

Why Special Educators Stay: A Phenomenological Examination of Factors Impacting Special
Educator Retention in Northern Virginia's Urban Public Schools

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Abstract

Cultural stigma and a looming teacher deficit, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have created an increased need for special educators. Considering these issues, this research used traditional phenomenological qualitative methodologies to understand why public-school special education teachers of students with low incidence disabilities (SETs-LIDs) remained in the profession. The purpose was to better understand the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs, and it was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study. The primary research question was “What factors impact SETs-LIDs who continue to teach in special education during difficult times?” Secondary questions were (a) “What are the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs that influence their retention?” and (b) “How do SETs-LIDs cope with the challenges of their work?” Data were obtained through a demographic survey and independent interviews, which were designed to better understand why public-school SET-LIDs remain in the profession. Participants were selected based on responses to the demographic survey, and inclusion criteria included SETs-LIDs with diverse employment backgrounds. Ninety-six special educators responded to the demographic survey and 15 SET-LIDs were interviewed. Textual descriptions generated from the research were work satisfaction from relationships, intrinsic or altruistic motivation, positive administrative experiences, and external factors. Structural descriptions of the research were frustration, a desire for understanding, inequity and exclusion, and uncertainty. The “what” and “how” of individuals impacted by the difficulties of SET-LID attrition were interpreted. Participants described meaningful relationships with students and administrators as being

fundamental to their retention. This research also found that SET-LIDs desired resources, understanding, appropriate professional development, and expert guidance. Implications for professional practices and future research were suggested.

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General Audience Abstract

School divisions have never adequately met the demand for qualified special educators. Cultural stigma and a looming teacher deficit, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have created an increased need for special educators. However, special educators are leaving the profession, and many are avoiding the working conditions in the special education field. Many are transferring to different career fields, retiring, or finding general education jobs. Considering these issues, this research used traditional phenomenological qualitative methodologies to understand why public-school special education teachers of students with low incidence disabilities (SETs-LIDs) remained in the profession. The purpose was to better understand the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs. The primary research question was “What factors impact SETs-LIDs who continue to teach in special education during difficult times?” Secondary questions were (a) “What are the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs that influence their retention?” and (b) “How do SETs-LIDs cope with the challenges of their work?” Data were obtained through a demographic survey and independent interviews, which were designed to better understand why public-school special educators remain in the profession. Ninety-six special educators responded to the demographic survey and 15 SET-LIDs were interviewed. Participants described meaningful relationships with students and administrators as being fundamental to their retention. This research also found that SET-LIDs desired resources, understanding, appropriate professional development, and expert guidance.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my girls, my wife Catrina, and my daughters Viola and Georgia.

I love you to the moon and back.

Thank you and have a happy journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of special education teachers of students with low incidence disabilities (SETs-LIDs). The study implemented phenomenological qualitative methodologies. Data were obtained through a demographic survey and independent interviews. The focus of this phenomenological qualitative research was understanding the employment factors that influence the retention of special education teachers (SETs), specifically those educators who continue to teach students with low incidence disabilities (LIDs).

Study Overview

Since the adoption of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1975), the United States had never adequately met the demand for qualified SETs. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) stated that a “growing and pervasive shortage of special education teachers threatens the quality of education students with disabilities receives” (p. 697). The current study focused on the factors that impacted SETs who continued to teach in special education. By addressing a gap in the literature, this study explored the reasons SETs, specifically SETs-LIDs, continued to teach in special education, even during times of high turnover. Additionally, the employment factors that impact SETs-LIDs were examined in detail.

A phenomenological qualitative research design was used for this study as it constructs “a better understanding of the lived experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 270). Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that phenomenology was “an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences” (p. 151). This research examined the phenomenon of SETs-LIDs who continue to teach special education. As such, data on the lived experiences of special educators were gathered through a demographic survey and

interviews, which were designed to better understand the phenomenon. The interview questions were generated by the research, and their validity is discussed.

This research is divided into five chapters. This first chapter introduced the phenomenon and research. Chapter 2 reviews the research and literature in the field of SET attrition and retention, with specific attention to the impact of administrative support and financial compensation. Additionally, the limited literature regarding SETs-LIDs is reviewed. The literature within these fields is detailed and tied to the research purpose and questions. Chapter 3 identifies the research methodologies. Then, the phenomenological methodologies and the lived experiences of special educators are examined. Following this, the interview processes and procedures are defined and aligned with Creswell and Poth (2018) and Moustakas (1994). Additionally, the data collection instrument design and validation are discussed. Chapter 4 describes the analysis of the research, and the profiles of all the participants are presented. The findings are described using textual and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. Lastly, Chapter 5 examines the findings of the research, tying the summation of the literature together, and presents a thorough discussion of their implications for practice before providing suggestions for future studies.

