An investigation into The influences Leading to Special Educator attrition; A Professional Development Approach

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ABSTRACT

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INFLUENCES LEADING TO SPECIAL EDUCATOR ATTRITION: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Kimberly A. Miller, Ed.D.
Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology, and Foundations
Northern Illinois University, 2019
Kelly Summers and Stephen Tonks, Co-Directors

This dissertation examined the differences within special education preparation and professional development support and the association with special educator feelings of self-efficacy and burn-out. The dissertation is organized into three separate papers. Paper 1 is a review of the research literature on the causes of special educator attrition. Paper 2 utilized the causes of attrition identified in Paper 1 and outlined research to further identify potential causes, and potential solutions. Paper 3 provides an outline of proactive solutions for districts to implement, in order to support special educators through meaningful professional development.

The literature review identified specific factors impacting special educators’ career longevity. Stressors such as the various needs of students, apathetic administrators, insensitive colleagues, and unsupportive or demanding parents effect overall job satisfaction. Additionally, the demands of professional paperwork associated with the role, increase the amount of time spent on non-instructional tasks resulting in less direct contact time with students. Various expectations within the role coupled with insufficient professional development and pre-service training, are additional influences reducing feelings of self-efficacy, concurrently increasing burnout, and ultimately resulting in special educator attrition.
For **Paper 2**, I conducted an interview study with ten special education teachers working in unit districts outside a large Midwestern city in the United States, on their perceptions of leading causes of burnout within their role. Participants were asked about whether the lack of professional development and support is linked to special educator role ambiguity, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using a Grounded Theory approach to identify themes within participant responses that could contribute to a theory and/or remedy to special educator attrition through an effective, consistent professional development model of support. Findings of the study included three major themes impacting special educator self-efficacy and attrition: Professional Development, Lack of Support and Understanding, and Instructional Barriers. In addition to the three major themes, several sub-themes emerged, detailing the perceptions of special educator needs to support their retention in the field. These themes suggest a need for consistent professional development and support relative to the unique needs of the special educator.

For **Paper 3**, I developed a professional development plan utilizing Microsoft Publisher 16.0, attached to this dissertation as a supplementary file. This Professional Development Plan is designed to provide special educators, administrators, as well as regular education counterparts, consistent support and information in the critical components of the identification and eligibility of students, as well as legally required elements within the IEP paperwork and process. This plan will help to alleviate the inconsistency and ambiguity behind the purposes of the legal statutes, while providing support and examples for effective application and implementation. Ultimately, the goal of the plan is to provide special education centered professional development support to reduce overall special educator attrition. Additionally, the plan will help to reduce unnecessary
costs associated with indefensible IEPs, while simultaneously increasing systematic support for the betterment of both special educators and students.
DE KALB, ILLINOIS
AUGUST 2019

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INFLUENCES LEADING TO SPECIAL EDUCATOR ATTRITION: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

BY
KIMBERLY MILLER
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, AND FOUNDATIONS

Doctoral Co-Directors:
Kelly H. Summers & Stephen M. Tonks
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Making the decision and commitment to writing a dissertation was one that was difficult for me at this juncture in my life and career. There were many thoughts and fears that paraded around my mind, challenging my thoughts of the likelihood of being able to actually accomplish this feat, throughout the writing process. It is with extreme gratitude that I type these words of acknowledgment to the people in my life that share this wonderful accomplishment with me; for without you, this would never be.

To my husband, Brad, who encouraged me while selflessly picking up my slack and helping me combat any self-doubt. I can’t thank you enough for being my rock, my sounding board, and my best friend; my daughter, Breanna, for making me work to better myself and serve as a role model for you. While sacrificing time with me was not easy for you, there was never a time that you made me feel that I wasn’t fulfilling my role or questioned my dedication or love for you. This required a level of selflessness from a child/young woman that I cannot emphasize enough gratitude for. It is important to me that I represent a strong woman and overcome any challenges that come my way, so you one day may remember my perseverance when you need to draw from it. To my family who pushed me to be my best, I dedicate this to you. Your unwavering support is more than a girl could ask for, and it is because of you that I am who I am today. Mom, I draw from your strength as a woman and mother. Know that your daughter’s accomplishments are due to your influence and love. Dad, your guidance, support, and direction has ensured that my accomplishments have no limit. To my friends who motivated me along the way, and Dr. Kelly Summers and Dr. Stephen Tonks who more than motivated me; championed and supported me throughout the entire experience, thank you.
DEDICATION

To all of the special education students I have had the pleasure to teach, program for, and influence, you inspire me to continue to make my own personal growth and progress. This is for you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>vi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF APPENDICES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter

**INTRODUCTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of the Dissertation</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Significance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended Audience</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Professional Setting</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PAPER 1. SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS AND THE ROAD FROM PRESERVICE TO SERVICE TO DISINTEREST: WHERE ARE WE GOING WRONG**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Paperwork</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Expectations and Training</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Burnout</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development Frameworks for Teacher Success</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Professional Development Frameworks</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considerations</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAPER 2. HOW TO PROMOTE CAREER LONGEVITY FOR THE SPECIAL EDUCATOR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Special Educator Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Stressors Impacting Special Educators</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Inclusive Practices</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Pre-service Preparation and Training</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Professional Development</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Current Study</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Methodology</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Participants</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Research Design</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Researcher Role</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Interviews</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Procedures</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Data Analysis</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Findings</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Summary of Findings</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Theme 1: Professional Development</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Theme 2: Lack of Support and Understanding</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Theme 3: Professional Barriers</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Purpose of the Study: Review</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Recommendations for Leadership</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Conclusions</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PAPER 3. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN | 82

Introduction | 82

APPENDICES | 83
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Participant Information</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Participant District Demographic</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Special Educator Interview Question Categories and Sample Questions</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Coding and Related Themes</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>SPECIAL EDUCATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>ADULT CONSENT FORM</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>RECRUITMENT EMAILS</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The issue of educational equity for all students came to the forefront during the 1970s with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This act initiated an eventual educational metamorphosis for students who had historically been denied a public education due to disabilities. The concept of equality, mandated through case law, promoted opposition to the prior educational “norm” for students with disabilities, many of whom were considered uneducable or untrainable. Through legal statutes also came language mandating not only the idea of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and due process procedures, but also the Individual Education Plan (IEP), the hallmark of special education, which ensures the needs of the individual child are met within the school setting. Since then, special education legislation has evolved to further fine-tune the provision of services for children with disabilities.

With each federal update of special education legislation, public school districts are required to revamp and update educator practices and special education documentation in order to ensure equal opportunities for children with disabilities. As practices and policies change, special educator responsibilities also change, leading to higher attrition rates compared with general education teachers (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010). A natural concern for stakeholders, especially educational leaders, is the correlation between high attrition rates and teacher burnout, defined as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (Emery & Vanderberg, p. 120). Teachers who feel overwhelmed within their roles may have burnout, which can cause them to leave the field altogether, leading to an eventual loss of highly qualified
teachers from the profession (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010). Special education teacher burnout warrants specific attention due to the unique nature of the role. They are not only teachers, but also case workers who are expected to be experts on all aspects of special education law. As such, my dissertation will focus on the issue of teacher burnout among special educators.

**Structure of the dissertation**

My dissertation attempts to address the issue of special educator burnout, by focusing on the following research questions:

1) How do special educators receive professional development support?
2) What do special educators perceive to be the professional development needs of special educators’ pre-tenure and post tenure?
3) Does the support that special educators receive promote special educator self-efficacy and retention?

I will attempt to answer these research questions through three separate papers, isolated by design, yet amalgamated by the purpose and intent within the study. The first paper provides the background and historical lens of the topic, supported by current research. The second paper proposes theoretical issues that are developing as a result of those topics outlined within the first paper and identifies the ways in which I will investigate associations among teacher self-efficacy, burnout, and professional development. The third paper presents solutions based the research I will conduct in the second paper. I will aim to develop research-based professional development practices for special educators to apply within their field in order to improve their practice and reduce burnout. Each section of the dissertation is further discussed below.
The focal point identified within the first paper relates to the relationship between self-efficacy and special educator attrition. While research supports a correlation between the two, ways to further improve special educator self-efficacy, while simultaneously reducing burn out, are not specified. Contributing factors such as legal parameters, paperwork, the lack of pre-service training and preparation for special educators, inconsistent on the job support, and feelings of isolation are also influences that can affect the relationship between self-efficacy and special educator attrition. A proposed solution to assist with the increase in burnout and reduction of self-efficacy, leading to teacher attrition, is professional development. This proposed solution is the core of the research and organization of the second paper.

The second paper outlines the research design as well as methodology that will be utilized to investigate how professional development, or lack thereof, effects special educator self-efficacy. Specifically, questions intended to provoke both special educators and administrators will gauge how successful their current professional development practices are, the evidence of that success or the contrary, and recommendations for improvement by each of the targeted groups. The qualitative research process will hopefully determine common pitfalls districts fall into, while outlining a series of remedies which will assist in the outcome of the dissertation study: professional development modules for special educators.

The third and final paper will summarize what was studied and learned as a result of the research conducted in the second paper. Factors leading to special educator attrition and decreased self-efficacy will be compared with the results of the research from the second paper. These influences and identified areas of professional development will then be transformed into specific modules for districts to use as a professional development framework. This professional
development framework will provide modules based upon the research from both empirical studies and theoretical research, describe instructional and non-instructional skills and practices, and clearly impart initiatives for districts to impose in the area of professional development support for special educators.

**Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of this study is to assist special educators, administrators, and universities in understanding not only the causes of special educator attrition, but also to identify proactive solutions. While there is research to support causes of special educator attrition, no specific proactive solutions that combat the growing numbers of teachers demonstrating signs of burnout or leaving the field have been outlined. Similarly, no remedies have been identified that bridge the gap between what universities outline as critical elements for beginning special educators to learn and what special educators are expected to know and understand at the district level. This disconnect is one that leads to special educators not only entering the field feeling ill-prepared, but also eventual frustration, job dissatisfaction, and potential abdication. This study’s significance lies in providing proactive solutions to fill these gaps.

When special educators leave the field or begin the trek down the path of job dissatisfaction, the students whom they service, also become negatively affected. Therefore, this study will work to assist all of these stakeholders by identifying specific practices which will assist special educators, either on the job from the identified support administrators can take within the district, or from preservice support universities can provide to promote prerequisite skills and readiness prior to them entering the field.
Intended audience

The scope of the potential remedies outlined within my dissertation is intended to target change in practices at both the university and district level. Therefore, the intended audience of this study of work includes both practitioners and scholars.

Practitioners within the field have inconsistent levels of support specific to instructional and non-instructional practices within the role of the special educator. Given that special educators are specialists, only colleagues or others who have sought out the understanding of that specialty can provide support specific to their areas of need. The limited support system available to special educators, as well as inconsistent information that is provided by colleagues or administrators with limited expertise, has been highlighted through research to be a contributing factor leading to special education attrition. The result of this work will be a framework for professional development, outlining the targeted areas of need identified by special educators, with guidance documents to provide consistent information relative to the specific duties required of the special educator. Both administrators and special educators alike will benefit from consistent topics and support documents that they can reference.

University scholars are targeted audience members due to the initial educational opportunities and impact they provide special educators. As referenced, consistency within training and support is critical at the district level, however a continuum of support is the most ideal, initiated at the university level and supported by districts. Another subsequent benefit is to provide the same opportunity for scholars; an identification of what information special educators are reportedly missing from their pre-services education, and guidance documents that they too can reference to better prepare their students to enter the field.
My Professional Setting

Working in the field of special education and in an administrative position, a majority of my role is to assist special educators with ensuring legal and ethical practices within their roles both in and out of the classroom. Since my District is the fourth largest in the state, we encounter many types of students with disabilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and a range of parental involvement. Consistency in practice is an area that is constantly focused upon, in order to ensure that services provided to students from any part of the District are equitable. This equity does not only relate to supports and resources directly provided to students, it also relates to the consistency of special education processes that fall under the role of the special educator in creating and implementing a student’s IEP.

Professional development has been the targeted solution towards remedying inconsistency or inequitable practices within my District over the last few years. We strive to provide a level of support for special educators with both instructional, and equally as important, non-instructional tasks, such as IEP paperwork, by implementing a professional development plan scaffolded to address the major areas within the role of the special educator. Implementing the professional development plan has allowed me to see how much support special educators, especially recent graduates, need to be successful in their roles.

Feedback from recent graduates include statements about the lack of support and understanding they received within preservice experiences, so much so that many have reportedly never participated in even a ‘mock’ IEP meeting. Likewise, little to no direct instruction is provided specific to the legal paperwork special educators are expected to complete, independently, immediately upon accepting their teaching position. Similarly, there is
an extreme variance with the role and expectations of special educators who come join the District with previous experience from different districts. A hypothesis explaining this inconsistency, which will be studied, is that district administrators often do not have the expertise or understanding of the intricacies within special education to provide support, let alone an understanding of how to create a professional development plan designed to fill in the gaps the universities either left out or expected districts to support. Therefore, special educators who are in districts such as these, are left to their own devices and ‘best guesses’ with legal paperwork and services for students with disabilities. It is the hope of this researcher to help identify remedies to these ironic end results, which lead to not only frustration, but become a recipe for disaster for all stakeholders. Imposing change at the district level is not enough however. Therefore, the intention of this research is that scholars review and implement the supports outlined in this study, alongside district administrators, to ensure optimal results for both special educators and students with disabilities.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this dissertation is self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs or perception that individuals have about their own capabilities (Anderman & Anderman, 2009). Self-perceptions of how well an individual can perform a task impact how motivated that person will be to achieve new personal accomplishments or learn new tasks overall. Self-efficacy also relates to how well individuals’ cope when new challenges are presented and the amount of effort put forth to overcome those challenges (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, if teachers continue to be presented with new tasks and have low self-efficacy,
personal accomplishments and motivation could be affected (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003). The details of this framework will be explained in greater detail below.
PAPER ONE

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS AND THE ROAD FROM PRESERVICE TO SERVICE TO DISINTEREST: WHERE ARE WE GOING WRONG?

