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### Special Education Teacher Persistence

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SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PERSISTENCE

by

Sally A. Thorp

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn L. Grady

Lincoln, Nebraska

March 2013

## SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PERSISTENCE

Sally A. Thorp, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisor: Marilyn L. Grady

The focus of this study was special education teachers, who remained in the teaching field 5 or more years. Through the use of qualitative mixed-methods study, variables contributing to their longevity were explored. Research indicates that 50% of special education teachers leave the field within five years of employment (Alliance for Education, 2004). For the study, 22 teachers from different school districts, as well as different geographical parts of the U.S., were interviewed. One man and 21 women, all with more than five years of experience were interviewed. Data obtained from these interviews was organized into six themes. Themes identified were: Children and How They Contribute to Longevity, Administrative Support, Opportunity to Collaborate and Network, They Felt it Was A Special Calling, What They Do is Appreciated, and The Freedom to Teach What Students Need. Each theme is explored in depth to determine its contribution to the understanding of longevity for special education teachers. Implications for the retention of special education teachers are presented.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

**Jeremiah 29:11** New International Version (NIV)

I am thankful for a God who plans our path, provides for us as we make our travels, and leads us to where we are meant to be. Of course we have to listen, accept guidance along the way and constantly believe in the “miracles” he places in our paths. That’s the hard part.

This journey could not have been made without the assistance of others in my life. So many have influenced me and been a part of this walk. We are a product of the lives we live and those who touch us for however short or long. I’m grateful for all, past and present.

For my children, and grandchildren...you are never too old to pursue the dreams in your heart. Life may lead you along a varied path, but persist. The end is worth the wait. Dream big, work hard and remember:

“Live your life as if everyday is a holiday and every meal a feast.” Ken Bledsoe

The friends in my life have been there to challenge, motivate, and encourage me in all aspects of my life, thank you for your support. I am in part who I am today because of your belief in me, support and encouragement.

My mentor advisor who “Doesn’t do long term relationships.” I have news for you...you do. My committee has read and provided insight along the way. Thank you for helping make this dream come true.

I am thankful for my dear sweet Mother and her unfailing love and devotion to me. To my Dad for being Dad....”Merle de’ Pearl, there isn’t another lawyer in the family, but a PhD isn’t shabby.

Most of all....thank you to my dear husband, John. He has been a steadfast support and it would have never been possible without him. I love you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Although school districts are laying off teachers in increasing numbers, qualified teachers for special education positions cannot be found, or when they are found, they are not retained. Understanding why teachers leave is one step towards retaining teachers. Crucial for the retention of teachers are the reasons why they stay. Understanding why teachers stay may help to improve the retention of special education teachers. Federal forgiveness loans are available for qualifying individuals employed in Title IV schools. Despite this program and incentives from districts and state governments, the shortage prevails.

The implementation of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142, 1975) mandated states and districts were required to provide specialized instruction for youth identified as having a disability. Educational reform requires classrooms be staffed with highly qualified teachers (Gehke & McCoy, 2007). In 2010, there was a shortage of special education teachers. During a time when districts were reducing staff due to budget cuts, there was a shortage of special educators to fill existing positions. The *Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listings* (March 2010) indicated that every state in the United States reported a shortage of qualified special education personnel. Again, *Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listings* identified this trend continues in 2012. (April 2012). Teachers for the follow classrooms are in short supply:

- Early Childhood Special Education
- Emotional Disturbances

- Hearing Impairment
- Learning Disabilities
- Mental Retardation
- Severe Disabilities
- Speech and Language
- Visual Impairment

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2004, p.1) reported:

- 14 % of new teachers leave by the end of their first year
- 33 % leave within three years
- almost 50% leave within 5 years

On August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012, I entered the classroom for the 20<sup>th</sup> consecutive year. Prior to this, I entered the field as a paraprofessional educator. During my tenure as a teacher, I have seen many of my colleagues enter the field of teaching and make their presence known with their enthusiasm and desire to share knowledge with young people. In my chosen field of special education, this drive for impacting a child's life is particularly motivating. Why then, do so many leave?

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study is to identify the reasons special education teachers remain in the field. Approximately 50% of new teachers leave the field within the first 5 years of employment. Identifying the reasons for special educators' longevity can provide administrators and educational leadership personnel with insight for retaining these educators in their districts and buildings.



As I reflect on my years, the colleagues who have both graced and stretched me as an educator come to mind. When I returned to the classroom in August 2012, many of those colleagues I had worked beside had retired. I know why they left. A more interesting question is, “Why did they stay so many years?” I have become an “Old War Horse” when considering my years of teaching experience. Why do I stay? Why do young teachers stay?

In Missouri, as in other states, there is a shortage of special education teachers. *In A Report to the General Assembly* (December 2010), Missouri data indicated a decade of teacher shortages. Missouri has one of the top retirement plans in the U.S. Educators from neighboring states may buy into the Missouri system based on previous years of service. Several retirement options are available, with the most popular being working “25 years and out.” Statistics show 50% of those teaching in 2011 will never make it to 25 years. For those who wish to retire with full benefits, 31 years is the “magic number.” Even fewer teachers will reach this milestone. Having entered the profession later than many of my peers, my retirement golden years are a few years away. I know why my close friends stayed. We have had many conversations on this subject. Do our reasons for persisting in a field where almost 50% leave align with the reasons of others? Are we the “oddballs who have managed to somehow survive?” What factors contribute to our persistence? As I considered topics for research, those “why” questions persisted and my focus remains on why do they stay?

In this section, I describe the intricacies of the special education profession. Fraught with confusing vocabulary, diagnoses, and converging theories, the field

becomes a minefield for even the established teacher to navigate. Young teachers become frustrated by the complexity, ambiguity and demanding commitment they encounter in meeting the differentiated instructional needs of students.

One of these intricacies affecting the decision to remain in the profession is the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB). This document, enacted by President Bush in January of 2002, was the reauthorization of the existing Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NCLB resulted in the broadest changes of federal law regarding public schools in almost 40 years. The act was designed with the intention of increasing the proficiency of educators, students, and districts. Accountability measures were identified with specific performance indicators. Specific dates were identified for the implementation of NCLB, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) assessment. Within NCLB is the requirement for the performance of special education students to increase on state testing assessments (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

States have been required to align academic content, achievement standards and assessment measures to NCLB requirements. The academic areas include the core subjects of reading/language arts, mathematics, and science. NCLB makes reference to academic standards in both content and achievement. When designing content standards, NCLB should be both clear and give stakeholders clear indications for guidance in learning and teaching. When designing performance standards, specific descriptions reflecting student knowledge and what students must be capable of demonstrating must be included. Specific criteria include:

Achievement levels~Labels for the levels that convey the degree of student achievement in a content area. Each level encompasses a range of achievement.

Achievement descriptors~Descriptions of competencies-what students know and can do-associated with each achievement level.

Exemplars~Examples of student work that illustrate the range of achievement within each achievement level.

Cut Scores~Scores on assessment that separate one level of achievement from another.

Student accountability levels in the areas of reading and math were established. Identified target dates for achieving preset standards of achievement were identified with 2014 the target year for achieving goals. Law was established which requires all students be taught by “highly qualified” educators. Improvement of communication between the student’s parents and the school was identified as a necessary area for improvement.

One of the measurements used to establish a district’s progress towards the 2014 deadline was the design of “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). As students progress towards the 2014 goal, each district must document yearly progress. Districts failing to meet yearly progress goals must submit plans for improving student achievement. Within the act are specific requirements addressing failing schools or districts if they fail to meet the identified progress guidelines. All schools, including Charter Schools, are held accountable for NCLB guidelines.

NCLB identifies the following subgroups accountable when examining student progress:

\*Asian and Pacific Islander

\*Black

\*Hispanic

\*American Indian

\*White

\*Free/Reduced lunch

\*IEP (Special Education)

\*LEP (Limited English Proficiency)

\*Other/Non-response

Each subgroup is required to meet AYP. Special education students are held to the same standards as other students. To meet AYP, 95% of the students in a group must be tested. In Missouri, if a subgroup does not test at least 95% of their eligible students, they will earn the “Level Not Determined” (LND) score. If the LND number of the tested student group exceeds 5%, the group is identified as not meeting AYP. A specific identified number of items must be completed for a test to be counted as a valid student attempt. In September 2011, the Obama Administration offered flexibility for meeting these guidelines. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) redefined how states could determine their students’ progress.

When examining the 2012 Missouri assessment program, NCLB does not override. The Missouri School Improvement Program, adopted in 1990, established

policies for student achievement and assessment. These policies are similar to the ones established in NCLB. Districts may achieve recognition for outstanding achievement in the state of Missouri, and not meet AYP.

On April 7, 2005, a new policy was designed for enforcing the NCLB assessment for special education students and AYP. This new policy allows states more freedom when assessing their special education population as long as states can document and prove their commitment for the academic improvement of students.

Within this policy is the availability for states to use an alternate assessment for 2 % of their more severely disabled population. This reauthorization took place in an effort to address the assessment needs of the most significantly disabled students. All students have participated in the state assessments, and individual cognitive abilities were not considered when reviewing and assessing for NCLB, AYP. This policy allows states to design alternative assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. This was determined necessary due to current assessments that were not adequately identifying what students were learning. When students are significantly below grade level, progress cannot be adequately measured. Within this reauthorization, states may design Modified Academic Achievement Standards (MAAS).

These new state-defined standards include an expectation of performance that is challenging for students who are eligible to participate in the assessment. These assessments are counted in the AYP accountability for NCLB.

The IEP team identifies participating students. Students who participate in these alternate assessments may be counted as proficient for AYP when they meet the performance standards set for these alternative assessments.

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011, *Education Week* reported,

When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is finally renewed, advocates and policymakers say, it is likely to leave out provisions that allow schools and districts to use some scores from students with disabilities using alternate exams for federal accountability purposes. And it appears that few people will be sorry to see the option go.

States, districts, educators, parents, and students have felt the frustration of the mandates of NCLB. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012, President Obama made the following statement;

“So when it comes to fixing what’s wrong with No Child Left Behind, we’ve offered every state the same deal. We’ve said, if you’re willing to set higher, more honest standards than the ones that were set by No Child Left Behind, then we’re going to give you the flexibility to meet those standards. We want high standards, and we’ll give you flexibility in return. We combine greater freedom with greater accountability. Because what might work in Minnesota may not work in Kentucky -- but every student should have the same opportunity to reach their potential.” President Obama.

President Obama and education representatives crafted a plan in which states may apply for a waiver from the criteria for NCLB and AYP assessment. Each state must apply and demonstrate how their plan meets the rigor for the accountability determined necessary for a waiver to be granted. To date, 33 states have been accepted into the waiver program. No data regarding student performance standards has been released. Testing in MO will begin in the 2014-2015 school year.

### **DEFINITIONS**

- Special education~encompasses instruction that is specially designed to meet the unique needs of a child who has been identified as a “person with a disability.” This includes equal access, opportunity, participation in meetings, and transition as outlined/identified in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 1997)
- Administrative support~A principal assisting with problem solving, providing support to special educators with the inclusion and integration of specifically-identified special education students. This encompasses discipline, demonstrates listening skills, and support for instructional practices including the acquisition of necessary teaching materials. (White, 2011).
- Individualized Education Program (IEP) means a written statement and document for a child with a disability

(Council for Exceptional Children, CEC Part B p.7).

- Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE)-This requirement of IDEA mandates all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate education that meets their individual needs. (CEC, Part B, p.1)
- Teacher burnout~When teachers are exposed to prolonged high stress, common results: withdrawing and caring less, or working harder, often mechanically, to the point of exhaustion (Farber & Ascher, 1991, Brock & Grady, 2000).



## CHAPTER 2

### Literature

Teacher turnover for students and schools can result in detrimental consequences. The financial cost and time to replace teachers creates a burden on districts. Students lose consistency in curriculum presentation and the sense of cohesiveness is lost when teaching staff changes. Research demonstrates staffs overrepresented with inexperienced teachers, whom research show, are less effective than experienced colleagues is less effective for student progress (Harrington and Grissom, 2010). NCLB requires districts to retain “highly qualified” teachers (Osterholm, Horn, Johnson, 2006). With teachers exiting within the first five years makes this difficult to establish. Research indicates young, inexperienced special education teachers leave the field (or indicate their desire to leave) more often than the older, more experienced special educator (Billingsley, 2004). NCLB requires students’ performance fall within the “proficient” levels when assessed (Thornton, Peltier, and Medina, p. 234). Finding, recruiting, and retaining these “highly qualified” teachers continues to challenge districts from all states.

Ingersoll noted teacher turnover is greatly affected by academic field. Data indicates educators in the special education field, along with math and science, are the most difficult to recruit and retain. It is reported that a higher percentage of special education teachers leave the field than general education teachers, even including those in the science and math fields (Billingsley, p. XX, 2005).

The monetary impact of turnover cannot be overlooked. The Alliance for Excellent Education Report stated the revolving door of turnover in United States

public education costs nearly \$4.9 billion each year (Harrington and Grissom, 2010). The impact of losing the 5<sup>th</sup> year teacher is found in student achievement as well as teaching capital (Harrington and Grissom, 2010). Overall, school performance can be affected by the continued turnover in teaching staff. The factors of high turnover and low academic performance can in turn negatively impact the social parameters of continuity and stability (Harrington and Grissom, 2010). “One of the most important challenges in the field of special education is developing a qualified workforce and creating work environments that sustain special educators’ involvement and commitment” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 39). Research indicates the work environment is one of the most influential variables when reflecting on school climate. The results from three large-scale studies propose schools, which model positive school climate, are more likely to retain teachers when compared to those in which school climate is not considered a positive factor (Billingsley, 2004).

Teachers report administrator support within the positive school climate as a leading school factor. In a study of more than 600 general and special education teachers, principal support was identified as necessary for educators to establish a sense of well being (Washburn-Moses, 2005). Recent analysis identifies a clearer understanding for defining administrative support. Billingsley (2005) reports that principals can do a “great deal” to aide in the retention of their special education teachers. Variables examined included job satisfaction, stress and commitment (Billingsley, 2004). Identifying the administrator’s supportive role is more difficult. Billingsley found that “emotional and instrumental support (e.g., helping teachers with work tasks, such as providing needed materials, space, and resources; ensuring

adequate time for teaching and nonteaching duties) correlate positively with both job satisfaction and school commitment” (Billingsley, 2001, p. 46). Osterholm, Horn, and Johnson, 2006, identify three categories administrators need to focus on. These are identified as:

- administrators need to focus on the job, the actual duties, and if they are similar to other districts of comparable size
- support groups for teachers are important
- benefits and rewards are important

Within their study, research found the most meaningful rewards were those that were intrinsic in nature (Osterholm, Horn, and Johnson, p. 8).

The Council for Exceptional Children (2011) reported that working with students, observing their progress and experiencing a sense of personal accomplishment were the primary reasons for remaining in the field. Second to these reasons were positive school climate, support from administration and colleagues, with salary and benefits at the bottom of the list.