Significance of the Study

The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (2019) posited that teaching students with special needs was considered a priority in the United States. However, the growing shortage of SETs and related service providers threatened the education system's ability to ensure students with special needs were educated appropriately. Since the creation of the IDEA in 1975, the supply of available SETs across the United States had never adequately met the demand for qualified SETs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

According to Mason-Williams et al. (2020), “special education has never enjoyed a fully qualified teaching workforce, and, in this sense, has never fully delivered on the promise of a free and appropriate public education for all students with disabilities” (p. 45).

Typically, teachers who left special education left high-minority or high-poverty schools (Simon & Johnson, 2015). These teachers opted to (a) move to areas with higher numbers of White students, (b) teach less racially diverse student populations, and/or (c) work in more affluent schools. Students with disabilities who lived in high-poverty districts had a greater likelihood of being taught by an unqualified teacher, a teacher more likely to leave, or both (Feng & Sass, 2015; Levin et al., 2015). Mason-Williams et al. (2020) asserted that teacher turnover was problematic because schools must rebuild new collegial and collaborative relationships with teachers, administrators, related service providers, parents, and students each time an experienced teacher departed. Ingersoll (2001) named this phenomenon the revolving door. This revolving door of teachers leaving the profession for reasons other than retirement negatively impacted school culture and student achievement.

Students in high-poverty, high-need, and high-minority population schools experienced the highest rates of teacher turnover (Bettini et al., 2020; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Scott, 2016; Scott et al., 2021). Special educators who worked in high-poverty schools often entered the workforce through alternative or emergency measures (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Scott, 2016). Programs that provided alternative routes to teaching resulted in novice educators being more likely to not complete their teacher training. These novice SETs were more likely to leave their school or the profession early (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), which put the most vulnerable populations at constant risk. Thus, the revolving door of SETs was created by efforts to shortcut effective programming and advance alternative routes to

teaching (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The results of alternative programming and their impacts on high-needs students were described by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017):

In schools with a majority of low-income students and students of color, turnover rates can be double the rates in schools with more White students and fewer low-income students. These schools wind up with teachers who have fewer years of experience and, often, significantly less training to teach. (p. 30)

Comparatively, students in schools with larger White student populations learned from higher quality educators and educators of similar socio-racial backgrounds (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Furthermore, Mason-Williams et al. (2020) indicated that the percentage of SETs of color continues to remain constant, even as the proportions of students of color continued to increase. As the population of students with disabilities grew in racial and ethnic diversity, the teaching population remained the same. Ultimately, the socio-racial gap between teachers of color and White teachers did not adequately support high-minority and high-needs schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Scott, 2016; Scott et al., 2021).

Study Purpose and Justification

The literature examining why SETs leave special education was expansive. A lack of administrative support, difficult working conditions, and poor financial compensation were considered the primary factors impacting SETs (Bettini et al., 2016; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Boscardin et al., 2018; Cancio et al., 2013; Conley & You, 2017; Johnson et al., 2021; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2019; Scott, 2016; Vittek, 2015). To address the disparity of factors impacting SET-LIDs attrition and retention in the literature, this study explored why

SETs-LIDs continue to work in the profession. The purpose of the study was to better understand the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study was “What factors impact SETs-LIDs who continue to teach in special education during difficult times?” Secondary questions were (a) “What are the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs that influence their retention?” and (b) “What are the challenges that impacted the work of SET-LIDs?”

Phenomenological Qualitative Research Approach

This research used a phenomenological qualitative research approach to better understand the factors that influence the retention of SETs-LIDs. The phenomenological qualitative research procedures used for this study were developed by Moustakas (1994) and reiterated by Creswell and Poth (2018). The following were the steps identified by Moustakas (1994) that were utilized for this study:

- Discover a topic and question rooted in personal and social meaning and significance.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of the research literature.
- Construct a nature and purpose of the research.
- Develop an agreement that contains informed consent, security and confidentiality, and ethical principles.
- Develop a set of questions that guide the interview process.
- Conduct and record person-to-person interviews that focus on the topic.
- Organize and analyze data based on individual and synthesized textual (what participants experienced) and structural (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, and context) descriptions gathered from the interviews.

Moustakas (1994) built upon previous research to describe the steps needed to conduct phenomenological research. Moustakas's (1994) original research was used to fill gaps in Creswell and Poth's (2018) summaries, in which they applied and shortened Moustakas' (1994) explanation of phenomenological research. A combination of Creswell and Poth's (2018) and Moustakas' (1994) work was applied in this study.

