published a study conducted in the state of California, with 92/154 special education intern teachers. There were individuals who did not possess a degree in teaching, met certain criteria, and were enrolled in a teacher certification program while teaching in schools. This study did not analyze retention rates, rather it analyzed the "perils to special education intern teachers' perceived self-efficacy and the quality of support they received, accounting for the influence of demographics, levels of paperwork, content knowledge, support from parents and school districts, and teacher preparation programs" (Lee et al., 2011, p. 64). This study is important in identifying why special education teachers did not feel prepared coming from an ARL certification program. The study found there appeared to be a correlation between a teacher's self-confidence and their perceived teaching efficacy (Lee et al., 2011). This indicates the importance of special education teachers gaining the needed knowledge from teacher preparation programs. Certification program designers should balance the many facets of a special education teacher's daily duties when producing teacher certification programs, to ensure they develop well-rounded individuals at the end of programs.

The State of Minnesota offers alternative pathways to licensure. This process changed in the legislative session in 2017 and was implemented in 2018. Before 2018, the licensing program

in Minnesota allowed individuals to work outside their licensure field with approval from the state (Office of the Legislative Auditor, 2016). After the legislative session, the State of Minnesota restructured its system to include a four-tiered licensing program to increase the number of teachers in traditionally difficult areas to hire (Budke & Nickel, 2022). This pathway allows teachers with college degrees outside the field of education to attain Tier One licenses for a year. This license can be renewed up to three times by a district and the teacher, along with the progress being made by the teacher toward completion of an accredited licensure program. The district must show its inability to hire teachers with Tier Two, Three, or Four licenses. In addition, an individual with a bachelor's degree outside of education that meets additional requirements can be licensed in Minnesota with a Tier Two license (Education Minnesota, 2021). Minnesota utilizes the tiered licensing system to fill special education teacher positions due to a shortage of individuals trained in the field (Dernbach, 2023). Statistics show there has been an increase in the number of special education teachers in the field since the implementation of the tiered licensing system. “Special education licensure areas represent nearly a third (32%) of all tier 1 licenses and only slightly less (30%) of all tier 2 licenses” (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Licensing Standards Board, 2022, p. 15). While the tiered system has increased special education teachers, they enter the field with limited or no training in special education. This can potentially affect student learning outcomes (Dernbach, 2023). However, since the induction of the new licensing system, Minnesota has not “examined the effectiveness of its teacher's colleges or of educators with non-traditional backgrounds who were licensed after the system changed in 2018” (Hawkins, 2024, p. 8).

Preservice programs for special education teachers vary in construction and delivery. Where a special education teacher receives their training can possibly affect how prepared they

feel to enter the field and be successful in it. With the research currently available, certain conclusions can be made. Preservice programs should highlight and train individuals on the entire role of their jobs. Having an in-depth background before going into student teaching and eventually into a district should only increase retention rates. Also, the pathway of ARL programs has indicated there is a need for these programs, due to individuals who make career decisions later in life and want to contribute to the field. While the retention rates from these programs appear to be smaller, they still contribute to teachers in the field, which have proven to be much needed. Overall, evidence points to a lack of special education teachers in the field, which makes it difficult for districts to educate some of the highest-need students. If we want to see a rise in retention rates, starting with high-quality preservice programs where teachers feel prepared, is a good first step.

Student Teaching Programs

Once special education teachers complete their preservice programs in a college or university, they are then required to complete a student teaching program, in conjunction with their college or university classroom experience. These vary from state-to-state in length and criteria; however, all hope to achieve the same result—preparing individuals to successfully navigate the day-to-day responsibilities of being a licensed special education teacher. Preparation in a special education student teaching program is an essential function of an overall preservice program experience. It provides individuals the hands-on experience that is necessary. As with research conducted on just preservice programs, research on just student teaching programs and retention rates is also limited. A high percentage of studies conducted on the attrition and retention rates of special education teachers often focused on characteristics of special education teachers, rather than on the preparation programs involved in the process (DeAngelis et al.,

2013). Further research focused on preparation programs and their focus versus characteristics of special education teachers, may benefit the overall research in the area.

Student Teaching Program Timelines

As stated previously, the amount of time required for student teaching programs varies state-to-state. This is significant in that research has shown the more prepared a special education teacher feels, the more likely they are to stay in the field (Billingsley, 2019). Currently, in Minnesota, general education teachers and special education teachers spend the same amount of time enrolled in student teaching programs. These programs can include lesson planning, administrative meetings, classroom teaching time, etc. However, the additional administrative responsibilities of special education teachers are not highlighted in these programs, nor given additional weeks of student teaching time; yet additional duties are required of a special education teacher. This can become problematic once the special education teacher enters the field and is expected to perform all of their duties within a limited time frame; yet they receive little exposure to them while in a student teaching format.

Connelly and Graham (2009) completed a study that examined the amount of time a special education teacher spent in a student teaching placement—10 weeks or less versus more than 10 weeks—and if characteristics or demographics of a special education teacher had an effect on the retention rates of individuals after one year of teaching. For the purpose of this review, only information regarding the amount of time a special education teacher spent in a student teaching placement was analyzed. In their study, Connelly and Graham drew data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) from the 1999-2000 school year and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS) in the 2001-2002 school year. Of the original 42,086 individuals surveyed in 1999-2000, Connelly and Graham eventually analyzed 168 individuals' surveys.

This was based on: Completion of the follow-up survey, special education placement, and special education teachers with less than three years of experience. After analyzing the surveys, they found the amount of time a special education teacher spends in a student teaching placement did have a noticeable effect on retention rates. Of the individuals involved in the survey, 49 received less than 10 weeks of student teaching placement and had a retention rate of 63%, while the 119 teachers with more than 10 weeks of student teaching placement had a retention rate of 80% (Connelly & Graham, 2009). A limitation of this study is that it did not account for teachers who left the profession versus moving out of their current district. Due to a smaller sample size, they were not able to conduct an inferential analysis of the leavers. Connelly and Graham (2009) stated:

> When teachers with limited to no student teaching enter the classroom, they may enter with limited foresight and practical knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities and realities experienced by classroom special education teachers. They may come to the realization that the work is not all that they had hoped it to be, a realization that could have been made before they entered the profession. (p. 266)

This study is significant in that it specifically looked at retention rates for student teaching placements versus preservice programs as a whole and it separated findings that included personal characteristics and demographics of a teacher. It showed individuals with longer student teaching practices were more apt to stay in the profession (Connelly & Graham, 2009). This could be due to feeling more prepared once they entered the profession. During their student teaching time, where was the focus spent, versus the teachers with lesser time? It could have allowed for more focused time on all aspects of teaching versus the student contact time.

Without the specifics of where the time is spent, it leaves it to the reader to assume what a hosting teacher emphasized during the additional weeks of student teaching.

Teacher Retention and Program Quality

As stated above, previous teacher retention studies have traditionally focused on characteristics of teachers entering the field or the organizational structures of schools (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Few studies over the years actually analyzed specifically how preservice programs and student teaching practices affect teacher retention, without accounting for other factors such as teacher characteristics, demographics of the school, etc. This is true even with general education teacher population studies, not just special education teacher retention studies. There is an area of study slowly emerging and adding to the current research. This research analyzes the improvement of preservice programs and offers recommendations for them (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Often, preservice programs do not analyze the long-term effects of their effectiveness by following former graduates and completing follow-up studies regarding their current placements or lack thereof. Instead, they evaluate compliance with standards and their own external expectations (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). While these studies do not look directly at retention rates, they are significant in that they identify the lack of studies, the need to evaluate preservice programs critically in terms of retention rates, and improvements that can be made to increase their effectiveness in preparing incoming teachers.

Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) completed a study analyzing teaching practices and early career decisions. Within this study, they made recommendations for preservice programs and where they can improve. Cochran-Smith et al.'s (2009) qualitative case study evaluated data from 15 teachers through their first five years in the profession, discontinuation of the program, or their departure from the field. Findings from the study concluded with five configurations of

early career decisions: (a) Strong teaching and continuing to teach in the same school, (b) strong teaching and moving schools, (c) adequate teaching and moving schools, (d) problematic/weak teaching and moving schools/ positions in order to continue to teach, and (e) problematic/weak teaching and leaving teaching (not by choice). The configurations then generated implications for policy, practice, and continued research (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). They found preservice programs would benefit from a formula that continues to follow special education teachers once they graduate from their preservice programs. In addition, they recommended preservice programs to evaluate the need for teachers to immediately demonstrate job readiness versus acquiring all the skills necessary over time. This is significant in that new teachers, general and special education, are evaluated in year one once they find placement (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). When they are hired, they are expected to demonstrate the ability to complete their day-to-day responsibilities. If preservice programs and student teaching practices are not preparing special education teachers for their roles, they can struggle once they are on their own. While mentoring programs and administrative support in districts is crucial for new teachers, identifying where preservice programs and student teaching practices are failing is essential. This could increase special education teacher retention by assisting in bridging the gap between the perceived job versus the reality of their job.

In 2011, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) published a study that took three years to complete (Greenberg et al., 2011). It should be noted that this study was for elementary student-teaching programs, it was not focused solely on special education practices and does not specifically address retention rates after teachers leave the programs. However, with the limited research in the field, it does supply relevant information for the purposes of this study. Lastly, the study authors, Greenberg et al.

(2011) stated: “we can identify no reason why our findings and recommendations would not generally extend to both undergraduate and graduate preparation of all classroom teachers” (p. 2). This study investigated the effectiveness of student teaching across the United States, by looking at a combination of 134 public and private higher education programs at the undergraduate level (Greenberg et al., 2011). It included preservice teacher programs from all 50 states including the District of Columbia. The institutions were evaluated on five original standards, then 32 of them were further evaluated on an additional 14 standards. Greenberg et al. (2011) also considered the varying standards set from state-to-state, so as to not decrease a rating for an institution because of state standards or lack thereof. They found institutions varied in the manner in which they complied with state regulations around student teaching programs. Institutions were found to comply with standards that were easily measurable, for example qualifications for a mentor teacher, versus standards that were less likely to be highly regulated or not quantifiable, for example the mentor teachers demonstrate a positive impact on student learning Greenberg et al. (2011).

The study concluded with two major recommendations for institutions to make: “a. shrink the pipeline of elementary teachers into the profession and b. institutions must make the role of cooperating teacher a more attractive proposition to classroom teachers” (Greenberg et al., 2011, pp. 35 & 39). These two recommendations accounted for overall trends they were able to identify. This does not exclude the recommendations of additional time in student teaching programs and other smaller recommendations; however, they focused their recommendations on major points the institutions identified as having the largest impact on student teaching practices. One of the major strengths of

this review is its transparency in how institutions were chosen for it. They helped minimize bias by reviewing institutions whether they approved of being involved in the study or not.

Host Teacher Implications

The role of host teachers in student teaching experiences is essential, shaping not only the development of would-be educators but also influencing the quality of education received by students. As mentors, host teachers provide invaluable guidance, support, and real-world insights correlating to the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge gained through post-secondary coursework. Their interactions with student teachers, both inside and outside the classroom, can significantly impact the learning experience and professional growth. Studies have shown that a host teacher's impact on aspiring teachers is significant (Bird, 2012; Smith & Avetisian, 2010).

Bird (2012) completed a mixed-methods study that focused on the impact of mentoring during the student teaching process. The study found mentoring teachers in student teaching is essential in teacher preparation and professional development. This study focused on five areas: personal attributes, system requirements, pedagogical knowledge, modeling, and feedback as a framework for measuring the effectiveness of student teaching experiences (Bird, 2012). They found the five factors to be a foundation for setting expectations and responsibilities for mentor teachers. Four themes emerged from the research. These included the importance of modeling, classroom management, feedback effectiveness, and the mentoring teacher's attributes (Bird, 2012). The study concluded with recommendations in the areas of 1) mentor/student relationship and the direct impact it can have on student teachers' confidence; 2) standardization of mentoring

practices and setting a framework for mentoring teachers to fall into to increase their effectiveness. This study offers valuable insights into the dynamics, challenges, and benefits of mentorship in teacher preparation.

Another qualitative case study completed by Smith and Avetisian (2010) focused on one student teacher who was mentored in her student teaching experiences by two different host teachers who approached their practices with differing viewpoints. The study focused on two models: the apprenticeship and the coaching models. The two host teachers, the student teacher, implemented one of the two models when working with Avril (Smith & Avetisian, 2010). The study found that the host teacher's approach impacted Arvil's experiences and what she gained from them. The study concluded with recommendations for host teacher training, how student and host teachers are paired, and the need for diverse views about how student teachers should perform in the classroom. Lastly, the study also spoke of universities' preparation of student teachers and host teachers and the implementation of cross-institutional discussions about the purpose of student teaching (Smith & Avetisian, 2010). By examining student teachers' perspectives on mentoring relationships, this study offers a distinct understanding of the factors contributing to a positive student teaching experience, such as mentor support, guidance, and feedback.

Student teaching programs for special educators are intended to prepare individuals to complete the day-to-day responsibilities of their jobs. There is limited research as to the effectiveness of these programs, making a connection between them and retention rates difficult. However, the research currently available, while broad, shines a light on an emerging area and needs additional studies. Preservice programs are

going to evaluate teachers for licensure recommendations, they should also be continually evaluating the practices in place to prepare an individual for their roles. If preservice programs are lacking in preparing individuals, it could have an overall effect on how individuals perceive themselves, their ability to do their job, and their eventual decision to stay or leave the profession.

Administrative and Mentoring Supports

Previous information in this study has focused on the effectiveness of preservice programs and student teaching practices on retention rates of special education teachers. This section now focuses on how early administrative and mentoring supports affect special education retention rates. This section is important in that it is a continuum of preservice programs and research has shown there is a relationship between retention rates and early support once special education teachers enter the field. Research surrounding retention rates and early administrative and mentoring supports is more prevalent than that of previously mentioned preservice and student teaching programs.

Once special education teachers enter the teaching field and are on their own, having first-hand support in the form of administrative and mentoring support can be essential. Support put in place for special education teachers can have a dramatic effect on how teachers perceive their first few years of teaching (Billingsley, 2019). Preservice programs and student teaching practices attempt to prepare special education teachers for their day-to-day responsibilities; however, with the differences in policies and procedures in districts, preservice and student teaching programs can only do so much. Fine-tuning practices need to be a team approach from the moment the new special education teacher enters the district. Supplying them with adequate onboarding practices, professional development, and administrative and mentoring services can

assist special education teachers in balancing their day-to-day responsibilities (Billingsley, 2019).