Abstract

This paper examines the following factors as they relate to special educator attrition: Job satisfaction, the burden of professional paperwork, ever-changing role expectations, and the lack of job-specific training special educators receive. It also focuses on the influence these factors have on teacher self-efficacy and how feeling less efficacious at work can impact the journey of special educators; from the initial feelings of motivation and enthusiasm to eventual burnout and departure from the field. Finally, this paper presents potential solutions to combat attrition, while improving both special educator self-efficacy and retention through professional development frameworks.

Introduction

Legislative reauthorizations, case law, and state interpretation of federal statutes have resulted in frequent changes to what is expected of special educators. For example, the most recent iteration of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), hereafter referred to as IDEA, puts increased pressure on schools and special education teachers to ensure all new provisions are followed to be legally compliant and prevent potential due process cases. Therefore, case law and the interpretation of the IDEA at the state level are impacting the way special educators’ complete instructional and non-instructional tasks. However, it can be difficult
for teachers to keep up with the myriad of legal changes, which creates confusion when they are not fully informed of the new requirements that fall within their professional responsibilities. These changes are leading to higher attrition rates within the field (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010).

A natural concern for administrators, teachers, and parents, and other stakeholders is preventing special education teachers from leaving the profession. As such, it is important to understand factors that may contribute to, or can prevent, attrition. In this paper, I examine the following factors as they relate to special educator attrition: Job satisfaction, the burden of professional paperwork, ever-changing role expectations, and the lack of job-specific training special educators receive. I then turn the focus toward the influence these factors have on teacher self-efficacy and how feeling less efficacious at work can impact the journey of special educators; from the initial feelings of motivation and enthusiasm to eventual burnout and departure from the field. Finally, I present some potential solutions to not only combat attrition but also to improve both special educator self-efficacy and retention through professional development frameworks.

**Job Satisfaction**

Special educator job stress is linked to a myriad of factors. The varied needs of students can affect instructional retention, sometimes leading to less observable gains due to impaired abilities (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Similarly, apathetic administrators, insensitive colleagues, and unsupportive or demanding parents can also contribute to increased job stress. Stress can have negative effects for special educators in the form of decreased interpersonal relationships with administrators and other teachers, higher turnover rates, and a resistance to change (Dedrick & Raschke). Negative coping strategies such as withdrawing from colleagues, venting and/or
displacing frustrations onto students, poor personal habits, arriving late to work or mismanaging time, are some examples used by special educators, aside from leaving the profession, which have led to lowered expectations, reduced quality and quantity of direct services for their students (Dedrick & Raschke).

Many special educators enter the field with high expectations, inspired to make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities (Brown & Andrews, 2015), yet many of them cite a mismatch between their day-to-day experiences and what they thought being a special educator entailed. This mismatch of experiences in the workplace and the desired or expected experience negatively impacts their job satisfaction (Brown & Andrews). For example, Brown and Andrews examined how field experiences shape educators’ feelings of effectiveness. They surveyed graduate students just before beginning their first year of teaching and with a follow-up survey given immediately after their first year in the classroom. Brown and Andrews found that participants’ teaching experiences had a direct influence on their personal perception of education. To illustrate, in the first survey, 93% of participants indicated they felt all children could learn. However, after their first year of teaching, only 88% of the participants expressed that belief. Similarly, 83% of the pre-service participants felt that they could make a difference in the lives of their students, yet after their first year of teaching only 68% of the participants maintained this belief.

On the whole, recruitment and retention of quality teachers is a priority for school leaders. The teaching field of special education is no different and, in fact, may present a unique case (Kritsonis & Nickson, 2006). For example, Kritsonis and Nickson contend that special educator job satisfaction is directly related to teacher retention within the building in which they work as well as to the field as a whole. Kritsonis and Nickson further state that workplace
conditions play an important factor in the detraction of job satisfaction for teachers: the more favorable the conditions, the more satisfied they will be in their jobs. It is critical for educational leaders to understand what factors contribute to the dissatisfaction that could lead to teacher attrition.

The role of a special educator can vary greatly depending on the needs of the students and the content areas they are expected to support, which can also impact job satisfaction. Similarly, the expectations regarding non-instructional activities, such as professional paperwork, that differ from regular education counterparts can have a significant impact on how special educators perceive stress within their roles.

**Professional Paperwork**

Professional paperwork is a significant part of a special educator’s role. Rather than working directly with kids, it is estimated that special educators spend approximately five hours per week on paperwork, more time than grading papers, communicating with parents and colleagues, overseeing paraprofessionals, and attending IEP meetings (Mehrenberg). Since the majority of that paperwork is related to developing and maintaining IEPs for students on their caseloads, there are numerous legal requirements that must be followed. Although the intention behind the paperwork is to focus on individual student’s needs and the required supports, two of the most common complaints expressed by special educators are that the paperwork is laborious and time consuming and has limited perceived value (Mehrenberg, 2013). Research indicates that 48% of special educators report teaching students with disabilities is not the primary responsibility within their role, which leads them to want to leave the field (Sindelar, McCray, Brownell, & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2014).
According to an observational study of 36 special educators by Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010), paperwork demands consumed on average 12% of their day, and in some cases up to 50%. Therefore, special educators must spend their time in fragmented ways, which interferes with opportunities for them to work directly with students and can lead to job dissatisfaction (Vannest & Hagan-Burke). Matuskey and Olson (1982) investigated six professional sources of stress for special educators: excessive paperwork, inadequate salary, discipline of students, inadequate planning time, student attitude, pupil to teacher ratio, of which excessive paperwork was reported to be the number one stress factor.

Special educators who perceive paperwork to be merely a legal formality that has limited direct impact on daily instruction can get caught up in the minutia of the process and forget the purpose behind it, negatively impacting teacher morale (Mehrenberg). For example, the first mandatory element of an IEP is

A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, including –
(i) How the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as for nondisabled children); or
(ii) For preschool children, as appropriate, how the disability affects the child's participation in appropriate activities. (34 CFR§§ 300, 2013)

This statement is used to justify the supports and services outlined throughout the document and, therefore, is the most important part of the IEP. However, due to the implications of this statement, special educators can easily get caught up in the process of how to document the information, as opposed to focusing on the content and purpose behind it. For example, special educators can and should create goals and objectives utilizing the present levels of academic and functional performance statements. Many however, tend to over focus on the format and wording of the goal as opposed to using the present performance to reasonably calculate where the
student should be performing in a year. While the IEP processes are important within the compliance aspect of writing IEPs, forgetting the purpose behind the documentation can add feelings of not only frustration but also apathy toward aspects of their role if special educators perceive paperwork as merely hoops to jump through.

Additionally, as litigation mandates change within the practice of special education, methods of documenting these practices are not excluded from having to change. Elements of paperwork such as goal progress reporting timelines, transition plans, and documentation of responses to behaviors are changes that have been added or changed since the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, often prompted by due process litigation (Education U. D., 2005). It is reasonable to conclude that the process of re-learning paperwork practices can result in some of the most veteran special educators feeling less efficacious, concluding that paperwork is a mere legal formality and ultimately triggering work related stress.

Experienced special education teachers who must re-learn practices are not the only ones impacted by changing expectations. Novice teachers with no experience or little preparedness within the application of the IEP in the field can perceive paperwork as confusing and cumbersome. Beginning special educators report that they had never attended an IEP meeting, written an IEP, or received very little preparation for the paperwork that accompanies special education (Whitaker, 2003) Novice special educators stated that the most beneficial training took place on the job (Mehrenberg, 2013), in that practice with paperwork in a real on-the-job setting was the most meaningful and they learned how to complete the paperwork mainly from colleagues as opposed to administrative support. In fact, administrative support was criticized by special educators due to their lack of understanding of special education paperwork. It comes to no surprise that if administrators lack an understanding of critical elements within the role of a
special educator, such as paperwork, supportive and proactive training will also be lacking, increasing the likelihood of frustration from paperwork revisions (Mehrenberg, 2013).

**Role Expectations and Training**

Special educators who reportedly rely on colleagues and on-the-job training for a clear understanding of aspects within their role such as professional paperwork and the application of the IEP, highlights not only the concern that special educators are entering the field unprepared for the new roles they are expected to fill but also the absence of effective preservice training. Aside from professional responsibilities that differ within the roles, other challenges that special educators face are the lack of preparation they have received, in comparison to their regular education counterparts, to deliver appropriate content area instruction (Brownell & Leko, 2009). Many preparation programs for special educators focus on general instructional practices and behavior management for students in grades K to 12. While direct instruction and cognitive strategy instruction provide special educators an understanding of what is “special” in special education, it does not prepare them to instruct specific content, which is an expectation within the field (Brownell & Leko, p. 66). Research has shown that while special educators may be more prepared in classroom management, their instructional practices in the area of reading were shown to be average to below average compared to general education teachers. Special educators who previously had preparation in content knowledge and took fast track special education certification courses later in their careers may have content knowledge but lack pedagogical knowledge necessary for the special education classroom (Brownell & Leko). In both instances, the special educator with more extensive content and less pedagogical knowledge, or vice versa, is required to help students and general education counterparts design and implement instruction across the curriculum (Brownell & Leko).
Since its reauthorization in 2004, the IDEA has increased expectations for special education students and their teachers, adding to the fundamental concern regarding special education instructional integrity. Students with disabilities must have access to the general education curriculum and make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state academic content standards (Brownell & Leko, 2009). As state and local policymakers work to improve the education for all learners by increasing demands, the fundamental shift of how students are taught requires professional development to be at the center of systematic reform initiatives (Birman, Desimone, Garet, Porter, & Yoon, 2001). Teaching practices aligned with high standards require teachers to have a deeper understanding of their subject areas to promote students’ deeper understanding (Birman et al.). Professional development efforts must therefore reinforce this deepening of knowledge and skills for all educators while simultaneously providing special educators with an understanding of how their instructional strategies work within the general education curriculum to ensure performance on state assessments.

Given that preservice preparation for special educators focuses on general instructional practices and behavior management, special educators may not be prepared for teaching practices based on high standards (Brownell & Leko, 2009). Depending on the preparation programs and professional development special educators have received, the difference between what content and pedagogical knowledge they possess may be vast. School-based collaboration efforts that work to unite special and general educators allow for the development of knowledge among both groups of teachers (Brownell & Leko, 2009). Research into special education novice teacher challenges and teacher attrition have also shown that special educators need continued support in the areas of special education policies and procedures, emotional support, procedural knowledge about their schools, and acquiring resources, as well as paperwork, pedagogy, and
content knowledge (Garvan, et al., 2009). As special educators have reported, the most significant training has predominantly come from on the job experience through collaboration with colleagues. This approach however has had little effect on special educator burnout, leaving administrators and stakeholders with the responsibility of reestablishing professional development models that increase self-efficacy and reduce role ambiguity.

Additional expectations from the 2004 IDEA reauthorization include educating students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Inclusion, refers to educating students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007), thereby increasing their time within the general education setting. Services and specialized instruction are, therefore, brought to the student as opposed to removing the student from the classroom to receive specialized instruction (Hadadian & Chiang). This model of inclusion relates to the Least Restrictive Environment (hereafter LRE) provision of the IDEA, which states that students with disabilities will be educated to the maximum extent appropriate in the Least Restrictive Environment (Education U. D., 2005). The impact of an inclusion model affects both special education and general education teachers, now expected to come to the classroom equipped with teaching techniques and curricular strategies to effectively educate special education students within the general education environment (Hadadian & Chiang).

Research by Emich (2011) on special educators’ perceptions of inclusion concluded that special educators who worked primarily in general education classrooms were at more risk of burnout (Billingsley, 2004). The service delivery and changing roles that result from special educators working in a general education classroom as opposed to a more traditional setting (e.g., self-contained and resource classrooms) contribute to role conflict. Special educators required to team teach in general education classrooms have reportedly felt that they are working
in areas for which they are not wanted or prepared (Billingsley). Additionally, special educators who find it difficult to implement an inclusive program model due to lack of support or resistance from general education teachers may find their work unfulfilling leading to an early departure from the field (Billingsley).

Training and preparation experiences for special educators can be vastly different depending on the preparation avenue they choose. Traditional approaches for students to attend a four- or five-year formal university preparation program have been ineffective in providing enough prepared teachers to keep up with the demand needed by districts (Sindelar, McCray, Brownell, & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2014). Additionally, the enactment of No Child Left Behind (hereafter NCLB) in 2001 perpetuated the inconsistency in teacher preparedness by shifting the focus from teacher certification to a standard of highly qualified, leaving the determination of whether a teacher was highly qualified to teach at the state level. In some states teachers with bachelor’s degrees, with or without formal preparation for teaching, could be deemed highly qualified in certain states as long as they demonstrated sufficient knowledge on state exams (Disabilities, 2011). Districts have been left no other choice but to employ teachers who have participated in abbreviated training programs or lacking certification altogether (Sindelar et al.).