A key aspect of the methodology of phenomenology was a process known as bracketing or epoché (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing was a practice where researchers attempt to suspend their judgments or set aside their biases. Moustakas (1994) described this process as a work towards "receptiveness":

I am more readily able to meet something or someone and to listen and hear whatever is being presented, without coloring the other's communication with my own habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing, removing the usual ways of labeling or judging, or comparing. I am ready to perceive and know a phenomenon from its appearance and presence. (p. 90)

To suspend judgments and set aside biases, the researcher dedicated attention and self-dialogue to reducing preconceived notions and judgments. Also, bracketing required the self-identification of experiences. Therefore, as the researcher was a former special educator with more than 15 years of experience in the field, they needed to refrain from making judgments based on their experiences throughout the data collection process and during data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). For example, the researcher needed to remove biases when asking follow-up questions; thus, they attempted to ask, from a neutral and unbiased viewpoint, questions that were nonjudgmental and receptive to fresh perspectives.

Constant reflection throughout the research to reduce or remove preconceived notions, biases, or judgments was known as phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994), and this was applied throughout the research. Moustakas (1994) described the researcher as one who must continually apply reflection and considerations to extract and exact a fuller and clearer understanding of the phenomenon. By continually pursuing phenomenological reduction, the researcher was able to concentrate on the “essential nature” of the phenomenon under study, or “what participants experienced.” The researcher made corrections to their understandings, constantly adjusting and analyzing them until an understanding of “what” the phenomenon was, was achieved. After this achievement through phenomenological reduction, Moustakas’ (1994) “imaginative variation” was sought.

Imaginative variation was the process of approaching a phenomenon from different, creative perspectives (Moustakas, 1994): “The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience... In other words the ‘how’ that speaks to conditions that illuminate the ‘what’ of experience” (p. 97). Imaginative variation required considerations of the structures that created a participant’s thoughts and feelings; for example, time, space, causality, relationship to self, and relationship to others are measured. Through imaginative variation, the researcher was able to tie the “what” to the “how.” Analysis of the essential nature of the phenomenon was described by “what” was experienced. Then, through imaginative variation, the “how” of the experience was given structural contexts.

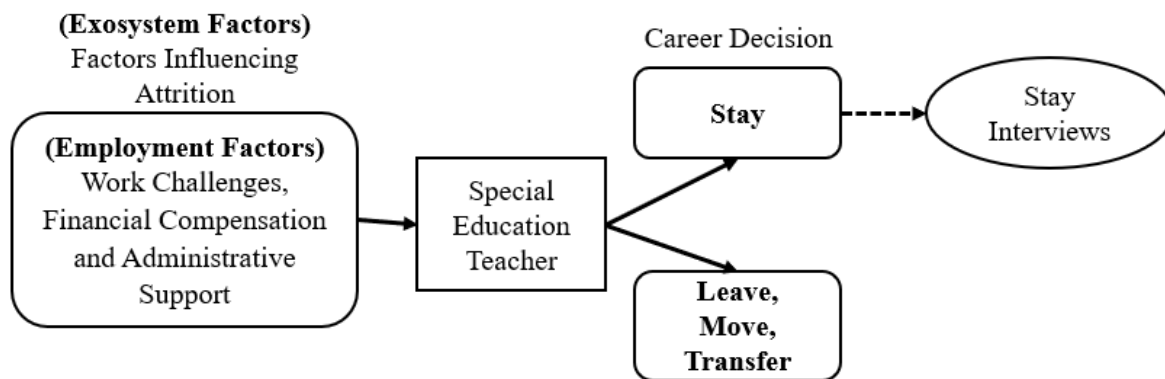
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework designed for this research was adapted from Billingsley’s (1993) conceptual model on SET attrition and retention. The theoretical origin of this model was grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Billingsley's conceptual framework are discussed in greater detail in the next section. Figure 1 is a visual of the conceptual framework for this research.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Factors Influencing Career Decisions to Stay



Factors beyond the immediate control of the SETs-LIDs were considered exosystem factors. These are factors such as employment factors, specifically work challenges, financial compensation, and administrative support that influenced the attrition of SETs-LIDs and impact their career decisions. This research utilized structures from stay interviews to understand the SETs-LIDs' decision to stay in their profession. Thus, the summation of this conceptual framework examines stay career decisions.

Billingsley's Conceptual Model

In Billingsley's (1993) initial methodological literature review of the SET shortage, a conceptual model was developed to better understand SET attrition and retention. Billingsley's model is still used today (Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019, Lesh et al., 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011). The author hypothesized that SETs' career decisions were based on three

factors: external, employment, and personal factors. Billingsley then theorized that these factors had either a direct or an indirect impact on a SET's career decision.