District On-Boarding and Early Professional Development Practices

Educators enter the field of teaching with eagerness to make an impact in young people's lives. They enter the field with teaching licenses they have spent countless hours attaining. Once they have been hired into a district, each district can have its own policies and procedures that vary from what teachers learned in their preservice programs and student teaching practices. Districts often have specific offices responsible for providing high quality professional development to new staff members and for re-licensure purposes. New teachers can enter a district with unclear and unrealistic expectations of their new surroundings. Experienced teachers have found ways to navigate a districts' systems and expectations. Therefore, it is essential to provide new special education teachers with all the tools necessary to understand what is expected of them in their new positions (Otto & Arnold, 2005).

Gersten et al. (2001) completed a study involving 887 special education teachers, with varying years of experience, from three large urban districts. Surveys were conducted with the participants with 81% of the participants responding. The study analyzed factors special education teachers identified as the reason they stayed or left the profession. Gersten et al. (2001) found participants identified the ability to professionally grow within a district and in their field was important. This is significant in that even teachers with multiple years of experience cited professional development practices as an ongoing concern in their decision to stay in the field. One could suggest that if this is an important factor with seasoned teachers, it could be even more important to new teachers in the field and weigh on their choice to stay or leave.

Research has also found there are two promising formats in professional development that may be even more crucial to new teachers in the field; coaching and collaborating (Gates, 2015). Coaching "has been shown to improve teachers' abilities to adopt and implement new teaching practices" and collaboration "helps to build relational trust in the school building, which enables teachers to more effectively make difficult decisions" (Gates, 2015, p. 14). Implementing these additional formats, beyond scheduled professional development can enhance the systems already in place. New special education teachers want to feel they are supported and have ample time to create relationships with their mentors that will assist them in their day-to-day responsibilities.

Mentoring Programs

Once special education teachers enter the field, having colleagues, more importantly a specific colleague, to work closely with is important in their decision to stay in the field (Parker, 2010). Mentoring by an experienced teacher is essential in helping new special education teachers navigate district policies and procedures, school environment, due process paperwork expectations, classroom management, and general support for new teachers (Parker, 2010). There is a large amount of research to suggest having the services of a mentor in their early years has a positive impact on special education teacher retention (Billingsley, 2019; Otto & Arnold, 2005; Parker, 2010). Not only is having the services of a mentor important in retention, but the quality of those mentoring services is also vital. Mentors need to be experienced in their field, have patience to work with new teachers and the ability to lead them in the direction necessary for bridging the gap between preservice and student teaching programs and the reality of their jobs (Parker, 2010). Bay and Parker-Katz (2009) noted from analyzing empirical studies:

> Beginning teachers rate mentoring as a highly effective phenomenon, especially when the mentor is a special education teacher who is prepared to mentor, who possesses excellent professional abilities and outstanding interpersonal skills, and who has the time to meet with the novice at least once a week in informal or formal settings. (p. 19)

While teachers come into their first years of teaching with preservice programs and student teaching experience, having a continuum of support in place assists them in keeping up with expectations and role responsibilities once placed in a district (Parker, 2010).

Whitaker (2003) completed a study that analyzed the use of mentoring and its effects on new special education teacher attrition. The study looked at how well the mentors matched with mentees, frequency of interactions between them, and the level of support for their mentees. The study consisted of responses from 156/200, first-year special education teachers, from South Carolina who were randomly selected from 301 participants. The participants were sent a questionnaire with a follow-up one mailed to non-respondents after two and half weeks. The study found matching of the mentor and mentee was significant in the effectiveness the mentee felt the mentor had on them. It also found the patterns of assistance provided to the first-year teacher were significant in the quality of the mentoring. Contact that occurred on a weekly basis was deemed more effective than contact that occurred less than that. Overall, the effectiveness of mentoring on retention rates was also examined. The study found after their first year of teaching, 36% of the respondents planned on leaving the field within the next five years. This is different from other studies (Billingsley, 2004; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Kaiser, 2011), that examined actual retention rates not perceived retention rates. However, this is significant in that these first-year special education teachers were already planning on leaving the profession

whether then or in the near future. One wonders if they did not leave after the first year, if there are other circumstances such as improved work conditions, increased administrative support and continued mentoring support, in the coming years that would change their decisions to leave within the five-year timeframe.

Parker (2010) conducted a mentoring study in North Carolina with teachers in the first two years of their practice. While this study entailed both general education and special education teachers, most research regarding mentoring and its effects on retention does not distinguish between the two. Parker (2010) analyzed a secondary analysis of the Teacher Working Conditions (TWC) Survey that 8,838 teachers completed. The study evaluated three conditions of mentoring: Mentor and mentee match, amount of support received, and the intention of staying in their current school (Parker, 2010). Results determined 61% of the participants planned on staying and 39% planned on leaving (this includes moving from one school to another, leaving the profession or moving to general education). Circumstances that influenced their decision included: How often they were mentored (e.g., planning time, observation time, feedback provided, and meeting time outside of school) and if their mentor was assigned in the same content area, school, and grade level as they were (Parker, 2010). This study, while including general education teachers, concluded retention rates that are in-line with Whitaker's (2003) study. Also, it included a higher sample size increasing the overall reliability of the study.

Studies continue to show mentoring can play a role in a special education teachers' reason to stay or leave. Mentoring has been shown to be a positive aspect of a new special education teacher's daily routine. However, the process of mentoring alone is not enough, who they were matched with and the frequency and quality of the mentoring partnership was

important as well. Additional research on mentoring can continue to build on what is already known. Completing studies focused on special education could increase the overall understanding of mentoring practices, in that area alone and on an individual's intent to stay or leave. Focusing on special education mentoring, due to the difference in responsibilities from a general education teacher, could also expand knowledge regarding if there is a difference in special education teachers and general education teachers leaving the field.

Administrative Support

In addition to mentoring support, once a new special education teacher enters the field, administrative support has been shown to be a key factor in retention rates (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Billingsley, 2019; Cobb, 2014). Along with having support from a mentor who provides a focus on professional development, having administrative support that focuses on management of operations and work performance is important. Just as the partnership between a mentor and mentee increases the likelihood of retention, so is the relationship between an administrator and the special education teacher. Mehrenberg (2009) noted:

> A common thread found in the majority of research on first year SETs was the need for support and structure. Although the research differed on which specific sources, such as mentors or administrators, provided the most useful support, it was clear that novices appreciated guidance, recognition and praise from fellow professionals. (p. 34)

While administrative support has been found to improve retention rates, it is common to find administrators with little to no experience in special education. Indeed, they can be found to be less effective than those with experience in the field and yet they devote between 36% and 58% of their time to special education matters (Cobb, 2014). Billingsley et al. (1995) found a higher

dissatisfaction with central administration than principal support—25% versus 20%—when they decided to leave. This is in contrast to general education teachers, who reported less dissatisfaction with central administration versus principals—10% versus 12%. This could be due to central administration being the entity that sets district standards and are possibly more interested in compliance versus the obstacles teachers on the front lines face.

Conley and You (2016) reported on a study using data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) 2007-2008. Information collected came from a combination of public and private schools and included more than 38,240 participants in the initial data set. After narrowing down the data set to include only full-time teachers, who worked in a secondary special education program, the final sample set was 2060 participants. Of the variables analyzed, administrative support was found to have the highest direct effect on teacher retention rates. Teachers who perceived their administrators as less supportive, disorganized, and with little teacher recognition showed less job satisfaction, creating reasons to leave versus staying.

A qualitative investigation completed by Bettini et al. (2017) focused on what cultivates an effective special education teacher community within a district. Research was centered in the Victoria School District, in the Southwestern United States where special education teachers (SETs) and local special education administrators (LSEAs) participated in interviews to examine how administrative support produced effective special education teachers. Data showed administration who took a shared responsibility approach to special education had a greater impact on the effectiveness of special education teachers. Having strong administrative support should improve or maintain high job satisfaction, which one could assume would lead to higher retention rates (retention rates were not specifically stated in this study). Limitations of this study

included that it focused on one district, with long-term administration at its forefront. Results from other districts may turn out differently.

Boyd et al. (2011) completed a study amongst first-year teachers in New York City in 2005. The 300-question survey was completed by an initial 4,360 teachers and included questions in four areas of interest: preparation experiences, characteristics of the schools in which they are teaching, teaching practices, and goals. The study completed follow-up surveys to the initial group of teachers regarding their teaching experiences and future plans for teaching. Of the second survey's responses, focus was on answers around leaving their positions and why, which accounted for 1,587 of the surveys (Boyd et al., 2011). A second follow-up survey was then administered to all teachers who left the profession after the 2004-2005 school year. This survey had 368 individuals respond, or a 61% response rate. Results showed in all surveys that dissatisfaction with building administration, over 40% of the individuals, was a leading cause of teachers wanting to leave the profession (Boyd et al., 2011). Factors surrounding this outcome included: Lack of problem-solving, assistance with curriculum and planning, instruction, collaboration, and meeting standards. This survey was not specific to special education; however, it still provides insight into why teachers, including special education teachers, are leaving the profession within their first five years of teaching (Boyd et al., 2011). This study also supports the need for districts to educate their building administrative staff in a manner in-line with both student and staff needs.

Research studies have continued to show the need for adequate support of special education teachers, and even maybe more importantly, novice special education teachers (Bettini et al., 2017; Boyd et al., 2011; Conley & You, 2016; Mehrenberg, 2009). How, and specifically what needs to be done, to accomplish this is a subject for further research. There are many

aspects of administrative support and how it is viewed from one individual to another. Continued research that looks at specific conditions of support could be beneficial in breaking down what special education teachers need to feel successful, have positive work experiences, and to retain them in the profession for years to come. The focus of my study was to add to this body of literature. While there may be gaps in research surrounding preservice programs and student teaching practices, there appears to be a larger need for continued administration and mentoring practices once a special education teacher actually enters the field. With expanded research in this area, I hoped to address the continued needs of special education teachers while attempting to increase retention rates as well.

Conclusion

Special education is a unique and essential field within teaching. It is an ever-changing landscape that should continually be evaluated at federal, state, and local levels. Not only are policy and procedural overhauls necessary, but consideration as to how those changes affect teachers working in the field is also important. The previous review of research supports multiple aspects of how preservice programs, student teaching programs, and districts can attain higher rates of retention. Having districts and preservice programs collaborate before new special education teachers arrive in districts appears to be a hurdle, but one that would benefit all parties in the long run. In addition, once teachers are hired and working in districts, continued support in the ways of mentoring and administrative collaboration is a factor as well. Special education teachers enter the field with the notion that they want to help and be of service to some of the highest-needs students in districts. Allowing them all the tools necessary to perform their jobs, which includes feeling prepared, supported, and appreciated will likely assist in the retention of them and the overall positive impact it will have on student achievement.

The research did show there is support for what is needed. All of the studies included in this review referenced a need for continued research in the area to create positive experiences for new special education teachers as well as the need for more focused research in the areas of preservice and student teaching programs. With the addition of this focused research, it may take pressure off of districts once the new special education teachers land in the classroom. With the assistance of preparedness at a higher level, administration and mentoring programs may be able to focus on broader aspects of teacher dissatisfaction and how to retain them at a local level versus one they have less control over.

Just as the research has shown a positive direction, there are also limitations as to what is currently occurring. The struggle of districts and preservice programs to collaborate is a barrier. Each has its own expectations and standards to meet and focus on, thus putting collaboration on the back burner. In addition, the lack of research specific to special education teacher retention rates versus general education teachers makes finding solutions more difficult. The needs of general education and special education are the same on some level; however, the addition of due process guidelines and administrative tasks for special educators adds a facet that is unique to them and should be analyzed specifically. With focused research, there may be insights for preservice programs and districts unique to special education they are not addressing or aware of.

Finally, my research focused on the needs of special education teachers, due process, as well as how supported they feel once they are hired in a district. I focused on teachers who left the special education profession for general education or all together, versus teachers who simply moved from one district to the next. This research was intended to analyze if special education teachers are leaving the field due to the lack of administrative and mentoring support once they are in the field.

Understanding why special education teachers leave the field they worked so intently on entering is essential to increase the retention of them. The continued exit of these individuals continues to put the special education students at a disadvantage. In Chapter Three, I present the foundation and methods of my study, in an attempt to increase retention rates of these individuals.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Part I: Introduction to Research Methods

Introduction

The previous two chapters focused on the history of special education teacher retention. They analyzed previous research regarding preservice and student teaching programs and the administrative and mentoring support special education teachers receive once employed by a district. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to break down the research more specifically to analyze the relationship between preservice programs, student teaching programs, administrative and mentoring supports, and the retention of special education teachers. The findings aim to enhance preservice and student teaching programs, as well as district support systems, to bolster retention rates and effectively cater to the needs of special education students.

Research Design Overview

In Chapters One and Two, the background and outcomes from lived experiences were detailed to build upon in this chapter. Special education teachers and their professional experiences have created the foundation of my current research. In my research, I utilized a qualitative research design that focused on a critical realism epistemological approach to detail special education teachers' experiences and their reasons for leaving the profession. Critical realism is defined by Zhang (2022) as “observable events are the actualization of the unobservable real, manipulable, and internal mechanisms” (p. 15). Critical realism looks at research from an ontological perspective of being a realist and an epistemological perspective of a subjectivist. It does not just examine the events and experiences of individuals but also considers the causal mechanisms behind those events and experiences (Fryer, 2022). Critical realism helped me to gain insight into the questions I examined because it not only takes into

account the personal events and experiences of research participants but also helps clarify what is causing the patterns we are seeing. Hence, we are assisting in determining how we can improve the retention rates of special education teachers.

Qualitative research works with words and meanings, which brings the current concerns to light vs. a quantitative research design that would not explain, in detail, why special education teachers are leaving. Mcleod (2019) stated, “Qualitative research can be used to understand how an individual subjectively perceives and gives meaning to their social reality” (p. 1). Each special education teacher has lived experiences different from the next. Some themes emerged from my research between each of the participants. They were able to articulate, in detail, their experiences, which enhanced my research, magnified the current concerns, and, in turn, attempted to find solutions to retention rates.

I chose to interpret the hands-on experiences of special education teachers from Minnesota who left the profession. I utilized one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, with follow-up questions, to examine and collect data from participants in the study. My intention in interviewing teachers who left the profession or moved to the general education sector versus special education was to gain insight into what I assumed was a significant switch for them due to the hours of education and training they spent on becoming special education teachers. Special education teachers who are still involved in the profession but are unhappy for many reasons, I did not believe would present me with the same research as someone who made a career switch. I hoped by examining this information, I could better understand how districts can add to the advancement of preservice programs, student teaching, mentoring, and administrative support and increase retention rates of special education teachers.