Coursework and preservice student teaching experiences within various preparation avenues have a direct correlation to teacher attrition (Sindelar, McCray, Brownell, & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2014). Historically, student teaching has been the primary means by which beginning teachers can prepare for the responsibilities to come within the role. Ironically, while the U.S. Secretary of Education’s 2002 Annual Report on Teacher Quality criticizes teacher educators for not fully preparing beginning teachers for the reality of the classroom, the report
subsequently recommends a reduction or elimination of student teaching experiences altogether (Connelly & Graham, 2009).

Research conducted by Connelly and Graham (2009) found that special educators with extensive preparation, 10 weeks or more of preservice student teaching experience, were half as likely to leave teaching in the first three years as opposed to teachers with little to no preparation (Sindelar et al.). According to the research, nearly 80% of those special educators with more than 10 weeks of student teaching experience remained in the field one year later. This is a significant contrast to one third of the nearly 29% of special educators who participated in less than 10 weeks of student teaching, exiting the field a year later (Connelly & Graham, 2009). This data suggests that special educators with less student teaching experience are at greater risk to leave the field after only one year as opposed to those with greater student teaching experience.

Likewise, Boe et al. (2007) found that more than half (54%) of beginning teachers from alternative certification programs had no student teaching experiences and were provided with only half as many teaching methods courses compared to those from traditional programs (Connelly & Graham). Given the relationship between teacher attrition and preservice experiences, alternative programs which encourage a ‘fast track approach’, therefore run the risk of increasing attrition rates as opposed to providing special educators the preparation needed to sustain their careers. Similarly, traditional preparation programs should reconsider which preservice experiences maximize the potential for teacher retention, since retaining experienced teachers is the basis for increased student achievement (Connelly & Graham).

Self-Efficacy

A factor that may have some influence on special educator job satisfaction is self-efficacy. Stemming from social cognition theory, self-efficacy theory supports that people can
shape their own actions, placing the responsibility on the individual to elicit change (Benson, Houchins, Jolivette, & Viel-Ruma, 2010). Individual perceptions of how well a person can perform a task impact how motivated a person will be to achieve new personal accomplishments or learn new tasks overall. Further, self-efficacy relates to how well individuals cope with new challenges and the amount of effort someone puts forth to overcome those challenges (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy also refers to the beliefs or perception individuals have about their own capabilities (Anderman & Anderman, 2009). Therefore, if special educators continue to be presented with new tasks and have low self-efficacy, personal accomplishments and motivation could be affected (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003).

Self-efficacy theory has four main components or expectations: Performance Accomplishments, Vicarious Experience, Verbal Persuasion, and Emotional Arousal.

Performance accomplishments refer to the strengthening of individual efficacy through repeated experiences of success (Bandura, 1977). The more a person experiences feelings of achievement and success, the more likely he/she will be to attempt new challenges or sustain motivation to overcome small failures. Repeated success and the individual perception of personal accomplishments that follow positively correlate to strong self-efficacy (Bandura).

Vicarious experiences are those that elicit efficacy through indirect evidence of personal accomplishments (Bandura, 1977). This indirect evidence is gathered mainly through modeling and observation rather than doing. According to Bandura, “Seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts” (Bandura, p. 197). This efficacy construct however, is less likely to preserve feelings of self-efficacy due to the reliance on perception and observation of other people’s success as opposed to feeling a sense of accomplishment of their
own (Bandura). Similarly, verbal persuasion is also a weaker construct in its promotion of self-efficacy due to the reliance on the persuasion of others to induce one’s feelings of accomplishments (Bandura). Therefore, when challenged by tasks that are repeatedly perceived as arduous or troublesome, individuals who relied on verbal persuasion are less likely to overcome them. Individual self-efficacy is based on ideas of what one could accomplish rather than drawing from actual task mastery experience. Lastly, emotional arousal focuses on individuals gaining a sense of self-awareness to alleviate unnecessary emotional responses that may inhibit performance (Bandura). High emotional arousal can negatively impact one’s perceived performance ability, especially when the arousal is aversive (Bandura).

When educators have a history of success of personal accomplishments, they are more likely to take on new tasks and attempt to master new experiences. When special education teachers are posed with new tasks, teachers with higher self-efficacy will be more likely to attempt to master those tasks and therefore build resiliency toward future demands (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010). Changes to expectations within professional responsibilities can impact an individual’s sense of self-efficacy and lead to teacher burnout or attrition. Most often special educators are required to implement rapidly changing expectations surrounding the legal paperwork and the implementation of services and supports within IEPs due to shifts through litigation at the state level. This can drastically impact how adept and efficacious special educators feel about their performance within their role, leading to teacher burnout.

**Teacher Burnout**

Burnout is defined as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010, p. 120). Teachers who feel overwhelmed within their
roles may have burnout, which can cause them to leave the field altogether, leading to an eventual loss of highly qualified teachers from the profession (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010).

Special education teachers may feel burned out due to multiple extrinsic factors and heightened expectations (Emery & Vanderberg, 2010). The legalities surrounding special education learners, requirements within IEPs, instructional techniques, behavioral management, and data collection all increase the workload for special educators, which may negatively affect job satisfaction (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Recent amendments to IDEA have required changes and additions to the non-instructional job-related tasks of special educators. Data collection, progress monitoring of student performance, planning and implementation of supplemental aids and services within the general education setting, and procedural safeguards are all additions through the amendments to the role of special educators and required subsequent paperwork. These changes can negatively correlate to a teacher’s self-efficacy if the teacher does not believe in his/her ability to complete the tasks or the tasks affect overall job satisfaction (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003). This relationship is the antithesis of what promotes longevity within the special educator teaching career, self-efficacy, and overall job satisfaction. Special education teacher burnout is a problem due to the potential lack of highly qualified educators, trained to work with high needs populations, leaving the field of education.

While burnout within the role of the special educator is highly probable, the progression from the initial passionate idealistic educator to subsequently disillusioned and discouraged is described through a hierarchical four stage process accompanied with identified stress symptoms: The Invigorated Good Shepard, The Mundane, Repetitious Soldier, The Disgusted, Thwarted Rebel, and The Apathetic, Unresponsive Robot (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). While special educators may fluctuate through these stages at different rates, it is noted that subsistence
at one stage versus another is highly correlated to the amount of internal and external support provided to the teacher (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

The Invigorated Good Shepherd stage refers to special educators upon completion of preservice training programs, idealistic and energized to find ways to help students prone to failure (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003). Their high levels of energy and high expectations can lead them to become workaholics, defining themselves as the primary person accountable for meeting the individual needs of their students. For many educators in this stage, work is their primary life focus (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Identified stress symptoms in this stage include working more than eight hours a day, relying on inner resources to solve problems as opposed to utilizing a support team, individually designing and creating elaborate behavior and instructional programs, and the ability to feel successful with each student they are assigned (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

The second stage, identified as The Mundane, Repetitious Soldier, describes an educator who has begun to lose the initial enthusiasm and idealism (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). The excitement of developing new programs or implementing new behavioral programs for students begins to lessen due to feelings of isolation and/or criticism from colleagues uncertain of the special educator’s role. Stressors such as academic and behavioral difficulties among students, IEP paperwork demands, and the perception of being misunderstood by regular educator counterparts, i.e. smaller student to teacher ratio equating to smaller job responsibilities, begins to take a physical and psychological toll (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Additional identified stress symptoms in this stage include somatic symptoms and an imbalance of time spent between pedagogical matters and significant others in their lives (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

The Disgusted, Thwarted Rebel phase describes a special educator who has feelings of hopelessness and an incapability of making changes in some students’ lives (Dedrick & Raschke,
Factors such as a lack of parental involvement, inconsistent student engagement, and lack of support services necessary for students with higher needs all lead special educators to feel they cannot make the difference in students’ lives. Self-efficacy and self-competence are questioned in this stage, leading these educators to consider their career choice as a whole (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Additional stress symptoms include increased somatic symptoms, questioning the value of teaching and the impact a teacher can make in the lives of their students, and feeling increased obstacles that cannot be overcome leading to feelings of ineffectiveness for students (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

The final stage, The Apathetic and Unresponsive Robot, analogizes special educators as robots, merely going through the motions due to emotional and professional withdraw. The mindset shift becomes meeting the minimal requirements of the job, i.e. replacing individualized instruction with lessons taught previously, thereby circumventing individual needs. Additional stress symptoms include feelings of exhaustion, being powerless or insignificant, and the feeling of disliking teaching overall but uncertain a career change is feasible (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

While stress within any given job is inevitable, the response to stressors has large effects on not only special educators, but also their classroom management, student achievement, and even school organization (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). When educators feel efficacious, they are able to grow from positive anxiety within the workplace, often called eustress (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Conversely, their lack of self-efficacy, or negative anxiety or distress, can negatively impact job performance as well as their physical or psychological well-being. Special educators in distress can demonstrate less tolerance to frustrating classroom events, which impacts classroom management and could result in a classroom that is out of control (Dedrick &
Raschke). Special educators who are burned out also demonstrate a preoccupation with their own personal concerns and are likely to be less sensitive to the individual needs of their students. This often deprives students of a good educational experiences and even jeopardizes students’ own sense of self-worth as they struggle to cope with a distressed teacher. This can lead students to employ negative coping strategies, negatively affecting their overall academic and behavior achievement (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

Edmonson and Thompson (2001) researched the relationship between burnout and role tensions for special education teachers. Prior research that focused on burnout and teacher attrition in the field attempted to differentiate between several different characteristics of burnout according to sub categories such as age, gender, professional training, and years of experience (Edmonson & Thompson, 2001). In an effort to analyze prior research as well as identify factors affecting future burnout for special educators, Edmonson and Thompson conducted a meta-analysis to gain a more thorough understanding of burnout within the role of the special education teacher. Edmonson and Thompson (2001) had six main objectives: identify all primary studies addressing burnout among special educators; research the hypothesis, target population, and burnout constructs and predictor constructs of the primary studies; specify the statistical hypothesis and inferential rules found in each research hypothesis; estimate population effect sizes for each research hypothesis; identify moderator variables relative to each research hypothesis; and explore the stability of each population effect size (Edmonson & Thompson, 2001).

To achieve these objectives, five meta-analyses were used (Edmonson & Thompson, 2001). The critical underlying goal was to understand and identify the specific role employees felt they played within their position. This factor, described within the study as a role construct,
was further expounded to include role ambiguity, role conflict, role expectations conflict, role overload, and self-role concept, and their relationships to burnout (Edmonson & Thompson, 2001).

Study findings indicated that as role ambiguity increased, emotional exhaustion also increased. Similarly, there was an inverse relationship between role ambiguity and personal accomplishment. Therefore, as educators find their roles to be more ambiguous, their sense of personal accomplishment decreases, while their emotional exhaustion increases (Edmonson & Thompson, 2001). Consistent with self-efficacy theory, when a person feels less capable of performing certain tasks, their self-efficacy becomes negatively affected (Bandura, 1977). According to the research by Edmonson and Thompson, this solidifies that inverse relationship between burnout and self-efficacy.

As the growth of special education student enrollment grows, so does the need for qualified special educators, a concern that is affecting districts nationally (Connelly & Graham, 2009) as special education teacher attrition rates rise. To combat many of the constructs that negatively impact special educator retention, proactive measures need to be implemented, specifically in the areas of professional paperwork, changing instructional practices, pre-service preparation, and ongoing professional development.

Recommendations to remedy some of the negative feelings of professional paperwork for special educators, directed administrators, teacher-educators, and other stakeholders to invest in multiple ways of providing paperwork assistance, in tandem as opposed to isolation (Mehrenberg, 2013). It is important to ensure that special educators fully understand the value of paperwork. For example, IEPs should be treated as a valuable tool for planning, instruction, and assessment as opposed to a legal hoop to jump through that unnecessarily takes special educators
away from direct contact with their students (Mehrenberg, 2013). Given the importance paperwork plays within the role of the special educator and the fact that it is more likely increase rather than decrease in the future, special educators need to feel comfortable with paperwork, and they need to clearly understand the reasons behind it to feel successful.

Similarly, as special educators work to follow the provisions under the IDEA, specific to LRE, it is imperative that there is an understanding of how to best implement inclusive practices. Understanding inclusion and the implications on both regular and special educators requires a level of mutual understanding to ensure that services are consistently provided, resources are effectively allocated, and individualized plans are reflective of student needs within both educational environments. As educators work to include students with disabilities within the regular education setting, it is beneficial to ensure that they have formal training and curriculum in special education. A study conducted by Bender, Vail, and Scott (1995) found a positive correlation between teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and the number of courses taken in teaching students with disabilities (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007). Likewise, inclusive practices have been found to promote academic achievement, social interaction, and behavioral skills for both students with disabilities as well as their non-disabled peers. Educators, therefore, need to be prepared to promote the inclusive practices mandated in the IDEA regardless of the content specialty (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007).

Although the mandates within the IDEA are clear, the implementation and application of those mandates within the classroom continue to create much debate among theorists and practitioners (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007). Preparation for teaching students with disabilities within the general education environment needs to extend past instructional and curricular strategies and include strategies that promote effective collaboration between special and general
educators (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007).