Previous research identified five factors that lead to the retention of special education teachers. These factors are: school climate, leader support, collaboration, resources, and compensation (Billingsley, 2007). Within these five areas, I will identify the descriptors that define each area. How do teachers define school climate, leader support, and collaboration? What specific resources are made available that encourage teachers to stay? What areas of compensation are most important?

Research supports special education teachers' decisions to remain in the field can be contributed to school climate, the administrative support in their building, and the support of their colleagues (Gilbar, 2012). Teachers who receive the required support of administrators are more likely to remain in the field (Prather-Jones, 2011). Specific factors identifying what administrative support entails are not clearly documented. Gehke and McCoy found teachers who experienced strong building and a variety of educational resources were more inclined to stay in the special education teaching field. Identifying how these factors are defined is not clearly defined. Gehrke and McCoy found participants identified other special education teachers as contributing to their decision to remain in the special education field. While administrative and colleague support has been identified as specific factors for their decisions to remain, specific, identifiable factors leading to a definition of what administrative and colleague support is not documented. Prather-Jones (2011) identifies there is a relationship that exists, however does not define what the relationship looks like or means. Emerging from Prater-Jones (2011) research three themes related to administrative support were identified. These three themes were:

1. Teachers referred to principals for their enforcement of rules and resulting consequences where students were concerned. They also wanted to be included in this decision making process.
2. Those who felt the most supported were made to feel appreciated by their principals.

3. The principals played an important part with teachers developing collaborative relationships with their colleagues. (Gillbar, 2012).

Based upon previous research, the need to special education teachers exists today and will continue to exist in the future unless changes are made towards their retention. Factors relating to their retention can be identified, however, defining how those factors are implemented needs to be explored.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Interview Methodology**

For this study, I used a qualitative mixed method of inquiry. Qualitative research, according to Creswell, is an approach of inquiry used to study meaningful problems of individuals or groups. The researcher collects data in the individual or group's natural setting. Qualitative researchers analyze their data inductively. Themes or patterns emerge from data collected. Once analyzed, "the final report is a presentation of the participants' views, the researcher's reflexivity and provides a complete description of the problem as well as an interpretation of the findings" (Creswell, 2007, p.51).

Qualitative research can be conducted for a variety of purposes. One of these purposes is to answer questions such as, "what is happening" and "why or how is it happening" (Bratlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, Richardson, 2005, p.196).

The characteristics of qualitative research include the following:

- Natural setting (field focused), a source of data for close interaction
- Researcher as key instrument of data collection
- Multiple data sources in words or images
- Analysis of data inductively, recursively, interactively
- Focus on participants' perspectives, their meanings, their subjective views

- Framing of human behavior and belief within a social-political/historical context or through a cultural lens
- Emergent rather than tightly prefigured design
- Fundamentally interpretive inquiry-researcher reflects on her or his role, the role of the reader, and the role of the participants shaping the study
- Holistic view of social phenomena (Creswell, 2007, p.38).

I chose this approach because I am interested in why special education teachers persist in a field where many leave. Through interpretive inquiring, I had the opportunity to learn first hand their reasons for staying. Interviewing participants who are currently in the field will give me the opportunity to observe and record their responses to open-ended questions. Themes were identified based on respondent shared information. "Qualitative research is not done for the purpose of generalization but rather to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals" (Bratlinger, et al p.203). Through the interviews, an emergent design will take shape and provide a holistic account giving a complex picture for their decisions to stay. In *Qualitative Studies in Special Education*, the authors state; "qualitative research has contributed to the fields of special education and disabilities and will continue to have an impact" (Bratlinger, et al, p.204).

## Interviews

For this mixed methods qualitative study, interviews were conducted. Creswell stated: “Phenomenological research describes the meaning for several individuals or their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon”(2007, p. 57). It is important for this type of research to share several individuals’ common or shared experiences (Creswell, p. 60). This study was comprised of 22 oral interviews concerning educator persistence. Data was collected from individuals who have lived the experience of persisting 5 or more years and are still working as special education teachers. One of the procedures for conducting a mixed-methods study is for data to be collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Participants completed a short demographic survey (Appendix A) reflecting years of service, geographical location, and educational background. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed based on 8 open-ended questions (Appendix B). Criteria for selection were based on longevity in the special education field. All participants had a minimum of five years experience working in the special education field. Interviews were conducted in different geographical areas.



### **Researcher Reflexivity**

“It is important for the researcher to begin with a description of his or her own experiences of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p.159). This year marks my 21<sup>st</sup> as a professional in the field of education. Seventeen of those have been in the special education field. I see first-hand the shortage of special education teachers and have witnessed the exit of younger educators within the five-year time frame.

As a Special Education Department Chair, I have mentored new teachers. Mentoring has given me a first-hand view of the difficulties new teachers encounter within the special education field. Identifying specific factors that influence new teachers to remain in the field is of significance to me. Understanding the reasons special education teachers persist beyond the five-year mark will provide insight into my mentoring support of current teachers who have less than five years of experience.

### **Data Collection**

When collecting data, one important step is for the researcher to find participants and to receive access for study (Creswell, 2007). Locating multiple participants who have experienced the phenomenon is important (Creswell, 2007).

The snowball technique was used to identify potential interview participants. Qualitative research uses purposeful sampling (Creswell p. 125). When used, the researcher selects participants due to their purposeful understanding of the research question (Creswell 2007). Each candidate received a letter regarding participation in the study. (See Appendix C) After accepting the invitation, a time was established for them to meet with the researcher. A follow up email was sent. (See Appendix D) I traveled to each teacher's school and the interviews were conducted. Oral interviews were taped and later transcribed by the researcher. Participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

## Data Management

Oral interviews were stored both in electronic and paper formats.

Transcripts were analyzed based on Creswell's methodology for a mixed-methods study. The methodological steps were:

- created and organized files for data
- read through text, made margin notes, formed initial codes
- described personal experiences through epoch
- described the essence of the phenomenon
- developed significant statements
- grouped statements into meaning units
- developed a textural description, "What happened"
- developed a structural description, "How" the phenomenon was experienced
- developed the essence
- presented narration of the "essence" of the experience; in tables, figures, or discussion (Creswell, 2007).

## Data Storage

Transcribed interviews and electronic files are locked in my file cabinet. Important steps for the storage and protection of data obtained during the study included:

- Developed back-up copies of computer files.
- Participants may withdraw from the study at any time
- Participation was voluntary
- Individuals signed an informal consent
- Used high quality tapes for audio-recording information during interviews.
- Develop a master list of types of information gathered.
- Protected the anonymity of participants by masking their names in the data.
- Developed a data collection matrix as a visual means of locating and identifying information for a study (Creswall, 2007).
- An electronic audio recorder was used.
- Data are stored on SD cards.
- The researcher transcribed the interviews.

### **Ethical Issues**

Qualitative research may embody ethical issues when the relationship between the researcher and participants is examined. The anonymity of the participants in this study has been preserved. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Institutional Review Board approved this study (See Appendix E).

### **Implications**

The results of this study provide insights into the retention of special educators. Retention of all teachers is a nationwide issue, not only those in the special education field.

The recommendations offered may be useful to general and special education administrators, administrator preparation programs, national administrators, special education, and teacher associations, as well as alternative certification programs.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Participants

Twenty-two participants completed the survey and provided information based on their teaching experiences and education. Four of the participants took part in the first pilot survey. Based upon suggestions from the participants, the survey was redesigned to allow for additional information related to participant certification status. Of the 22 participants, 22 returned the surveys. Information from the surveys is presented in the following tables. Through professional contacts, and using the snowball technique, the participants were asked to take part in the study (See appendix C and D).

The following states are represented in the study:

Participants Home State	Number of Participants (22)
Iowa	1
Missouri	6
Maryland	4
Michigan	1
Montana	1
Nebraska	3
New Mexico	1
West Virginia	5

Table 4.1

Eight states and 11 school districts are represented in the findings of the study. Data was gathered during the Spring of 2012. I traveled to each participant's school and conducted the interviews. The interviews averaged 28 minutes in length. All participants were eager to share their story regarding their journey in the special education field.

A criterion for participation in the study was that participants had to have a minimum of five years teaching experience in special education. Participants were divided into three experience categories. Five teachers reported between 5-9 years of teaching experience in the area of special education. Three teachers had 10-14 years of experience. Fourteen teachers had 15+ years of teaching experience in the field of special education. All teachers were working in the field full-time, part-time, or on a contractual basis at the time of the interviews. The largest representation of special teachers was in the 15+ years of experience with 63.6 % of the study participants in this range. The special education teachers who had been in the field 5-9 years represented 22.7% of the study participants. The special education teachers in the 10-14 year range comprise 13.6% of the study participants. The participant's ages ranged from mid 20's to 60 years old. Twenty-one females and one male participated in the study.

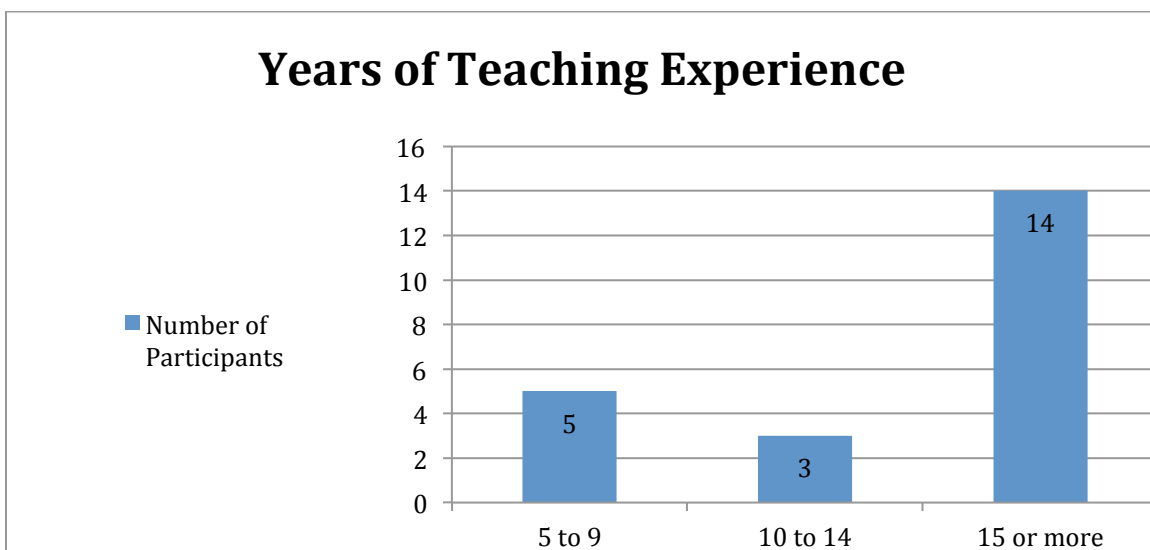


Table 4.2



Participants were asked to identify if their primary certification was earned through traditional 4-year undergraduate program in teacher education that led to certification as a special education teacher. Twenty participants attended a traditional undergraduate program that led to certification as a special education teacher. One participant participated in a traditional education program that led to certification as an elementary teacher. The final participant obtained a degree in social work and returned to school and earned the certification to work as a special education teacher. The two non-traditional certification teachers chose to return to school and earn the certification requirements necessary to teach in the special education classroom. All participants are certified to teach in the special education classroom today.

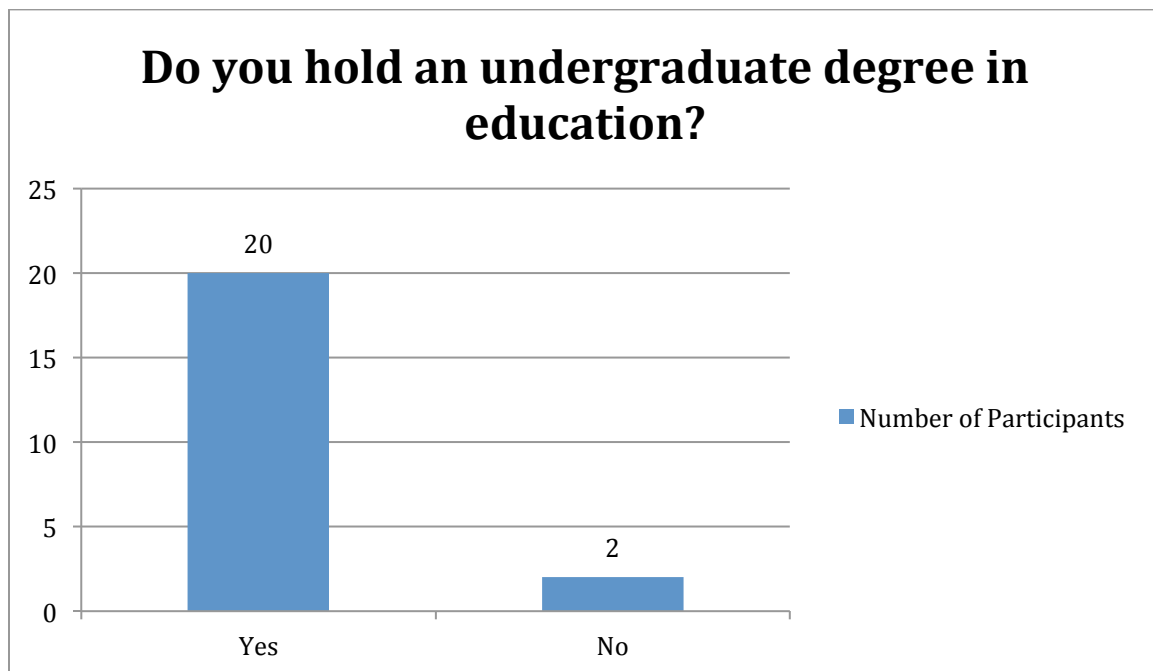


Table 4.3

Of the participants 18 had obtained the Master's Degrees with one having completed a Specialist Certificate. (See Table 4.4)

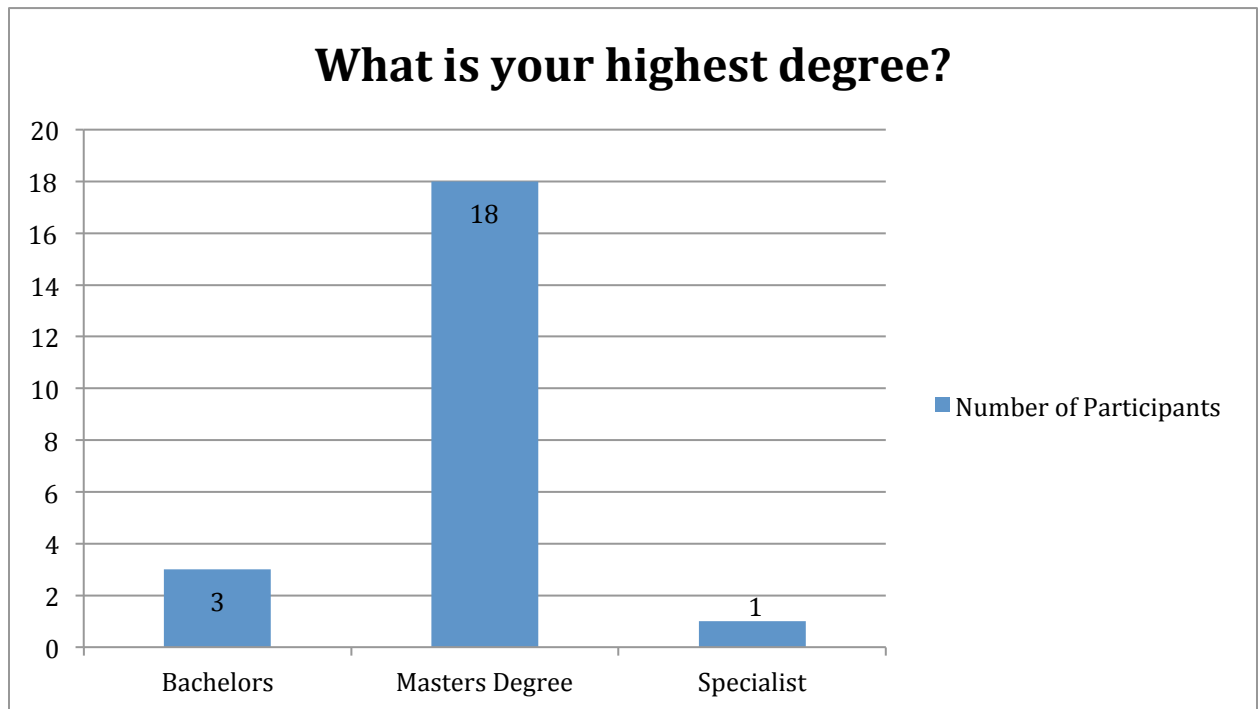


Table 4.4

All 22 participants were certified in the area of special education. Fourteen of the participants were certified in the area of regular education as well.