Previous research in this area has been conducted in this manner as well. Research conducted by Bradley (2019) approached the problem from a qualitative narrative perspective. In Bradley's (2019) study, seven special education teachers teaching for more than five years completed semi-structured interviews, which were then analyzed for common themes. Five characteristics emerged from the research that districts should implement to increase special education teacher retention. While this research was conducted in a single rural school district, it produces strategies that can be implemented in rural, suburban, or urban districts. In addition to Bradley (2019), Brant (2020) conducted a qualitative case study that involved 10 beginning special education teachers who worked in self-contained classrooms. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews that were then utilized to create a three-day workshop for administrators to increase their knowledge of what early special education teachers need to feel supported and, in turn, improve retention rates. These studies show how special education teachers' in-depth interviews and narrative experiences can increase awareness of early special education teachers, their needs and expectations, and how they can best be supported once working in a district. The intention with my research was to add additional information that includes narratives from multiple perspectives, not only from special education teachers who have been in the profession for a longer or shorter period.

Utilizing the research mentioned above model, I gained insight into the following research questions:

1. What is the disconnect, if any, between the perceived job of Minnesota Special Education Teachers vs. the reality of their day-to-day responsibilities?

2. What training, experiences, or support do Minnesota Special Education Teachers who have left the profession perceive as increasing the likelihood of them continuing in the profession?
3. What recommendations do Minnesota Special Education Teachers who have left the profession have to support beginning teachers in an attempt to increase special education teacher retention?

Positionality

It is essential to understand my positionality while I was researching and writing my dissertation. It assisted in relieving some bias I naturally carried with me into the process. I have been a special education teacher for 18 years, as of the start of the 2023-2024 school year. Before my career in education, I initially pursued a degree in criminal justice to become a police officer. When I realized that career was not for me, I pursued my master's in education, emphasizing special education, specifically licenses in learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorder, and reading. While finishing my schooling, I applied for a special education teaching position at a charter school. I was able to qualify for a provisional license to teach special education while I was finishing my degree and licensure program. During this time, I was also working on-site, which made my student teaching process different from other prospective teachers. I was under the supervision of a licensed teacher; however, I was managing my classroom versus someone else's. During this time, I was "thrown into the fire," with little to no experience writing paperwork or teaching my classes. I learned while I was teaching my students. This experience, I believe, prepared me better than I could have been prepared in a student teaching program. I had a supportive mentor who was very well-versed in due process paperwork; therefore, I learned to write the paperwork from a practicing teacher and had to

complete it correctly and within the given timelines to maintain my job. This additional incentive assisted me in being able to, at the time and still to this day, be strong in this area of my practice. In addition, my mentor was consistently there when I needed assistance and allowed me to make mistakes, allowing for plenty of teaching moments to build my practice on.

For 18 years, I have been a special education teacher, working through the trials and tribulations of day-to-day expectations. There are days, even 18 years into the profession, when I question why I remain in my position. I have enough experience and education in multiple areas that I could leave the profession and be readily successful elsewhere. I am proficient at my job and enjoy it; however, the mantra of "doing more with less" becomes daunting when district administration, I feel, forgets what the day-to-day rigor of being in a classroom entails. Particularly last year, special education teachers in my former district were stretched thin. My former district, like most others, was and is still short-staffed. In addition to being short-staffed, thus forcing special education teachers to pick up where we are lacking with paraprofessionals, there were mandates from the state that have piled on to account for the loss of direct, special education services during the distance learning year. Those mandates did not include additional paperwork for general education teachers but were required of special education teachers. Extra pay from the district was offered; however, offering pay was not the solution teachers wanted. The needed support entailed not continuing to spread special education teachers thin, even with more pay. Allowing additional time during our workday to fulfill duties could have ultimately been the answer.

As I have continued my career as a special education teacher, I have also been a mentor, host teacher for a student teacher, and due process building coach. In those roles, I have had the opportunity to be a leader within my department and a teacher. These roles have allowed me to

address concerns from new and seasoned teachers when they arise. In addition, they have also allowed me to see how valuable having support in place can impact special education teachers, newer teachers more than seasoned ones. It is one thing to learn to navigate a district when you are a seasoned teacher but another hurdle when you are new to the profession and in a district. Preservice programs and student teaching programs can prepare you, to a point, to be able to complete the responsibilities of your position; however, once you are fully responsible for the students in your classroom and the ones you case manage as a special education teacher, do you understand what being a special education teacher is all about? While attending Augsburg College for my master's, I had a professor who taught my Social Studies Prep Class. He was a practicing social studies teacher in another metro area district. He started the first class by giving us a document with 50 items. None of the items on the list included instructional practices or other duties that someone outside of the profession would provide as typical teacher job duties. It included what other preservice classes, programs, and some student teaching programs do not tell you. It was a list of everything you do besides teaching: evacuate for fire drills, break up fights, feed hungry students, etc. During my career, I commented on the document's correctness and how eye-opening it was. I make that observation because while preservice and student teaching programs can provide an overview until you are truly engulfed in your classroom, I do not believe you encounter what being a special education teacher entails. With that said, having a solid support system to assist in navigating everyday situations outside of actually teaching was essential in my early years of teaching.

During 18 years of teaching, unfortunately, I worked in districts where I did not have a robust support system, and the administrative team was not helpful. Those two years were some of the most challenging years in my career. The second of the two years pushed me to a breaking

point, and I was on the fence regarding my future in the profession. I chose to leave the district. I was three-quarters of the way through the school year and worked outside the profession for four months. I eventually applied in my now former school district, was offered a position, and was happy that I spent 10 years in the district. During those 10 years, I was grateful for the solid administrative and mentoring support I received. Not only was I given a district mentor my first year in the district, but I was also fortunate to have a special education teacher in the building who mentored me. It was not the teaching and the due process paperwork that was difficult to navigate; it was the nuances specific to the district. I believe the two challenging years I encountered in my career have helped mold my leadership and mentoring skills. I reflect on those two years and focus on what made them difficult and how I can mentor and lead to avoid making the same mistakes.

There is a flip side to the coin, however. I have been involved in a mentoring partnership that ultimately was not successful. The mentee I was assigned had a teaching contract that was not renewed. After careful reflection, I said I did all I could to assist him in his journey. My mentee needed to be more motivated to be successful in his practice. He was offered multiple layers of mentoring, administrative assistance, and time, yet was still unsuccessful in completing the daily responsibilities of his job. I state this point because even though I am in the field and see the high turnover, I can set aside my bias and realize that some individuals will leave this profession due to no fault of a district's lack of support and attention to their employees.

Lastly, I recently obtained my administrator's license and completed my administrative intern hours. Through that process, I view education from an alternative lens, increasing my awareness of administrative support and concerns. This also increased my overall knowledge of possible contributions to retention concerns.

My experience as a special education teacher, mentor, due process coach, administrative intern, and the support afforded me throughout my career have shaped how I view the profession. While I am aware these experiences can shape how I view the profession, I am not looking to confirm my personal experiences as others' experiences and their individual experiences could vary from mine. I am also confident that as a researcher, I was able to set aside my personal experiences through detailed note-keeping, generalizing questions, and allowing the data to present itself to eliminate confirmation bias. I conducted research that not only added to the current available research but also could assist districts in their journey to retain special education teachers for a significant duration of their careers.

Guiding Ethical Principles

"The goals of human research often include understanding real-life phenomena, studying effective treatments, investigating behaviors, and improving lives in other ways. What you decide to research and how you conduct that research involve key ethical considerations" (Bhandari, 2021, p. 1). The ethical considerations in my research were important not only for the integrity of the study but also for the participants' privacy. While these were important factors, I do not feel they were challenging. I worked with research participants who left the profession for another profession or are now working in the general education setting. In addition, I did not focus my research on just one district or the district in which I work. I am also in a position they were formally in and not in an administrative role; therefore, I believe it "leveled the playing field." I also think participants found it easier to share their personal experiences with me, knowing I will be entering administration. I want to utilize the information I received to better others' experiences in the field.

As a researcher working with individuals who have left a profession or moved into different fields within education, I knew questions may arise during the interviews that can carry negative emotional responses due to participants' experiences. During the interviews, I enlisted the following methods to protect the participants if they desired them:

- Provided questions to participants before the interview to review.
- Ability to take breaks.
- Multiple interview sessions if necessary.
- Continually checked for understanding and clarity.
- Participants reviewed the information before it was published.

Before I began my research, I completed the International Review Board (IRB) Application process. I did not conduct the research solely in one district; the participants all left the profession; therefore, I did not need additional district permission to complete my research study. After receiving IRB approval and identifying my research participants, I proceeded with the process stated in the Participants and Research Site Section.

Part II: Data Collection Steps

Sampling

The participants for my study were selected utilizing purposeful sampling, which bases selection on “participants who can provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation” (Statistics Solutions, 2021). In addition to purposeful sampling, I utilized snowball sampling methods, where research participants assisted in recruiting other research participants (Glen, 2021).

Recruitment

I am currently working in the special education field as a teacher. Therefore, I utilized my contacts with other special and general education teachers and administration to locate eight research participants. To do this, I emailed and spoke with individuals in the education field I know and asked them to forward my contact information to individuals they knew who left the profession (see Appendix A). I then compiled a list of those individuals who left the profession and sent them a pre-qualifying questionnaire to fill out. Initially, I inquired about their background in special education and where they were now outside of the special education field (see Appendix B).

Consent Process

Once former special education teachers were identified, I contacted them. I explained who I was and the research study I was conducting to identify participants who were interested in completing an in-depth interview for the study (see Appendix C). During the initial contact with the prospective participants, I explained the process. This included the reason for the study, how I planned to keep anonymity, the interview process, and the intention of the findings, which was to increase the retention rates of special education teachers in school districts (see Appendix D).

Data Collection Processes

For my research study, as explained earlier in this chapter, I conducted my research utilizing in-depth interviews. They were semi-structured, using a predetermined set of questions (See Appendix E) provided to the participants before the interview. They also allowed for follow-up questions based on their responses. An advantage of semi-structured interviews includes the ability to decrease bias or leading of a participant (Patten & Newhart, 2018). I also wanted the participants to be able to examine the questions so they were fully prepared for the

interview. Once in the interview, I took opportunities to probe deeper to elicit a more detailed response from the participants. Farrell (2016) stated, “The most important benefit of open-ended questions is that they allow you to find more than you anticipate: people may share motivations that you didn’t expect and mention behaviors and concerns that you knew nothing about” (p. 1). Due to the personal nature of this study for the participants, I did not want to deter them from sharing their fears, disappointments, struggles of being in the profession, and the successes they had along the way.

Part III: Data Analysis Steps

Data Analysis Processes and Procedures

When I completed the interview process, I analyzed the qualitative research to identify themes and coded them from the participants' narratives. I used a phenomenological approach when I conducted and analyzed my research. Fraenkel et al. (2019) stated phenomenological studies “generally assume that there is some commonality to how human beings perceive and interpret similar experiences; they seek to identify, understand, and describe these commonalities” (p. 387). I chose a phenomenological approach because it analyzes common themes I found about special education teacher retention.

Initially, I completed semi-structured interviews, with follow-up questions, with eight research participants. After my initial interviews, I determined if additional information was needed. I did not need additional interviews with participants. Interview transcripts were generated through Zoom, and for accuracy, I reviewed completed transcripts and compared them with the recording. Throughout the interviews, and as I reviewed transcripts, I took memos to reflect, made connections and deductions, and recorded questions about the data.

Protections were put in place regarding the identification of participants, research data storage, and eventual disposal of research information. I made every effort to de-identify all data. When I wrote up the study, I used pseudonyms for participants, their schools, and the district. Furthermore, I did not specify the city where the research occurred. I only used pseudonyms in interview transcriptions and memos I wrote. I deleted the video recordings once the interviews were transcribed. I kept all digital data in password-protected folders on a password-protected computer. I kept one document that linked the real names to the pseudonyms—this document was password-protected and deleted when the study was complete.

Once the transcription was complete, I started the process of memoing and coding. During the memoing process, I reviewed all interviews and utilized a separate spreadsheet to note any wonderings, findings, and questions I noted in the interviews. Each interview had a designated spreadsheet to keep track of information specific to that interview. After completing the memoing process, I started the coding process to develop themes from the interviews. I worked with a hybrid method utilizing deductive and inductive coding processes. This involved three rounds of coding: an initial coding to find broad themes and then line-by-line coding to dig deeper into the data (Jansen, 2022). In addition, after the first round of coding was complete, additional coding allowed me to create themes or categories to assist in the research analysis.

Member Checking

Completing the member-checking process was a way to increase the validity and reliability of the information and how I coded it (Fraenkel et al., 2019). I conducted member checks early in the analysis process to increase credibility. Member checking in this study involved an opportunity for review. Participants received the reviewed transcripts of the interview via email and were able to send any clarifications back. They were able to provide

feedback, including additions, subtractions, and clarifications. Participants did not have clarification feedback once the transcripts were sent to them.

Part IV: Quality Research Criteria

Limitations

My study included interviews with former teachers across urban and suburban districts in Minnesota. This was meant to gain a perspective from multiple types of school districts. With my research in Minnesota only, it cannot be assumed perspectives, resources, mentoring, and administration support reflect individuals' experiences elsewhere in the United States. In addition, I utilized a small sample size, with eight interviews. When working with a small sample size, questions can arise about the validity of the information and can increase the margin of error.

Part V: Research Dissemination and Conclusion

Participant Appreciation

Research participants received a $25 gift card as appreciation for completing the study.

Publishing

Upon completion of my dissertation, it is my intention to publish the completed dissertation as part of the Institutional Repository, so it is searchable through Google Scholar or within the institution as metadata only.

Conclusion

Chapter Three of my dissertation described and detailed the research design, methodology, ethical considerations, and my positionality of my research topic. A qualitative research methods approach, utilizing the phenomenological approach, was used to complete and

analyze my research. In the next chapter, I present and interpret the findings obtained through the methods described in this chapter.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

Special education teacher retention is not only crucial for the field of education in general but also for the researcher and the participants in the study. This chapter presents the findings from the case study, brings continued attention to the problem of retention in special education, and communicates factors that participants view as possible reasons retention rates continue to decrease. The study focused on post-secondary education, student teaching, and administrative and mentoring support once an educator was in the field in an attempt to center on more specific areas versus other studies that include numerous internal and external factors. Through the data collection process, I was able to develop themes from former special education teachers on the topic of retention. These themes are: Participant Reasons for Leaving Special Education, Post-Secondary Program Course Impact on Participant Preparation, Student Teaching Impact on Participant Preparation, Organization Support, and Retention Strategies.

In the following section, I summarize the current position of the eight participants, the demographics concerning their post-secondary programs, licensure areas, student teaching placements, and finally, initial district employment to give a general background of experiences and profiles. I then introduce and analyze the themes generated from the in-depth interviews conducted with the participants.