Billingsley's (1993) conceptual model suggested that within the three factors, there were a variety of sub-factors that may impact a SET's career decisions. The model also implied that some factors were beyond the SET's control. For example, external factors may impact a SET's employment and personal factors. Factors such as the societal and cultural prestige of teaching may cause some SETs to reconsider their employment (Billingsley, 1993). Personal factors, according to Billingsley, comprised demographic, cognitive/affective, and family factors. Billingsley subdivided employment factors into the categories of professional qualifications, working conditions, commitment, and employability.

Much of the research in Billingsley's (1993) literature review analyzed employment factors, specifically working conditions. These factors were commonly researched because employment factors are much more easily altered. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) cumulatively hypothesized that "a combination of demands, coupled with insufficient resources, contributes to negative affective responses, and thereby contributes to attrition or intent to leave" (p. 727). Billingsley's model of factors that impact SETs' career decisions was the basis of the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

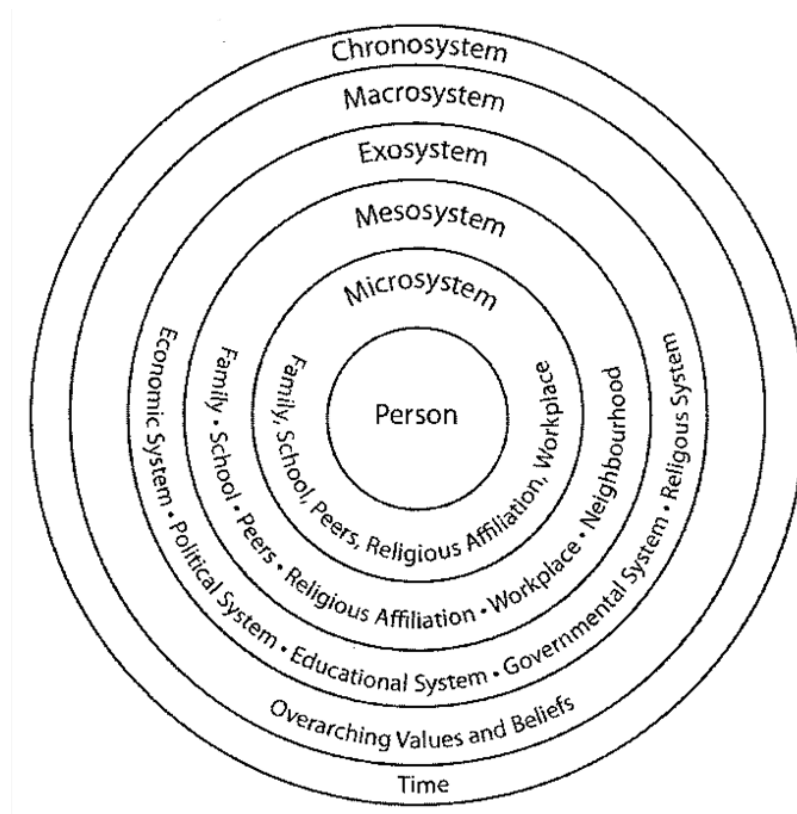
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Formulated by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974), ecological systems theory asserted that different environmental systems influence human behaviors. First applied within the context of child development, Bronfenbrenner's research recognized that there were environmental forces and factors that impacted a child's development. In understanding how the ecological systems impact the person at their center, Bronfenbrenner defined five co-existing systems: the

microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Figure 2). Although this section provides a thorough examination of the ecological systems theory, the exosystem was the primary focus for this research.

Figure 2

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Note. Adapted from Stanger (2011).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described each level of the ecological system as being built upon the previous level. At the heart of the system was the person or individual. The first layer influencing the individual was the microsystem: the environments and system that were most connected to the individual. Common settings and structures of the microsystem were schools, workplaces, families, religions, and employers. The second layer was the mesosystem, where each microsystem component influenced and interacted with the others. For example, a person's

negative microsystem experience at home may lead to a negative mesosystem experience at school. The third layer, the exosystem, was where the person did not have an active role but had some form of daily participation. Bronfenbrenner (1977) described influences from government agencies, school boards, and mass media as examples of exosystem influences. In understanding the role of the exosystem, this research aimed to understand exosystem factors that SETs-LIDs do not directly control but that influence them daily. This research specifically studied the exosystem factors around SETs-LIDs' employment, such as administrative support and working conditions. The last two layers, the macrosystem and chronosystem, were systems and life events that occurred beyond the larger context of environmental control (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Stay Interviews

Stay interviews were semi-structured conversations that allow employers to identify factors that affect their job satisfaction and thus increased their likelihood of retaining great talent within the organization (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015). Endorsed as a strategy for increasing the retention of talented employees, stay interviews provided an opportunity for supervisors to better understand the actions and efforts that retain valued employees (Bradbury et al., 2022). The Society for Human Resource Management, an organization supporting the rights of over 115 million workers, identified stay interviews as “an antidote to exit interviews” (Bergeron, 2022).