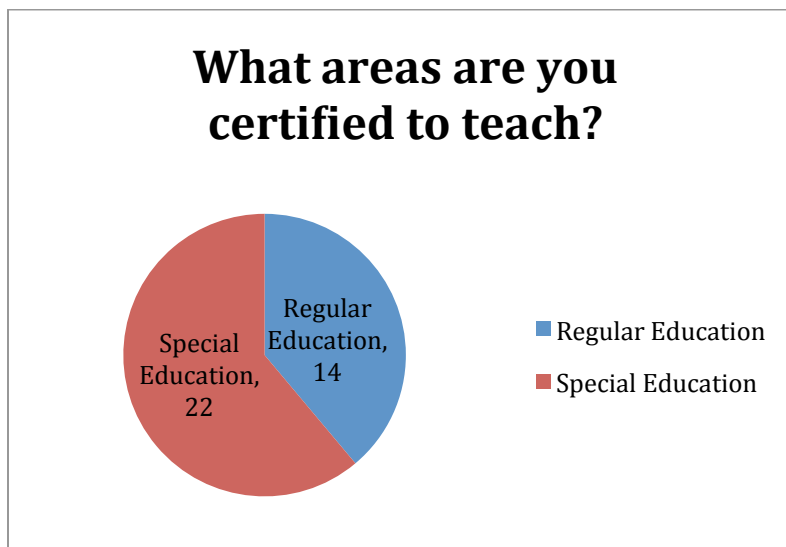


Table 4.5

The special education teachers obtained content area specializations as shown in Table 6. Four of the participants held multiple areas of content area certification. Eighteen of the participants did not hold specialized content area certification. Participants who had been in the field longer had returned to school and added additional areas of certification. With the implementation of NCLB and the highly qualified requirement, several had returned for additional training.

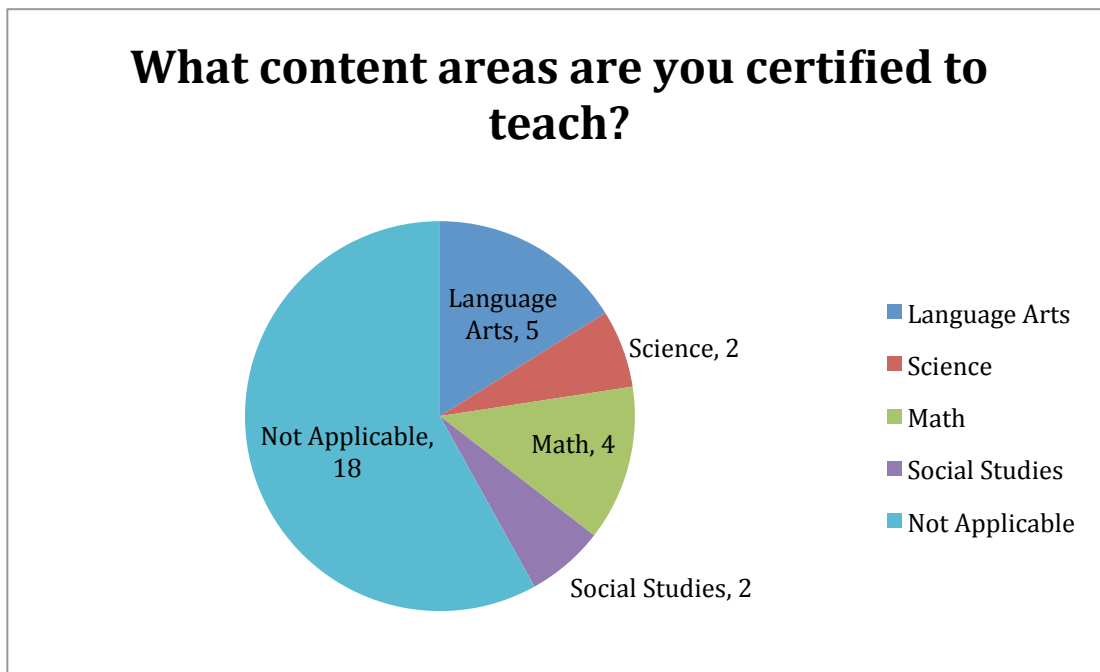


Table 4.6

All 22 participants were certified to teach at the elementary level. Twenty of the participants were certified to teach at the middle and high school levels. All were working in the special education field at the time of the interviews.

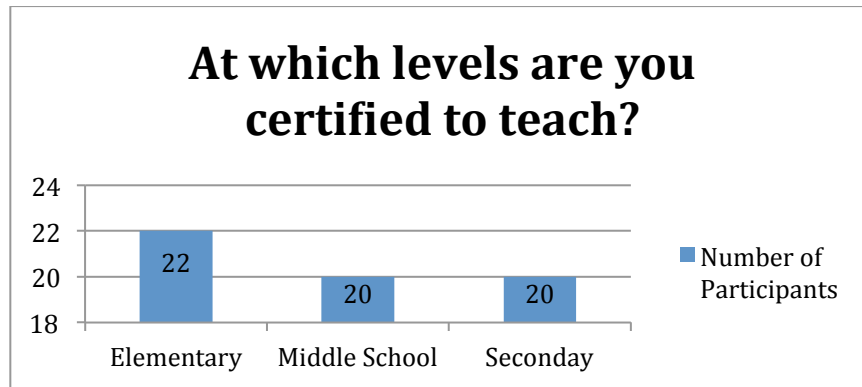


Table 4.7

Participants were asked whether they had changed teaching assignments during their career. Nine of the respondents had changed teaching assignments 4 or more times during their teaching careers.

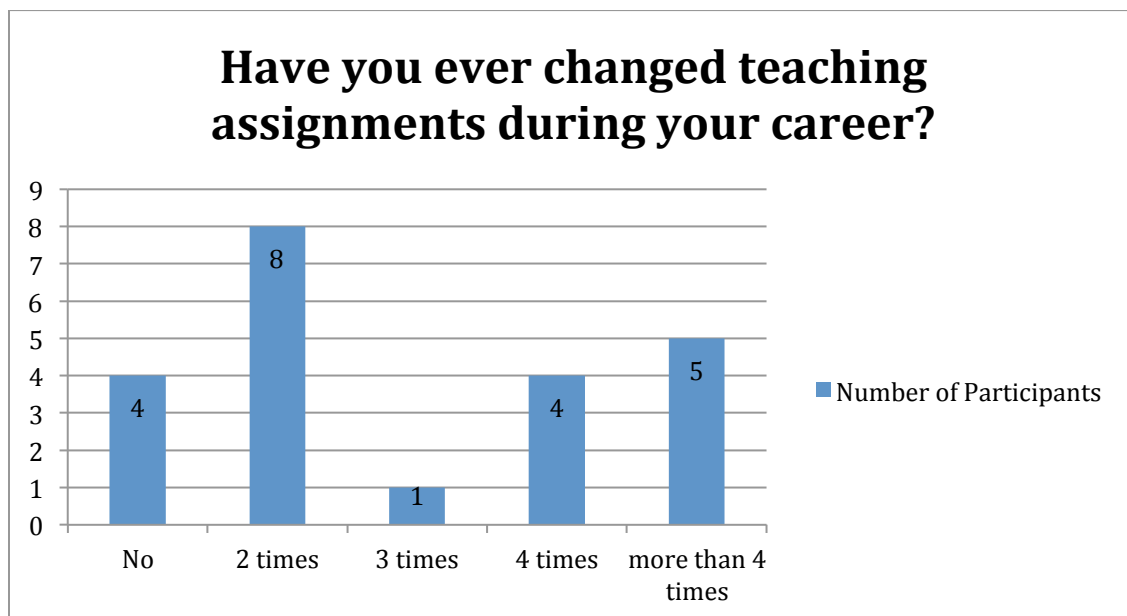


Table 4.8

## CHAPTER 5

### The Findings of the Study

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify the reasons why special education teachers remain in the field. Approximately 50% of new teachers leave the field within the first 5 years of employment (Alliance for Education, 2004). Identifying the reasons for special educators' longevity can provide administrators information and educational leadership personnel can use to implement retention strategies.

Participants were asked to respond to a series of interview questions related to their longevity as special education teachers. (See Appendix D)

The interview transcripts were coded. I hand coded the transcriptions and matched the coded texts with key words and phrases to determine themes. The following format was used when coding the texts:

Essence of the Phenomenon				
Epoch or Personal Bracketing	Significant Statements	Meaning Units	Textural Description	Structural Description

Creswell, 2007, Page 170

Six themes were identified through this process.

#### Factors Related to Teacher Persistence

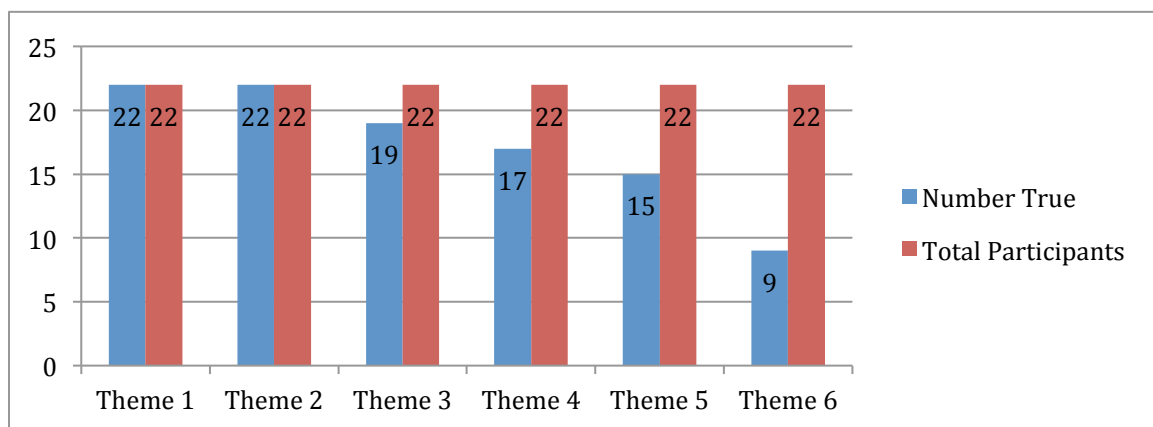
Children and How They Contribute to Longevity	One
Administrative Support	Two
Opportunity to Collaborate and Network	Three
A Special Calling	Four
Being Appreciated	Five
Freedom to Teach	Six

Table 5.1

The above table reflects the themes ranked according to the participant's responses and their importance in their decisions to remain in the special education field.

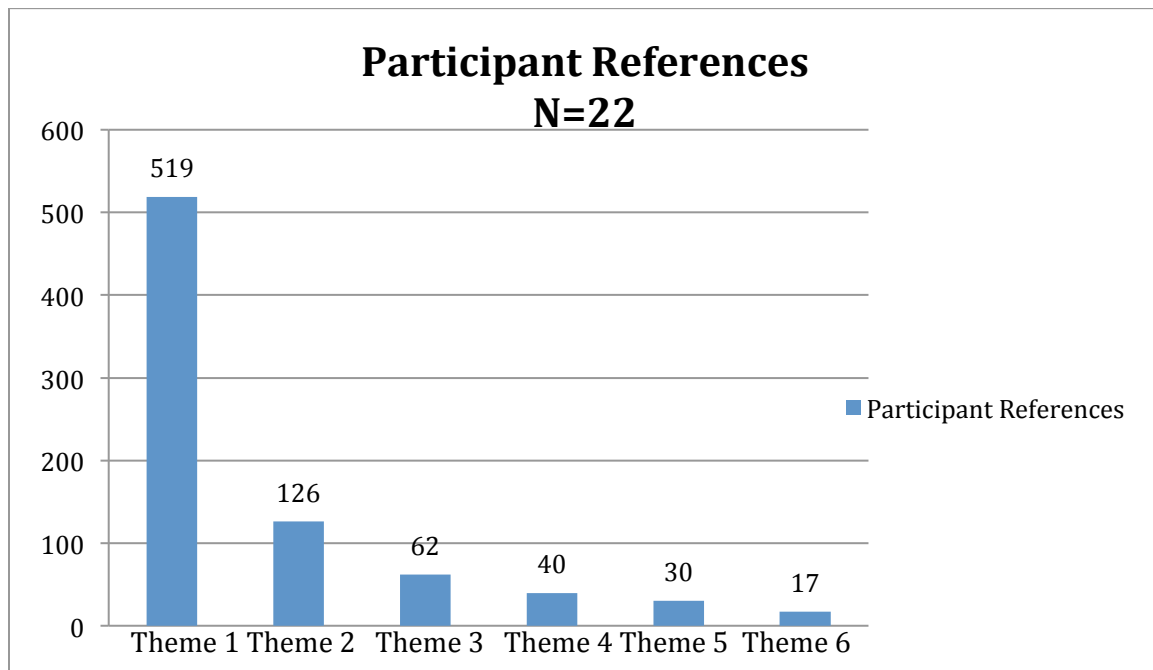
The graph below shares the number of total participants and number of participants who identified the themes as a contributing factor for their decision to remain in the field past 5 years.