Summary and Analysis of Research

Participants Background

The first part of the in-depth interviews included questions to establish the current job position of participants, along with demographic information about their post-secondary programs, licensure areas, student teaching placements, and initial district employment. This information can be found in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1

Employment and Post-Secondary Information

Name	Current Employment Status	Previous Experience in Special Ed.	Education Level	Student Teaching Placement	Licensure Attained
Lon	No, corporate trainer	No	Bachelors	International and suburban	Academic and Behavior Strategist
Cameron	No, real estate agent	Yes, volunteered & sign language interpreter	Masters	Urban	Community Expert License
Marie	Yes, teacher mentor	No	Bachelors	Urban	Academic and Behavior Strategist
Rose	Yes, long-term substitute	Yes, paraprofessional	Bachelors	Suburban	Academic and Behavior Strategist
Kaydence	No, information technology	Yes, paraprofessional	Masters	Suburban	Academic and Behavior Strategist
Vayda	Yes, fifth grade	No	Bachelors, double major	Suburban	Specific Learning Disabilities
James	Yes, high school social studies	Yes, paraprofessional	Masters	Urban	Academic and Behavior Strategist
Katlyn	No, business owner	No	Masters	Suburban	Deaf Hard of Hearing

Table 2

Career and District Information

Name	Career Start	Duration	Urban or Suburban District	Grade Level	Federal Setting
Lon	August 2019	Four years	Suburban	K-5	2-3
Cameron	October 2012	Two years	Urban	6-12	1-2
Marie	August 2017	Six years	Urban	6-8	3
Rose	Spring 2021	One semester	Suburban	K-4	3
Kaydence	August 2014	Five years	Urban	6-8	1-2
Vayda	August 1995	Five years	Suburban	K-6	1-2
James	August 2017	Five years	Urban	9-12	1-2
Katlyn	Fall 2005	Six years	Suburban	Birth-12	1-2

The data summarized above provides background information for the participants. It is important to note their backgrounds and varying placements after post-secondary schooling to understand where each participant views their experiences. In addition, information regarding their current job placement is included to clarify where their current frame of reference is coming from, whether that be in the field of education or not. For this section, I chose to utilize the words of the participants combined with themes that emerged from the research process to authenticate their lived experiences.

Previous research has indicated, and as noted in Chapter Two, that teachers with advanced degrees have shown to have higher retention rates than individuals with lesser degrees (Andrews & Schwab, 1995; Burstein et al., 2009; Edgar & Pair, 2005; Kaiser, 2011). The data I

collected indicates the level of education each participant attained; however, throughout the interviews, the participants did not indicate their education level was a factor in their decision to leave the profession. It should be noted that the interview questions and follow-up questions did not specifically address the area either.

Also included in the above-referenced data is information regarding previous experience in special education. This question established previous work experience in education before becoming licensed. The information was provided as a form of reference regarding how the individuals entered the field of education and whether those experiences offered valuable insight and training before attending formal post-secondary programs. Of my participants, 50% had previous experience as a paraprofessional or volunteer/sign language interpreter in an educational setting. These participants explained this experience was valuable in establishing norms, rituals, and routines in an academic setting. It also gave them insight into the workings of the district, thus assisting them when they started to teach.

Previous research indicated having spent time in the classroom as a paraprofessional can increase the likelihood of individuals staying in the profession. Winstead (2013) showed paraprofessionals and their personal experiences assisted with managing information and paperwork. They felt better prepared for challenges and had more ideas for working with students based on previous experiences. In addition, Burbank et al. (2009) stated paraprofessionals value curriculum, pedagogy, and potential drawbacks of standardized testing, which is information they may have yet to access solely from their post-secondary programs.

Theme 1: Participant Reasons for Leaving Special Education

Throughout the interview process, participants indicated at one point or another why they left the field of special education. The reasons varied among participants, sometimes including

multiple reasons, and all but one participant indicated one reason was due to struggles within the profession in and of itself.

Overloaded Professionally

Collins et al. (2017) noted:

> Special Education Teachers must manage two significant domains to navigate their initial years successfully: (a) the personal domain, which includes managing the many stressors presented by their new role and the relationships it brings; and (b) the professional domain, which includes developing the necessary skills to teach students effectively and perform numerous additional job duties. (p. 214).

During the interviews, six of the eight research participants noted being overloaded with professional duties was either a leading cause of them leaving the profession or a mitigating factor to their departure from the field. The workload impacted them mentally and physically, decreasing their love of the profession.

The due process aspect of the job has been noted as a cause in previous research as a factor for special education teachers leaving the profession. Teachers stated it takes away instructional time from their students, is burdensome, and contributes to an already difficult workload (Billingsley, 2019). Vayda shared, "I guess in the end, if I had to say what it was, it was probably just the paperwork." James shared a similar view: "I think my simplest answer to that would be the paperwork, the compliance side of the job." Both Vayda and James indicated they entered the profession to teach and work with students. The paperwork eventually impacted this, due to it taking time from their ability to work with students. Vayda stated, "I wanted to work with kids." While James said, "I've always wanted to teach, like actually teach it. Not that that's not teaching, but I guess it's just not the teaching I envision myself doing or wanted to do."

Not only is paperwork a noted factor but being overwhelmed by the job and everything it entailed was also indicated as a factor in retention. One participant also included compensation in connection with their workload as a factor. Additional workload has a negative effect on special education teachers and their willingness to remain in the profession (Sheldrake, 2013). Marie, Lon, Cameron, and Rose shared similar views: "The stuff that I was doing really should be, in my opinion, another full-time job," "primarily workload and compensation," "We had one teacher who had, 45 kids on his caseload and was supposed to have direct minutes with more than half of them. How is someone supposed to do this?," and "I felt super overwhelmed." While Vayda expressed the amount of paperwork was the main factor in her leaving the profession, she also described feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work: "It was that paperwork that was bringing me down; it was just too much. I was working with students. I was having to meet with parents. I was having to test kids. There was one of me."

Mental and Physical Health

The workload of the job can negatively affect the mental and physical health of special education teachers. Mehrenberg (2013) stated, "Physical and psychosomatic illnesses were not the only health-related issues that plagued sample members. A few also reported mental health struggles" (119). Five of the eight participants expressed some form of anxiety or mental or physical health effect the day-to-day workload had on them. James stated,

> Then over time, anxiety builds up when you feel like you're not good at something or more time passes. From a psychological point of view or side, it made me feel like no matter how good I was doing at the teaching, I was not good at my job.

Cameron indicated she took a leave of absence in the Spring of 2018 due to health concerns related to the stress of her job. She attempted to resume work in the Fall of 2018; however, she stated,

> I thought I was going to be able to get better through the summer. Then I went to the first day of school, and I couldn't do it. I left after the second hour. Not the best moment, but I walked out, and I was like, I'm done here, and it sucked.

Kaydence indicated even with one year under her belt as a teacher, she went into the second year of teaching, still struggling with mental impasses. She stated, "No one told me until I was in my second year; it is often harder because you're harder on yourself, and you feel like you should have it down." In Brindley and Parker (2010), a study conducted specifically with three second-year teachers, they determined, "Each of our three second-career teachers faced some tension between what they believed they 'should' do as teachers and the practical decisions they had to make on a daily basis" (p. 590). Marie shared, "… my own mental health and general enjoyment" and Lon also commented "… knowing that I had other skills that I utilize in a less stressful environment." Previous research shows "Knowing whether workload manageability predicts novice SETs' burnout is important because teachers experiencing burnout are more likely to plan to leave their schools, and they may invest fewer resources in providing effective instruction" (Bettini et al., 2017, p. 247).

Administrative Support

"The dominance of dissatisfaction with administrative support is striking" (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 327). One statement from previous research cited earlier in Chapter Two demonstrates the effect administrative support can have on a special education teacher and their desire to remain in the profession. While not the specific reasons the majority of the participants explained

why they left the profession, one could conclude that being overworked, bureaucracy, staff shortages, etc., fall under the direction of administration in a building. Marie indicated, "There was a lot of dysfunction. Everyone was doing their own thing." However, she also stated,

> Principals had their hands full with a lot of other things, so go for it, we trust you. It was great for a while, but then the turnover continued, and I was doing that and training new people. There was really no one else in the building that anyone could go to.

Marie could articulate, while she felt administrative support could have been better, she also understood administrators are also overworked and can find it challenging to support everywhere when needed. Cameron stated she needed "Just more support in general."

Vayda entered the profession in the 1990s as a special education teacher; after five years, she moved into general education and has remained there since. She did not state administrative support was a reason she left. She reflected on her time and how education looked regarding administrative support then and now. She explained it this way:

> I felt there were so many supports in place, which I think has changed a lot. It just felt like there were a lot of people who were super knowledgeable. They had an understanding. I think all people in education, I think we all have an understanding, but I think the part that was different was that there seemed to be more time. I don't know how. I don't know why that was. I don't know if it's because we live in a slower world. I don't know if education was so different back then. It always felt like it was a team.

This statement shows, while some of the research participants who were newer to the profession struggled with administrative support, others viewed it differently.

Staff Shortages

Staff shortages in special education were considered a problem before COVID. Since COVID, the shortage of educational staff is seen as even more prevalent. Researchers also indicated no easy solution to solve the shortage (Kenneally, 2022). Two participants indicated staff shortages were a mitigating factor in their decision to leave special education; however, it was not the primary reason. Yet, they did augment their primary reason for leaving. Marie stated, "… then our paraprofessionals got cut. And we had to share them," and "More staff would have made a huge difference." Cameron also said, "More staff would have made a huge difference." Having support staff who are adequate and effective has been shown to ease the workload of special education teachers (Collins et al., 2024).

Personal Reasons

Special education teachers over the years have also left the profession to no fault of the profession. Just like other professions, special education teachers move on due to personal reasons that include raising a family, relocating, retirement, etc., where no amount of intervention would have made a difference (Billingsley, 2019). One of the participants fell into this category as Katlyn stated, "I really left because my husband and I wanted to move forward with this business idea that we had been concocting in our heads for many years." When asked if she misses it, she further shared,

> Yeah, I miss the kids a lot. I really loved deaf and hard of hearing and just special ed in general. It is always like a big puzzle of how you could help the students, and who could provide support in this way, and who in this other way.

Other Reasons

Lastly, participants also expressed other reasons they were no longer in the profession. One of the participants explained, after her first trimester of teaching, she was asked to step down from her position due to struggling in the classroom. This is common in the profession and is sometimes attributed to a lack of support to complete the job and being overworked (Moore, 2018). Rose indicated, while she was asked to step down from her position, she was willing to stay on as a paraprofessional to assist at the school due to staff shortages. She stated,

> I just transitioned back to a para role at that school. And then, when I finished out the year I didn't come back. I just had to quit altogether. Then I thought, I need to regroup, get my stuff together and look at what different places look like, and get a little bit of different experience under my belt.

Conclusion

The findings in this section coincide with research conducted by numerous researchers and studies, both referenced in Chapter Two, along with many other studies not referenced (Billingsley 2019; Boyd et al. 2011; Collins et al., 2024; Moore, 2018), etc. Research has found connections between each of the reasons denoted in this section and why other special education teachers have left the profession. The research participants each listed the primary reasons they left the profession but also noted there were mitigating factors as well. Whether primary or mitigating, each of the participants was able to articulate why they left and felt strongly regarding their decisions. In the following sections, the participants' data elaborate more regarding their programs and the support they did or did not receive, along with recommendations based on their lived experiences to increase retention.

Theme 2: Post-Secondary Program Course Impact on Participant Preparation

Another facet of the inquiry in this study involves research questions centered around the participants' preparedness. These questions were asked for two areas: post-secondary preparation programs and student teaching programs. Themes emerged from both areas regarding whether they felt prepared and why they were or were not prepared. Previous research has looked specifically at these areas and found they have been factors in retention (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2011).

Felt Prepared

Participants in the study were specifically asked about the location of their post-secondary institutions and how well-prepared they felt when they left them to enter the field of education. Six of the eight participants stated they felt prepared when they left their programs in some way. Lon, Vayda, and Katlyn stated, "I felt really prepared." Katlyn specifically cited the amount of practicum time in the classroom as a reason she felt so prepared, and Vayda also stated, "I honestly, I felt like I had the best program we had. I had such a great experience." Kaydence, Marie, and Rose all stated they felt generally prepared or prepared well enough. One theme that emerged amongst the participants regarding preparedness was understanding that sitting in a classroom can only teach you so much. Special education changes day-to-day, and the reality is that it is difficult to emulate in a college setting and can make it difficult to apply once in a classroom. Previous research suggests preservice programs collaborate with K-12 institutions to make those realities more prominent (Washburn-Moses, 2009).

Did Not Feel Prepared

Two of the eight participants felt very strongly about needing more preparation when they left their post-secondary institutions. James and Cameron felt they would have struggled if

they had not had previous work experience in a school setting as a paraprofessional, volunteer, and sign language interpreter. Specifically, Cameron stated, "Had I not already been in the school and I was just going with fresh eyes from the program that I was in then, I would not have felt prepared at all." James also spoke about the relevancy of what he learned: "I learned a lot, but it wasn't all relevant to my specific needs. I felt what I needed more of was practice with compliance." Previous research cited in Chapter Two acknowledged preservice preparation programs should include instructional and pedagogical aspects of the job and all aspects of the job (DeAnglis et al., 2013).

Due Process Courses

Morewood and Condo (2012) specifically referenced in their study the emphasis on pedagogical, content, and curricular knowledge; however, programs truncate due process knowledge. Four of the participants in the study specifically cited their due process classes in their programs, and each of the four participants emphasized their significance. Lon stated, "We had a three-hour course each week, specifically dedicated to IEPs." Kristin concurred, "They walked us through assessments, making your own assessments, using other things, and talking about what that looks like. Good and bad, pros and cons, we had to write IEPs." Vayda also stated, "I remember taking a class that we actually practiced giving the assessments to kids." Lastly, Kaydence mentioned, "A class on how do we conduct the special ed assessments? And how do we manage that? That was very good."

Practicums

One other sub-theme that emerged from the participants was the completion of practicums in the classroom while they were enrolled in their post-secondary classes. Of the participants who spoke of their time in the practicums, the length of time in them varied,

depending on the programs they were enrolled in. However, despite the time being varied, all three participants who detailed their time in practicums established these experiences benefited their teaching practices. Of the participants, Lon's practicums were the most robust. She stated, "I had five semesters of just that, direct instruction with practicums." She followed by stating, "I was in a placement throughout all my four and a half years there." Vayda also spoke highly of her practicum experiences:

> I can't tell you how many practicums I did. We had a practicum one, a practicum two, and a practicum three. Along with my classes, I was taking and going into the school. It was once or twice a week, but I felt like I had a lot of preparation.

Lastly, Cameron indicated she did gain some positives from her practicums: "Program internships or site experiences that we have was good exposure, but you didn't get to see the nitty gritty of how you manage difficult classroom behavior."