While there are many reasons outside of pre-service preparation that may lead to attrition, teacher educators have a responsibility to identify and promote aspects of pre-service experiences that will assist with immunizing special educators from leaving the field early in their careers (Connelly & Graham, 2009). In 1976, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) partnered with the National for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE is responsible for the accreditation of colleges of education nationally, while CEC is responsible for recognizing quality special education preparation programs. Across the country, special education preparation programs submit for accreditation and recognition by NCATE and CEC, and students interested in pursuing a career in special education are encouraged to verify that the preparation program they are considering are approved by both organizations (Children, 2000).

The guidelines created by the CEC are designed to ensure that programs preparing individuals for various professional roles: special educator, administrator, etc. are done so within their standards of fidelity (Children). Therefore, recommendations regarding preservice experiences are outlined within their guidance documents. The CEC guidelines define the minimum extent of knowledge and skills necessary at a preservice level for various roles within special education. The guidelines have required practicum experiences to be no less than 10 full weeks of supervised experience within the student’s intended area of specialization (Children, 2000). Additionally, the CEC guidelines outline the basic knowledge and skills every special educator should possess to ensure special education preparation programs align with the profession. The eight core competency areas set forth by the CEC include: 1) Philosophical, Historical, and Legal Foundations of Special Education, 2) Characteristics of Learners, 3) Assessment, Diagnosis, and Evaluation, 4) Instructional Content and Practice, 5) Planning and

Although the CEC has made recommendations for what broad based knowledge and skills college and universities should ensure special educators acquire prior to initiating their career, the implementation of this information has reportedly been inconsistent as alternative programs, for example, provide condensed versions of preparation (Connelly & Graham, 2009).

**Professional Development Frameworks for Teacher Success**

Despite the recognition of the importance of professional development and the millions of dollars schools, districts, and the federal government spend, the result is a fragmented and superficial approach, ineffectively supporting teachers and contributing to what is considered to be “the most serious and unsolved problem for policy and practice in American education today” (Borko, 2004, p. 1). Professional development criticism revolves around historical approaches of workshops with limited follow up, which are too short in nature (Fishman, Gallagher, Penuel, & Yamaguchi, 2007) and rarely center around specific approaches to special education professional development (Jones, Stevens, & West, 2006).

For professional development to be effective, it must be coherent and connected to other aspects of the educational reform agenda (Fox & Lang, 2004). Joyce and Showers (1995) indicate that when teachers participate in traditional workshops with no follow up activities, the level of implementation of those trained practices is between 5 and 10 percent. When teachers from a variety of schools received training and follow-up activities with study groups and peer coaching teams, the implementation rate of the practices were between 75-90 percent, increasing that rate to between 90-100% when the whole school faculties are involved (Fox & Lang, 2004).
Similarly, Boudah and Mitchell (1998) found that professional development that was considered to be an “authentic professional development model” that included one and one-half to two hours of on-site training, modeling, and follow-up trainer observation and feedback had significantly better results than a traditional form of professional development. The new strategy was used at least once by 95% of the group who participated in the authentic professional development as opposed to 38.5% from the traditional professional development group that lacked follow up and modeling/practice opportunities (Fox & Lang, 2004).

For professional development to be the most effective, activities will need to incorporate ongoing job-embedded activities that call for interaction and reflection as opposed to traditional passive methods of knowledge dissemination (Fox & Lang, 2004). Both individual and collective learning opportunities consisting of continual feedback and support are ideal, since there is often what is referred to as an implementation dip – a period of time when a teacher first implements a skill and feels an awkwardness upon initial implementation (Fox & Lang). With ongoing support from colleagues and administrators, teachers are more likely to implement new strategies and embed them within regular practice.

As an alternative to traditional professional development methods, Fox and Lang (2004) have offered professional development format options that can be chosen to meet the individual needs of the teacher. These strategies include 1) Action Research: Having teachers identify an area in which they want to improve using transitional research and collaborating with peers to share results, make changes and improve their practice 2) Cases: Discussing real world examples of teaching through cases in order to analyze different teaching and learning strategies and the related benefits or drawbacks 3) Coaching: Utilizing a person to listen, observe, ask questions, and facilitate reflections to help colleagues grow within their practice 4) Curriculum
Development: Teachers participate in grade level or school committees to design curricula, in order to develop and share curriculum, in order to encourage connections between disciplines 5) Journaling and Reflective Logs: Teachers analyze their practice by recording and summarizing events and experiences, encouraging perspective taking and provides teachers with logs that can be shared with colleagues for feedback and additional insight 6) Mentoring: Using seasoned professionals to provide insight to the school culture, share resources, and support new staff with problem solving, lesson planning and the development of instructional strategies 7) Networks: A group of practitioners who come together on a voluntary basis with a sense of commitment to an issue, shared purpose, and direction to build collaborative relationships with colleagues 8) Portfolios: A collection of artifacts and evidence of teaching practices gathered over time that can help teachers showcase good practices for individual reflection, study groups, and discussion amongst colleagues 9) Study Groups: Small groups of staff members who meet to discuss topics of need/interest to provide professional development and/or support for various challenges 10) Train the Trainers: District staff or teachers are trained to in turn train other colleagues, allowing for collegial learning models that promote coaching and mentoring relationships, study groups, etc. (Fox & Lang, 2004).

Choosing the best approach to the professional development format depends on the needs of the teacher and the complexity of the desired learning outcome. For example, teachers who are struggling with learning how to write IEPs may require professional development formats that allow for embedded theory and practice as well as support throughout implementation (Fox & Lang, 2004). This will also require administrators to work collaboratively with personnel charged with planning professional development activities to ensure they are building a system capacity for future development and ongoing trainings (Fox & Lang, 2004).
National Professional Development Frameworks

While national efforts in the area of education have influenced educational policies through measures such as advising and researching educational practices and allocating funding in compensatory programs, systemic approaches to improvement have been left to state and local levels to develop (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000). In 2000, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), a non-profit association focused on professional development and school improvement, created a set of standards and guidelines districts can use to evaluate their professional development models. NSDC focused on these main constructs for districts to adopt within their professional development models (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000):

Create a new model- “The Learning School”

The traditional model of incremental professional development should be replaced with a systematic approach to teacher learning through embedded professional development activities. This model requires common planning time for teachers who share similar students and encourages them to discuss similar strengths and weaknesses of their student populations, create lessons together, and practice and share new teaching methods and problem solve collectively. Teachers are encouraged to sit in on other teachers’ lessons to observe and learn as well as provide feedback. These teachers would mentor other teachers, plan, research, and analyze student work in groups to develop a mutual understanding of excellent and acceptable student work (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).

Under this model, schools incorporate professional development into everything teachers do and directly link that development to school improvement goals. Consultants can be brought in for specific tasks and staff can be sent for outside training in specific areas, but that too
becomes part of the collective professional development approach as information is disseminated, discussed, and incorporated into the larger learning school (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).

*Provide Additional Time for Professional Development:*

For professional development to work effectively, sufficient time needs to be allocated. According to the NSDC (2000), approximately 60-80 percent of professional development programs last under eight hours, but studies show that teachers are three to five times more likely to show improved teaching through professional development lasting eight hours or more. Therefore, the recommendation is for schools to creatively adjust schedules to increase the time for teachers to collaborate, share lessons, and plan by 25 percent.

*Increase Collaboration as Part of Professional Development*

Since professional development in this model requires an embedded practice throughout the day, it is recommended that teacher learning occurs by activities such as peer review – learning from observing others. Teachers learn by discussion but also by the observation of colleagues. In this model, experienced teachers can even have a reduced load so they can mentor novice teachers within the classroom, observing and providing feedback as the teaching occurs. This feedback allows for growth that would surpass preservice work since many classroom nuances and strategies are best addressed in practice. Similarly, experienced teachers can also utilize time to use peer review to help less successful teachers improve their practice or districts can bring in consultants to provide similar feedback. Mentorship and coaching during the day, as opposed to before and after school, provide meaningful feedback that can be personalized to individual instructional practice. This mentorship can therefore reduce the rate of teacher attrition as novice teachers learn from the expertise of veteran colleagues, simultaneously developing partnerships and support systems within the schools (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).
Strategies and recommendations from NSDC align with the recommendations from Fox and Lang (2004), but continue to be broadly focused. Local interpretation in accordance with these methodologies can differ greatly due to the lack of recommendations of what information should be disseminated and prioritized. Therefore, districts leaders may struggle with replicating a professional development model that maximizes the intended growth due to the potential variance of interpretation, resulting in ‘piecemeal’ versions of the model.

**Considerations**

The purpose under IDEA was to create opportunities for students with disabilities that are equal to those of their non-disabled peers. With special educator attrition rates increasing, students with disabilities are left with inconsistent instructional practices and even replacement teachers filling the instructional void. In 2001, approximately 808,000 students with disabilities were taught by personnel not certified in special education (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Special educators who feel less efficacious due a lack of preparation to handle the ever changing responsibilities within the role, the lack of professional development received on the job, and overall role ambiguity threaten the quality of education students with disabilities receive (Connelly & Graham, 2009).

Research from the United States Department of Education in 2004 found that a shortage of fully certified special educators had increased to 47,532 or 11.4% of the total number of special educators (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Since research indicates that special educators early in their careers are the most vulnerable to attrition, professional development models and on the job support are critical. While it is feasible to conclude that attrition rates, to some extent, can also be affected by more meaningful pre-service experiences, research shows that special educators feel they need the most assistance upon entering the field in the following areas:
pedagogical concerns (instructional concerns, lack of appropriate materials and resources, student behavior and classroom management), system information (information about policies, paperwork, procedures, guidelines, and expectations related to district special education programs), and special education issues (mainstreaming and collaboration with regular education teachers, working with paraprofessionals, scheduling students, and writing IEPs) (Whitaker, 2003). Studies indicate that while beginning special educators report needing a great deal of assistance in a number of different areas, the assistance that they receive in the field is far less than they need. Likewise, special educators report receiving the majority of their support from special education colleagues as opposed to mentors and administration, but it is still not enough to combat the roles and responsibilities special educators face, especially within the first year (Whitaker, 2003).

To ensure that students with disabilities are afforded equal educational opportunities commensurate with their non-disabled peers, it is critical for districts to provide consistent professional development support to combat special educator attrition. Likewise, pre-service preparation programs are not providing effective training and experiences that are combating teacher attrition. While a special educator shortage continues to plague school districts across the nation, the number of students with disabilities is increasing, forcing districts to continually hire new staff and/or resort to hire special educators from alternative fast track certification programs.

These efforts only serve to exacerbate the reduction of efficacious special educators who can effectively serve our students with disabilities. While National Professional Development Frameworks provide general guidelines for professional development strategies, they are too general and do not address the unique aspects special educators need support with within their role. Similarly, the same concern exists with regards to districts supporting special educators, as
there are no specific special education frameworks for reference. District administrators are either left to determine the areas which are important for professional development, or they rely on colleagues to support each other in the various aspects within the special educator role.

Special educators, and their students, deserve consistent and effective professional development specific enough to reduce role ambiguity and provide the support that will combat burnout and attrition.
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PAPER TWO

HOW TO PROMOTE CAREER LONGEVITY FOR THE SPECIAL EDUCATOR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Abstract

Factors such as workplace stress, federal mandates, job satisfaction, changes in role expectations, and the lack of training for special educators have jeopardized special educator retention. This study will examine how support, or lack thereof, is related to self-efficacy and burnout, the specific factors which may contribute to special educator attrition, and how attrition may be able to be halted through high quality professional development. Through a qualitative method of research and the application of a Grounded Theory approach, this researcher will work to better identify factors negatively effecting teacher retention, while simultaneously ascertaining quality professional development areas. The awareness of special educator needs through the results of this study will not only help to remedy teacher attrition, but also promote special educator self-efficacy.

Introduction

Many conversations relating to educational improvement across our nation share a similar thread: How do we create effective instructional practices that impact student achievement? As practices for assessing educational effectiveness continue to focus on student growth in all categories, the pressure for educators to demonstrate impacts on achievement
extends to both regular and special educators alike. While some changes effect general practices across districts, the amendments of IDEA are specific to special educators' roles and functions, which further elicits special educators’ feelings of disassociation or isolation from their general education peers (Wolfe, 2002). Changes in both instructional and non-instructional practices have inadvertently created workplace stress, a reduction in self-efficacy, and an increase in teacher attrition for special educators across the nation (Billingsley, 2004).

In order to investigate remedies for special educator attrition, it is important to understand factors that may contribute to, or prevent, attrition. Job satisfaction, the burden of professional paperwork, ever-changing role expectations, and the lack of training for special educators have varied degrees of influence on the role of a special educator. Likewise, understanding how those factors begin to erode an educator’s initial feelings of determination, grit, and excitement upon entering the classroom, allow for potential solutions to increase special education teacher retention, impacting the journey from a path towards burnout, to one of career longevity.

1.1 Special Educator Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction has a tremendous impact on special educators’ retention and overall feelings of effectiveness within the classroom. Many special educators enter the field with high expectations, inspired to make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities (Brown & Andrews, 2015), yet many of them cite a discrepancy between their expectations and actual day to day experiences within their role, which negatively impacts job satisfaction (Brown & Andrews, 2015). Special educator roles vary greatly depending on the needs of the students they serve and the content areas they support, all of which can also impact job satisfaction. Similarly, the expectations regarding non-instructional activities that differ from their regular education
teacher counterparts can have a significant impact on how special educators perceive the stress within their roles (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).