#### Identified Themes



Graph 5.1

Data were analyzed according to Creswell's (2007) strategy for identifying key words and phrases. The following chart indicates the number of statements made by the participants that led to the development of the themes related to their retention.



Graph 5.2

Three of the participants shared non-related factors that contributed to their decisions to remain. Other participants did not mention these factors. One participant made the transition from working in public education to working on an Indian reservation. The move was made primarily to financial benefits. After experiencing working with the children on the reservation, she realized their need was so “great” and the teaching so satisfying she continued to teach on the reservation.

Another participant commented:

I am stubborn. I didn't want to be a statistic that dropped out after or before 5 years. I have always sort of been stubborn about that, pig headed in way. I like to try and prove people wrong. Part of a personal preference, a personal desire. I have desired to get better at my craft; and, it really wasn't until that fifth year where I felt like everything I had studies in undergraduate and all of the practice that I had gained really could show.

The third participant made reference to the financial gains of working in special education and commented:

At first it was for the children, and then for a while it was, I needed a paycheck and that's what I was trained to do, and I had a job there, but then it was, I like the teaching. I love to teach, and I like to be with kids, and I like to see those ah-ha moments when they figure things out.

Based upon the participant's responses, children and administrative support are two important contributing factors for their decision to remain in the field. All 22 of the participants identified both of these factors as key elements in their decisions. When teachers observed how students progressed, saw the "light bulb" click on, and were able to follow students' progress through the years they were motivated to remain in the special education field.

A second important factor was the support given by the administrators in their buildings. These participants identified those administrators that took an



active part in the special education process and recognized them as educators, contributed to their decisions to remain in the field.

Children played an important part in their decision to remain in the field. With 519 references to students, their importance in the decision process for remaining can be explored in depth.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Children and How They Contribute to Longevity**

Based on the interviews with the 22 participants, students are the most important factor contributing to their longevity. All 22 teachers reported their importance children make in what they do. They noted how student progress, interactions and relationships factor into their decisions.

#### *Teachers Who Have Taught Five to Nine Years*

Teachers who have remained in the field 5-9 years noted the following thoughts regarding their decision to remain in the classroom.

They said student success and the building of relationships motivated them. Taking part in helping students reach those successes and establishing relationships was important and motivating to these teachers.

One participant shares building student relationships was “really, really” important. Another participant further defined the rewards as

I love the self-advocacy part of it where they learn how to learn about themselves, and they learn what it means to work through a hard time, even if it’s not getting an A. Getting the A isn’t the big deal, but the “I couldn’t do this last year, but now I can.” “I couldn’t do this in middle school, but now I’m getting better and better” and have them be reflective on that” (Participant with 7.5 years of experience).

Another participant described seeing progress, even though it may be small at times is motivating. Being able to see the day-to-day changes children make, the growth,

and their increased confidence is rewarding. There are times when the progress is slow, however, when you are patient you will see the progress. She further stated why she stayed was because of the students: "It is definitely because of the students. I would much rather work with a group of children that need help than the ones that don't." The opportunity to work individually or with children in a small group was rewarding. The most satisfying aspects of her job was the relationships that were built with the students. The opportunity to watch everyday things, beginning their day, helping with routines and getting to know families is very satisfying. Seeing any growth was exciting. One individual provided the following story:

I have a lot of BD kids, and it's really dumb, but I took his hat away, because it was just constantly—it's in the handbook; you can't do it and behavior, behavior, behavior, and it was right before we took the state test, and, "I want my hat. I want my hat." I'm like, "Okay. Here's the deal. You raise your test score, I'll give you your hat back." His score jumped 25 points. He said, "I read it, I read it."

Special education teachers have the opportunity to view first hand the large and small gains children make. Seeing their progress over the years is motivating. A participant said: "I love special education because I really get to teach one-on-one with my students, and these students really need me. That's very fulfilling." The opportunity to see children move through the years and be an on going part of their education motivates them to remain. One participant stated:

Getting to work with the kids and watching a student go

from kindergarten to first, and not know what a letter or a sound is to being able to tell me what every sound is like, having them be able to suddenly go from one in counting to 1 to 20, it just really keeps you going.

For teachers with 5-9 years of experience, the primary reason to remain a special education teacher was the students.

#### *Teachers with 9-11 Years of Experience*

The teachers with 9-11 years of experience, the smallest group of teachers, with 3 representing reported the following. One participant said,

One good thing about teaching is we get to start over every year. As a special education teacher, we get to see a lot of the same students. I have students now inviting me to graduations that I didn't know if they would make it. They tell me, "You know, what you did really made a difference. You were one of my favorite teachers.

You did a good job. That's pretty rewarding."

Working as a secondary teacher, this participant gets to see the "end result." This individual began her career thinking about working at the elementary level but transferred to a desire to "see the end result." Watching students move through the years, preparing them for what life will be after high school was one factor that keeps this participant returning year after year. Knowing they can be successful after high school was rewarding.

This participant told the following story about a young man who was one of the students in the high school where she worked. "One gentleman- I used to teach at the community program here, is now a manager of a business." Being a part of that successful transition into adulthood was motivating.

A second high school participant reported that seeing students move from their freshman year to their senior year was exciting. Another participant liked seeing changes in students and it was nice to see the students for four years. The relationships that were built were rewarding. Being able to see growth was one of the best things and seeing them after high school, in the work force was rewarding too. Watching students grow and step out into unfamiliar experiences was a satisfying aspect of the special education teacher.

The participants from this group noted the importance of watching children progress through the years, building relationships, and taking part in everyday gains, and seeing them successful after high school as motivating factors for their decisions to remain in the field past five years.

#### *Participants with Fifteen Plus Years of Experience*

The 15+ years of experience in the special education were the largest group in the study. There were 14 participants in this group. They shared many of the same thoughts and expressions regarding their decisions to remain as special education teachers.

One participant with 21 years described watching students being successful in situations where they had never been successful before was "one of the neatest"

lessons. Participants identified that relationships that were built were missed when the students were gone.

A teacher with 30 year longevity said, "Seeing that spark when you hit the light bulb zone....have someone say: "Wow, you really reached my kid this year. made the work worthwhile." Even the simple things, like a smile when students came in each day kept them going. They said they liked the opportunity to work with smaller groups. They described the groups as more "intimate" and you had the opportunity to get to know your kids. This was rewarding, even when some were "real stinkers."

A 25-year veteran, working with elementary students, stayed because:

The personal gratification I get from helping children with learning difficulties is one of the main reasons I stay. I simply enjoy working with them. I enjoy trying to figure out how they learn best and how they best learn. I just really enjoy the feeling of satisfaction I get when they experience success.

Seeing student growth was motivating. A participant reported most satisfaction from the growth that students made. Being a part of that day-to-day progress was important.

It is especially motivating when I see the light bulb go on. There is that satisfaction of seeing a student finally get a concept that maybe we have worked on for quite a while. I see how that helps their feeling of self-worth.

This participant further explained why she had chosen to remain in the field for 25 years:

When I see how that helps their feeling of self-worth, I think all of that has contributed....those types of situations far outweigh anything negative that has happened over the years. Because it's about the students. It's all about children and it's about helping them discover themselves...how they best learn, helping them get a desire to be a life-long learner.

A 31 year veteran who has remained positive and in the field described herself as a positive person and one who has contributed as well. She enjoyed seeing a student she had worked with years before out in the work force. Having students come up to her and say, "You remember me?" Sometimes she does not remember their names. They go on to share that she was an important part of their success in high school. Many times that success has transferred into adulthood with good jobs. They said, "I'm here because you helped me." She believed it is the students' themselves who have kept her there.

I think probably more than anything, it's the students themselves. I look at the student that a lot of young—a lot of educators will snub, and how sad is that? So when they can write and say, "You have made me feel worthy," I would say probably there, they, themselves, my special education students, are the ones that encouraged me to stay in it more than anybody.

When sharing thoughts regarding longevity, a participant with 18 years experience remarked:

I've always been an advocate for special education kids. I'm not always certain the regular classroom teachers have understood how much special education students can do.

Helping students be successful in the regular classroom was motivating to this participant. Experiences have shown her that kids are very appreciative of the help they receive. She enjoyed seeing the kids progress and try things they never had before. One student tried out for an FFA speaking competition. He was very successful and sharing in that success was motivating. Seeing the kids make gains, that to many were unbelievable, was amazing. It all came down to "I simply just enjoy working with the kids so much."

One participant had 32 years of experience, with 22 of those in the field of special education. The kids were the number one reason she remained. She noted that they are different and she felt like they have needed her. The fact that the kids were different every year was a motivation. She believed that a teacher gets to know the students in the special education field more so than other students. When you see the kids in a smaller setting, you have the opportunity to see the little bits of progress that other people might not get to see.

With 15 years of experience, one participant described seeing the success of the students as the biggest motivator for staying. Some of the biggest motivators come when students learn the life skills necessary for life after school, not when they are especially successful on state testing. After working in the field 17 years, a



participant reported the same view. It is not the state testing that indicates growth, but the day-to-day living skills necessary for life. Watching students “grow up and handle life.” To be able to watch kids do things they have never been able to do before is especially rewarding and motivating for these teachers.

When given the opportunity to work with students for more than one year, a participant with 15 years experience said having former students return and talk about what they are doing in their lives was important. Having students acknowledge that what she told them was in fact something that took place was gratifying. Preparing these students for life after high school was important and hearing their success stories continued to motivate her to remain. She stated, “It all comes back to helping the kids.”

“The challenge, trying to help kiddos that are very poor with their skills and lack confidence” was a 24-year veteran’s, motivation for remaining. It was also nice to see that “little light bulb” go on. Seeing a student proud due to completing their homework was satisfying. Having phone calls with parents and relaying successes was gratifying.

Another 21-year veteran said what motivated her to return was:

Every day, I get up in the morning with the same idea: Do my absolute best for all of my students. It is already difficult enough for kids in special education to have a positive outlook on the school day. I try to make sure they enjoy each day in my classroom.

The participant with the longest longevity had 41 years in the field of special education. She simply stated: "I like to be with the kids." When summing up what was most satisfying she said:

I think when the kids got it, you know, and they would look at you and be like, I got it, I got it! It was also when I had some students who just felt really comfortable in confiding in me. They just wanted someone to talk to, and I think being more than someone who helped them learn something academic, I helped them work through adolescent issues and that made a big difference.

Recurring throughout the responses was the statement "the kids" were the primary reason these teachers returned year-after-year. Being a part of and watching their students grow and change over the course of a year, or as in many cases, several years, motivated them to return. Seeing the "light-bulb" click on and students making progress on previously unknown concepts were reasons to return. Knowing that they were a part of the child's life as they moved through their school years was satisfying and meaningful for these teachers. All of the teachers, no matter how many years of experience they had, reported similar reasons for remaining in the classroom. As one stated:

The reason I keep teaching every year----and I don't see myself ending is because I'm making a difference in my students' lives."

The participants in the study identified students as their primary reason for remaining in the special education field. They discussed the importance of seeing

students make progress when in many other classrooms they had failed. The importance of “making a difference” in the lives of these students was mentioned by all 22 participants.

Seeing students reflect on their progress and recognize their self-worth was motivating to the participants. Throughout the interviews, making a difference, students’ growth, student recognition of self-worth, and a sense of success for their students were mentioned by all participants.

The participants interviewed identified the student as well as administrative support as key factors in their decision to remain in the field. Administrative support, second to students in the number of times it was mentioned, plays an important role and is examined in Chapter 7.

## CHAPTER 7

### Administrative Support

When questioned about who has played a role in their decision to remain in the field, all 22 teachers referenced administrative support as important in their decision to remain. Found throughout the participant responses were comments about administrators who had taken an active part in the special education process. Administrators who were involved in the process and maintained a day-to-day involvement were important to teachers. Understanding their role as the leader was important to the success of their students. Many of the participants' comments were related to encouragement, support, and recognition of these teachers. Administrators who assisted in securing resource materials were identified as supportive.

Acknowledging when teachers were doing their job was important. One participant said her administrator was good about "praising us." She said her belief was it is "very important to be supportive to the team." She described ways this administrator encouraged the teachers.

We have weekly meetings with our "As a Team" and every other week the principal sits in with us. She is there to listen to our concerns. She may give us advice if we are having problems with a certain student. And then we have times during the year where we sit down with her individually, and that's been good, and just—I feel—she has an open door. We can always go to her.

Seeing principals “everywhere” in the building and not finding them behind “closed” doors was important to this teacher.

Having a principal who comes from the special education background was a plus. One participant had a principal who began in the special education field. She commented: “If something needs to be done and the superintendent says so, it gets done.” He remained passionate about special education and this is supportive to the teachers. This participant believed “We are very, very lucky.”

Administrators were important in their encouragement of teachers. “We had a director of special education who hired me and got me started.” This administrator served as her mentor and was an instrumental individual in supporting this teacher. Knowing she had someone who “knew she could do it,” was important. This teacher actually left the field and when she returned, it was basically because of the director. Her administrator served as a mentor for the paperwork. The kids were “no problem.” Another participant reported that her administrator was previously a special educator as well. During her first year of teaching, she found herself faced with students she was unfamiliar in regards to how to teach. This principal came into the classroom and assisted. She stated: “probably coming into the classroom and actually helping was the biggest thing.”

Another participant said administrators who are visible in the building are important. Knowing you have a principal who is “on board” with your program makes a world of difference.

A “super, superintendent” was responsible for one participant’s decision to remain in the field. One of the outstanding ways this superintendent supported special education was when she:

wrote a grant large enough to supply all ten of the schools  
in her district with computers and hooked us up to the internet.  
We got six-trait training as well.

The participant said, “Teachers in our district feel like they are a ‘part of the system.’ I never felt like I was just somebody to take care of ‘those kids.’”

Another participant reported on an administrator who had a background in the area of special education was. Her principal was a previous special education teacher and she “knew how important special education was.” This elementary principal actually let the special education team make their schedule first and then the rest of the day was scheduled around the special ed staff’s schedule. “She really valued special education tremendously, and that was because of her background in special ed.”

Having the support of the administrator was found in another participant’s responses.

I have the support of my administrator and staff, and my colleagues. I have an administrator with an open door policy and if I have an idea, throw it at her. She will chew on it for a while and then come in and says; ‘Go for it and whatever you need.’ It’s just incredible.

One participant described having “phenomenal support” from building and district administrators as instrumental in their tenure. The participant said knowing that the principals, vice-principals support you is important. She noted, “It has not always been smooth, however, when they don’t understand, they are willing to listen and work with teachers to make it better.”

Administrators played an important role in the decisions teacher make for remaining in the job. One participant had a principal note early in her career who said,

“You’re probably the most positive aspect of this kid’s day.’

That let me know that he appreciated what I was doing with my students, and that he realized, paid enough attention to know that I was making a difference.