Conclusion

Overall, participants had relatively positive experiences in their post-secondary programs, considering how limited they can be regarding the real-life experiences special education teachers have in the classroom. Participants who had positive experiences could articulate the nuances of their classroom versus a college classroom. In addition, they felt the due process knowledge, practicums, and pedagogy they gained were beneficial to them once they got into their own classrooms.

Theme 3: Student Teaching Impact on Participant Preparation

Length of Student Teaching Program

The length of student teaching has been shown to have an impact on how prepared a new teacher feels once they enter the classroom (Connelly & Graham, 2009). The longer the student

teaching experience, the more prepared the special education teachers feel in their classroom and taking on the day-to-day responsibilities. In Table 3, the length of time each of the participants spent in their student teaching programs is denoted.

Table 3

Student Teaching Information

Name	Length of Student Teaching Program
Lon	2 Semesters
Cameron	Embedded in her 1st year of teaching on a Community Expert License
Marie	Full Semester
Rose	Full Semester
Kaydence	13 Weeks
Vayda	Full Semester
James	Full Year
Katlyn	She started as a student teacher and then embedded in her job by taking over a classroom.

The range was from 13 weeks to one full year, and two participants had the student teaching embedded in their first year as teachers. The two participants who had the student teaching embedded in their first year of teaching did so due to the license they held at the time: Cameron (Community Expert License) and Katlyn (another teacher left and she took as the teacher). Both participants had unique situations for student teaching. They were leading their classrooms and getting paid as a teacher to complete the requirements. This is not unique in the State of Minnesota. Due to shortages in the field, the state has allowed for districts to license individuals via a Community Expert License, a variance or out-of-area placement, and most

recently via the Tiered System currently in place in MN (*Minnesota Teacher and Related Services Licensure Fields,* 2021). It should be noted that I also completed my student teaching via a Community Expert License and as the lead teacher in a classroom.

Katlyn expressed the experience was positive; however, Cameron felt she needed to receive adequate feedback while in the process. While they were not fully prepared, they both understood they had little choice but to figure it out because of their placement. Katlyn stated, "I felt I was strong in it because I had no choice but to be strong in it from the beginning." Cameron stated, "The person I was supposed to talk to, he kept saying, I'm doing a great job, and I was like, I don't even have a degree in this, there's no way I'm doing a great job." Cameron also referred to growing up in sports and having a realistic look at her abilities, knowing she could improve but was not getting the feedback she determined she needed to do so. While not discussed, one could presume she received less feedback due to her unique position because she was viewed as the lead teacher in the classroom versus a student teacher.

The other participants in the study had relatively the same amount of time as student teachers, except James. James completed a program in tandem with the district he was working in at the time. In conjunction with the district, this program established a year-long student teaching program that utilized the gradual release model. This enabled James to ease into his student teaching and slowly take on more responsibilities during the year until he was entirely in charge of the classroom. James expressed this was a positive experience for him due to the collaboration with the district, familiarizing himself with the students, and repetitions in the classroom. He was familiar with the nuances of the district already. Therefore, it eased the transition. He also specifically commented on the length: "The idea of being able to student teach for an entire school year, I found really beneficial and made a really big difference." Previous

research completed by Kaiser (2001) and Lee et al. (2011) made recommendations regarding K-12 and preservice programs collaborating to increase teacher retention. Those recommendations included practices that were included in James' experiences, which demonstrates the collaboration between educational institutions and school districts could play a role in the retention of teachers.

Host Teacher and Placement

Throughout the interview process, all participants expressed different opinions on their host teachers and their placements. This produced one of the main sub-themes not only about their experiences but also laid the foundation for some of their recommendations later in the interviews. The participants expressed a direct correlation between how practical their student teaching experience was and their host teacher. Research completed by Bird (2012), references a direct relationship between these experiences as well. They also make suggestions for increasing the positive experience during student teaching. In Table 4, each participant's student teaching experience is denoted. It explains the number of student teaching locations and their overall experiences with their placements.

Table 4

Student Teaching Host Teacher and Placement Experiences

Name	Number of Locations	Overall Experience
Lon	3	High School: Positive and Negative International: Unknown Elementary: Unknown
Cameron	1	Positive
Marie	2	High School: Positive Elementary: Negative
Rose	1	Positive
Kaydence	1	Negative
Vayda	3	High School: Negative Middle School: Positive Elementary School: Positive
James	1	Positive
Katlyn	1	Positive

During the student teaching experience, four participants, all of whom had only one student teaching placement, expressed they had positive experiences in their programs and learned a lot. The three participants with multiple placements could also articulate what made at least one of their student teaching experiences positive. Within the theme of positive experiences, there were multiple common reasons among the participants for those positive experiences, including if the host teacher was hands-on, included them in due process procedures, and gave them constructive feedback they could put into their practices.

In terms of constructive feedback, Rose commented,

> If I didn't understand what kinds of materials she was looking for in the lesson, I would ask those questions. It was beneficial at the time for what she would tell me. Then she would walk me through how she would preplan the lessons and do everything, and then I would do the same thing.

Marie had similar experiences: "My high school placement, that one really prepared me more. Being in the classroom in general and the host teacher was very good at giving me feedback that was useful and showing things."

Those participants who spoke about the teacher working hands-on with them mentioned the difference it made in their confidence level and learning from watching. James mentioned, "They use the gradual release model. Where you don't start taking on a lot of the instruction but it happens pretty quickly. Then, gradually, you take on more, and I found it really useful." Cameron also agreed, "She showed me how to set everything up and break everything down."

Finally, due process and the participant's ability to be involved with IEP writing, due process meetings, staff meetings, etc., were other positive points they made regarding feeling prepared when they left student teaching. Vayda stated, "I think the most helpful thing that I had during that time was when I was student teaching. I got to sit in on those evaluation meetings and learn how to write an IEP and how to write goals." Lon had similar experiences "… awesome, cooperating teacher who let me join in on all the IEP meetings." Marie confirmed by stating,

> I would go to IEP meetings with her, and she would show me how to enter things into the system for due process. It was helpful because I knew I wanted to be in their district, and that district has a totally different system than everyone else. I wanted to see this and see how it works; then I got familiar with it.

These statements and positive experiences are important, particularly due to specific statements made regarding the paperwork earlier in this chapter and it being the reason some of the participants left the profession. Even with the positive experiences in student teaching with those administrative tasks, it still impacted their reason to leave the profession.

One participant, James, felt he needed more support in due process during his student teaching program. He made multiple statements during his interview referring to this. They included, "He did it, and we didn't do it together," "It was difficult to really sit down and do that stuff together, especially in a setting where you're getting pulled out of class to go to the office," and "We didn't do much compliance together." This is important because James listed his specific reason for leaving the profession as the compliance and paperwork duties of the job. He also stated the anxiety and lack of self-confidence in the area that took a toll on his willingness to stay in special education. Finally, it can also be concluded, due to his current position, which is still in the field of education as a social studies teacher, that it can negatively impact retention rates.

One participant, Kaydence, who had one student teaching placement, did not feel prepared from her student teaching experience. Kaydence indicated the host teacher needed to be more hands-on with her. She also stated due to the classroom routines and rituals in place, the classroom had a way of running itself. The teacher had been in the position for 20-plus years; it was a small class size, and the students were familiar with expectations. She said,

> I didn't get formal training. I did a lot of stuff; she was like, “I'm going to take a step back and let you do everything.” I specifically remember, with grading, how do I grade the kids for what we've done in this? I go through and how much do they participate? You

> get one. You get two, not even a real informal assessment. It was a gut thing based upon what I think of the kid.

Kaydence indicated one positive aspect of student teaching was having access to due process practice. She stated, "I did it myself, and she looked over my work, which I felt okay with for IEP meetings and that kind of stuff."

Three of the participants completed student teaching at multiple locations. The access to multiple locations was beneficial for all three participants because they indicated one of their locations, during student teaching, was not a positive experience. Had they not had other locations to balance the negative experiences, they may have felt unprepared after student teaching. Two of the participants stated they had negative experiences at one of their locations due to being put in charge of the classroom, and the host teacher was not readily available to oversee the process. In their words, they utilized their student teachers to ease the stress of their job and workload.

Vayda's high school experience was negative enough that her professor was also concerned. Vayda stated, "One day she came in and observed, and she said, "This isn't even safe for you," it was such an extreme experience." She also stated, "For me personally, I was just finding ways to survive. There's really no group of kids that I've ever worked with that has ever compared to that." This is important because Vayda has been in education for 25 years. It can put into perspective how negative experiences in student teaching, without the help of positive ones, could skew the lens of individuals entering the field.

Conclusion

Throughout this section, the role of student teaching was seen as having a significant impact on how prepared new special education teachers feel when they enter the field. The

length of time spent in their placements was reflected as a reason for their preparedness. Even more emphasis was placed on their experiences with their host teachers. Based on the data from participants, this should continue to be a significant factor when post-secondary programs secure placements and host teachers for incoming student teachers. The information showed the significant positive and negative impact it could have on retention.

Theme 4: Organizational Support

This section discusses the roles of onboarding, administrative support, and mentoring support and their impact on special education teachers. Effective onboarding, administrative support, and mentoring programs play pivotal roles in fostering a conducive environment for seasoned and novice teachers. This section outlines the importance of onboarding, administrative support, and mentoring within educational settings and its impact on retention.

Positive Onboarding Experiences

The onboarding process in the school districts where the participants had their first special education job had multiple pieces in common. First-year teachers typically had two weeks of onboarding versus one for returning teachers to the district. In addition, the second week of onboarding included work within their specific departments. Three of the eight participants had positive things to say about the onboarding process in their district. Those positive experiences came from access to curriculum, specificity to their roles, and overall experience.

Cameron, Vayda, and Katlyn indicated they received information from the onboarding process that applied to them and that it was helpful to get started at the district. Katlyn had the most positive experience. She stated, "It was a fine onboarding process, and I think it was super helpful. I feel like there was quite a bit." Katlyn also stated she met many people from her

department, which was specific to her role. Cameron also expressed, "We were set specifically to mingle with other people, other seasoned teachers. Somebody did sit down and walk me through all the technologies, emails, IEP program. I was an itinerant teacher, so tracking mileage, things like that." She stated she received little direction regarding classroom setup or curriculum design. Vayda also had a positive experience as she shared,

> We used the SRA Program when I first started. I was really fortunate because I got to go through and be trained in SRA reading and SRA writing, and we had a curriculum that we used with our kids to help with comprehension and fluency and even writing.

Each of the three participants was able to state information that made their experiences helpful. Although each teacher did not have it tailored to all of their needs, they gained some of the information they needed to start with class opening day. As stated in Chapter Two, Otto and Arnold (2005) referenced this in their study and explained the importance of supplying new teachers in a district with the necessary tools to get started in their positions.

Unfavorable Onboarding Experiences

Onboarding is an initial integration process of new educators into the school community, and it sets the tone for their professional journey. With this in mind, five of the eight participants did not feel their onboarding process was effective. Reasoning for this was indicated as a need for more curriculum, too generalized, and overwhelming. Lon, Marie, Leah, and James all indicated their onboarding process was generalized and unhelpful. Specifically, Marie stated, "… get to know the school district as a whole, less about my role." James was more direct and said, "I didn't find it useful at all, if I'm being completely honest." Kaydence explained how it impacted her first week with students,

> When it came to actually starting the first week of school, the first week of school was all community building with your advisory, and there was nothing for that. I remember being so terrified, what am I supposed to do with these kids all day? I partnered with one of my other special Ed teachers who saved my life.

Rose's unfavorable experience was due to feeling overwhelmed with the process. She stated the amount of information she received was challenging due to how much there was. Also, had there been opportunities for her to access the information earlier, she would have utilized that opportunity on her own time. She did not need to be paid; she would have preferred to take her time with the information. She specifically stated, "That's overwhelming. It's a lot of stuff to do in five days when you've never been in a school before."

Mentoring Experiences

Mentoring is a cornerstone of professional development and support within educational communities. Pairing experienced educators with new special education teachers offers guidance, encouragement, and insights individuals new to the profession rely on and can benefit from. Beyond technical assistance, mentorship fosters a culture of reflective practice and collegiality, along with bridging the gap between college coursework and lead teacher (Billingsley, 2019; Otto & Arnold, 2005; Parker, 2010). Table 5 below provides participants' information regarding their first-year mentors, or lack thereof, their overall mentoring experiences, and whether they had additional support to work with are outlined.

Table 5

Mentoring Experiences

Name	Type of Mentor (Year One)	Overall Experiences	Additional Supports
Lon	In-building	Positive	Building Supports Leads
Cameron	In-building	Positive	Unknown
Marie	District	Negative	Special Ed Colleagues
Rose	None	Negative	Outside Agency
Kaydence	District	Positive	Unknown
Vayda	In-building	Positive	Special Ed Director Reading Specialist
James	In-building	Positive	Unknown
Katlyn	Host Teacher	Positive	Audiologist Special Ed Colleagues

Six of the eight participants stated they had positive experiences with their mentors overall. These experiences were positive due to the feedback received, assistance with due process and curriculum, and overall navigation of the district. Four participants had mentors who were in-building leads or mentors who supported them. While those individuals' jobs were not dedicated to mentoring, it was an aspect of their positions. Lon, Cameron, Vayda, and James stated the partnerships with their mentors were helpful and positive. Specifically, Lon said, "I feel really lucky. I had really supportive leads at both of the schools that I worked at. They would be there for a lot of advice or just giving suggestions." Cameron said, "I learned a lot of information from her." James had similar comments, "The woman I worked with was good, and I feel I got stuff as a teacher."

Kaydence had a district mentor, versus an in-building one. She also had a positive experience with her mentor. Unlike the in-building mentors mentioned above, the district mentor she was paired with had a role specific to mentoring new teachers. She stated, "I got some good mentoring, I guess, in how to do lesson plans, but as for actual classroom stuff, it was pretty much just sort of on your own." Also, "She was helpful to check in with and do rubrics and stuff like that." Katlyn's experience was unique due to her student teaching being embedded into her first year of teaching. She worked with a host teacher who was also her mentor. She had a positive experience from this. She stated, "I had such a strong mentor and teacher to work with. It really prepared me more."

Two of the participants did not have positive mentoring experiences. Marie had a district mentor, and Rose stated she did not have one specifically assigned to her from the building or the district. Their experiences were not positive due to the level of feedback they received and the access they had to them. Marie's district mentor, which was their specific role, was not accessible to her regularly. She stated,

> She came a couple of times but didn't come very often. I don't remember it being very useful, which is funny because that is exactly what I do now. I feel like I'm trying to make it more useful. I can see why she didn't come to my room because it wasn't on fire like other peoples' were.

This statement not only describes some of her experience but is also interesting because Marie's current job placement as a mentor in the same district where she was a special education teacher is impacted by her mentoring experience, as stated above. Rose's experience was unique in she did not remember anyone specifically being assigned to her as a mentor. She had individuals

who stopped to check-in or completed observations, but she stated she received minimal feedback after referring back to emails she saved during the school year.