Another factor that may influence special educator job satisfaction is self-efficacy, which is an individual’s perceptions of how well she can perform a task. Said another way, self-efficacy refers to the beliefs or perception individuals have about their own capabilities (Anderman & Anderman, 2009). Bandura (1977) maintains that people can shape their own actions, placing the responsibility on the individual to elicit change, and self-efficacy plays a large role in how well individuals elicit change. Importantly, self-efficacy impacts how motivated a person will be to achieve new personal accomplishments or learn new tasks, how well individuals cope with new challenges, and the amount of effort someone puts forth to overcome those challenges (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, if teachers continue to be presented with new tasks and they have low self-efficacy, personal accomplishments and motivation could be negatively affected (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003).

1.2 Stressors Impacting Special Educators

While stressors are customary within the educational profession, special educators have both heightened instructional and non-instructional stressors that tend to be specific to their roles (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Since specific content instruction is an expectation, but not the focal point of their preservice work, they are left feeling ill prepared for many aspects of their job. The often competing demands of delivering appropriate content area instruction while simultaneously maintaining the critical behavioral and cognitive strategies unique to the needs of their students, adds to frustration and role confusion (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990).
Aside from pedagogy and content knowledge, other stressors special educators face are the unique demands of professional paperwork. Since the majority of the paperwork for which special educators are responsible is related to developing and maintaining Individual Education Plans (hereafter IEPs) for students on their caseloads, there are legal requirements that must be followed. Behavior intervention plans, manifestation determination review materials, annual goals and objectives and the progress students make therein, and student re-evaluation forms (Mehrenberg, 2013), are just some examples of paperwork responsibilities which unique to special educators; general education teachers have nowhere near the same level of mandates or responsibility to statutory rules and regulations.

Paperwork demands consume a significant part of their day, leaving special educators frustrated with the lack of direct contact time they have with their students. Researchers indicate that 48% of special educators report that teaching students with disabilities is not the primary responsibility within their role, leading them to want to leave the field entirely (Sindelar, McCray, Brownell, & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2014). As professional paperwork becomes a frustration or even worse, a nuisance, the perceived value, or lack thereof, can effect special educators’ morale. Additionally, as litigation and changes in statutes correspondingly mandate changes within paperwork practices, special educators are required to re-learn paperwork expectations, sometimes more than once a year. This ever-changing target forces special educators to learn new and updated paperwork practices, resulting in some of the most veteran special educators feeling the frustrations of a novice teacher. They may conclude that paperwork is a mere legal formality that does not actually help them in their teaching, which might ultimately trigger work related stress, apathy, and burnout.
These frustrations not only impact special educators ‘relearning’ the paperwork requirements within their role, it also impacts novice teachers, especially if their pre-service training in this area was limited, as can be the case in many training programs. Both veteran and novice special educators criticize the lack of support they receive on how to complete paperwork, not only when changes occur, but also when general guidance is needed, from administrators (Mehrenberg, 2013). The lack of perceived support from administrators, in each specific area of special education, significantly lowers job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and increases teacher attrition. The influence professional paperwork support has on teacher attrition and self-efficacy is therefore a critical factor to investigate further.

1.3 Inclusive Practices

The application of the key components within the IEP and provisions under IDEA is another hurdle for special educators. For example, as special educators work to follow the provisions under the IDEA, specific to Least Restrictive Environment (hereafter, LRE), it is imperative that there is an understanding of how to best implement inclusive practices. Although the mandates within the IDEA are clear, the implementation and application of those mandates within the classroom continue to create much deliberation among classroom teachers (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007). Special educators need to be prepared to not only teach students with disabilities within the general education environment, but also learn strategies to effectively collaborate with their general education counterparts, some of whom are resistant to the mere notion of having to accommodate special needs students in the first place (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007).

Delivering inclusive practices under the LRE provision requires a level of mutual
understanding between the special educator and general educator to ensure that services are consistently provided, resources are effectively allocated, and individualized plans are reflective of student needs within all educational environments. As educators work to include students with disabilities within the regular education setting, it is critical that districts offer formal training and curriculum in special education, and continued on the job support for both special and regular educators.

Aside from the interpretation of the IDEA in practice, another challenge that special educators face is the lack of preparation they receive, in comparison to their regular education counterparts, to deliver appropriate content area instruction (Brownell & Leko, 2009). Since its reauthorization in 2004, the IDEA has increased content knowledge expectations for special education students and their teachers, adding to the fundamental concern regarding special education instructional integrity. Students with disabilities must have access to the general education curriculum and make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state academic content standards (Brownell & Leko, 2009). As state and local policymakers increase demands to improve the education for all learners, this fundamental pedagogical shift requires professional development to be at the center of any systematic reform initiative (Birman, Desimone, Garet, Porter, & Yoon, 2001). Teaching practices aligned with high standards require teachers to have a deeper comprehension of their subject areas in order to promote students’ deeper understanding (Birman et al., 2001). Special educators may not be prepared for new innovative teaching practices in accordance with these new standards. Implementation of these standards may vary dramatically, depending on the preparation programs and professional development that special educators receive.
1.4 Pre-service Preparation and Training

Training and preparation experiences for special educators can be vastly different depending on how they earned their teaching license. Traditional teacher training institutions where future educators attend a four or five-year formal university preparation program, have failed to provide enough prepared teachers to keep up with national demand (Sindelar et al., 2014). Districts have had no other choice but to employ teachers who have either participated in abbreviated training programs or lack certification altogether (Sindelar et al., 2014).

The enactment of No Child Left Behind (hereafter NCLB) in 2001 perpetuated the inconsistency in teacher preparedness by shifting the focus from teacher certification to a standard of “highly qualified”, leaving the determination of whether a teacher was highly qualified to teach at the state level. In some states, teachers with bachelor’s degrees, with or without formal preparation for teaching, could be deemed highly qualified as long as they demonstrated sufficient knowledge on state exams (Disabilities, 2011).

1.5 Professional Development

As districts across the nation continue to struggle with the causes and effects of teacher “burnout” and subsequent attrition, administrators work to ensure burnout does not happen in the first place. Research into novice special education teacher challenges and teacher attrition has also shown that special educators need continued support in the areas of special education policies and procedures, emotional support, procedural knowledge about their schools, and acquisition of resources. Additionally, these teachers need help navigating the volume of paperwork, new pedagogical strategies, and help in acquiring new content knowledge (Garvan,
et al., 2009). A proactive approach, such as providing meaningful professional development, becomes a promising solution to increase self-efficacy amongst the special education teaching staff. Within the teaching community, special educators have heightened pedagogical responsibilities that may impact feelings of job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and overall job related stress (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). The effects, however, do not solely impact educators; they can trickle downward and impact instructional practices, lessening overall growth and/or achievement of all students. Having a heightened awareness of these factors by school leaders can lead to practices, which hopefully remedy, relieve, and potentially reduce feelings of teacher burnout.

While each year, thousands of teachers are reported to leave the profession due to feelings of burnout, added stressors relating to the demands of special educators; increased academic and behavioral challenges, non-instructional duties, student attitudes, and feelings of isolation from colleagues due to professional demands, escalate the likelihood of attrition (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate types of supportive leadership and professional development practices that can mitigate these issues.

Teachers who are in a stage of burnout have an effect on the culture and climate of the school organization as well (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). Characteristics of special education teachers afflicted with burnout include: apathy and inflexibility toward new initiatives, the infestation of negativism amongst staff, absenteeism and/or misapplication of sick day policies, and rigidity leading to a reduction in job satisfaction for colleagues (Dedrick & Raschke). Therefore, burnout has a domino effect with a potential to impact all stakeholders.
Given the impact burnout can have on all stakeholders, the urgency to identify specific remedies to prevent the domino effect is critical. Since the laws and professional expectations for special education teachers change regularly, factors which reduce feelings of efficacy become overwhelming. How then, can administrators and school leaders increase resilience within special education teachers? Specifically, would consistent professional development opportunities provide the support special educators need to ward off the burnout epidemic?

1.6. Current Study

Multiple studies have identified concerns surrounding special education teacher attrition and its subsequent negative effects on student success. While identification of the problem has been comprehensive, connections between the identified problem and proposed solutions have been incomplete, as districts offer fragmented solutions which have not shown to be successful in addressing the issues head on. In order to fully investigate the needs of special educators, it is important to study how the lack of professional development and support is linked to special educator role ambiguity, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. Similarly, understanding the disconnect between the training special educators require and the actual support they receive, will not only deepen identification of the problem, but will also allow this researcher to create viable solutions districts can use to target those needs. In exploration of those solutions, in the current study I report on special educator’s perceptions on professional development support they receive in their roles, as well as their beliefs about what they need to make them feel more efficacious.
The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1) How do special educators receive professional development support?

2) How does the support that special educators receive promote special educator self-efficacy and retention?

3) What are the professional development needs of special educators’ pre-tenure/post tenure from the special educator standpoint?

2. Methodology

The goals of my study were to research how district on the job support of special educators, or lack thereof, is related to their self-efficacy and burnout, what factors contribute to special educator attrition, and how high quality professional development might decrease attrition.

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of ten special educator teachers from four unit school districts outside a large Midwestern city in the United States. Participants received an invitation to participate in one-on-one interviews through an email (see Appendix D). The email was sent to both female and male teachers from the Chicagoland area.

Given that districts with different available resources and populations of learners can impact the teaching experience, gathering information from special educators from heterogeneous districts helps reduce the possibility of limiting the scope within the research (Maxwell, 2013).

Ten special educators participated in the interview after providing written consent. See Table 1 for demographic information on participants. The teachers’ years of experience varied,
as did the grades taught, and the makeup of their students. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, the school districts, schools, and teachers are not identified. Information gathered from the introduction questions provided the following information about the participants. Out of the ten special educators interviewed, seven of them taught in self-contained programs (classrooms consisting of all special education students and taught by a special education teacher). Seven teachers were tenured, three teachers were non-tenured. Eight teachers have worked in more than one school district and two have worked in more than three districts, as a special educator.

Table 1

Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Learners Taught</th>
<th>Grade/Level</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Unit District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Low Incidence, Autism, Cognitive Disabilities</td>
<td>Grades 6-8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Cross Categorical- Emotional Disabilities, Autism, Specific Learning Disabilities</td>
<td>Grades 3-5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disabilities, Hearing Impairments,</td>
<td>Grades 2, 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Resource- Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disabilities, Autism</td>
<td>Grades 6-8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Self-Contained- (ED,OHI)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Self-Contained- (ED,OHI)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Self-Contained- (ED,OHI)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Self-Contained- (ED,OHI)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Resource Teacher</td>
<td>Grades 3, 4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Resource Teacher</td>
<td>Grades K-3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows comparative data of the districts in which the participants were employed at the time of the interview. The purpose of this data is to consider the population of learners
each of the districts serve and potential differences or similarities within the settings when analyzing the data. Comparisons within the district demographics will potentially allow for additional insight into challenges or benefits from one district to the next, in relation to the resources and supports for staff and students, reported by participants (i.e. curriculum, professional development, plan time).

Table 2
Participant District Demographic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total Number of Schools in the District</th>
<th>Total Number of Students Served</th>
<th>% of Students with Disabilities</th>
<th>% of Low Income Students</th>
<th>% of English Learners</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit District A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12,809</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>White (63%) Black (7%) Hispanic (18%) Asian (8%) American Indian (0%) Two or More Races (4%) Pacific Islander (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit District B</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4,893</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>White (22%) Black (61%) Hispanic (12%) Asian (1%) American Indian (0%) Two or More Races (4%) Pacific Islander (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit District C</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12,442</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>White (66%) Black (2%) Hispanic (12%) Asian (7%) American Indian (0%) Two or More Races (3%) Pacific Islander (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit District D</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6,598</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>White (46%) Black (19%) Hispanic (27%) Asian (2%) American Indian (0%) Two or More Races (6%) Pacific Islander (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2. Research Design

In order to understand how professional development, or lack thereof, influences self-efficacy and teacher attrition, qualitative research methods were used for this study. This approach allows for an understanding of how various contexts, events, and meanings directly influence participants and their actions (Maxwell J., 2013). In this case, participants from different unit districts were asked questions about their own experiences with topics, such as professional development supports and needs, in order to glean a better understanding of their perspectives. Qualitative research in this study allowed for participants to express how their experiences within their role effect their feelings of burnout, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction, in order for this researcher to create potential solutions to the issues raised through participant interviews.

A specific approach of qualitative research is phenomenology, which involves understanding personal meanings, constructed through lived experiences (Burke, 2014). Phenomenology assumes that there is a commonality within human experience, referred to as an invariant structure. Not every experience will affect people the same way, however phenomenologists believe that there are invariant structures or essences that are common to everyone. This research technique allows for researchers to understand the commonalities within certain experiences which influence participants’ feelings and actions (Burke, 2014).

In order to glean participants’ experiences with professional development, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data on commonalities or themes influencing teacher self-efficacy and attrition. Once the data was collected, analysis through identification and coding
was utilized to develop a theory. This process of generating a theory through an inductive research approach is referred to as grounded theory (Burke, 2014). Grounded theory insists that data collection and analysis occur concurrently and continually while the researcher works to initially determine a central idea, ultimately resulting in a created theory (Burke, 2014). Developing a theory based on the analysis of data was used to inform this researcher on ways to create professional development experiences leading to higher levels of self-efficacy.