She concluded the interview with, “I appreciate that someone appreciates my experience. They appreciate me enough to ask me to mentor. Passing encouragement to another teacher is important. We need to encourage our new teachers and give them the support they need.”

Another participant provided the following reflections regarding principal support.

She was the first principal to hire me when I started in 2001.

She helped me be the best teacher I could be those first three years. I think every educator knows those first three years are the hardest. But, if you have someone to shape you into the best you can be, you will keep that. This administrator

treated me like gold, like I was the most precious gem, fine china. I was the most valuable teacher, yet she treated all of her teachers that way. She expected the best from you and I wanted to be the best for her.

Having administrators who allow you to keep doing what you need to do is important. As a special educator, "If you don't have that one person as an administrator supporting you, I've found you don't want to come to work any day, not one day. That's why I left my position in another state. It's why I returned here. I have that support."

Administrators play a key role in the participants' decisions to remain in the special education field. Participants appreciated when administrators recognized special education teachers and their role in the school. It could be as simple as "popping in to say hello" to students. Teachers identified time to collaborate with others as important and when administrators made those opportunities happen, it was supportive to them. Administrators that take a "hands-on" approach to special education, participate in the daily functions, and were seen by students and staff was recognized as important factors in their decisions to remain.



## CHAPTER 8

### Opportunity to Collaborate and Network

When discussing those who have supported their decision to remain, colleagues and the opportunity to collaborate and network with them were another reason they chose to remain in the field. Seventeen of the 22 teachers made references to how their colleagues and the opportunities offered for collaboration provided additional support while teaching.

A 7.5-year veteran, who describes herself as 'stubborn', attributed much of her persistence to her colleagues.

I've stuck with it, because I've had excellent co-teachers that are just very, very meaningful relationships, and they keep me going strong. They acknowledge me when I share my instructional materials or when I've come up with an idea for the team, they acknowledge that.

The opportunity to collaborate with others was an important element for this teacher. She stated, "Just the collaborative part of it has been supportive and encouraging, and I've made very good friendships with my co-teachers." Being a member of a teaching team was important. "I've had very good experiences in both schools where they really let me do my piece and help me be an equal." Colleagues were important for providing feedback, "I get positive feedback that I am doing a good job, and they say that I work very hard." She ended her reflection with "The colleagues I work with are definitely a big one."

Becoming a part of a team was reflected in another participant responses as well. "I think it's important to be encouraging to the team. I'm very close to my team and I feel like I am included. I'm one of them." This teacher worked in an open classroom format where several classes shared one large area. Collaborating and teaming made for "sparking" ideas. Seeing how another teacher handled teachable moments made her think, "Oh, yeah I need to add to my discussion or, I need to do that." It helped to have others to collaborate and team with. When working as a team, the teachers in her building met once a week to plan their units. Teachers in her building all took part and put their resources and ideas together. Their teachers had planning at the same time. Book studies have added to their opportunity to collaborate and work as a team.

One participant identified taking time to collaborate was an important aspect of why she stayed. "We work on the Indian reservation. It is tough. We have bonded together through strife and working together makes it possible." She stated she "makes is a point to go to each teacher she works with and ask; "How did it go today?" The close working relationship has led to "very good friends." One participant reported this belief and expanded with "I think that staff is going through the same things in the classroom, the same challenges, and having someone who understands what you are really going through is important." Many times family members and those outside of education do not fully understand. When contributing their thoughts a participant said, "the culture of the building, the positive culture, where others have your back is supporting." Building collaboration was good. "If you need help with curriculum or resources, there are many, many

things there.” One participant mentioned co-teaching. “Co-teaching usually helps me when I get to work with a general educator. It allows me the opportunity to work with the general population and keep in mind what is normal for students.” Working with other teachers was important for both the teacher and the students.

Positives for another participant included the “people I work with.” “The relationships built with other educators make me want to stay.” This educator now found herself in their ‘comfort zone’ and liked the people they worked with in their department. She described the people they work with as getting along “very well.” They are all team players.

With 30 years in the field, one participant reported,

I think it’s the people that are around me. I’ve always made sure that I made good relationships with the teachers that I have worked with, and I think that’s one of the most important things. Especially now as we’re being inclusive. You’re no longer in your own little world. You really have to build relationships, not only with our kids but with the teachers you work with.

Establishing those working relationships has led to trust. She stated, “We trust each other to do what is necessary.” They don’t think, “Oh, she’s just the special education teacher. She knows her stuff.” Teaming made it so much easier. Having a group of people who supported you and what you do made her want to return. She ended her reflection with, “We are our own little family.” She said that closeness and cohesiveness was important.

A twenty-five year veteran teacher stated the close relationships she has made with colleagues was an important factor for remaining in the field. "I have some colleagues and former colleagues that I can share success stories with. I can also share my concerns." Those colleagues and friends give encouragement to her. She establishes, "I've been very fortunate to have life-long friendships with previous colleagues." She credited these "master" teachers as having helped to maintain her excitement for working with children with special needs."

A very satisfying aspect for remaining in the field has been, "getting to know some really fantastic teachers. These are teachers who wanted to work together and that I could learn so much from. She reported the opportunity to learn some "really great things" from some "neat" people who are willing to share ideas." Another satisfying aspect has been her good fortune to have great mentor teachers and administrators. These were people who encouraged her that what she was doing was right. She acknowledged great "co-workers" who encouraged each other. They did activities together. They wrote grants, collaborated and encouraged me to learn new things. She concluded with "They challenged me to be better." Following these thoughts another participant reported many of the same factors. "I've been really lucky to be with people who care about kids." She said having teachers trust what she suggests has been a positive experience. "The opportunity to collaborate and work with great teachers has made me a better teacher."

Finding the best collaborative relationships has been a motivation to remain according to one participant. She found working with people who had similar personalities was good. Similar personalities and classroom management skills

made for a stronger team. "Sharing a teaching room with a friend is nice. We aren't isolated and since we share similar teaching styles and student expectations, it is a plus for the students." She related these experiences as a motivating factor for her remaining in the field. Another participant related these same thoughts. In her school, they have a program that encourages staff members to share how they have impacted their teaching. Working with teachers and establishing relationships improved the building culture.

Establishing relationships, a collaborative atmosphere, trust, and teamwork were all factors that influenced teachers to remain in the field. One participant summed it up with the following statement:

I have a lot of personal friends. You have to be able to vent. I have friends in the same building I teach in and friends in other buildings. I have friends who teach in the same area and those that don't. Being able to network with others, share ideas and support has had a huge impact on my remaining in the field.

Being able to work with others outside the special education field is important. "I don't feel like I'm in that hole at the end of the hall.....and the only one working with kids who have difficulties."

The participants recognized that administrative support was an important factor in their decision to remain in the special education field. Administrators are responsible for designing the schedules that allow for teachers to collaborate and develop "teams" that benefit all students, not only the special education student.

When administrators include the special education teacher in the day-to-day aspects of education, effective teams comprised of general and special education teachers are designed. Giving teachers the opportunity to learn from one another is an important key for all student success.

Allowing special education teachers to be involved in meaningful professional development is crucial. Effective administrators create an environment that promotes special education teachers to remain in the field when they are given the opportunity to develop their craft to meet the needs of their students. One participant mentioned that not all students learn the same. Within this statement is the recognition that not all professional development fits all teachers. Special education teachers need the opportunity to meet with other special education teachers to network, brainstorm, and share information to better meet the needs of their students.

Special education teachers who remain in the field are drawn to the needs of their special students. Not all teachers are drawn to work with students who challenge educators to “work outside the box.” The opportunity to meet and collaborate with other educators committed to special education students is a factor related to their decision to remain.

## CHAPTER 9

### A Special Calling

Participants expressed varied reasons for entering the field of special education. A theme identified throughout the interviews was that many felt a “Special Calling” to enter the field. Many knew early in their lives, during high school, they wanted to pursue the path in special education. Several had parents or friends whose story led them into the field. A participant who had been in the field for 7.5 years became a teacher based on “It was more of who’s going to protect these kids?” A participant with 8 years experience said:

I have an aunt with a disability, and a lot of times people do have someone in their family, and I did not really choose it until my senior year in high school, and I worked with a group of students in a special education classroom. The classroom I had my first experience in was a secluded setting, —so I did over 50 hours with those kids my second half of my last year of high school. I just kept going with it. I loved it....just working with them individually or in a small group. I never changed the desire, and I love it everyday.

A participant with 7 years experience always worked with kids and actually got her degree in general education. She was subbing and was placed in a special education room as a full-time sub for a few months. She found:

Holy cow, special education is pretty cool! She went back and got her special education degree. She further stated, "I just kind of jumped in with both feet. I didn't really know sped was my thing until I did it. It just kind of fell in my lap." A participant with 5 years experience, had a parent who taught school; and, "There was no other thing I was going to ever do." A participant with 7 years experience, stated: "I've always wanted to work with students with disabilities and I just really love what I do: and, I think that has a huge impact."

A participant with 11 years experience, told of the long journey into the classroom. The participant said,

It was kind of a long trip. I really wanted to be a teacher when I was in high school: but, I had a few teachers that said, "Don't teach. It's the worst job ever. It's the worst job," and complained a lot during class so I decided I would not teach. In college I kept thinking, "You know, I would like to teach. I would like to teach." Every time I started to go towards it, I thought "No, no," and when I was committed to a major, let's see, it was about my senior year, I decided I really did want to teach, but realistically it didn't make sense for me to stay in school and switch majors, so I just finished, and I did social work for about four years, and the whole time I decided I was going to teach. One day I went to an elementary school and another day I went to a high school just to observe. I decided that was it, I'm teaching.



This teacher went back and enrolled in master classes part time. This teacher found a program that included 60 hours of courses and completed the teaching certification. The participant has never regretted the decision to change fields.

A participant believed God has given her a purpose in working in the special education field. She identified this early in high school, when her mother ran an in home daycare and cared for children with disabilities. One participant, a special education teacher for 11 years, saw other students during her high school years struggle; and wanted to help those who “needed it most.” She made a decision that she has never been regretted.

A participant with 30 years experience commented, “It’s what I know; and it’s what I’ve always wanted to do. I grew up with a cousin who was deaf, and I think that started my journey in special education.” Another individual with 25 years experience said:

My whole teaching career has been in the area of special education even though that was not my intent to begin with. I had no intention of teaching special education. I more or less went into special education because, as a non-traditional student, I was told that if I got a degree in special education, it would guarantee me a job. But then sometimes life just throws you curves, and I ended up being in special education, and I never looked back.

Another participant stated:

I just really feel that God gave me the gift. I think that is my calling and I've worked with special education students before they were labeled special education students, even when I was in high school before, you know 1973-1974. It was a special calling for me. I've just always wanted to be there for them and I've never gotten tired of being there for them. (31 years experience)

In the field for 18 years, one participant noted: "I just felt it was a special calling for me. I guess I always thought, if I don't do this, who's going to be there to look out for them?" Beginning a career in regular education, one participant made the switch 22 years ago and has never regretted the move.

Family and friends who have been a part of participants' lives have led several into the field. A participant with 15 years reported:

I went into special education because I had a deaf friend. I taught in both fields and then realized there were so many children that needed individualized teaching styles, and I had a hard time sleeping at night when teaching in the regular education room....knowing there were kids falling through the cracks.

This participant further explained that she felt better equipped to work with individual children, to "individualize" instruction most suited to their educational needs. In the field for 17 years one participant said "I think it was a God-called thing to do, and that's why I do it, because God called me to do it." A participant with 11

years of experience has worked in multiple states and said, "I'm going to leave my mark on this world. I hope, you know, one person at a time."

Twenty-two individuals, of various ages, levels of experience, from throughout the country, came together with one purpose. A common thread found throughout these participants was a special call to work with children of varying needs. Their stories may differ, the particulars not the same; however the desires of their hearts was to make a difference in the lives of children they touched everyday in their classrooms.

Knowing how they made a difference in the lives of their students and this difference was appreciated was important to the participants. Appreciation for their work with their students did make a difference in how they viewed themselves in 15 of the participants' reflections on why they remained in the special education field. We look how they defined "appreciated" in Chapter 10.

## CHAPTER 10

### Being Appreciated

Fifteen of the 22 participants made reference to appreciation and its importance in their decisions to remain in the field. The following table is a list of the participants and individuals who indicated appreciation of their efforts.

Appreciation Reflected to Participants

Participant 1	Administrator	Colleagues
Participant 2	Administrator	
Participant 3	Administrator	
Participant 5	Administrator	Students
Participant 10	Administrator	Parents
Participant 11	Administrator	Parent
Participant 13	Administrator	
Participant 14	Administrator	Students
Participant 16	Administrator	
Participant 17	Administrator	Students, Parents
Participant 18	Administrator	Students, Parents
Participant 19	Administrator	Students
Participant 20	Administrator	Students
Participant 21	Administrator	Students, Colleagues
Participant 22	Administrator	Students, Colleagues

Table 10.1

The participants indicated that verbal thanks were most often the way individuals showed their appreciation. There were no references to any monetary or gifts to show appreciation. Most often appreciation was demonstrated by it was a smile, a thank you or a note expressing appreciation for what they had done.

After discussing the importance of appreciation and how it related to their decisions to remain, 9 participants identified the 'freedom to teach' students based upon their identified needs as a factor related to their decision to remain in the field. Chapter 11 discusses how participants identified the "freedom to teach" and how it contributed to their decisions to remain in the special education field

## CHAPTER 11

### Freedom to Teach

Nine of the participants described the importance of being allowed to use what one participant termed “the freedom to make educational decisions that were best for their students.” With 41 years of experience, this individual stated:

Sometimes when you’ve been around a while, sometimes you know how things are going to pan out. It’s okay to trust your educators, to rely on their experience. Let teachers try different things and not be locked into whatever the going trend is. Sometimes those things don’t work with our kids. They have special needs by definition and sometimes you have to do things a little differently.

Children with more severe needs, require different educational programming than students with less severe disabilities. One participant worked with students who had severe cognitive deficits. The school she worked in allowed the teachers to address the life skills needed for independent living. She explained how the “freedom to make educational programming” affects her job.

The curriculum is very broad and it’s more what the children need. We’re allowed to teach them more of what they need. It’s that freedom of having a more open curriculum and really being able to teach what the kids need. It has been amazing. I can choose my own materials. I have some set, but the freedom to choose what they really need and what motivates

them. That's huge!

Another participant with 14 years of experience as a special education teacher described the experience of being allowed to "do what was right" and the "freedom" to do things in the classroom. She noted that even when administrators did not understand what she was doing, they said, "Sure, if you think it will work and you want to try it--go ahead. "This confidence in her meant a great deal. One participant described it as a "trust," that you know what you are doing and the administrator supports your experience with children.