To better understand the effectiveness of stay interviews, the San Francisco Human Services Agency conducted over 73 stay interviews. They found that employees appreciated the agency's services and their organization's continuous efforts toward improvement (Caraballo & Williams, 2020). Most importantly, stay interviews were an opportunity for supervisors and employees to share mutual trust and respect with one another (Bradbury et al., 2022).

In this research, stay interviews were used to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of SETs and SETs-LIDs' career decisions. Finnegan (2015) asserted the following about stay interviews:

[They a]re the primary tool to use to learn why your employees stay or might leave, what you can do to improve their happiness and productivity, the destinations they have in mind for their career, and the degree to which you can count on them for the long term. (p. 8)

Stay interviews required the cultivation of conversations through specifically designed questions that promote listening; they were a combination of art and science (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015). The goal and purpose of using stay interviews for this research was to better understand the factors influencing SETs-LIDs and their career decisions.

Definitions of Terms

Attrition

In this study, this referred to SETs who leave, move from, or transfer out of a special education position or profession (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Measures of attrition vary per study and are identified in the literature review.

Exosystem

“One or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect – or are affected by – what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (Newman & Newman, 2020). For the purposes of this research, the exosystem referred to the factors that affect SETs-LIDs and the factors SETs-LIDs affect related to their profession.

Low Incidence Disabilities

Educational disabilities that occurred in low numbers or are less common in the general population are known as LIDs. Under a revision of the IDEA (2017), an LID was defined as, a visual or hearing impairment, or simultaneous visual and hearing impairments; a significant cognitive impairment; or any impairment for which a small number of personnel with highly specialized skills and knowledge are needed in order for children with that impairment to receive early intervention services or a free appropriate public education (§. 1462c)

Related Service Providers

This referred to the specially trained school personnel who provide unique support for students with disabilities. Related services included, “speech-language pathology services, or any other related service, if the service is considered special education rather than a related service” (IDEA, 2017). The specific related services providers used in this research were an occupational therapist and a speech and language pathologist.

Retention

This referred to a SET that remained in the same teaching assignment as the previous school year (Billingsley, 2004).

Special Educator

This referred to a teacher who served in an assigned special education setting or classroom and includes related service providers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Special Education Program

This referred to a placement or setting that specifically served students with LIDs. For the purposes of this research, special education programs existed within a public-school building, and student placement in these programs was identified by Individual Education Program (IEP)

teams (OSEP, 2021). Special education programs within the selected school district specifically service students with LIDs.

Limitation and Delimitations

A specific limitation identified in this research was the number of participants. Qualitative analysis experts assert that phenomenological research should include 7–10 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, this research was limited by the demographic selection criteria used to determine eligible participants. Since a convenience sampling methodology was used for the study, participants had to work within a specific school district that the researcher had access to. This limitation was addressed, and a delimitation was created.

The researcher chose to address the shortcomings of convenience sampling by increasing the number of interviews conducted for this research. Instead of the recommended 7–10 participants, the researcher selected 15 participants. This delimitation was implemented to aid in achieving the research's aims and better address the research questions.

An additional delimitation included specifically focusing on SETs-LIDs instead of considering all special educators or general educators. This delimitation addressed a group of educators that specifically impacted a subgroup of vulnerable students. The teachers selected for this research require considerable resources and support, making this subgroup of special educators unique when compared to the larger sample of other types of educators. Additionally, the demographic uniqueness of the participants selected for this research addressed a disparity in the literature and the understanding of the attrition and retention of SETs.

The limitations of this study also included the qualitative nature of the research and the selection of participants. Although quantitative research around SET attrition and retention has historically generated correlative conclusions, understanding human experience is not a

correlative methodology. Qualitative analysis limits the ability of research to generalize and create broad conclusions. Additionally, qualitative analysis requires triangulation and coding in accordance with particular transcribed phrases or words. However, this coding may lead to errors in interpretation or misunderstanding participants' phrases or statements. Also, the practice of phenomenological research is inherently limiting because it abides by specific guidelines and expectations when compared to other qualitative methodologies. Phenomenology limits the researcher's ability to make broad generalizations about anything beyond the specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research was further limited by the school district's response to the research inquiry. As part of the research process, the researcher was required to submit a research proposal application to the selected school district. In response, the school district asked for the removal of two questions from the original interview protocol. As per the school district's request, the questions were removed. This created a limitation in the ability to access the full scope of the intended research. Specifically, the researcher intended to ask questions related to financial compensation. The removals of these questions are addressed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Lastly, the selection of participants for interviews for this research was limited. Only participants who had taught for 3 years were eligible for participation. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 indicates that the retention of SETs after their first 3 years of working is difficult. Therefore, this limitation was due to the difficulty of retaining veteran SETs beyond 3 years.