2.3 Researcher Role

The findings in this study are particularly relevant to me, as I am a practicing Director of Student Services, charged with evaluating, staffing, and managing special educators, as well as the programming for students with disabilities. Finding and sustaining quality special educators is a challenge for all districts, including mine. Special educators who feel burned out or less efficacious are going to demonstrate those signs within their professional setting and while working with students. It has been my experience that when a teacher demonstrates signs of burnout, students within their classroom are negatively affected. My experiences with teachers through evaluations, professional development, IEP meetings, etc., was separated to ensure that my bias was not reflected throughout the course of my study. Interview questions were asked uniformly and without any anecdotal feedback or commentary from this researcher, and only data collected from participants within the study was analyzed; without any influence from my personal experiences within my district. While I was able to reference similarities and differences within participant responses to the responses I received from teachers I work with, I only drew from those comparisons for the purpose of further discussion and potential solutions. Although I work in a unit district similar to those of the participants I interviewed, I purposefully
did not interview any special educator from my district to ensure that participants could speak freely and without influence. Similarly, I did not discuss my position with participants prior to any interviews.

2.4. Interviews

Ten special education teachers were interviewed about self-efficacy, burnout, and professional development. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and took place over the phone through a phone interview. In all interviews, I followed a set interview protocol, and asked additional follow up questions to clarify teachers’ answers and probe further discussions.

The goal of the questions was to analyze participant responses and determine identified contributing factors impacting special educator self-efficacy, in order to create systematic and idyllic remedies within the area of professional development, to prevent teacher attrition.

Interview questions for special educators were divided into eight categories that literature suggests have most profound impact on special educator self-efficacy and attrition. Table 3 includes the category titles and a sample question from each. See Appendix 1 for the full interview protocol.

Specific commonalities or themes within the responses from all interviews were the most helpful in determining causation specific to attitudes, self-efficacy, and teacher attainment.
### Table 3

**Special Educator Interview Question Categories and Sample Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sample Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Tell me about your current role as a special educator?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>What is the most satisfying part of your job? What is the most frustrating part of your job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Stressors/Burnout</td>
<td>What are the main areas of your job that are stressful? Which of those things could lead to possible burnout?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive Practices</td>
<td>What supports could your district provide that would better help you meet the goal of more inclusive practices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Service</td>
<td>Upon first entering the field, what job specific training did your district offer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>What sort of ongoing training is needed for all special educators?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support</td>
<td>What ways do you feel administration supports you within your role as a special educator?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>What parts of your role are you most confident with? What parts of your role are you least confident with?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5 Procedures

The email contained a brief description of the study and contact information for participants to reach me if interested in participating. Prior to each data collection, participants were given a brief overview of the study, the procedures, and data storage practices. Participants were told that their participation was voluntary and those participating in an interview gave passive assent by initiating an email to schedule an interview. Additionally, participants provided a signed consent form. Each participant participated in a phone interview that lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, which was audio recorded for transcription.

Validity and reliability were considered during the data collection and analysis processes. Interview questions were asked similarly and carefully to prevent any guiding of answers from subjects and were recorded and transcribed for consistency. Interview transcripts were reviewed and coded by only the first author, to maintain integrity and categorizing strategies will preclude any potential personal bias from this researcher.

2.6 Data Analysis and Coding Strategy

I independently coded all data, using an open coding process (Burke, 2014). During the open coding process, I reviewed the transcripts line by line to determine similarities, relationships, and patterns within the data that became prominent within the interview responses to each research question (Burke, 2014). During each interview, I took notes on consistent themes that emerged from the participant response to interview questions. Both notes and transcripts were read and reviewed before utilizing axial coding to further analyze the themes and subthemes.
Prior to interviewing, each interview question was connected to the research questions that it related to, or was thought to answer. Therefore, when conceptual similarities were identified, I used axial coding to organize the concepts. Categorizing strategies such as matrices allowed for the comparisons of answers within each of research questions and were utilized to organize the information and identify the common themes and subthemes from participant responses. As I cross-referenced and compared the information, I used selective coding to frame a theory based upon the data and information systematically collected and analyzed (Burke, 2014).

3. Findings

3.1. Summary of Findings

The results of the study identified three major themes: Professional Development, Lack of Support and Understanding, and Instructional Barriers. In addition to the three major themes, several sub-themes emerged. Major themes are organized and summarized with corresponding subthemes to capture the perceptions of special educators’ responses to interview questions.

Major Theme 1: Professional Development

Several interview questions investigated special educator perceptions regarding pre-service and on the job training experiences specific to their role. Participant responses indicated that professional development is a major concern as ten out of ten talked about it. Sub-themes within this major theme include: 1) Inconsistent Readiness Upon Entering the Field and 2) Lack of Quality Professional Development Support, each of which are expanded upon below.
Table 4

Coding and Related Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme One</th>
<th>Theme Two</th>
<th>Theme Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Lack of Support and Understanding</td>
<td>Professional Barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subthemes</td>
<td>Number of Participants That Discussed This Theme</td>
<td>Subthemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent Readiness Entering the Field</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lack of Support from Administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Quality Professional Development support</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lack of Support from Colleagues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Major Theme 1: Professional Development

Several interview questions investigated special educator perceptions regarding pre-service and on the job training experiences specific to their role. Participant responses indicated that professional development is a major concern as ten out of ten talked about it. Sub-themes within this major theme include: 1) Inconsistent Readiness Upon Entering the Field and 2) Lack of Quality Professional Development Support, each of which are expanded upon below.

Subtheme 1.1: Inconsistent Readiness Entering the Field:

Seven of the ten participants reported participation in a field/student teaching experience through their teaching preparation programs, which reportedly made them feel ‘somewhat’ prepared to enter the field. Six participants were already working in the field in some capacity,
prior to entering the field, either as a teacher assistant or current general education teacher, while obtaining their certification. All of those working in the field while participating in the student teaching/field experience reported that on the job training provided better job readiness skills than participating solely in the field experience. For example, participants who worked as a teacher assistant, or had previous teaching experiences, were able to relate to strategies taught at the university level, due to their experiences working in a classroom setting. Participants reported that while they found value in the field/student teaching experiences, the on the job training while working in a classroom allowed for a better understanding of various parts of the role such as, working directly with student behavior plans, learning about goal writing, providing accommodations and modifications to students, and practicing instructional techniques specific to students with disabilities that extend more than just theory or short term field experience from university programs.

Additionally, while Teacher G reported that he was happy with the field experience within his undergraduate program, he felt that it only trained him in the area of providing accommodations and modifications.

“My first year teaching position, I went into the hardest because I knew the burnout rate was 3-5 years and then move into resource or other types of jobs. The school prep was very difficult. The hardest part about special [education], you don’t have a degree in math, you don’t have a degree in Science, you don’t have a degree in these main subjects so it makes it very difficult having to come in and teach those subjects. The schooling [at Northern] taught you absolutely how to accommodate and all of that but it then it turned into, my God, I have to learn all of this material and then accommodate, it and then you have 5 classes on top of that to teach. So you have 5 different subjects you have to go at… so it was successful at preparing me for accommodations. When it came to actually teaching the material in the real world… that is the biggest frustration when you first start out, having to learn all of the material for the first time to teach it.”
The three participants who did not participate in a field/student teacher experience attended a certification program to obtain their LBS1 certificate. All three reported that the certification program was insufficient at preparing them to be a special education teacher.

Teacher B reported:

“Certificate program classes were a joke. The two years I spent as a Resource aide were infinitely more educational than the coursework…. I sat for the exam [LBS1 endorsement] after just the first class which was really just an elaborate review of special ed law that I learned in my undergrad. I sat for the exam after that in order to start teaching in the fall….You need anywhere from a 240 to a 300 [score] on this test to pass and I got a 289 after taking a third of the coursework. The coursework is a joke.”

Interestingly, while the subtheme of Inconsistent Readiness Upon entering the field was prominent within responses, four of the participants noted that they did not feel any pre-service experience could have fully prepared them for what to expect as a special educator because so much of the role deals with unexpected situations (i.e. behavior manifesting from students’ disabilities). For example, Teacher D reported that her pre-service experience offered suggestions and scenarios in how to best respond to students, however felt that, “being in the moment is different because instincts kick in, which can’t be taught necessarily.” Similarly, Teacher I reported that her field experience sufficiently prepared her for the technical aspects of her job, however stated, “…I don’t know what more they could do to really train you for on the job things that happen that are so unique to this position and so different that you almost can’t perceive or plan for them.”

Participants also revealed the limited amount of job-specific training offered to the special educators upon first entering the field. While two participants stated that they participated in IEP paperwork training, the training was specific to the IEP system that was being
used in that District, as opposed to training on best practices in completing IEP paperwork. One participant (Teacher B) discussed her experience as a first time special educator, hired in a district that had a joint agreement with a cooperative.

“The first district I was employed in, they sent me to goal writing training and all of that kind of stuff. They were great about it. We worked through the cooperative we were a part of had all of these trainings, frequently, for managing behavior and, modifying instruction for struggling learners and goal writing and testing and you know, like data analysis, and they were great about sending new teachers.”

When she joined her current district, however, (Unit District B), she noted that new teachers did not receive similar training, possibly because the trainings were previously provided by an external area cooperative, in which her current district does not participate. Another participant from Unit District B, (teacher C), confirmed this lack of initial training for new special educators and discussed that a mentoring program is offered as a substitute. Teacher C noted however, that in the mentoring program, special educators are frequently paired up with regular education teachers, which does support those new to the field of special education.

Teacher A started her career in an alternative therapeutic day school within a special education cooperative and shared a similar job-specific training experience as Teacher B, upon first entering the field of special education. The cooperative provided certification training in Crisis Prevention Intervention and specific disability related training opportunities such as sensory diets for students with Autism. These training experiences, however, were uncommon amongst participants, likely due to the opportunities and services that cooperatives can provide their member districts and staff, unlike non-member unit districts. Out of the participants interviewed, seven out of ten did not have any job-specific training. When asked about whether their districts provided a mentoring program, three participants said that there was not a
mentoring program offered, although one of the three received job-related training. Six out of the ten participants were offered some sort of mentoring/induction program from their district. However, only one participant was provided a mentor that was a special educator, and still reportedly unhelpful to her as a new teacher. She stated, "They had a formal mentor program for first and second year teachers but the mentor I was given was the special education teacher I was a teacher assistant for. She never once came to observe me teach because she said, ‘I’ve seen you teach, you’re fine, you know what you’re doing.’"

The other participants who participated in a mentoring program reported the experience was helpful with selective information pertaining to general non-instructional practices within the building (i.e. Student Information System usage, grade book access, etc.) and would have preferred a mentorship experience that was geared towards special education practices. Two participants felt it was important to have someone coach new special educators on “real life scenarios” so that they could be more prepared for what they will actually encounter, specific to behavior concerns, lesson planning, and how to provide instructional minutes to students with multiple instructional needs.

Subtheme 1.2: Lack of Quality Professional Development Support:

Consistent across participants’ responses was a lack of professional development specific to their role as a special educator. Teacher J reported,

“I would love PD that is geared for special ed and not for [general education] classroom teachers and then [say], oh just pick a grade, pick a session, because they may offer social emotional [skills] but I already know that. I need new tricks. I feel we sort of get the short end of the stick all of the time when it comes to PD. It would be nice to have something geared more towards us….That’s a complaint that we’ve had for years and I don’t think it will ever change”
Eighty percent of the participants stated that regular training on how to write an IEP and time to discuss legal updates or changes to IEP paperwork would be beneficial professional development for them, yet they do not receive such training consistently. According to three participants, the lack of support in this area promotes their reliance on colleagues to get up to date information regarding changes within the legal requirements of IDEA. Teacher J stated, “It would be nice if we had [resource] meetings but we don’t anymore…our Director just emails that stuff out to us and we are supposed to just teach ourselves how to do it.” Two participants reported to receive information about paperwork changes when they are in attendance at an IEP meeting and have to change a part of their paperwork to comply with that new change. While three participants stated that they receive an email from special education administration if changes occur, one participant stated she believed that there is a newsletter that is sent out but was unsure and another reported to have no support in this area.

While there was some commonality amongst the other participants’ responses, an outlier was Teacher I, the one out of the ten participants who stated that her district worked hard to provide training on paperwork and legal requirements, but acknowledged that the efforts were made in response to compliance issues recently surfaced through a special education audit from the State. As a result of the audit, the district has taken measures to improve their procedures and communication about changes.

“Our district last year was audited. I feel it was a good thing. They pointed out where we need growth and where we need work and so we’ve had a couple of special ed [trainings] based on our audit what it looked like what we need assistance in. We’ve had a lot of IEP writing training making sure we are following exactly what is required by the law. There was a court case that came out a couple of years ago [in our district] so we did a study based on the IEP brought to the court case, why it was found to be not sound and why the district was accountable for not having an appropriate IEP for that student…Due to the audit, we had like a couple of things that were red flagged. Like goals weren’t being
written correctly, you had benchmarks instead of objectives here, and like, little things…we got hit hard last year.