Another participant told her story of teaching between two states. Her initial teaching experience was in a state outside where she grew up. While teaching in her new home, she had administrator support and trust that what she was doing for her students was appropriate and based on their educational needs. Due to family and the desire to be closer to her family, she returned to her home state. Education there was very different. She found herself unable to meet the needs of her students. Despite facing two mortgages and reduced income, she and her husband decided to move back to her previous job. The "freedom" to work with students and address their needs was the determining factor.

The participants in this study identified the administrative support to "teach" their students what they needed as an important factor in their decisions to remain. They were given the "freedom" to use curriculum suited to the individual needs of the student, without worry about state assessment performance. The participants noted the importance of special education being "specially" designed to meet the needs of individual students as necessary for student growth and performance.

When given the opportunity to meet students where they were at academically and provide appropriate instruction based on the students' skills, student progress was seen. The participants identified this "freedom" as contributing to their decision to remain.

Throughout the interviews, participants often commented,

I wish administrators would....

It would be great if an administrator said.....

It would make such a difference if administrators.....

Chapter 12 addresses the advice that the participants identified as important and could lead to the retention of special education teachers.



## CHAPTER 12

### Advice to Administrators

During the interviews I asked the participants to reflect on what advice they would give to administrators to aide them in the retention of their special education staff. Following are the participant responses.

A young teacher with 8 years experience, who has been in the same building during her teaching career, shared the following story. The following response was her first thoughts on advice she would like an administrator to see and understand.

I know you have to be so politically correct about who is in special ed. You don't want -- you don't want to just put it out there, but, I guess, kind of -- parents often come in, and they don't know who I am. We do have a back-to-school night where we get introduced, so we try to really let them know who we are; but, of course, we're at an at-risk school with a lot of different levels of population coming in. So, a lot of our parents don't come to things that we offer. We probably only had maybe 20% of them come out of the whole population. I just feel like some of them don't know who we are as special ed teachers, unless they have been through the process with us.

Even during conferences, often I'll walk in, and they don't know who I am, or if I'm sitting in -- of course, I introduce myself, but just kind of having it well known before they have to

meet you face-to-face. And some are good about that, so that just feeling like -- more like what you do is important, and it is meaningful, and we know it is, but -- and that it is respected because I've been asked, even after being here eight years, if I'm a teacher, so it's kind of funny. I try not to let it bother me, but there have been times, especially at first, when it kind of bothers you.

This teacher also talked about the consistency of working with children through-out their elementary years.

Also, when your child has a different case manager each year it difficult, that's how we handle our caseloads. When they move up, they get someone different. Now, there have been children that I'll have in kindergarten, and then I'll have them again in third, so it just depends; but, I've often thought.... would it be better for that case manager to follow the child? I think it's kind of confusing for the parent.

In her final thoughts she reflected about the acquisition of teaching materials.

Sometimes central office will send books and pacing guides and things, and they don't send enough copies for the special ed people. It's like, really, because you need one, too, just as much to plan, because your children are supposed to be learning the same things, so we've had that happen, and it's gotten better but still, you know, sometimes you're thinking, "Well, gosh, I'd really like to have a

copy of that," and then you have to go hunt one down or find somebody, so -- but little things like that, but, you know, over all it's been a very good experience here.

She ended her interview making sure I heard "overall it's been a very good experience here."

Another 7-year participant, who works primarily with students with behavior disorders, noted how "safety" is an important element.

I think safety is real important, and we get that -- I don't know if it's Mandt, or whatever training you want to do, to positively restrain a kid. We have a lot of behaviors and safety is a key element.

This teacher shared one final thought regarding students with disabilities. Many times students within the mainstream setting have accommodations that need to be met. Support from administration is important for assuring all accommodations are met.

Follow the IEP. Oh, goodness sakes, if you're supposed to give the kid notes, give the kid notes. If you're supposed to shorten his work, shorten his work. If it says -- if you're having the kids read out loud and you know he can't read, don't make him read out loud. It's just simple little things -- I mean, it really is simple stuff like that, just don't poke an angry dog. Don't feed the problem.

An 11 year veteran gave advice regarding new teacher support.

Try to help reduce conflict between the special education teachers and general education teachers. I don't know that there is a lot of it,

but the one thing that I think -- if you can't control the students that come in the building, you need to control the variables you can, which to me would be staff members. Some staff members will build up new staff and some staff members will ignore new staff, and some staff members will have conflict with new staff.

If you can shelter that staff member until they can at least figure out how the building works, how the curriculum goes, it would help them transition into the culture of the building. That first year is so rough. If you can just shelter them as much as possible while letting them grow, that seems to be the best thing I can think of. The new people need shelter. They need to be nurtured almost as much as any kid coming in. They need that guidance.

Ongoing training was important to teachers. One participant related her experiences regarding the importance of, not only regular professional development training, but to offer new teachers additional in and out of district training opportunities. The world of education is always changing and special education teachers need additional training for their students with exceptionalities. She said:

I would like to see a principal be covering a special education department. I recognize their job is like huge and our department is huge, but I don't think you get a pulse on the school, unless you're looking at your exceptionalities. My advice is to be more present, to support and really tell your teachers that you appreciate them, but say it because you've seen it. Don't say it because you heard it from

somebody who heard it from somebody else, because it was, "Come back to me with five great things that your staff and your department did." I don't want to tell the head of my department things that I have done, so he can tell the principal. I want the principal to know it, because he was there or she was there.

A young teacher who had two small children and needed assistance from the building principal for meeting the responsibilities of her job commented on her need for assistance. She related the following story regarding how her principal was willing to make accommodations for her special condition. The willingness of the principal to meet the needs of this teacher strengthened the commitment of this teacher.

For her to make an allowance, because I am valued by her, makes me want to work harder for her. I will do now whatever she needs me to do, because she's willing to understand my weaknesses that I can't control. So I think, again, it's having a relationship with your staff, knowing what they need and coming to them when things aren't going so well where they fill out that slip saying, I might have to leave.

Communication. That's a big key, communication, being seen, making yourself seen...

I know administrators, they're busy too, but you know, make yourself available to the teachers, a listening ear, and not judge them. Ongoing training and communication are two important keys.

The following reflections were from a teacher who had between 5-9 years of

experience.

I think acknowledging our hard work sometimes is a very little thing that can really go a long way. I was talking about earlier, every once in a while when you get a positive e-mail from a parent. I think that really goes a long way when an administrator stops in your room and says something positive or really acknowledges all the extra stuff sometimes that we have to do as special educators, because a lot of times it goes unnoticed. Especially if administrators don't have a background in special education themselves, they might not even realize all the paperwork and all the extra stuff that we do, so I think acknowledging that, and kind of just giving some positive feedback, because sometimes -- sometimes when you're doing all the right things, you don't get feedback. It seems like the people that get the feedback are the people that are struggling with something. So, I think acknowledging the positives, too. I mean, we always are taught to do that with the students, and I know we're all adults, but sometimes that makes a big difference when you're having a bad day, or you're just overwhelmed.

A participant 5 years of experience and a participant with 24 years of experience shared similar remarks in their advice for administrators.

Acknowledge them. Tell them they are doing a good job. Tell them you're glad they're here. Sometimes I feel like I'm used like a cork, just to stick in the dam so it doesn't burst. "Here, take this kid.

Everybody else is going crazy, just take this kid." Yeah, and I don't mind, but sometimes I feel like, I'm the stopgap measure, rather than the person who really can do something really good for this child. Be interested in what's happening in the special education classrooms, go by on a very regular basis, see what the successes are of the students. Even though they might be somewhat small, from time-to-time, give them the encouragement that the sports kids get, the music kids get, brain-bowl kids get. They need their fair share of all that recognition as well, and supporting the teachers in a way. Whenever things are kind of sour, we can use a pat on the back, too, and there's often times not enough of that, when that happens.

The participants reflected on how the collaboration of teachers is important. They would like to see time set aside for scheduled collaboration. Teachers who have the opportunity to meet, plan, and discuss the students they work with are more satisfied. They see their students as more successful. Successful co-teaching partnerships require a lot of effort on the part of both teachers. They develop over time with effort by both teachers. A 30-year veteran gave the following advice:

I think they need to be very careful where they put them to include them into a team. They need to because I know that there's times that I feel burnout when I'm with a teacher who just doesn't get it, who just doesn't see the need, or if they see the need, they pick one thing -- for example, differentiation, and they feel like they're doing differentiation, and I constantly say, "You can't do everything orally

and still say you're differentiating," because my kids aren't oral learners. They are visual and tactile, kinesthetic learners ninth-tenths of the time. So I think the match between the regular ed and the special ed is terribly important, and once you get that -- once you get a good person to work with special ed, don't think, "Oh, well, this person really needs to learn how to do that, too," and move us over here and it doesn't work.

Woven throughout their conversations were numerous references to support, what it looks like, how important it is to teachers, and how it serves to encourage teachers to remain. A 21-year veteran shared her thoughts on supporting master teachers,

I think the main thing administrators, they just, they need to know -- teachers need to know that their administrators will support them as long as they do their job, as long as they are good teachers. I don't think any administrator should support an ineffective teacher. That's not best for the children; that's not best for the school district; that's not what administrators should do. But administrators should support their good teachers, and I think teachers need to know -- they need to know what their expectations are. They need to know that their building principal, their superintendent, or their board of education, whatever, will support them as long as they are master teachers and they do their job well.

With 31 years in the field, this participant is concerned about the constant



need for special educators to know all there is in the field. Educators are trained, yet that training and need for knowledge is an ongoing need. It is not always the same training that regular education teachers need. It becomes more specialized and the opportunity to attend training and professional development directly related to the educational needs of special needs students is important. This teacher continued the thread of conversation about the importance of communication and recognition for these teachers.

I think -- I believe that administrators need to not assume that just because a person has a special education degree, that they understand the whole scope of special education. We are talking about students that come to our schools that cannot do much of anything, and I don't mean that bad. I just mean we are an inclusive school, and so students that can't speak, that are non-ambulatory, that cannot attend to their toiletries by themselves, they come to our schools. And then we have the LD student that has a wonderful IQ but just has a disability in a certain specific area, and we have students that have behavioral needs, and we have other health impaired. Do not assume your teacher knows everything about all the disabilities out there. They don't. Bring somebody in that can educate them on those disabilities. Just because we've had the classes, doesn't mean we understand how that child ticks.

I think you need open communication. I think you need to check on

them, don't put them in a classroom and expect four months later, oh, maybe I ought to go see if they're okay. You need to check on them on a regular basis. And they need to praise them. They are not going to get praised from their students. They are not going to get praised from the parents a lot of times. And a lot of times other teachers and administrators within the building don't think to praise them either. They are just trying to get through the day as well. I think praise and education and communication. I remember the downtown office used to come around the buildings with, you know, "We just wanted to say thank you and have some cookies for today." I haven't seen that for years, you know. Even just come in and say, "Hi, thinking about you today," or e-mails, just touching base, want to make sure you're okay today, haven't heard from you. You know, it doesn't take any time to do that. I think communication, appreciate them and maybe look at whatever businesses do, because education is a business. What do businesses do to retain their employees? Do they give them incentives? Should you be doing that? Think about it.

With 41 years experience, this educator shared thoughts regarding collaboration, paperwork and taking a "full part" in the whole process for including the special education department needs in their daily administrative duties.

Give them time to collaborate. Give them time to collaborate with regular teachers so they can be better. To me, sometimes you just need to be able to sit down with the kids' teachers, regular teachers

and say, "This is what's going on. I want you to know. You know, you need that time. That time is such a premium. Provide a sub if you need to, to let those special education teachers just talk with the regular education teachers. Not only for content reasons but also for kid reasons, individual kids, you know. That's what we need to do or meet together with the kids. Also to be able to collaborate with other special education teachers, and for administrators to understand the process those special education people have to do, all the things that they are expected to do and know and produce, and for administrators to -- how do I want to put that -- for administrators to realize -- to take a full part in the whole process. They need to not just breeze in, sign something, breeze out and not realize how many hours special education teachers are expected to do paperwork, to do documentation, and all the other work. Everybody else has work, too. I know that. Regular education teachers have that, too; but, sometimes the process is different. I think they need to understand and just maybe even experience a little bit. Go to workshops with your special education teachers sometimes just to see the kinds of things that they are presented with.

Oh, and spend less time on paperwork. To sometimes allow special education teachers, especially after they've been around awhile, I think, you know, it's kind of hard to even know when I see first five-

year teachers-- you know teachers in the first five years, thinking that they have all the answers. But when you've been around awhile, sometimes you know what -- how things are going to pan out, and it's okay to trust your educators, to rely on their experience, and also to know where to go for help, that, you know, they don't always -- let us, you know, be a part of the decision making, but also let them move around as far as -- and I don't mean physically move around, but to try different things and not be locked into whatever the going trend is they want everybody to try, because sometimes those things don't work with special needs kids.

They have special needs by definition, and it doesn't mean that they receive the instructional plan that is the same as a building they may have. Sometimes you have to do things a little differently.

These similar thoughts are reiterated by a teacher with 18 years of experience.

Well, I think they need to simplify the paperwork. I mean, I do think it's necessary -- I think it's necessary to make sure that students are identified accurately. I think it's necessary to make sure that it's reviewed periodically, because you don't want students identified incorrectly, and you definitely want it reviewed to make sure that they -- that no one stays in a program that shouldn't be there. But when it gets to the point that the teachers aren't teaching; the teachers are telling others what to do, and they are just spending time on

paperwork, and they are having to just fill out form after form after form, then I think there's something wrong. The teachers need to be the ones working with the students and not completing forms is what I think. I think you need to have the teachers working with the students.

This teacher had suggestions for how to make this work.

Here's some ideas: I would say like maybe one day a week or half-day a week of time where they could just work on -- if that's what their role is to be, if they are going to continue to have to do that, then they may need a half-day a week where they could just do nothing but their paperwork, and maybe that half-day a week would be a day when maybe during that time, their paras could take over the role in the classroom. At least give them some downtime that day a week where they could do it. I would think -- to encourage them to stay in it, I think fewer caseloads.

With 32 years in education, and 22 in the special education field, this participant reflected on many of the themes found throughout the other participant's responses. This veteran would like to see two things.

Two things. One, we've already discussed. It would be so awesome if we had planning time with our collaborating teachers, time that is built into the contract day so that it's not a hardship. The other thing is, I think that special education teachers need to have more training and more support when they first start out in doing paperwork and

scheduling and sticking to what's legal and isn't legal. I think people come out of college, and they think they know what they're going to do, but you don't know how to do that stuff. We have a teacher here who started in February. She's a career changer, so she's working on a provisional endorsement.

She's a hard worker. She catches on quickly. She wants to do well, but at the same time, she knows nothing about how to do things. And I just don't think that -- when we train our beginning teachers, I don't think we teach them those things. Here, at least, it's -- I don't know, I'm talking about the little things, like, how do you write an IEP? Which buttons do you need to click when you're writing it? It's just little stuff like that. Just give them in-service training, just something on the day-to-day nuts and bolts in special education. It needs to be ongoing. We have a great mentorship program, but having a mentor for a year or whatever, it's not enough, because new things come up, and I think that new people just need somebody to work with them hand-in-hand, closer than we're able to do right now.