Five of the participants also mentioned in their interviews other helpful staff, or they formed mentoring relationships. However, it was outside the official capacity of their jobs. The five who stated they had additional support stated these individuals included colleagues from the special education department, outside agencies, audiologists, and the special education director. Vayda's experience is necessary to highlight because it ties back to statements she made earlier in Chapter Four regarding why some participants left the field. Vayda specifically detailed how she had access to her Special Education Director for additional support beyond her building mentor. When she had questions, she was able to reach out to the special education director, and he would come to her room to assist. She explained it this way,

> I remember the director of special education. He would hop into my classroom and watch me teach and then conference. It wasn't being evaluated. It was never paperwork, but he would just sit at my desk, and he would work. He would literally just spend the afternoon in my room. That wasn't just me. When kids were close to qualifying, but they wouldn't qualify, I can remember calling my director of special education and just saying, "Hey, what do you think?" Then he'd come over and do an observation, or he would give advice.

This experience stands out due to other comments by the participants that explained they did not have access to administration for day-to-day work or needs.

In Chapter Two, effective mentoring and the results it can produce were highlighted by multiple studies. Billingsley (2019), Otto and Arnold (2005), and Parker (2010) all demonstrated the need for effective and patient mentors who can bridge gaps in their preservice programs and,

most importantly, are mentors with a special education background to understand what is needed fully.

Administrative Support

Administrative support serves as the backbone of operations within educational institutions. From managing day-to-day operations to providing resources and logistical assistance, adequate administrative support allows teachers to focus on their daily teaching and learning responsibilities. Furthermore, administrators who are proactive help with collaboration and continuous improvement.

During the interviews, the participants were asked specially about their administrators and the support they received from them. Surprisingly, the information received was minimal and not very detailed. This is interesting because Chapter Two findings have identified how administrative support can positively or adversely affect retention rates. Six of the eight participants stated, when asked about administrative support, they felt supported when they needed something from the administration. Two participants did not directly answer the question when asked if they felt supported.

When participants were explicitly asked about the feedback they received from administrators, they were able to be more detailed. Three participants stated while they felt supported by the administration, they did not receive constructive feedback. Rose, Marie, and Cameron specially addressed the feedback they received. Rose stated,

> I don't remember getting any feedback emails because, what I say was, I kept those emails because I wanted to go back and reflect on what they said I could do and change so I could take it with me for future stuff to remember. I don't remember anything coming from the principal.

Marie and Cameron had similar feedback comments. Marie stated, "I would get some feedback, but I don't remember getting feedback and thinking I'm going to implement this new thing tomorrow." Cameron conferred, "I got no constructive feedback." Cameron's experience was also unique in that she would teach in sign language. She explained her unique situation this way,

> Most of the time, I was teaching in American sign language, and they didn't understand what I was saying. It took a couple of observations for them to also make sure that we had an ASL interpreter sitting with them, voicing what I was doing.

One last question asked of the participants was if their in-building administrators had a special education background. Four of the participants indicated they had administrators with special education backgrounds. This question was specifically asked of the participants due to the unique nature of due process paperwork and nuances in special education. Also, when participants spoke of retention recommendations, some highlighted administration with special education backgrounds as a factor. The participants who stated their administrators had a special education background also felt it was beneficial to them as special education teachers. Cameron said, "Our principal had a sped background, and he advocated strongly for our school." Marie also stated, "I had a pretty good assistant principal at the time that had special ed experience." Previous research noted in Chapter Two also highlighted the importance of having administrators with special education backgrounds. Billingsley (1995) and Cobb (2014) highlighted special education teachers find their administrators less effective when they lack knowledge or a background in special education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the organizational support provided through effective onboarding, mentoring, and administrative support is crucial in promoting teacher retention, supporting professional growth, and providing first-year and veteran teachers with experiences that will maintain effective day-to-day operations. From day one of onboarding to the final day as a special education teacher, participants noted how the effectiveness of these experiences positively and negatively affected them in the profession.

Theme 5: Retention Strategies

Retention strategies for special education teachers are crucial for ensuring the stability and effectiveness of special education programs. This section covers retention strategies conveyed by the participants in three areas: post-secondary coursework, student teaching practices, and district administrative and mentoring support. The retention of special education teachers and the reasons why it is crucial are highlighted throughout Chapter Two. Recommendations from the participants coincide with many of them.

Post-Secondary Recommendations

The participants in the study focused their post-secondary recommendations in two areas, the first being built-in classroom experiences and the second being courses focused in certain areas. The most significant recommendation was that of built-in classroom experience. Six of the eight participants articulated the need for having practicums or other volunteering opportunities built into college coursework, not just when they got to student teaching.

Cameron and Marie felt very strongly about having the classroom experience to support coursework. Cameron stated, "Before you can even get in, the program should require that you've spent at least one year in a school setting. They just have to be in the classroom and in a

variety of classrooms, volunteering in educational settings." She also included, “From what I heard, many of them had really good experiences, and they said that they had learned a lot, but they felt that it was they felt that it was kind of like a controlled space.” Marie agreed and went even further by stating,

> Where you're partnering with a specific district, and you're bridging the gap between curriculum and seeing classrooms all around, whether it be the metro area, it doesn't have to be the same district. Student teaching can be an isolated experience. You're with one teacher for this long; that's all you know. It'd be cool to have some classes like behavior management. Learning about it one day and the next time you meet, people meet in different schools and see some of these strategies at play.

Cameron and Marie’s statements were also significant because they highlighted information that had not come up in other completed research: The potentially isolating impact of student teaching. In the classroom environment, you are possibly with only one teacher, which can limit what you see versus getting multiple perspectives on working through situations.

Marie pointed out another significant difference between special education teachers and some general education teachers, “People go to school to teach, to be a teacher, then they specialize, to become a math or science teacher. With special ed, you have to learn how to teach all different levels, and sometimes in one room.” Katlyn, Vayda, Kaydence, and Rose also stated the need for gaining classroom experience in their courses. They indicated they do not feel there could ever be too much classroom exposure.

Exposing college students to the classroom is beneficial for multiple reasons. These can include a practical application of knowledge, skill development, understanding student needs, gaining cultural awareness, and overall building confidence. Burstein et al. (2009) highlighted

this, where the study tied teachers' concerns back to their course work and the emphasis on theory versus practice. Participants found value in their ability to put their knowledge to work hands-on in a classroom setting.

Another area that emerged from the participants was specific recommendations regarding the type of courses they took. These recommendations included coursework in behavior management, curriculum, co-teaching, and due process. Two participants stated having more exposure to classes in behavior management would have been beneficial. They understood every day in special education could be different and coursework cannot account for every situation they dealt with. However, they wanted more opportunities to learn about workarounds, building relationships, making connections, and behavior support plans. Kaydence stated,

> I think focusing on increasing and building relationships, making connections, meeting students where they are. Really emphasizing, especially in special ed, that it's not about is my lesson good, therefore I'm a good teacher. It's about relationships first so that you can create that buy-in with students.

Erica also said, “Bringing more of a realistic approach to what that looks like.”

Kaydence and James specifically addressed co-teaching. They were in districts that utilized co-teaching in the general education classroom daily. Their co-teaching experience included them as special education teachers being paired with a general education teacher and teaching the classroom as a team. They did not feel their college coursework prepared them for this. James stated, “It seems like something that needs to be more defined to people.” Kaydence agreed,

> Another thing would be, because the current model is about co-teaching, focusing on that. I guess when I'm thinking now about my post-secondary training, we talked about the

> different models of the classroom and the different models of co-teaching, but maybe more reality-based. How co-teaching works. Emphasizing that and balancing that with pull-out classes.

This is significant because both Leah and James commented about their co-teaching experiences in their first year of teaching. James was almost exclusively co-teaching five different classes, and Kaydence spent much of her day co-teaching. Kaydence explained her strain with her first-year co-teacher because of vaguely defined roles,

> She was like, who was responsible for what? No one really knew exactly. That first year, I was basically told that I was supposed to teach equally with my co-teacher, and that created a little bit of the forming, norming, and storming. Some storming between us because she sometimes felt resentful that I wasn't doing as much, but at the same time, I wasn't trained in math in that way. I was trained to support math.

James also stated, while he got along with all of his co-teachers, he could not say the same for other co-teaching partnerships in the building. He stated,

> I saw a lot of strained relationships because the co-teacher was just working with the special education students, or they were modifying too much to make sure that kids passed and things were fine. Some teachers don't want to give up control, while others think you need to do more on top of all the stresses that the job already holds. To have to go into a classroom where you're not on the same page with the person that you're supposed to be partnered with would strain and leads further.

Co-teaching was not addressed in Chapter Two. However, there is research that supports James and Kaydence's viewpoints. Carty and Farrell (2018) completed a study on co-teaching

and the types of models and highlighted strengths and considerations when entering a co-teaching partnership.

Lastly, two participants noted some lack of due process classes and the ability to practice their learning. They felt the need for more practice writing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), evaluations, Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP), etc. James stated, “Some sort of minimum IEPs written that need to be an assessment which you're graded upon.” He followed up with a statement regarding placement with a host teacher for student teaching.

> If you're with an LD teacher, you might not do a BIP for the entire year, and if you take a job as an EBD teacher, that's a huge part of the job. You're going to have to learn on your own, or you're going to have to meet other teachers and develop relationships with them. They're going to have to be willing to take time out of their already busy schedule to show you that stuff because everything I did learn, that was the way I learned it from other teachers who were kind enough to walk me through the process and help me.

Rose said, “I don't remember us doing an initial evaluation. I thought that would have been helpful to try to do something like that.” Research in Chapter Two also highlights this with studies from Billingsley (2019) and Morewood and Condo (2012).

Overall, classroom experience is integral to developing effective and competent educators. It provides the foundation for future success in teaching by combining theoretical and pedagogical knowledge with practical skills and understanding of student needs. It helps build the professional identity of future teachers.

Student Teaching Recommendations

Effective student teaching serves as a cornerstone in preparing eager special education teachers, offering helpful opportunities for applying practice, mentorship, and professional

growth. As a critical component of teacher preparation programs, student teaching provides future special education teachers with experiences in natural classroom settings, where they can apply theoretical knowledge to practice and refine teaching skills.

The research participants' recommendations for student teaching fell into three sub-themes overall. These included host teacher qualifications and experiences, student teaching isolation, and hands-on experience with due process. Six of the eight participants recommended information for the host teacher. This included qualifications and being honest with their student teachers about their day-to-day expectations, situations, and the environment they will be working in. Not only did these participants make recommendations in the area, but they also spoke of their experiences earlier in the research and how it impacted them professionally and personally. They emphasized host teachers who were trained, were hands-on, open-minded, and did not utilize a student teacher to lessen their workload. Marie stated, “Emphasis on vetting the cooperating teacher, the host teacher. Making sure that they are someone who would work well with a student teacher.” Both Kaydence and Cameron included comments around the host teacher’s mindset. Kaydence stated, “It doesn't need to be younger exactly, getting a student teacher mentor, who is not that far removed.” Cameron concurred,

> The teachers were kind of close-minded, or they weren't really open to the new strategies that the kids were coming with from their grad program. … My teacher was in her fourth year of teaching when she was mentoring me, and I learned so much from her because she was still really motivated, really active, but also open to trying new things.

Valencia et al. (2009) highlighted the relationship between the host teacher and the student teacher, fitting into existing norms, yet wanting to try out what they learned in their coursework.

Vayda, James, and Lauren also spoke of their host teacher and talked about being honest and having clear expectations. Vayda and Katlyn both stated, “Host teacher having clear expectations.” James had similar viewpoints, “Clear and defined roles would be really helpful so people know exactly what it is that they're doing or getting themselves into.” Kaydence said,

> Being honest with your student teacher about what it's like. That isn't just about grades and doing a lesson. Practical because I definitely went into teaching thinking, “Oh, I'm supposed to think about the lesson plan” and it was all this other stuff.

The participants' recommendations coincide with the research highlighted in Chapter Two. Bird (2012) stated,

> It was found that the student teachers entered the student teaching experience with preconceived personal beliefs about what makes good teachers. They imagined themselves as good teachers based on memories of themselves as students. In reality, they found they did not understand the complex relationship between classroom management, student behavior, and academic tasks. (p.17)

The third recommendation for student teaching was being involved and completing more of the job's meetings, paperwork, and administrative duties, not just participating in the classroom aspects. Four participants stated they would have liked more due process support or stated how impactful it was to have those opportunities. Lon said, “Hands on as much as you can in IEP writing whether you're doing a mock write-up of it alongside the teacher. Give us more of those practice pieces.” James made a similar reference, “Give us time to sit down with our person specifically for compliance because the supporting teachers have deadlines they have to meet, too.” Vayda spoke of the paperwork and running the due process meetings or attending them. She said, “… attending meetings, not just being in the classroom, run the meeting, having

sensitive conversations." Lastly, Rose also commented about data completion. "Doing data collection more, having some support, and just practice and what that looks like."

Adequate student teaching opportunities play an essential role in shaping future special education teachers' professional development and readiness. By providing relevant experiences, mentorship, and opportunities for reflection and growth, student teaching readies would-be teachers with the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to succeed in the classroom. Student teaching experiences need to ensure that novice special education teachers are well-prepared to meet student's diverse needs and navigate the teaching profession's intricacies.

District Recommendations

The importance of school district mentoring and administrative support cannot be overstated. This section explores the critical roles of mentoring and administrative support within school districts, highlighting their significance in fostering special education teacher growth, retention, and overall school improvement. The participants formulated recommendations to assist districts in cultivating a culture of collaboration, innovation, and retention.

The participants spoke of recommendations on mentoring. They analyzed the experiences they had with mentoring once they were in a district and talked about where they needed more support. Participants highlighted three main recommendations. These included having set times for mentoring meetings, mentors with a special education background, and a set person for mentoring, not a teacher in the building trying to double as a classroom teacher and mentor. James and Rose both spoke of having a set time for mentoring. They stated, while there was someone to get information from, it needed to be built into their day. The mentors would reach out at inopportune times or when they did not need immediate support. They also explained it

would have forced them to take more time to ask questions rather than feeling like they were bothering the individuals. Rose stated,

> I think I probably could have went to them as well to ask questions, but at the time, I don't remember feeling like I needed something. When I think back on it, I probably could have went and asked her. But I didn't. Again. I feel like people are busy, too, sometimes, which stopped me.

James said, “New teachers could take a day and go to a district building to do compliance stuff. There'd be people there who could theoretically help. I think those things for new teachers need to be mandatory.”

Two participants also had recommendations regarding their mentor's background in special education. Since special education teachers complete paperwork and administrative duties in due process that general education teachers do not, having a mentor with a special education background is essential. James stated, “They should be focused on compliance for special education teachers.” Cameron also said, “Your mentor team has to be sped.”