Summary

This chapter introduced the phenomenon of special educators' remaining in the profession despite challenges and high teacher turnover. Special educators are impacted by a variety of exosystem factors that consequently impact their career decisions. A conceptual

framework was presented to demonstrate the phenomenon and how it was understood in this research. The basis of this study, the theories supporting its conceptual framework were also discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, a review of the literature pertaining to the impact of SET turnover and its effects on SWD are discussed. The impact of administrative support and financial compensation on SET attrition and retention is also discussed. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), “[a]bout 90% of the nationwide annual demand for teachers is created when teachers leave the profession, with two-third of teachers leaving for reasons other than retirement” (p. v). In their review of 2012 data from the School and Staffing Survey, the authors found that 8% of SETs leave teaching every year (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Another 8% of SETs moved schools or transferred to teaching general education. Altogether, 16% of SETs migrated to schools, found new positions, or exited the teaching profession entirely. Comparatively, the attrition of schools in Canada and Finland was only around 3%–4% (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Search Process

Due to the persistent and costly results of SET attrition, researchers had sought solutions. To find the most influential research and resources in SET retention and attrition, a variety of search methods were used. For instance, to review the most recent literature pertaining to this, an internet search of relevant literature was conducted. Using the online research platform EBSCOhost, literature was gathered using search terms that included: (a) “working condition” (or the related terms: “work environment,” “worker conditions,” “organizational conditions,” or “management”), (b) “special educators” (or the related terms: “special education,” “special needs,” “disabilities,” or “special education teacher”), (c) “teacher retention” (or the related terms: “teacher attrition,” “teacher turnover,” “teacher persistence,” “intent to leave,” “burnout,” “burn-out,” “stress,” or “occupational stress”), and (d) “low incidence disability” (or the related

terms: “low incidence disabilities,” “intellectual disability,” “severe disabilities,” “multiple disabilities,” “profound disabilities,” “complex disabilities,” “autism,” “autism spectrum disorder,” “visual impairment(s),” “blindness,” “hearing impairment(s),” “hard of hearing,” “deafness,” “deafblind,” “emotional disabilities,” “behavior disabilities,” or “orthopedic impairment(s)”). The search results were limited to publications from 2015 to the present. The initial search results yielded over 2,000 articles. To reduce the number of articles, limiting terms “and” and “or” were added. Additionally, the titles and abstracts of the articles were reviewed for relevance.

Articles by researchers that consistent arose during this research were also collected and reviewed. The following authors served as consistent contributors to the field of SET attrition and retention: Billingsley, Darling-Hammond, Ingersol, and Bettini. Each of these researchers had published multiple works surrounding special education, the impact of SET on students, and/or SET attrition and retention. For example, Billingsley and Bettini (2019) conducted a review of literature on SET attrition and retention. This review was built upon previous reviews conducted by Billingsley in 1993 and 2004. Billingsley’s other seminal works and works cited by her were used as additional resources for accessing pivotal literature in the field.

Both Billingsley and Bettini’s (2019) methodical literature review and the leverage briefs created by the Department of Education (2021) were essential literature for this review. For the latter, only the leverage briefs pertaining to financial compensation and administrative support were utilized. The reference lists in the areas of funding and loan forgiveness and enhancing professional leadership were thoroughly examined and utilized, and those resources were also added to this literature review. Additionally, resources and literature related to ecological systems theory and stay interviews were reviewed. The research pertaining to ecological systems

theory and stay interviews can be found in Chapter 1. For this literature review, 75 peer-reviewed articles, 11 educational organization reports, 5 books, and 2 laws and policies were used.

Important Literature

The Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], (2021) and Billingsley and Bettini's (2019) recent literature reviews in the field of SET attrition and retention provided current and thorough perspectives. Therefore, both these substantial works will be discussed. The OSEP (2021) published 13 leverage briefs separated into three areas: 1) attracting, 2) preparing, and 3) retaining special educators. Each of these areas, and the included bodies of research, described strategies and resources for decreasing SET attrition and increasing retention. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) identified four themes that have the greatest impact on SET attrition and retention: 1) teacher preparation and qualification programs, 2) school characteristics, 3) working conditions, and 4) teacher demographic and nonwork factors. Both the OSEP (2021) and Billingsley and Bettini (2019) provided expert opinions on SET attrition and retention.