The second is, I have a lot of leeway; but I also have a lot of responsibility. Those kind of go hand-in-hand. I think there's a great amount of trust. That means a whole lot. I think the fact that we or I am willing to do extra stuff, go the extra mile, then the administrators give us that extra freedom. They are very supportive. They let us try

new techniques or, you know, new strategies that we've learned about. They try to give us time to do things with our collaborating teachers. They do the best they can. There are only so many hours in the day. The hardest jobs have been the ones that you don't have the support. I'm very proactive. I'm proactive with my students. I'm proactive in teaching. I'm proactive even with my administrators. If I have a problem, I will go to them.

I think it comes down to administrators, too, the fact that, do they provide you opportunity to participate in collaboration? Do they provide you the opportunity to go to workshops and professional development? Do they provide you opportunity to bring in outside resources or agencies? Again, I'm in the dream job. We had a very difficult student this year. I had to do the research; but she's like, "Whatever you need," and we brought in an outside agency, and -- the administrator being very supportive has been the key thing. I look to them for the support though, too. I've been pretty fortunate in the situations I've been in. I have been given the freedom to do what I need to do, to do the research, or get the means, what I need.

When asked to reflect on what advice they would give to administrators to aide in the retention of teachers, these teachers gave advice that reflected transformational leadership styles. They want reflective leaders who have a vision and heart for their students, provide support and play an active part in the day-to-

day responsibilities for meeting the needs of the special needs population.

These participants identified administrators that communicated as instrumental in their decisions to stay. Administrators that took an active, informed approach to special education and the support teachers needed was important to their decision to remain.



## CHAPTER 13

### Analysis

The purpose for conducting the study was to identify the reasons special education teachers remained in the field of special education.

Twenty-two participants responded to 8 interview questions. Through the interviews, they identified the reasons for remaining in the field of special education. Working with children with special needs was the number one reason they remained in the field. The second reason they remained was the support of administrative personnel included principals, vice-principals, downtown administration, and department heads. The third reason was the opportunity to collaborate and network with fellow teachers. A fourth reason was the special education teachers indicated that working in the special education field was a calling for them. The final reasons the special education teachers remained were the appreciation they were shown and the freedom they had to address the educational needs of their students based upon the students' disabilities, not state or district-tested material.

My central question for this study was designed to determine what reasons were identified by teachers for influencing their decisions to remain in the field. The participants' responses supported the importance of specific factors and their contribution to teacher persistence. The factors identified by the participants were.

- children with special needs
- administrator support
- opportunity to collaborate and network with fellow teachers

- a special calling
- appreciation
- freedom to teach

### *Working with Children*

Children were identified by the participants as their number one reason for remaining in the field. Factors that contributed to their decision were:

- building of relationships
- seeing the light bulb of understand
- watching students progress through school
- attending graduations of students
- planning for post secondary transitions
- working with their families as a team
- working with other educators for meeting their educational needs

### *Administrative Support*

The second reason teachers remained in the field of special education that contributes to their longevity was the support of their administrators. They defined support as:

- open door policy
- scheduling considerations
- attending meetings
- collaboration time
- understanding of the roles and responsibilities of special

- education teachers
- resources for teaching
- support with parents
- encouragement
- professional development opportunities
- build strong working relationships
- provide ongoing support
- improve teaching skills
- provide insight into student progress
- develop instructional planning
- design curriculum

These findings corroborate the literature reviewed for the study. School climate and administrative support are intertwined in the participants' reflections. Participant comments during the interviews reinforce the importance of positive school culture and administrative support.

#### *Collaboration and Networking*

The third reason the participants gave for remaining in the field of special education was the opportunity for collaboration and networking. Participants noted the following considerations for administrators:

- set aside a specified time for collaboration with general education teachers
- set aside a specified time for collaboration with special education teachers

- meet with teachers on a regular basis regarding student progress and growth
- establish co-teaching teams that are matched and provide for planning time that allows for lesson planning
- provide set aside time for mentoring of new special education teachers
- provide a day each quarter for special education teams to work on the completion of paperwork

These findings corroborate the literature that reports the necessity for teachers to have the time to collaborate.

Three themes that emerged from the study were not mentioned in the literature reviewed. These themes were:

A Special Calling	19
What They Do Is Appreciated	15
Freedom to Teach	9

Each of these themes was derived from the participants' references to events or moments in their careers that had influenced their decisions to remain in the field of special education. Their experiences and stories reflected the importance of these events for their decisions to remain in the field of special education five years or longer.

### *A Special Calling*

A reason for remaining in the profession not identified in the literature was having a "passion" for special education in the form of a "special calling," or as a

“God” given gift. Nine individuals described their responses in comments such as the following:

- I felt God called me to work with children with special needs
- I had a cousin, aunt, neighbor or child with a disability
- If I didn’t look out for these children, who would?

### *Appreciation*

Fifteen of the participants referenced appreciation expressed to them as motivating in their decisions to remain in the special education field. The following examples were mentioned in their responses.

- receiving a letter of thanks from parents
- phone calls expressing thanks
- letters from students
- invitations to graduations
- students returning to visit after graduation
- visiting with students after graduation
- a smile from their students

### *Freedom to Teach*

Participants described administrators’ trust in their ability to make educational programming decisions that met the needs of their students as reasons to remain as special education teachers. In a time when state and federal mandated testing compliance is at an all time high, these administrators allowed teachers to, at times, “step outside the box.” One participant commented, “not all learn the same way and sometimes the methods used with other children won’t work with special

needs students.” Principals who recognized their professionalism and competence was satisfying to these participants.

Teachers who participated in this study were motivated by the trust, respect, and professionalism demonstrated by the principals they worked with.

Administrators who lead with honesty, integrity, compassion, and an appreciation for teachers, are respected by teachers and instill the desire to remain in teaching.

The participants in this study identified 3 themes consistent with previous literature. The children, administrative support and building culture, and the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues as important to their decision to remain in the field of special education.

Three additional themes were identified. Participants identified they identified a “special calling” to work with students with disabilities as a contributing factor. Two additional themes of “appreciation” and “freedom to teach” as important reasons for them to remain in the field of special education.

## CHAPTER 14

### Reflections

There are times in all of our careers when we question, “Is this where I’m supposed to be?” There are times when the day-to-day tasks of getting up, going to work and putting in another day become almost mundane in repetition. Then we start the “doctorate” journey and, along the way, commence the project of the “dissertation.” We pick a subject near and dear to our hearts; one that will keep us focused on finding the “answers” to that burning question. What many take away is a sense of accomplishment as they write the “paper” and complete the coursework. We are to fine tune those leadership skills, sharpen our minds and develop scholarly research skills. I can honestly state, “I’ve progressed in all of those areas.” A person must also be honest regarding the financial rewards and the Dr. title that accompanies the feat. They are both a motivation. An increase in our economic condition is always a plus, especially when we live in such times of economic challenges. Traveling where others only dream is satisfying. All of these factors play a part in the individual’s rationale for beginning the journey and remain as motivators for completion. It is not a journey for the weak-hearted. Having begun this journey at the end of my public teaching career, some aspects were more important to me than others. There is a great sense of accomplishment for the skills I’ve practiced and perfected along the way. However, the most meaningful for me is, I’m proud to be a special education teacher. I’m honored to work in such a profession where children are the reason we get up, go to work, see at times minute progress and most importantly

touch their lives. While the process of getting up, going to work for many is mundane, this is our passion. Meeting and visiting with 22 individuals rekindled my passion for working with the children we serve. Somehow, somehow we need to recruit others who share this passion. We need to mentor and assist new teachers who have this passion before they burn out. We need compassionate, dedicated administration to lead our school.

That has been my great “take-away.” I’m proud of what I do. Meeting with the 22 participants in my study, I’m proud to say I see people who are committed to children. I’m privileged I had the opportunity to meet such outstanding, committed educators who have persisted where many have given up. It is not a profession for the faint-hearted. Much of what they shared are my reasons for “persisting” 22 years. Let me tell you what I have learned.

I chose this topic as I see first hand the need for special education teachers. In the district I teach in, the need for these teachers is a constant. In the building I teach in, in the last year, we lost 30% of our teachers. Of those teachers 66% were in the first five years in the profession. At the present time we have 3 first year teachers. Three of our teachers are in the 5-9 year range and the remaining 4 have 15+ years of experience. As with the national statistics, we are losing our teachers in the 1-5 year range, losing at least 50% of those teachers. What I found interesting from the study was regarding those in the 9-14 year range of experience. This was the smallest population of teachers I found available for participation. All were recommended by school administrators. Specific years of teaching experience for



the teachers were not given. The years of experience simply “fell that way.” The smallest group represented were those in the 9-14 year range of experience. It has caused me to question why this group is dwindling. If we have teachers successfully completing the 5-year mark, why then is that statistic dropping in the middle years? They made it the first 5 when the majority quit. There is need for further study of this group. Although I found what I believe to be important reasons for teachers to remain, I believe more in-depth study is necessary to determine why this middle group is smaller. Not only do we need to be concerned with why we are losing teachers in their first five years, but also in those in the 9-14 year range. From my study, the teachers in the 15+ years category were the largest group. These teachers have “hit their stride.” Their attitudes, practices, and persistence got them through the middle years. They are now the veterans. Not only are we in critical need of teachers who will stay for 5+ years, their overall longevity are issues. We need to concentrate on the middle years of experience as well.

Staying positive is important. I know how easy it is to see the negative in a situation. Special education teachers have challenges other teachers never face. Falling into the discouragement trap is easy. Not only do these teachers have the children’s learning as a responsibility; but they also have the federally mandated responsibilities of IDEA. It is easy to become frustrated, negative, and give up.

The teachers I visited with commented that they viewed themselves as “positive” people. They have a tendency to view the world through the “half-full” glass. Although they see the difficulties facing the profession, the struggles children have, and, at times, experience poor working conditions, they remain positive for

what they can do for children. They take the small gains and hold on to those. One participant mentioned her satisfaction with seeing children who could not identify letters, now reading simple words. The joy in seeing the progress students make, no matter how small, is something they take joy in. Experiencing the “light bulb” in a child’s eyes is rewarding. Students play the major role in why these teachers remain positive in a field where many chose to become frustrated and leave. Whether they see the gain daily, weekly, or over the course of several years; seeing children do what they were unable to before brings that smile to their face.

Teachers at the secondary levels enjoy and experience a deep sense of satisfaction for seeing in the “end” result of 13 years of education. Watching students walk across the stage at graduation is satisfying. Hearing both students and parents express gratitude for the accomplishment, at times when no one thought it might ever happen, is meaningful. They feel a great sense of accomplishment. What they are doing is making a difference in the lives of children. None of this is surprising to me. Seeing children become successful, when others expect failure, is immensely satisfying. Being a part of that process is rewarding. It is one of the reasons I stay.

Seventeen of the participants mentioned the relationships they established with co-workers as contributing to their longevity. I was surprised this was not a reflection shared by all of the teachers. Meaningful relationships are important in life. Teaching is an opportunity to work with like-minded individuals. It is a service industry despite what many believe. Teachers “serve” children and their families. Many viewed teaching as an opportunity to work as a team. It is satisfying and a

motivation for remaining. The individuals we surround ourselves many times, become “extensions” of ourselves. Opportunities to collaborate, work beside, and form meaningful relationships were mentioned many times by those who identified these as reasons for their longevity. Teaming with like-minded people motivated them to work harder. Sharing successes and commiserating with others when problems erupt is supportive. Teachers spoke of success and attributed it, in part, to their coworkers-those who encouraged them to become better at their “craft.” Teachers need support, not only from their administrators, but from their coworkers as well. For these 17 teachers, establishing relationships is a vital aspect of the job. This is not new to me. I was simply surprised it was not mentioned in depth by all of the participants. It is a reason I remain.

One aspect of job satisfaction and motivation for returning was administrator support. This did not surprise me at all. Having experienced both the positive and negatives related to administrative support, I agree with their comments. Educational “leadership” is important and vital to our schools. Several of the teachers mentioned the importance of a building “culture” that included the special education teachers. During my program of studies, the administrators these teachers described demonstrate Bennis and Nanus’ theory of “managers do things right while leaders do the right thing.” Administrators with “open door” policies, who “listen” and provide meaningful feedback are important. Brainstorming to find solutions and assist with the issues surrounding special education are skills vital to teachers. One of the things I have learned in my career and that was mentioned by the participants is the importance of leadership that encompasses the ability to

“visualize.” Leaders who are honest, trustworthy, and make things happen for “all” students are found throughout their responses. Leaders who find a way to include their special education teachers in the culture of their building contribute to their longevity. These transformative leaders have made their job easier, recognize their efforts and support them. This is a vital aspect to their longevity. I know the type of leadership they describe has been a determining factor in my decision to remain.

I learned that it was important for the participants to have a strong supportive foundation. Family, co-workers and administration all played important roles in their decisions to remain. Several expressed a sense of “who would help these children if I don’t.” Participants felt “called” to the field. They knew early in their lives they wanted to work with children with special needs. These teachers were in the 15+ years of experience group. All mentioned an “inner” motivation. Like these teachers; I had that same “inner” motivation. Like one of the participants, I originally obtained a degree in a different field. I found myself going back to school and was the non-traditional student. The paycheck, summers off, or the nice classroom isn’t what motivates the special education teacher to return. The building of relationships, touching of lives and desire to make a difference were the motivators for these special education teachers to persist.

I found from the study that, 15+ year veterans made the most moves or transitions throughout their careers. Although I would expect this to be true for this group, I found it interesting that all of the participants commented that the moves gave them “fresh” starts, new beginnings and referenced a “renewing” of their passion for special education. They indicated that their ability to move among

different levels and programs was a factor for their longevity. Flexibility was cited as an important factor for longevity. None of the participants indicated a desire to leave special education.

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## Appendices

### APPENDIX A

#### DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

##### Why Do Educators Persist and Stay in the Field?

Greetings!

I am conducting a study to learn about the persistence of educators in the field.

Would you please complete the short survey?

Thanks so much,

Sally Thorp

I am interested in learning about your educational credentials. Would you please complete the following questions?

1. How many years have you taught?
  - a. 1-4
  - b. 5-9
  - c. 10-14
  - d. 15+
  
2. What content areas are you certified to teach?
  - a. language arts
  - b. science
  - c. math
  - d. social studies
  - e. not applicable
  
3. What is your highest degree?
  - a. Bachelor's degree
  - b. Master's degree
  - c. Specialist
  - d. Doctorate
  
4. Are you:
  - a. male
  - b. female
  
5. Which type of degree do you hold?

- a. Educational teaching degree
- b. alternative certification degree

6. What area do you hold your certificate in?

- a. elementary
- b. middle school
- c. secondary

I would like to know a little about your experience.