Lastly, three participants spoke of having a set person as their mentor. When special education teachers are also asked to incorporate mentoring duties into their day, it can make it difficult for new teachers to receive the support they need. Individuals with a designated title as a mentor are more likely to be effective and available when needed. Marie, Kaydence, and Katlyn spoke on this. Katlyn stated,

> Having a one-on-one mentor would be incredibly important for an itinerant teacher who's new to the district because there's so many schools that you're dealing with and so many different teachers. Each school, even though they're in the same district, they work in

> different ways. Just to have someone to be able to chat with about it would be super important.

Kaydence said,

> Teachers are already overworked; they don't have time to officially mentor, and unless it's going to be built into the contract where they have a certain number of days, a month, or something, but it has to be days. It can't be hours.

Marie talked about having a specific person and ensuring those mentors have ample time. She said, “Mentoring from the district is huge. When there are enough mentors where they can have lower caseloads, they can actually get to the classroom more often with new teachers.”

Previous research from Bay and Parker-Katz (2009) summarized all three recommendations noted by the participants. Through mentorship, new teachers gain practical skills, confidence, and a deeper understanding of best practices for serving students with diverse learning needs. As a result, they are better equipped to meet the profession's demands, contribute positively to their school communities, and ultimately improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Beyond mentoring recommendations, the participants also had the opportunity to talk about administrative recommendations. These recommendations included effective feedback, providing adequate staffing and resources, caseload sizes, and meaningful training and professional development. Four of the participants made recommendations regarding having sufficient administration. They noted feedback they received from the administration and whether they had a special education background. Cameron stated,

> At the admin level, nothing is more obnoxious than somebody coming from a business background, coming into education and saying, “Hey, you! You're a really good teacher,”

> I'm like, “No, you don't know anything about sped. You don't know if I'm differentiating. You don't know if I'm meeting their IEP goals. You don't know if I'm tracking appropriately or anything like that.”

Rose said, “I think the feedback is really important because if you don't know what you're doing well or not, it's not going to change.” Katlyn also said, “Knowing more of the specializations all throughout special ed.” Kaydence also noted, while she had an administrator with a special education background, “Our best administrator, they had too much on their plate.” Billingsley (1995) and Conley and You (2016) also provided research to support these recommendations. Both studies showed the need for administrators with special education backgrounds, specifically since administrators spend a significant amount of their time on special education.

Another area of recommendation from the participants was adequate staffing and resources. While both areas fall to a district level versus a building administration, participants noted them as areas of need. Six of the participants stated additional support in those areas is needed. About staffing, Kaydence stated, “Having additional support staff for mental health, social workers, that kind of thing.” Cameron had a similar statement, “not having enough classroom support because behavior management was so high.” Marie also stated, “There needs to be more of the people in my role to actually provide that support.”

In terms of resources, three participants referenced the need. Vayda said, “Systems aren’t set up for teachers to be successful.” Rose and Lon stated the need for a central location for resources to make accessing these resources easier. Lon said, “Resources and guidelines. Whether it is templates or just more examples.” Rose stated,

> Maybe putting together some kind of a folder or digital access in the school so that you have a place to go. It would be nice since everybody's all up on their digital stuff. You

> don't have to go searching for information; it's all in one spot. If they had something on the school's website where you can share math.

Lastly, another district recommendation was to limit the size of special education teachers' caseloads. Depending on the school district, union contracts with the district, amount of staff, etc., caseloads for special education teachers can be daunting. Three participants, James, Vayda, and Cameron, made recommendations about smaller caseloads. James went the most in-depth with his recommendation. He also stated it may not be equitable to do so. He said,

> There should be caps on caseloads for new teachers to prevent burnout so they can learn the process. Something that might be a little bit more manageable because I don't think an IEP takes as long for a 15-year teacher as it does for a first year. I know that leads to logistical problems or maybe pushback from older teachers, but it would make a big difference.

Cameron stated, "Kids got added to caseloads, and then they laid off more teachers. Then your caseloads are getting higher." Vayda said, "Caseloads needed to be more manageable."

All the district recommendations the participants made mirror previous research completed in the area. Boyd et al. (2011) listed assistance with curriculum, planning, and instruction as reasons for dissatisfaction with their districts. In addition, Bettini et al. (2017) demonstrated what supportive administration can do for a district. Supportive administration, adequate resources, and staffing contribute to the overall success of schools. Educational stakeholders must prioritize and invest in these essential components to ensure special education teachers' continued growth and excellence.

Conclusion

This chapter summarized research findings from in-depth interviews with former special education teachers. It spelled out themes generated by the participants and utilized their lived experiences to support them. The interviews provided insight into why special education teachers leave the profession and why districts struggle with retention. Participants also included recommendations for post-secondary education, student teaching practices, and district support to increase retention. Background information was included on the participants. However, the information did not show significant impacts on the findings. In Chapter Five, I provide implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and scholarship. Lastly, I detail how contributions to retaining special education teachers will be shared with stakeholders.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This phenomenologically informed case study explored the retention of special education teachers and its effect on education. The study interviewed eight participants who were former special education teachers who left the field of special education. The retention of special education teachers is essential not only for districts but also for all stakeholders. The study was conducted to understand why special education teachers leave the profession.

A sizable body of research on special education teacher retention has been completed. Other studies have included a variety of reasons why special education teachers have left. However, this study focused on three areas: post-secondary coursework, student teaching, and administrative and mentoring to retain teachers. I completed in-depth interviews with each participant, included follow-up questions, and analyzed the transcripts to produce a summary and narrative of their lived experiences.

Throughout the study, the participants were able to explain reasons for leaving the profession, personal experiences in their post-secondary education courses, student teaching experiences, and the support they received once in a district, along with recommendations for increasing retention in the profession. In this chapter, I summarize the findings and provide implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and scholarship.

Overall Contribution and Summary of the Current Study

Special education teacher retention is crucial for the field of education. This case study set out to identify possible gaps in the system that lead special education teachers to leave the profession. Throughout my career and experiences as a special education teacher and at the onset of my study, I identified three areas where I recognized a disconnect in the system: post-

secondary coursework, student teaching experiences, and administrative and mentoring support. Previous research identified these areas, however, they did not limit their focus to specific areas and included many external reasons as well. Even with those three areas in mind, I went in with an open mindset that my research may lead me elsewhere as it relates to why special education teachers left the profession.

The research study identified eight former special education teachers who left the special education profession and either continued in the field of education in some capacity or left education entirely and now have careers outside of it. Through in-depth interviews and analysis of the transcripts, I was able to generate five themes that emerged from the research. These themes were: Participant Reasons for Leaving Special Education, Post-Secondary Program Course Impact on Participant Preparation, Student Teaching Impact on Participant Preparation, Organization Support, and Retention Strategies. These findings offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by special education teachers and highlight the importance of addressing key areas of post-secondary preparation, student teaching experiences, and district support to increase teacher retention. In addition to the five themes generated, background information was analyzed to determine if there was any correlation to their reasons for leaving the profession. While their background information did not significantly impact the findings, explaining them to build a foundation for their experiences was important.

Each of my participants explained why they left the profession. Seven of the eight participants left the profession due to circumstances attributed to the above mentioned areas: post-secondary coursework, student teaching experience, and administrative and mentoring support. One of the participants left for personal reasons; however, she did have similar experiences as others; it was just not the conclusive reason for her departure from the profession.

The study reveals commonalities between participant experiences and existing research (Billingsley, 2019; Boyd et al., 2011; Collins et al., 2017; Mehrenberg, 2013), emphasizing the impact of challenges related to post-secondary coursework, student teaching, and administrative support in driving special education teacher retention. Despite their passion for teaching and dedication to their students, many participants cited systemic gaps and challenges within these areas that contributed to their decision to leave the profession.

Each participant spoke of how they truly enjoyed teaching and the students they worked with. They also spoke of missing the profession and the students if they left the field entirely. Those still in the education field explained they now enjoy their work more. They get to work with students the way they envisioned at the onset of their career and are taking their current positions to gain more insight into special education or mentor new special education teachers so they do not have some of the same experiences.

The second theme in the research was the impact post-secondary program coursework had on them and their preparedness. Six of the eight participants felt their post-secondary coursework prepared them as much as possible. They understood their coursework could only cover so much and account for broad situations versus the ever-changing day-to-day situations that can arise in special education classrooms. Some also specifically cited the coursework in due process and the practicum experiences they had access to. Of the two participants who did not feel their coursework prepared them, the lack of relevancy and hands-on experience were noted as areas of need.

Theme three, student teaching impact on participant preparation, was one area where the participants expressed the most need or what prepared them the most. It also included host-teacher implications not initially addressed in Chapter Two. This sub-theme generated extensive

information in the findings and recommendations for future student teaching programs. Participants also spoke about the length of time they spent in their student teaching experiences, the opportunities they were exposed to, and their school placement/s. All three areas impacted how prepared they felt when they left student teaching.

The fourth theme from the research centered around district support once a special education teacher secured their first job placement. Specifically, administrative and mentoring support, along with the onboarding process in their districts. Three participants noted their positive onboarding experiences and explained they felt it helped them lay the foundation when they got their first teaching job. In the area of mentoring, six of the eight participants expressed the positive mentoring experiences they received in their first position. Along with designated mentors, the participants described how helpful other colleagues were when they needed guidance. Lastly, administrative support was identified as an area that affected their experiences. Six participants stated they felt supported by their administrators. However, when asked about the feedback they received from their administrators, three of them indicated the feedback they received needed to be more constructive.

Theme Five was centered around recommendations. In addition to illuminating the challenges, the study offers valuable recommendations for improving the preparation and support of special education teachers. Participants emphasized the need for more relevant and hands-on post-secondary coursework, comprehensive student teaching experiences, and ongoing support and training once in the classroom. The participants also commented on whether additional training and support would have kept them in the profession. Four participants stated if they had more support and training, they would have stayed in the profession versus moving on. The participants' experiences along with previous research highlights the significant impact of

effective mentoring, onboarding processes, and constructive feedback from administrators in shaping teacher experiences and can have far-reaching implications for practice, policy, and scholarship within the field of special education.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

In the area of practice, the study accentuates the importance of targeted interventions and support mechanisms to address the identified gaps and challenges faced by special education teachers. Special education teacher retention is crucial for maintaining high-quality educational services, promoting student achievement, and fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment for students with disabilities. Previous studies have indicated the effects high turnover of special education teachers can have on a district, both fiscally and time-constraining (Billingsley, 2019). In addition, it can affect the overall performance of students with disabilities (Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

Mentoring Practices

Practices in the area of mentoring were stated not only by participants but also in previous research. With those in mind, mentoring practices that should be readily addressed in districts are effective mentors and set schedules for mentoring.

Effective Mentors

Special education teachers require specialized knowledge, skills, and support to effectively meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities and ensure equitable access to education. Their day-to-day practices vary in relation to general education teachers. With that in mind, it is crucial that mentors for special education teachers have a background in special education and have been practicing it within a set time frame of being mentors. Special education teachers need to feel supported and have up-to-date mentors on best practices and guidelines in

special education. Special education is an ever-evolving field where professional development and best practices are updated regularly (Tutt & Williams, 2023).

Feedback from mentors is also imperative in how new special education teachers view themselves and their practices. Feedback needs to be constructive and informative to novice teachers. Too much information at once can be overwhelming and challenging to implement into their practice. Focusing on two or three areas for a set amount of time would make implementing the information more manageable and effective. In addition, mentors can monitor and collect data on what the mentees are implementing, have them set manageable goals, and continue to help mold their practice via performance feedback.

Mentoring Availability

Along with having mentors with a special education background, it is essential to have access to a mentor on a regular, scheduled basis. Special education teachers have a set schedule, just like general education teachers. However, paperwork, behaviors, higher needs students, and other factors do not necessarily allow special education teachers downtime to figure out their own needs before they become overwhelming. Also, like most teachers, novice teachers understand how difficult and busy other colleagues are. Some are reluctant to reach out and ask for help when it is not readily scheduled or available to them. Other times, they may have mentors checking in on them when everything is going well, and they do not perceive an immediate need from the mentor. Mentoring relationships are critical in the experiences new special education teachers have. Therefore, weekly meetings, 30-60 minutes in length with their mentees, would be beneficial to both parties. Mentors could collect appropriate data, give meaningful feedback, and set new, small goals for the following week. Mentees would be able to

reflect on their week, initiate conversations around accomplishments and needs for the week, and continue to hone in on their skills.

District Practices

Practices on a district level, outside of mentoring, include co-teaching and onboarding practices. Recommendations for co-teaching practices and professional development practices are addressed in this section.

Co-Teaching Practices

Co-teaching has become commonplace in districts around the country. The practice has been influential with general education students and special education students (Carty & Farrell, 2018). With the influx of co-teaching into districts, special education teachers now have even more to work through than before. Some special education teachers are paired with multiple teachers in different subject areas and are expected to plan and partner effectively without the time and support. In addition, districts have approached the co-teaching model in a generalized way and left it up to teaching partnerships to figure out what it will look like in their classrooms. When new special education teachers enter a district, it would be beneficial to have co-teaching partnerships that limit how many a new special education teacher can have and limit it to one subject across multiple grade levels. This would ensure new special education teachers have time to focus on one subject area, see how the curriculum and standards flow into the next grade level, and produce effective student outcomes—also, having set times built into the workweek for co-teaching partnerships to meet and plan. This could be in the form of an additional prep for new special education teachers. This would assist with workload and time management.

Onboarding and Professional Development Practices

The onboarding practices of districts are meant to showcase what new teachers are in store for and give them nuances of the district that will need to be implemented in their practice. When new special education teachers entered districts, they reflected on their experiences with onboarding and professional development during their first few weeks in the district. Participants spoke of the lack of time, the content, and the generalization of the onboarding processes in the district. In addition, there is a lack of curriculum to implement effectively in their classroom. New special education teachers need to have district practices specific to their roles explained to them and ample time to dive into the curriculum before the first day of school starts. Along with those duties, they need ample time to set up their classrooms and acclimate to their school buildings. Allowing new special education teachers to access new curricula and classrooms before the onboarding process starts would effectively use time and fiscal resources for a district. This allows the new teachers to focus on the information, district policies, etc., they must know and work through the first two weeks of onboarding. In addition to the initial onboarding, working time into their year will allow for continued professional development to practice and gain feedback on policies and practices explained to them during the onboarding stage.