Office of Special Education Programs

As previously mentioned, the OSEP (2021), an arm of the U.S. Department of Education, published 13 leverage briefs aimed at attracting, preparing, and retaining special educators. The goal of these briefs was to improve and increase the pipeline of the special education workforce. The briefs were presented at a variety of events, were open to feedback opportunities, and attempted to create a culmination of resources. Each of the 13 briefs provided deep insight into a specific issue of SET retention and attrition (OSEP, 2021). These 13 leverage points served as a review of 13 fields related to SET retention and attrition (OSEP, 2021). Each leverage point included a description of the brief, an overview of the brief, including relevant research, and the

impacts on related service providers and early elementary schools. Additionally, each leverage point incorporated critical components for success and examples of successful programs. For the purposes of this literature review, only the funding and loan forgiveness and supportive work environment briefs will be discussed. These two leverage briefs included considerations for policymakers at the state and local levels regarding SET retention and attrition (OSEP, 2021).

In addition to the 13 briefs, the OSEP included information about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the U.S. education system in the introduction to the briefs (OSEP, 2021). While the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were still widely unknown, these briefs were developed during the pandemic. The introduction to the leverage briefs hinted that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will further compound the issues faced by SET shortages. Although this literature review will not focus on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, future research is needed to examine the impact of the pandemic on SET attrition and retention (OSEP, 2021).

Community of Scholars

Billingsley and Bettini's (2019) literature review provided a vital overview of SET attrition and retention. Within it, the authors identified four primary themes impacting SET attrition and retention: teacher preparation and qualifications, working conditions, school characteristics, and demographic and nonwork factors. Their work sought to narrow down the studies that examined the impacts of SET attrition and retention. Using a systematic and methodological approach to conducted a thorough literature review in the field of SET attrition and retention, Billingsley and Bettini referenced various journal articles, studies, policy briefs, and privately funded research. The authors reviewed literature from 2002 to 2017, seeking information on attrition and retention. Thirty articles were included in their review.

Billingsley and Bettini (2019) identified a disparity in the research that remains to date. Much of the research regarding policy and policymakers maintained a national perspective. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) suggested that district- and local-level policymakers invest in their administrative data sets to better understand the factors contributing to attrition and retention. The disparity of state or local administrative data sets suggested that policymakers and administrators can make systematic changes that may impact SETs. Furthermore, interventions and support created at the local level may also create models of success for statewide or nationwide policy implementation (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The disparity in research between national, state, and local policy further exemplified the need for deeper understanding about what factors impact SET retention.

Billingsley and Bettini's (2019) findings expressed a deeper understanding of factors that impact SET attrition. However, students with disabilities remain vulnerable to teacher shortages. The authors' argued that policymakers must influence and intervene to create positive working conditions for special educators. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) defined a slew of subthemes under working conditions: job demands, social contexts, resources, financial compensation, and affective responses and coping strategies. The primary body of research emphasized for the purposes of this literature review focuses on administrative support and financial compensation, similar to Billingsley and Bettini (2019).

Administrative Support

Administrative support was an impactful factor towards attrition or retention of SET. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), "[w]hen teachers strongly disagree that their administration is supportive, they are more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching" (p. 29). Collectively, administrative support demonstrated the greatest impact on

a teacher's intent to stay, leave a school, or leave the profession (Bettini et al., 2016; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Boscardin et al., 2018; Cancio et al., 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Conley & You, 2017; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Vittek, 2015). School administrators impacted multiple aspects of the working conditions within a school and therefore impacted the lives of teachers in multiple ways. Bettini (2017) asserted that "special educators have many complex responsibilities, and they may experience frustration and be more likely to leave when their demands require more than they can reasonably provide" (p. 246). Administrative supports influenced supportive work environments, which directly and explicitly impacted SET attrition and retention (OSEP, 2021).

When reviewing the conceptual model presented by Billingsley (1993), employment factors consistently arose in the author's research, remaining in focus throughout each literature review (Billingsley, 1993, 2004; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Identified and embedded in employment factors were professional qualifications; working conditions; and commitments to school, district, the teaching fields, and the teaching profession. Examining the factors within employment, Billingsley developed the following hypothesis: when qualified teachers were working in desirable positions, which have greater opportunities for higher salaries and better career recognition, their level of commitment to the profession is higher (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Billingsley's (1993) conceptual framework and hypothesis established the foundation for future research on SETs leaving the field.