7. Do you currently teach:

- a. regular education
- b. special education

8. Have you changed teaching assignments?

- a. no
- b. yes
- c. 2 times
- d. 3 times
- e. 4 times

9. Are you considered "highly qualified" in your area as defined by NCLB?

- a. yes
- b. no

**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What has caused you to remain in the special education teaching field for \_\_\_\_\_ years?
2. How have you managed to remain positive about your work as a special education teacher?
3. What aspects of your work as a special education teacher have been satisfying?
4. Which individuals have encouraged you to remain in the role of the special education teacher?
5. How have these individuals encouraged you in your work as a special education teacher?
6. What aspects of your work environment have contributed to your longevity as a special education teacher?
7. What have been the decision points in your long career in special education?
8. If you were to give administrators advice for retaining their special education teachers, what would it be?

**APPENDIX C**  
**PARTICIPANT INVITATION**

Initial Invitation~Mailed

From: Sally Thorp, [sally.thorp@sjsd.k12.mo.us](mailto:sally.thorp@sjsd.k12.mo.us)

Anticipated Sending Date: November 1, 2011

Recipient: Certified Educator

Subject: Contributing Factors of Educator Persistence

December 2011

Dear Educator,

Welcome Back! For many of us, we are rapidly approaching the end of our first quarter of the school year. Once again we have greeted new students, said hello to retuning students and fallen back into our “school mode.” Added to my normal “school mode” is my continued work on my doctorate. I am asking you to contribute to my research project. As a part of my research, I am asking for teachers to share with me what keeps you coming back year-after-year? Why do you persist in a field where research shows we lose 50% of new teachers within 5 years?

Learning the factors that lead to teacher persistence can help school district administration, building school administrators, and those in the pre-service educational field better serve educators. Your response is important for learning what factors lead to teacher satisfaction, success, and longevity.

Your participation is voluntary. No personal information such as name, school, or district will be identified.

I look forward to learning why fellow educators remain when so many leave. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at [sally.thorp@sjsd.k12.mo.us](mailto:sally.thorp@sjsd.k12.mo.us) or my doctoral advisor, Dr. Marilyn Grady at [mgrady1@unl.edu](mailto:mgrady1@unl.edu).

Thanks Again,

Sally A. Thorp  
PhD. Doctoral Student  
University of Nebraska~Lincoln

**I am interested in participating in this study and agree to be contacted for an interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D**  
**REMINDER LETTER**

Email Reminder  
Participation in Research Project  
Special Education Teacher Persistence

Date:

Dear:

This is to confirm the date, time and place for the interview we scheduled regarding why special educators remain in the field.

Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Time:\_\_\_\_\_

Place:\_\_\_\_\_

I'm looking forward to visiting with you. If this is no longer a convenient time for you, please contact me at [sally.thorp@sjsd.k12.mo.us](mailto:sally.thorp@sjsd.k12.mo.us), and we can arrange a more convenient time.

Thanks,  
Sally Thorp  
Doctoral Student  
University of Nebraska~Lincoln

**APPENDIX E**  
**INSTITUTIONAL BOARD REVIEW**



<b>University of Nebraska-Lincoln</b> <b>Institutional Review Board (IRB)</b> <b>312 N. 14th St., 209 Alex West</b> <b>Lincoln, NE 68588-0408(402) 472-6965</b> <b>Fax (402) 472-6048</b> <b>irb@unl.edu</b>	<b>FOR OFFICE USE ONLY</b> <b>IRB #:</b> <b>IRB Decision Date:</b> <b>Date Received:</b> <b>Code #:</b> <b>NUgrant Project ID: 11855</b>
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### 1. General Project Information

1. Project Title:

Special Education Teacher Persistence

2. Principal Investigator and 3. Secondary Investigator:

Principal Investigator:	Sally Thorp sally.thorp@sjsd.k12.mo.us	Secondary Investigator:	Marilyn Grady mgrady1@unl.edu 402 472 0974
Department:	Department of Educational Administration	Department:	Department of Educational Administration

4. Type of Project:  
Research

5. Does the research involve an outside institution/agency other than UNL?  
No

6. Where will participation take place (e.g., UNL, at home, in a community building, schools, hospitals,



clinics, prisons, unions, etc)? Please specify and give location if not already listed above.  
The participation will take place in a suitable place that is convenient for the participants.

7. Briefly describe the facilities available for the research (e.g., there will be a quiet room in the school to conduct interviews, a secure lab space is available, etc).

These facilities will have a quiet room where the interviews will take place.

8. Present / Proposed Funding Source:

Not Applicable

9. Study Start Date

11/01/2011

10. Study End Date

11/01/2013

11. Is this a multi-institutional study?

No

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## 2. Project Information Continued

1. Does the research involve Prisoners?

No

2. Will the research only be conducted in schools or educational settings?

Yes

2.a. Does the research study involve only normal education practices (such as research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or research on effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.)?

Yes

3. Does the research involve only the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior?

Yes

3.a. Does the research involve children (under 19 years of age)?

No

4. Does the research involve only the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens?

No

5. Does the research involve only studying, evaluating or examining public benefit or service programs?

No

6. Does the research involve only a taste and food quality evaluation or food consumer acceptance study?

No

7. Does the research present more than minimal risk to human subjects?

No

- Clinical studies of drugs and/or medical devices.
- Collection of blood samples by finger stick, heel stick, ear stick, or venipuncture.



- Prospective collection of biological specimens for research purposes by noninvasive means.
- Collection of data through noninvasive procedures routinely employed in clinical practice, excluding procedures involving x-rays or microwaves.
- Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for non-research purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).
- Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
- Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior).
- Research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

7.a. Does the research involve only procedures included in the previous 8 categories?

Yes

7.b. Could identification of subjects put them at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be socially or economically damaging?

No

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### 3. Description of Participants:

1. In the table below, please the estimated number of participants per category:

	Male	Female	Unspecified	Total
Adults	5	15	0	20
Children	0	0	0	0
Totals	5	15	0	20

2. Please indicate which special groups will be utilized/recruited for your study. Check all that apply.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adults, Non Students       | <input type="checkbox"/> UNL Students                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Children (under age 19)               | <input type="checkbox"/> Decisionally Impaired                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institutionalized Persons             | <input type="checkbox"/> Students                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnant Women/Fetuses/Neonates       | <input type="checkbox"/> Persons with Neurological Impairment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Persons with Limited Civil Freedom    | <input type="checkbox"/> Language Impaired                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Persons with HIV/AIDS                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Prisoners                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Persons with Psychological Impairment | <input type="checkbox"/> Persons with Mental Retardation      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adults w/ Legal Representatives       | <input type="checkbox"/> Handicapped                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employees                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Other                                |

3. Will participants of both sexes/genders be recruited?

Yes

4. Will participation be limited to certain racial or ethnic groups?

No

5. Describe the participant population to be included in this research and how they are selected, including any special characteristics targeted for inclusion.

Special Educators who are currently in the field with 5 or more years longevity will be included. Special Educators will be selected by the researcher and the Snowball Technique will used to recruit as well.





6. Describe your access to the population that will allow recruitment of the necessary number of participants.

I am currently employed in the education field. I will seek to recruit subjects for the study. I will use the Snowball Technique to recruit the subjects as well.

7. The research plan should have adequate provisions to protect the privacy interests of participants.

Explain provisions to protect privacy interests of participants. This refers to how investigators will access private information from or about participants during and after their involvement in the research (e.g., time, place, etc of research procedures)

Interviews will be completed and participant identification will be limited to pseudonym. Data will be stored according to the pseudonym, not the name or district of the participant.

8. Describe your process to ensure that all persons assisting with the research are adequately informed about the protocol and their research-related duties and functions.

An informational letter describing the proposed study and participants function will be designed and distributed to all participants. Participants will be asked to sign as Informal Consent Form before interviews are conducted.

9. If not already described above, will any groups or categories of participants be excluded from this research?

No

10. Will some or all subjects likely be vulnerable to coercion or undue influence?

No



#### 4. Unique Research Methodology or Data Sources

1. Will your project involve audio taping?

Yes

1.a. How long will tapes be kept? Where will they be stored? Who will have access to the tapes? If transcriptions are required, how will transcriptions be handled? Who is doing the transcriptions? Please attach a copy of the confidentiality agreement that transcriptionist will sign.

Audio recordings will be kept for a period of 3 years and stored in a locked file cabinet in the primary investigator's office. The primary and secondary investigator will have a key to the locked cabinet. The primary investigator will transcribe the tapes.

2. Is this project web-based research?

No

3. Is this study utilizing Protected Health Information (PHI; e.g., information obtained from a hospital, clinic, or treatment facility)?

No

4. Does this project involve genetic data, sampling, or analysis?

No

5. Does this project ask questions about illegal drug use or criminal activity that places the participant at risk for legal action?

No

6. Does this project involve photography?

No

7. Does this project involve videotaping?

No

8. Does this project involve archival or secondary data analysis?

No



9. Does this project involve biological samples?

No

10. Does this project ask participants to perform physical tasks?

No

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## 5. Purpose, Methods, & Procedures

### Describe the research purpose of the project

1. What is the significance/purpose of the study? (Please provide a brief 1-2 paragraph explanation in lay terms, to include a brief literature justification.)

The purpose of the study is to identify factors contributing to the persistence and retention of Special Educators in the field of education. Research indicates approximately 50% of new teachers leave the field within the first 5 years of employment.

Identifying the contributing factors for the longevity of Special Educators can give Administrators and Educational Leadership personnel insight for retaining these educators in their districts and buildings.

### Description of the Methods and Procedures

2. Describe the data collection procedures and what participants will have to do.

Participants will participate in an oral interview with the researcher. Within the context of the interview, participants will be asked questions relating to the contributing factors to their longevity in the Special Education field.

3. How long will these procedures take the participants to complete? Please describe the duration of the session, the number of sessions, over what period of time, etc.

Participants will initially complete the interview in one 45 minute session.

4. Will there be any follow-up or will reminders be sent?

Yes

4.a. Please explain:

Participants will be asked to identify their preferred meeting time and place in advance. A reminder will be sent to the participant 24 hours prior to the scheduled meeting to confirm their interview time and place.

5. Differentiate any procedure being done solely for research purposes from procedures being done anyway.

All procedures are solely for research purposes.

6. Describe the time you have available to conduct and complete the research (ex. the time from initiation of the research to completion of data analysis).



2 years

## 6. Description of Recruiting Procedures

### 1. How will the names and contact information for participants be obtained?

The names of participants will be sought from leaders in the field of education. A Snowball Technique will be used to solicit participants as well. Subjects of the study are employees of public institutions and their contact information is public.

### 2. How will participants be approached about participating in the study?

Participants will be approached through a letter requesting their participation in the study. .

## Description of Benefits and Risks

### 3. Explain the benefits to participants or to others.

The Special Education field is experiencing a shortage of highly qualified educators. Understanding the factors that contribute to teacher longevity within this field can impact the retention of this group of teachers.

### 4. Explain the risks to participants. What will be done to minimize the risks? If there are no known risks, this should be stated.

There are no risks to the participants.

### 5. Describe the availability of medical or psychological resources that participants might require as a consequence of the research.

There are no medical or psychological consequences of this research.

### 6. Will compensation (including money, gift certificates, extra credit, etc.) be provided to participants?

No



## 7. Informed Consent Process

1. How will informed consent/assent be obtained?

Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent agreeing to their participation in the study.

2. Who will conduct the consent interview?

Sally Thorp, the researcher will conduct the consent interview.

3. Who will provide consent or permission?

The participant will provide consent or permission.

4. What is the waiting period, if any, between informing the prospective participant and obtaining consent?

None

5. What steps will be taken to minimize the possibility of coercion or undue influence?

Participants will be given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at anytime. Participation is voluntary.

6. What is the spoken language used by those obtaining consent?

English

7. What is the language understood by the prospective participant or the legally authorized representative?

English

8. Will any subjects be decisionally impaired so that they may not have the capacity to give consent?

No

9. In certain cases for children over the age of 14, such as UNL students who are 17 or 18, waivers of informed consent can be granted. Would you like to request a waiver of consent?

No



## 8. Confidentiality & Data

### Description of How Confidentiality will be Maintained

1. The research plan should make adequate provisions to maintain the confidentiality of the data. How will confidentiality of records be maintained?

The data will be stored in a locked and secure file cabinet.

2. Will individuals be identified during data collection or in the results?

No

3. How long will records be kept?

Records will be kept for 3 years.

4. Where will records be stored?

Records will be stored in a locked file in the researcher's office.

5. Who has access to the records/data?

The researcher is the only individual who has access to the records.

6. How will data be reported?

A dissertation will be completed. Data will be reported at conferences or teacher in-services.

### Monitoring of data to ensure safety

7. Does this research involve more than minimal risk to participants?

No





## 9. Attachments and Comments

### Copies of questionnaires, survey, or testing instruments:

An oral interview will be conducted by the researcher. A copy of the questions used is attached to this document.

A letter will be sent to each participant regarding their interest in participating in the study.

Uploaded
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Attachme

nts:

Questions

ThorpSM.

docx

Thorp

Survey

Invitations

.docx

Email

Reminder

.docx

Consent Thorp-Approved.pdf

### General Comments:

Reviewer: Becky

Freeman Date:

10/11/2011

03:42 pm

Comment: Ms.

Thorp and Dr.

Grady,

Your project has been approved. You are authorized to begin data collection.

1. The approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant (file with - Approved.pdf in the file name). Please use this form to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent form, please submit the revised form to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

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I made some minor edits to the informed consent form to shorten it up some (removed the compensation section, edited the section on asking questions, and corrected the phone number for the IRB office.) These edits are in line with approval for an exempt research project.

Your official approval letter will be emailed to you and

uploaded to NUgrant shortly. Good luck with your research!

Becky Freeman

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## APPENDIX F INFORMED CONSENT



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration

### Special Education Teacher Persistence INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of the study is to identify factors relating to the persistence of Special Educators to remain in the field. Research identifies approximately 50% of new teachers leave the field within the first 5 years of employment.

**Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require 45 minutes of your time for the interview. You will be asked to participate in an interview with the study's principal investigator, Sally Thorp, who will audiotape with your permission. You may ask that the tape be turned off at any time during the interview. The tape will be transcribed by the researcher and will be sent to you for review. At that time, you may clarify your responses or give the researcher other information. You may select a place with the researcher for the interview.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks associated with this research.

**Benefits:**

The Special Education field is experiencing a shortage of highly qualified educators. Understanding the factors that contribute to teacher longevity within this field can impact the retention of this group of teachers.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. The audiotapes will be erased after transcription verification is deemed accurate.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may call the investigator at the numbers listed below. If you have any questions or wish to express any concerns, please contact the UNL Research Compliance Services Office at (402) 472-6929.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the University of Nebraska- Lincoln.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Check if you agree to be audiotaped during the interview.

**Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of Research Participant* Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s):**

Sally Thorp Principal Investigator Office: (816) 671-4080

Marilyn Grady, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator Office: (402) 472-0974