The due diligence on behalf of the district to remedy the compliance issues resulted in positive feedback from Teacher I regarding monthly meetings that she participates in with colleagues, as well as in-depth training about legally defensible IEPs provided in her district. It is worth repeating, however, that the district took these measures in response to focus monitoring through the State, as opposed to proactive in-depth trainings with the intent to prevent compliance related issues. It is quite possible that the other districts used in this study have not encountered a similar inspection, and therefore do not see the need for such attentiveness in their training on paperwork and legal requirements, but would respond accordingly if the need were to arise.

Participants discussed additional professional development areas they felt necessary for special educators. Training on available curricular and assessment tools within the district, for both new and veteran teachers, is a topic consistent across responses within this study. One teacher reported that she was never told what programs were available to her and didn’t realize she could use certain curriculum or progress monitoring programs until her second year in the district.

“I honestly think new special education teachers need to be given someone actually in their position to sit down with and have that coaching, mentoring. Teachers starting in my district are not given smart goal training or training on the programming. We get newsletters from central office telling us, here are the programs you’re required to use, here is your testing, but they don’t instructions on how to use them to benchmark.”

Additionally, five participants stated that regular support in addressing student behavior is needed, due to the variety of behaviors they must respond to, resulting in a loss of instructional time and even injury in doing so.
Major Theme 2: Lack of Support and Understanding

Participants reported a general lack of support within their role. Subthemes identified within this theme were: 1) Lack of Support From Administrators and 2) Lack of Support From Regular Education Counterparts.

Subtheme 2.1 Lack of Support from Administrators

While participants expressed frustrations with areas such as paperwork, lack of time, student behavior, lack of curriculum, and student motivation, 60% of them stated that a lack of support from administration was the most frustrating. When asked about what additional administrative support they felt they needed, half of the participants stated that they wish they had more of a say in some of the decisions that administration make. Participants emphasized feeling this to be especially important with decisions impacting students on their caseload. Furthermore, they had a lack of confidence with administrators’ ability to understand the needs of their students. Additionally, three participants highlighted that they did not feel administration knew what their job entailed or fully understood what they did or needed. Specifically, teacher A stated, “[If ] they knew what was going on in my room and the importance of what we do every day, even if it may not look like what we do is important [they may understand].”

Other frustrations reported by special educators included feeling constantly shuffled around due to the broad population of learners the LBS1 certification covers. Participants discussed the tendency for administrators to haphazardly group students with disabilities without consideration of the nature of the disabilities and relative needs, leaving special educators feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and undervalued. Additionally, special educators reported frustration resulting from the constant changes in grade levels or programs they are assigned to teach,
frequently without the necessary staff or caseload support to service the students adequately, not only as major contributors of burnout, but also early departure from the field.

Three participants stressed the need for validation from administration to help them feel more confident within their role. “Just letting us know we’re doing the right thing. Just saying hey, good job every now and then is nice to hear. A lot of time we don’t know we are doing a good job and with our [student population]. Sometimes it is hard to tell.” As referenced previously, two participants emphasized that they would feel more confident in their role if administration would allow them to have a say or some decision making authority, and one of the two participants said that she didn’t feel she needed more professional development to build her confidence. “I think administration needs to go to some professional development on how to empower their teachers because that is not what [special educators] are getting.”

Subtheme 2.2 Lack of Support from Colleagues

Participants discussed feeling misunderstood by their regular education colleagues, due to general education teachers’ lack of understanding of the role of a special educator, which subsequently results in a lack of collegial support. One teacher reportedly feels viewed as an assistant instead of a certified teacher by her regular education counterparts, when she tries to provide support within their classrooms. Others reported frustration with the lack of training regular education teachers seem to receive in learning how to manage student behavior or their overreliance on special educators to be take the lead when challenging student behaviors arise. Teacher B reported,

“I service 6 different classrooms…if I’m not dealing one on one with students academically, I am called for my students who have behavior problems. If they are having major meltdowns, I need to go in and remove them from the classrooms, so a lot
of my day is spend servicing students that way. I would [prefer] to spend more time with students who are really struggling academically to close the gap.”

Additionally, participants reported feeling that regular education teachers do not understand all of the aspects within their role which can lead to a lack of job satisfaction. Participants felt misunderstood and undervalued by their regular education counterparts due to the various work related duties that special educators are required to perform, different from regular education counterparts. Participants reportedly felt criticized by their colleagues when working directly with students. As teacher J reported,

“Comments like, why are you letting [the student] do XYZ, or I saw you sitting in the hall with him for an hour today, it’s like what do you want me to do? I’m doing my job…They are looking on the outside and they don’t understand the process. Yes, I might be sitting with the student for an hour [in the hallway], but I’m doing a whole lot of things. I’m doing the behavior plan. I’m keeping time, I’m taking notes, I’m keeping track, I’m doing all of the strategies that I’m supposed to do but it doesn’t look like it from their perspective. That is very stressful.”

Teacher I stated that 80% of her day is spent pulling students with disabilities on her caseload from the general education setting to work in small instructional groups or in a 1:1 setting in order to target goal areas and “close the gap”. While the majority of her day is spent working with students, this way of providing services to her students is an identified stressor due to the frustration her regular education counterparts can demonstrate when she tries to take students out of the classroom for specialized instruction. “Sometimes some of the general education teachers are a little bit difficult to work with because, you know, they want to keep their schedules the same…they’re not [always] letting me pull my kids when I need to pull them.”
Participants reported that a lack of collaboration amongst colleagues can also lead to frustration. All but two participants reported to have little to no time to properly plan with their regular education colleagues for students within the general education setting. This causes stress as special educators feel insufficiently able to support their students within that environment. Additional stress was reportedly caused by the reluctance of regular educators to accept ownership and responsibility for teaching and supporting students with disabilities. Teacher F reported that having to deal with the bureaucracy within the educational environment could be a direct cause of burnout for him.

“Dealing with other teachers that don’t quite understand. The whole mentality of they’re your kids not our kids can burn you out pretty quick. Just dealing with the bureaucracy side of things... so frustrating when you are trying to do something positive to help these kids out. It gets so bogged down and the bureaucracy stuff really wears you out pretty quick. The bureaucracy, the paperwork. You have a plan and you want to try get it going [for students] and it takes so long and it has to go through so many people, that it doesn’t seem like it’s ever going to happen. So frustrating.”

**Major Theme 3: Professional Barriers**

Participants identified facets within their role which create barriers for professional longevity. Although the other themes share this commonality, additional stressors which reportedly make special educators feel less efficacious are highlighted and organized into two subthemes: 1) Lack of Curriculum Support and 2) Professional Paperwork. As these subthemes were briefly discussed above, further explication is necessary, given their reported impact on the role of the special educator.

**Subtheme 3.1 Lack of Curriculum Support**
Seven out of 10 participants reported that the majority of their day is spent on instruction with students. One teacher, teacher B, noted that instruction with students, while a majority of how she spent her time within the day, was actually a stressor for her within her role. The students that she serves are considered to be a ‘low-incidence’ population of learners, and therefore have myriad instructional needs. Teacher C also identified instructional time as a concern within her role, due to the lack of curriculum available to meet the various instructional needs her population of learners require. Therefore, searching for curriculum was identified by teacher C as an endeavor which occupied much of her professional time.

Teacher H reported that while her building principal is really easy to talk to “more useful professional development for curriculum as a new teacher” would be helpful.

“For me I came in in my classroom, I didn’t have desks, I didn’t have chairs, I didn’t have even my own desk, I had no books. I had nothing. It came [from] me going around and annoying people to get stuff. Like the books, I was like, you guys don’t have a science book that you use? You don’t have a math book? How have you guys been teaching in the past? I had to track down different people outside of our program to get materials. Then I’m opening it and it’s so daunting because it’s like, ok what is useful, what can I teach?... Having this [support] would have been really helpful, because I remember the first month I was getting here at like 6am and staying here till 5pm trying to create something and it was so stressful and so overwhelming.”

Subtheme 3.2 Professional Paperwork

Participants identified instructional planning and paperwork as two areas they were able to spend the least amount of time on during their day. Teacher H specified that she waits for “work days”, days without students in attendance, to make the time to write IEPs. These days are most beneficial for her to complete the non-instructional parts of her role such as paperwork, due
to the lack of planning time during the day and her attempt to ensure a better work/life balance by reducing the amount of work she brings home to complete at night.

Eight out of 10 participants felt that paperwork was indeed stressful and a contribution to burn-out. A main premise associated with paperwork across participant responses was the time or lack thereof, required to ensure that the paperwork is completed. Many of the participants reported the inability to get paperwork done during the school day, resulting in special educators having to come in to work early and stay later. One participant reported that a single IEP can take sixteen to eighteen hours to complete. Another participant, teacher I, reported,

“We try to schedule a lot of our meetings on the same day…which it makes sense in the long run because I don’t want to miss kids, but trying to organize the amount and hours that I will spend doing the paperwork you know for the IEPs, and it always comes home. I wish I could be able to have the time to do it at work but it will come home and I will be doing it at 9oclock at night at my kitchen table to make sure it gets done.”

Other participants stated that they felt the paperwork expectations were constantly changing. One teacher reported to have worked in three different districts and was told to complete paperwork in three different ways per each of the district’s preference. Other participants didn’t see the value in the paperwork and felt it was an unnecessary step in helping students. Teacher G reported,

“When you get to high school, I feel the same goals have been worked on forever with these kids. I feel like yes, we are still working on these goals, there needs to be some type of paperwork of course, but it just seems to be getting out of control when it comes to what you actually need. When a student comes in to a classroom you should be willing to teach them with everything that you can…. I just don’t understand the whole thing that you need a piece of paper to do that, or a label.”
Additional stressors reported by participants included the data collection that is needed to write an IEP, as well as the collaboration required by special education teachers with their regular education and related service counterparts.

“I think sometimes paperwork is stressful. For example, I was trying to fill out paperwork for a student whom I am trying to put in a different placement in our District and the classroom teacher didn’t have some of the data that I needed and I was kind of like, what do you mean you don’t have that [data]? How do you not have that? Trying to rely on other people to give you those pieces when they are not as responsible. Also working with your team sometimes. They wait until the last minute and you are like, I need all of this done now and not wait. So, sometimes it’s more adult stress than kid stress… I like to things done at a certain time and you know my social worker is always the last one to get the goal updates done, or as I’m printing he tells me he’s changed something.”

Participants reported that professional paperwork includes more than just checking boxes on an IEP. It requires data and anecdotal information about how the student performs in various settings, including both the special education and general education settings, as well as the student’s progress working with related service providers. Given that the IEP is written for a year, regular collaboration with staff is required in order for the team to gauge if the supports outlined in the student’s IEP are appropriate, as well as provide regular reports on the student’s progress. This in of itself has been identified as a stressor for participants, given the lack of time that special educators reportedly have during their work day.

3.2 Purpose of the Study: Review

Ultimately, the intent of conducting this research was to investigate special educator perceptions on how professional development, or lack thereof, can effect special educator self-efficacy and attrition. Three main research questions guided the study: How do special educators receive professional development support?, How does the support that special educators receive promote special educator self-efficacy and retention?, and What are the professional
development needs of special educators’ pre-tenure/post tenure from the special educator standpoint?

In order to answer the research questions, interview questions were created and organized based on specific categories, indicated through research to increase special educator attrition: Job Satisfaction, Job Stressors/Burnout, Inclusive Practices, Pre-Service, Professional Development, Administrative Support, Self-Efficacy. Using a Grounded Theory approach, participant responses to the interview questions were coded to identify themes and then analyzed for the purpose of recommending research based solutions to remedy special educator attrition rates through potential professional development practices.

This study utilized three main research questions to gather information relative to special educator attrition and professional development support. Data analysis reveals the answers to the questions and considerations for future remedies.

1. **What are special educators’ perceptions of professional development support?**

Districts utilize inconsistent practices in delivering professional development support for both new and veteran special educators in the field. While some districts provide mentoring programs for special educators upon entering the district, the success rate of the program is relative to the mentor they are assigned. Often special educators are assigned with regular education counterparts, which allows for support in aspects of their role as an educator but not sufficient in the unique aspects of their role as a special educator. Likewise, consistent on the job training is lacking, and therefore, special educators rely on colleagues to inform best practices with critical aspects of their role, such as: how to write legally defensible IEPs, collect data on student
progress, find and implement curricular resources, and implement programmatic aspects of their students IEP.

2. **How does the support that special educators receive promote special educator self-efficacy and retention?** Proactive support is reportedly lacking, resulting in special educators’ uncertainty about whether they are successful within their roles. Validation from building administration is an area that is reportedly missing. Many more participants often feel that administration and regular education colleagues are unclear about the role of the special educator. Likewise, participants reported to feel like an ‘after thought’ because they are shuffled around in their role (i.e. moved around to teach various grade levels or student populations that are unfamiliar to them, unlike their regular education counterparts). Resources such as, curriculum and time to complete paperwork, are not provided to special educators. This increases stress in accomplishing vital facets within their role, such as instructional and non-instructional tasks.

3. **What are the professional development needs of special educators’ pre-tenure/post tenure from the special educator standpoint?** Special educators who participate in field experience during pre-service are more likely to feel prepared to enter the field, however, aspects unique to the special educator are still not supported solely by field experience to make special educators feel equipped to handle them when entering the field. Teachers who obtain special education licensure through certification programs were reportedly utterly unprepared for the role due to the absence of any meaningful field experience. Tenured teachers report feeling a need for consistency in professional development on the legal requirement and changes to paperwork, curriculum, and behavioral strategies to deal with the various learners they serve.
Similarly, administrative support relative to the unique demands of their role is something that special educators seek in order to reduce the reliance on professional development through colleagues. Likewise, collaborative, proactive support by administrators who understand their role is something that special educators feel would increase retention, as they often make decisions on behalf of their classroom and for their students in isolation, without special educator input.