The adverse effects of high turnover rates among special education teachers have been well-documented in previous research, impacting both school districts' fiscal stability and students' academic performance. Effective mentors, constructive feedback, and district-level practices, particularly in co-teaching and onboarding procedures, are crucial for improving special education teacher growth and development. In addressing these areas of practice, districts can effectively support special education teachers and design an environment for their professional growth, ultimately benefiting both educators and students alike.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

The participants in this study stated their experiences may have been very different from others. They also noted their struggles and reasons for leaving may not resonate with others. However, they are interested in helping policymakers retain special education teachers due to their significant role in education. By implementing strategies informed by the study's findings and previous research, school districts, and policymakers can work towards enhancing the retention of special education teachers and improving outcomes for students with disabilities. These recommendations aim to inform the development, implementation, or revision of special education teacher retention policies, regulations, or practices.

Post-Secondary Coursework Recommendations

Participants throughout the study highlighted areas of growth in their post-secondary coursework and areas they felt needed improvement. Some of the participants noted post-secondary coursework can only do so much. The day-to-day experiences of a special education teacher would be difficult to emulate due to the endless situations a special education teacher may encounter. However, they noted areas where more coursework could give them strategies to work through situations more easily. Also, access to practicums throughout their entire post-secondary coursework. They stressed the need to be hands-on and turn theory into practice.

Coursework Recommendations

Post-secondary coursework for special education teachers covers many areas. One of the unique aspects of coursework for special education teachers is the many areas it needs to cover versus a general education teacher attending college for a specific area. Special education teachers need a background in all subjects and their areas of expertise. The participants explained their coursework specifically in the area of due process. Some cited the significance it had on

their programs. However, others did not feel they received adequate coursework in the area. Implementing more coursework in due process (e.g., IEPs and evaluations) is essential for post-secondary institutions and coursework to consider. It allows special education teachers to practice without penalty. It also allows them to build accommodations, modifications, and scaffold curriculum based on the needs outlined in the paperwork. Lastly, it will enable them to practice giving assessments and collecting data to implement in their practice versus learning on the job.

Practicum Recommendations

Robust practicum time in the classroom, coupled with coursework, was recommended by the participants. Participants stated the importance of practicing their theory and pedagogical work while learning it. Those participants who received ample practicum opportunities during their coursework cited the difference it made in their post-secondary experiences. Previous research also cited the correlation between feeling prepared when special education teachers left their program and retention (DeAngelis et al., 2013). Implementing practicum work into all coursework specific to their roles would benefit special education teachers. This would allow them to utilize what they have learned in real time versus waiting until student teaching to implement everything they learned in their coursework.

Student Teaching Policy Recommendations

Student teaching policy recommendations from participants covered multiple areas. Recommendations in this section fall into two areas: host teacher recommendations and multiple student teaching sites.

Host Teacher Recommendations

During the interviews and analysis of the research, there were multiple references to the impact the host teacher had on the participants' student teaching experiences. Previous research also supports the direct correlation host teachers can have on special education teachers' feelings of preparedness (Bird, 2012). Not every outstanding teacher excels at mentoring and hosting new teachers. When post-secondary institutions pair with districts to place student teachers, host teacher criteria requirements are crucial for placement. Host teachers must have a pedagogical background and the mindset to work hands-on with the student teacher to implement the practice. A gradual release model is implemented so the student teacher can grasp the concepts, implement them with fidelity, and gain feedback for further practice. In addition, specific amounts of time are related to due process practice and implementation. Working in real-time with students with disabilities, completing the paperwork hand-in-hand with the host teacher, and attending and leading due process meetings will enhance their student teaching experience and set a foundation for them to build on.

Multi-Site Recommendations

Student teaching requirements for the participants varied based on the post-secondary institution they attended. Also, the grade level in which they were most interested was a factor for some teachers. Participants stated the impact of the host teacher on their student teaching experiences and the site location. Throughout the study, multiple participants commented that student teaching was an isolating experience. Only having access to one site and host teacher does not allow student teachers to gain multiple perspectives towards their practices. Post-secondary institutions would benefit their prospective special education teachers by setting multi-site parameters for student teaching. In addition, additional timeframes for each setting

should be set so student teachers can implement enough coursework practices into their experiences. This would allow student teachers to increase adaptability. They would learn to be flexible and adaptable in different classroom environments. Also, student teachers could expand their professional networks, providing valuable mentorship, support, and professional development opportunities throughout their careers.

District Recommendations

Participants made multiple recommendations regarding their administration throughout the interviews. One policy recommendation is related to administrators' background knowledge or work experience. Special education is unique and carries an area of due process that is difficult to navigate for individuals with a background in it, let alone someone without a background in the area. Previous research also cites a lack of administrators with special education backgrounds and the time they must devote to the area (Cobb, 2014). While ensuring building-level administrators have a background in special education is not feasible, policy in the area can be created to bridge the gap. To receive an administrator's license in Minnesota, individuals must be competent in 12 areas, which includes some background in special education. A proposed policy suggestion for K-12 Principal licensure in Minnesota would be incorporating an additional special education competency requirement. This would allow for an enhanced understanding of the unique needs of special education students and staff. In addition, it would also increase support for staff in the areas of guidance, resources, and professional development. Lastly, administrators with solid knowledge of special education can collaborate more effectively with special education teachers, related service providers, and families to develop and implement individualized education plans (IEPs), accommodations, and interventions.

The participants in this study indicated their individual experiences and recognized their struggles and reasons for leaving may not align with those of others. Despite these differences, they expressed collective importance in aiding policymakers to retain special education teachers, recognizing these educators' significant role in education. With the implementation of the strategies learned from the study's findings and previous research, school districts and policymakers can take proactive steps toward enhancing the retention of special education teachers.

Implications and Recommendations for Scholarship

Throughout my study, I sought to narrow down why special education teachers are leaving the profession and what can be done in specific areas: postsecondary education, student teaching, and administrative and mentoring practices to increase retention. Through the lived experiences of eight participants, I drew themes and recommendations for retention. The themes identified coincide with previous research, but more research is also needed in the area.

Limitations of my study included the small sample size and it taking place in urban and suburban districts in the State of Minnesota. Minnesota has different licensing requirements for teachers than other states, including additional requirements. Along with those limitations, my sample size only included an interview with one male participant. A single male’s perspective may not provide sufficient insight into how gender influences teaching practices and professional relationships. Addressing the concerns amongst a larger sample size in various states and districts may elicit different findings due to requirements for teachers, administrators, and postsecondary institutions.

Secondly, additional research on pairing districts with postsecondary institutions would be beneficial. Multiple participants in the study were involved in programs that partnered with

districts. These programs offer different avenues and experiences to licensure. One of the programs also provided a significantly longer time in student teaching. Additional research in this area could highlight some of the recommendations from the participants. These include utilizing their coursework and its relevance in a classroom experience, specifically around the current curriculum and due process policies and programs in those districts, and access to multiple sites and perspectives. In conjunction with longer student teaching experiences, consider making student teaching a paid experience, especially if the length is expanded.

Finally, future research should aim to broaden discussions among practicing special education teachers, administration, and policymakers. Special education teachers frequently express frustration with the perceived lack of relevance in policies and procedures implemented by individuals who may be detached from the realities of the classroom. It is not uncommon for teachers to feel decisions are made by individuals who have been removed from the front lines of teaching for years or, in some cases, have never experienced teaching firsthand. This disconnect can lead to frustration among teachers, as they may perceive their voices as being disregarded or undervalued in the decision-making process.

Conclusion

Special education teacher retention is an essential component of districts' overall goal to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Districts have struggled for decades to retain special education teachers, and the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic has only compounded the problem. More students are identified as needing special education services, while fewer teachers fill the void. Now, more than ever, research that produces systematic gains in retention is needed.

Throughout my study, I was able to understand the reasons special education teachers ultimately decided to leave a profession for which they spent countless hours learning and

preparing. In addition to my personal experiences in the profession, the research participants' insight expanded on and developed areas of need to increase retention. Each of my participants thanked me for my work on the subject matter and expressed their desire to help in any additional ways possible. While it is unfortunate the participants in the study have left the profession, their willingness to contribute to research and seek solutions is truly inspirational. It reflects their enduring commitment to serving others and their dedication to making a positive impact in the field of education.

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Appendix A: Sample Contact Communication Email to Locate Participants

Greetings,

My name is Jill Bachmann. I am currently working on my dissertation at Concordia University and am in the process of conducting my own research. My research is being conducted on Special Education Teacher Retention. You are receiving this letter due to your current position in the field of education.

I am looking for participants for my research study that have left the field of special education. Listed below are the parameters for participants:

-Were teachers in the field of special education in the state of Minnesota
-Have worked in urban or suburban school districts
-Left the profession completely or moved out of the special education field, however, are still employed in the field of education.
-Left their special education role within one-six years of entering the field

If you know of individuals that fit this criterion, please kindly pass the following information on to them to contact me:

-Jill Bachmann
-bachmaj1@csp.edu

Appendix B: Sample Pre-Qualifying Questionnaire

Greetings,

My name is Jill Bachmann. I am a doctoral student at Concordia University in St. Paul, MN. I am currently completing my dissertation on Special Education Teacher Retention. Thank you for contacting me regarding my inquiry about research participants. I am looking for individuals that fit a certain criterion that has been determined as my research focus for my dissertation.

Below are a short set of screening questions that will assist me in determining the final 8-12 research participants. Please click on the following link to complete the screening survey.

https://forms.gle/XMPZDL8haNZA4qgs9

Thank you for your time and participation. If you meet the screening criteria, I will follow-up with an email detailing the research study format and applicable information regarding participation in the study.

Sincerely,

Jill Bachmann

Appendix C: Participation Invitation Letter

Dear Invitee,

Thank you for completing the previous screening questionnaire regarding my research study on Special Education Teacher Retention that I am completing as part of my doctoral studies at Concordia University. The purpose of the study is to understand why special education teachers leave the field of special education and/or education completely within the first six years of entering the field.

Based on the previous screening questionnaire it has been determined that you fit the criteria for my research study. Participants can remain anonymous, via the use of a pseudonym, for all research documents and the dissertation. The interview process will be approximately one-hour in length and will include a semi-structured interview process. Participants will be provided with the study results and findings prior to the completion of and publishing of the dissertation and can clarify any conclusions or findings of the study. Lastly, participants will receive a $25 Visa Gift Card as compensation for their time.

Participation in the research study is completely voluntary, you may withdraw from study at any time and there are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. Possible benefits of participation could include providing knowledge and understanding of areas of support for special education teachers and retention of them in the field.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your continued interest in this study.

Sincerely,
Jill Bachmann, Doctoral Student, Concordia University

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL

Informed Consent for a Research Study

Study Title: Special Education Teacher Retention: Are Special Education Teachers receiving the post-secondary assistance and early year career supports to keep them in the profession.

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled Special Education Teacher Retention: Are Special Education Teachers receiving post-secondary assistance and early year career support to keep them in the profession. The study is being done by educational researcher Jill Bachmann of Concordia University, Saint Paul. Below you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in this study. Please read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this study.

Why are the researchers doing this study?

Historically, special education teachers have left the profession at a higher rate than their general education colleagues. There are numerous factors that have led to concerns and questions on whether special education reform is needed and if so, how do we go about completing that process (Department of Education, 2023). Included in those conversations are whether the concerns and questions causing special education teachers to leave the field of special education at a higher rate and if so, where supports can be put in place to increase the rate of retention for special education teachers.

This research study will examine special education teacher retention by looking at the effectiveness of preservice programs, student teaching programs, and lastly administrative and mentoring support once a special education teacher has been placed in a position. It will focus on these three specific areas versus other studies that have included personal factors, district socioeconomic factors and individual characteristics.

This study then seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the disconnect, if any, between the perceived job of Minnesota Special Education Teachers vs. the reality of their day-to-day responsibilities?
2. What training, experiences, or support do Minnesota Special Education Teachers, that have left the profession, perceive as increasing the likelihood of them continuing in the profession?
3. What recommendations do Minnesota Special Education Teachers, that have left the profession have, to support beginning teachers in an attempt to increase special education teacher retention?

Why have I been asked to be in this study?

The participants selected for this study are former special education teachers that have either left the education completely or are still in education but have left the special education field and moved into another role in education, worked in an urban or suburban school district in the State of Minnesota and left special education within the first six years of entering the field. The participant field will include up to twelve participants.

If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in a 45–60-minute semi-structured interview. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom, and recorded.

What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify us and you will be removed immediately. You may withdraw from this study at any point, however once data is aggregated into larger themes, withdrawal of your interview data will no longer be possible as it will have informed the analysis. Your decision of whether to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with Concordia University, St. Paul, or with any of the researchers involved in the research.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

The risks associated with participation in this study are minimal.

What are the benefits that may happen if I am in this study?

This study offers no direct benefits to study participants. Indirect benefits include providing knowledge and understanding of areas of support for special education teachers and retention of them in the field.

Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?

You will receive a $25 gift card as a thank you for participating in this study.

What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?

I will make every effort to de-identify all data. When I write up the study, I will use pseudonyms for participants that request one, their schools, and the district. Furthermore, I will not specify the city in which the research took place. I will only use requested pseudonyms in interview transcriptions and memos I write. I will delete audio or video recordings once the interviews are transcribed. I will keep all digital data in password-protected folders on password-protected computers. I will keep one document that links the real names to the requested pseudonyms—this document will be password protected and deleted when the study is complete.

Could my information be used for future research?

No, your data will not be used or distributed for future research purposes, even if de-identified, without gaining further consent from you.

Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?

If, during the course of this research study, the research team learns about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, they will inform you of these findings.

How can I get more information?

If you have any questions, you are welcome to ask them before you sign this form. Please also feel free to contact us at bachmanj1@csp.edu. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, you are welcome to contact the Concordia University Institutional Review Board at irb@csp.edu.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Questions:

1. Tell me about your current job position:
   a. Is your current job position still in education?
      i. Yes, what position do you currently hold in education?
      ii. No, what job position do you currently hold outside of education?

2. Tell me about your time in special education:
   a. When did you start in special education?
      i. What post-secondary option did you attend to attain licensure in education?
      ii. Where did you complete your student teaching?
      iii. Where was your first job as a special education teacher?
         1. District
         2. Grade Level
         3. Federal Setting
   b. How long did you stay in special education?

3. Tell me about feeling prepared to teach in special education:
   a. Describe the training you received in your post-secondary preparation programs, and how it did or did not prepare you to enter the classroom.
   b. Describe the training you received in your student teaching programs, and how it did or did not prepare you to enter the classroom.

4. Tell me about district supports and processes:
   a. Describe the onboarding process when you started your first job.
   b. Describe the mentoring and administrative support in your district.
   c. Are there supports, training, processes, etc. that would have increased the likelihood of you continuing in the profession?

5. Recommendations:
   a. What are post-secondary support recommendations for increasing teacher retention?
   b. What are student teaching support recommendations for increasing teacher retention?
   c. What are district-level onboarding, mentoring and administrative support recommendations for increasing teacher retention?

6. Is there any additional information you would like to share that may be of value in the retention of special education teachers?