3.3 Recommendations for Leadership

Instructional and non-instructional expectations for special educators are different from their general education counterparts (Brownell & Leko, 2009). While mandates under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), may be clearly outlined, the application of how those mandates affect practice continues to create much debate among theorists and practitioners (Hadadian & Chiang, 2007). Additionally, as case law and the mandates within the IDEA inform change in practice, special educators are tasked with relearning aspects of their role, leading to concerns with their feelings of self-efficacy and career longevity (Billingsley, 2004).

Results from this research confirms the literature. Out of the ten participants, seven participated in field experience and felt it to be moderately successful in preparing them for their role upon entering the field. Given that the role of the special educator is unique amongst teachers, not only due to the nature of the instructional specialty, but also to the population of learners served and the non-instructional responsibilities required within that role, it is imperative for special educators to receive continual professional development support.
As is similar with other instructional specialists, such as teachers of English Language Learners, many district administrators and teachers are unfamiliar with distinct aspects of the special educator role, and either intentionally or unintentionally obstruct the support that is often provided to their counterparts (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990). As identified within participant feedback, validation and support from administration is a critical aspect to job satisfaction. Ironically, special educators reported that they felt administrators were unclear on what the special educator role entailed, while simultaneously identified the lack of regular feedback and/or professional development specific to special educators. It is unclear to this researcher if the lack of specific special education support by administration through professional development was due to the alluded role ambiguity suggested by participants, but is a topic worthy of future research.

Inconsistencies across higher education programs about priorities for students in special education pre-service preparation programs have been identified in educational literature as well as this research. Special educators new to the field receive varying degrees of understanding and preparation for their new roles. Given that many district administrators have a limited understanding of the details and facets of their role, special educators have inconsistent and limited support while in the field, resulting in a reliance on professional growth and development from colleagues.

Additionally, a clear dichotomy was present throughout this study between the support and instructional materials that is provided to regular education counterparts. Participants were clear in feeling unsupported by administration due to the lack of instructional materials for their students with disabilities. Given the myriad instructional levels and needs of students,
participants felt increased stress due to the lack of curriculum and resources designated for special educators. Participants noted a feeling that their students were disregarded in this capacity. The pressure and the responsibility to acquire and utilize curricular resources at the special educator discretion led to a decrease in overall job satisfaction. Similarly, participants felt a lack of support in the area of professional development in managing behaviors due to the nature and severity of many of their students’ disabilities. The lack of support both curricularly and behaviorally attributed to special educators feeling less efficacious.

Research indicates that professional paperwork is an area that is a constant stressor for special educators, yet is a primary responsibility within the role of the special educator. Matuskey and Olson (1982) investigated six professional sources of stress for special educators: excessive paperwork, inadequate salary, discipline of students, inadequate planning time, student attitude, and pupil to teacher ratio. Of these issues, excessive paperwork was reported to be the number one stress factor. Not much has changed in the almost 40 years since Matuskey and Olson (1982) conducted their research. Yet, professional paperwork remains to be a critical aspect of the special educator’s role due to the legal implications of the IEP and corresponding paperwork. Paperwork is often seen as a dominant aspect of their role, yet it is consistently cited as a stressor. Because of this, it is imperative that districts provide consistent communication and professional development in this area.

Consistent with the literature, this research indicates that paperwork was reported to be a major stressor for 80% of the participants in my study. Similarly, participants reported feeling a lack of support in not only how to complete legally defensible professional paperwork, but a lack of support in how to complete paperwork and other non-instructional tasks pertaining to their students within the instructional day.
The legal implications documented within the IEP have resulted in profuse litigation since the initiation of PL 94-142 in 1975 and subsequent reauthorizations amending the requirements for students with disabilities to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education. Documentation of how a student’s disability impacts access to the general education environment and curricula is critical for ensuring that a student receives FAPE and the district’s compliance under the IDEA. Litigation at the district, circuit, and Federal level has resulted in a denial of FAPE when school districts are unable to demonstrate that the supports provided within the IEP are reasonably calculated to demonstrate educational benefits (Endrew F. v Douglas County School District RE-1, 2017).

In a 2015 case against the Illinois State Education Agency, the Independent Hearing Officer contended that the district did not provide the student FAPE when the IEP was written in ‘vague’ language, not specifying the specialized instruction, related services, or measurable goals needed to demonstrate the student was making progress in the district’s academic setting. As a result, the district was required to provide an alternative educational setting at the district’s expense for the student, as so requested by the parent through the due process complaint (In re: Student with a Disability, 2015).

Ironically, while the impact of non-compliant IEPs remain to highlight the costly measures districts endure as a result, research from my study informs a lack of attention to professional development in this area. Only one district from this study reportedly had a professional development plan to ensure consistent legal guidance for special educators and related services staff, but these measures were a result of focus monitoring and settlement agreements from indefensible IEPs from their district resulting in litigation.
Despite the recognition of the importance of professional development and the millions of dollars schools, districts, and the Federal Government spend to in-service staff, professional development available to special educators is fragmented and superficial in approach and implementation. This leads to what is considered to be “the most serious and unsolved problem for policy and practice in American education today” (Borko, 2004, p. 1). With special educator attrition rates increasing, students with disabilities are left with inconsistent instructional practices and even unqualified substitute teachers filling the instructional void, opening up districts to costly lawsuits. In 2001, approximately 808,000 students with disabilities were taught by personnel not certified in special education (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Special educators who feel less efficacious due a lack of preparation to handle the ever changing responsibilities within the role, the lack of professional development received on the job, and overall role ambiguity threaten the quality of the education that students with disabilities receive (Connelly & Graham, 2009).

3.4 Conclusions

Professional development for special educators when entering the field, as well as consistently throughout their practice, will provide support in multiple ways. Directly, the support will inform how special educators can refine their practice with both instructional and non-instructional duties within their roles. Indirectly, consistent professional development will allow special educators to feel less isolated, more informed, and connected to their regular education counterparts and school community overall. Additionally, when administrators support and provide professional development, based specifically on areas identified by special educators, continuous learning to refine special educator skillsets is not the only outcome being provided. Many administrators fail to recognize that professional development has a positive
impact, not only on self-efficacy and special educator retention, but also on the relationship between administrator and teacher. When special educators feel heard and valued within their organization, trust is generated and subsequently sanctioned as a result of administrator endorsed and/or provided opportunities for continuous learning.

In order for special educators to feel ready for the various aspects associated with their role, districts will need to utilize consistent measures to address the professional development areas that require the most support. As special educators have reported, the majority of training they receive on the job through collaboration with colleagues is not standardized. Since this has been an ineffective way to combat special educator burnout and attrition, administrators and stakeholders are left with the responsibility of re-establishing professional development models that increase self-efficacy and reduce role ambiguity (Mehrenberg, 2013).
References


Endrew F. v Douglas County School District RE-1, 580 (The Supreme Court 2017).


In re: Student with a Disability, 66 IDELR 263 (Illinois State Education Agency 2015).


PAPER THREE

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Introduction

To address the complexities of issues highlighted in this research, I designed a professional development plan specific to the needs of the special educator, with accompanying lessons or modules. Based on the research findings, the professional development plan outlines all of the necessary elements special educators need to know within the field, while also filling in the gaps created through inconsistent pre-service preparation programs. The benefits will be twofold: identifying the most important requisite areas within the role of the special educator while simultaneously providing consistent information through supplementary modules. The professional development plan details the areas special educators identified as the most challenging during the research process, as well as provides explicit professional development modules to help guide them in those specific areas. These modules allow special educators to have command of the essential aspects of their role, concurrently affording administrators the opportunity to delve into the fundamental aspects of special educators in order to lend support.

The professional development plan was created through Microsoft Publisher software, version 16.0, released September 22, 2015, and can be found as a supplementary file attached to this dissertation.
APPENDIX A
SPECIAL EDUCATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

1. Tell me about your current role as a special educator?
   Follow up: How long have you been in your role as a special educator?
   Follow up: What population of learners do you primarily service?
   Follow up: How many places have you worked? (May get at burnout)
2. In looking at a typical day, describe how you divide your time?
   Follow up: What takes up the most amount of time within your day and what do
   you spend the least amount of time doing? (RQ 1, 2)
   Optional follow up: What do you wish you could spend the most time doing?

Job Satisfaction:

1. What is the most satisfying part of your job? (RQ 3)
2. What is the most frustrating part of your job? (RQ 3)
3. If you could change one thing about your role as a special educator, what would it be?
   (RQ2)
4. What areas do you see as being the biggest challenges for special education retention in
   your school/district? (RQ 3)

Job Stressors/Burnout:

1. What are the main areas of your job that are stressful? (RQ 3)
2. Which of those things could lead to possible burnout? (RQ 3)
3. What would cause you to leave your job? (RQ 3)
4. Let’s talk about paperwork in particular. Do you find it stressful? (RQ 3)
   a. If Yes: What aspects of it do you find stressful?
   b. If No: What strategies do you use that make it not stressful?

Inclusive Practices:

1. Tell me about your comfort level with facilitating inclusion in the general education setting?
   (RQ 2)
2. What supports could your district provide that would better help you meet the goal of more inclusive practices? (RQ 2,3)

Pre-Service:

1. Tell me about your pre-service training as a student?
   a. Follow up: Did you feel it sufficiently prepared you for the role of a special educator? (RQ 2,3)
2. Upon first entering the field, what job-specific training did your district offer? (RQ 1,2)
   a. Examples: Mentoring & Induction program, informal mentoring?
   b. If no specific training, ask how they learned the ins and outs of their job.
3. What on the job professional development do you think is MOST needed specifically for new special educators upon first entering the field? (RQ 3)

Professional Development: (Let’s keep talking about PD…..)

1. You talked about what you think PD should look like for new special educators, what sort of ongoing training is needed for ALL special educators? (such as paperwork, inclusive teaching practices, legal updates, co-teaching models, etc.) (RQ 1,2,3)
2. Tell me about how you stay up to date on legal requirements of IDEA. How do you keep up to date on paperwork guidelines? What aspects of the paperwork do you feel are the most challenging? (RQ 1,3)

Administrative support:

1. What ways do you feel administration supports you within your role as a special educator? (RQ 1, 2, 3)
2. What ways do you feel you need additional support from administration? (RQ 1, 2, 3)

Self-Efficacy:

1. What parts of your role are you most confident with? (RQ 3)
2. What parts of your role are you least confident with? (RQ 3)
3. What could be done to make you feel more confident in your role as a special educator? (RQ 3)
   a. Follow-up: What specific professional development would help your confidence?
APPENDIX B

ADULT CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the research project titled A Qualitative Investigation Into The Effects of Professional Development on Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy, conducted by Kimberly Miller, a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is analyze the effectiveness of professional development for special educator retention.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour. I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Kimberly Miller at (630) 375-3976 and Dr. Kelly Summers at ksummers@niu.edu.

I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588. I understand that the intended benefits of this study include understanding the effectiveness of professional development for special educators and research that may help to improve special educator retention and job satisfaction.

I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential. Interviewee’s names and schools will be kept anonymous. All data (interview) will be secured in a password protected computer and deleted following the study.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

____________________________________________________
Signature of Subject Date

By signing this form, I am allowing the researcher to audio record me as part of this research. I also understand that this consent for recording is effective until the following date: June 4th, 2020. On or before that date, the recordings will be destroyed.

____________________________________________________
Signature of Subject Date
Dear Educational Administrator:

My name is Kimberly Miller and I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University in the Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology, and Foundations. I am completing my Ed.D. in Educational Administration. The focus of my doctoral dissertation research has revolved around the concerns with special educator attrition and ways administrators can provide professional development and support to these professionals. As an educational administrator, your insights are essential to this field of research. Therefore, I would greatly appreciate a brief interview with you. **Can you please let me know when you would be available to speak with me for approximately one hour?**

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you will be provided with a consent form upon my arrival that will offer more information on the study. Please feel free to reach out with any questions. Additionally, my dissertation director is Dr. Kelly Summers, Assistant Professor of Educational Administration, Northern Illinois University. You are welcome to contact her as well with any questions you may have. Dr. Summers can be reached at ksummers@niu.edu.

Thank you in advance for your valuable time.

Best Regards,

Kimberly Miller

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Kimberly Miller
Special Educator Recruitment E-Mail

Dear Special Educator:

My name is Kimberly Miller and I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University in the Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology, and Foundations. I am completing my Ed.D. in Educational Administration. The focus of my doctoral dissertation research has revolved
around the concerns with special educator attrition and ways administrators can provide professional development and support to professionals like yourself. As a special educator, your insights are essential to this field of research. Therefore, I would greatly appreciate a brief interview with you. **Can you please let me know when you would be available to speak with me for approximately one hour?**

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you will be provided with a consent form upon my arrival that will offer more information on the study. Please feel free to reach out with any questions. Additionally, my dissertation director is Dr. Kelly Summers, Assistant Professor of Educational Administration, Northern Illinois University. You are welcome to contact her as well with any questions you may have. Dr. Summers can be reached at ksummers@niu.edu.

Thank you in advance for your valuable time.

Best Regards,

Kimberly Miller