Billingsley's (1993) conceptual framework established the foundation for research conducted by Conley and You (2017). In their evaluation of the School and Staffing Survey data, Conley and You (2017) sought to link workplace factors, mediating factors, and SET intent to stay or leave. Using data collected from a national sample of teachers, Conley and You (2017)

aimed to see how the workplace factors of administrative support, job design, autonomy, and student engagement impacted the mediating factors of job satisfaction, commitment, and intent to leave. Using structural equation modeling, the researchers assessed the relations between the variables using a variety of criteria and by reviewing data for goodness of fit. Not surprisingly, most of the SETs who participated in Conley and You's (2017) study reported having supportive and encouraging school administrators and greater intent to remain in teaching. Administrative support specifically affected work commitment strongly ($r = 0.58, p < 0.05$). In contrast, of all other workplace variables, administrative support was found to be one of two factors that directly impacted SET intent to stay or leave. If a SET's perceptions of their supervisor or administrators were not positive, they were likely to be less motivated and less committed to teaching (Conley & You, 2017).

Continuing the use of Billingsley's (1993) conceptual framework, Cancio et al. (2013) focused on the importance of administrative support for teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Specifically, Cancio et al. (2013) aimed to identify the perceptions of teachers regarding administrative support with mediating variables such as trust, appreciation, and growth opportunities. The results of the survey proved Billingsley's hypothesis: SETs rated administrative support as the key influence on their intent to stay or leave. Additionally, teachers intending to stay for the long-term reported greater feelings of appreciation, trust, and growth opportunities from their respective administrations ($r = 0.010, p < 0.01$). Teachers who intended to stay in the field rated their job satisfaction higher than those who intended to leave (Cancio et al., 2013). Positive perceptions of administrative support resulting in greater teacher retention is apparent in both Cancio et al. (2013) and Conley and You's (2017) research.

Similar to the positive impacts of administrative support demonstrated in Cancio et al.'s (2013) research, Ansley et al. (2019) studied the positive and negative relationship between the perceptions of school leadership and teachers. As part of a grant from the OSEP, Ansley et al. (2019) examined the perceptions of teachers who worked in special education programs where students exhibited severe externalizing behaviors. Using a 43-item Likert scale survey, the authors found that school leadership directly impacts positive work contexts. In determining the relationship between school leadership and overall job satisfaction, many results demonstrated statistical significance. Each item response's relationship to school leadership was shown to have a significant correlation ($p < 0.01$). These results demonstrated that effective leadership is necessary for teachers to experience high job satisfaction. Ansley et al. (2019) found that "overall job satisfaction was strongly associated with most items pertaining to school leadership". Although the above mentioned studies indicate positive relationships between SET retention and administrative support, additional studies indicate negative relationships between the two.

Multiple studies have linked the negative ramifications of poor administrative support to SET attrition and retention. Since school administrators impact the experiences of SETs, SETs were much more likely to move, leave, or transfer when they described experiences where administrative support was lacking (Ansley et al., 2019; Bettini et al., 2016; Cancio et al., 2013; Conley & You, 2017; Vittek, 2015). Although research struggled to holistically define administrative support, researchers agree that school administrators impact multiple aspects of SETs' work. For example, the number of students on a teacher's caseload was identified as an administrator's responsibility. In a study of SET caseloads, the varying degree of caseload responsibilities left many SETs, especially novice SETs, feeling burnt out. Furthermore, high

caseload numbers impacted SETs' intent to leave the profession (Hogue & Taylor, 2020).

Unfortunately, the impact of high caseloads was not viewed equally by administrators. In Hogue and Taylor's (2020) study, administrators did not indicate caseloads as impacting teachers' intent to leave. Additional studies found that school administrators were ill-equipped to support SETs.

According to the OSEP (2021), administrators may be underprepared to support SETs. Administrators working with special education programs were expected to carry out a variety of day-to-day managerial tasks. These tasks included ensuring special education programs comply with legal requirements and adhere to the norms of the organization, all while advocating for students' needs (Lashley, 2020). Beyond the managerial responsibilities of special education, school administrators balance multiple aspects of school supervision and may lack knowledge about special education. In a review of leadership preparation coursework, Bettini et al. (2017) found that courses or criteria in special education are not a part of most principal or leadership development programs. Additionally, SETs reported that principals and school administrators were ill-equipped to support SETs and SWD (Billingsley et al., 2020). The Council for Exceptional Children [CEC] (2020) asserted that special educators must understand and advocate for the needs of their jobs, positions, and students. While the complexity of teacher and administrative relationships required additional research, researchers have identified that administrators directly impact SETs and SWDs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Financial Compensation and Policy

Teaching is considered an unappealing profession (Kozleski & Proffitt, 2020): it is not culturally or financially attractive, nor is it interesting, intellectual, or worth the effort. Aspiring youth find the profession undesirable, and teaching is widely viewed as a career failure (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Those teachers who leave the field describe dissatisfaction with their

school, dissatisfaction with their administrators, and frustration with their career (Podolsky et al., 2017). The unattractiveness of the teaching profession creates systems of school insecurity, where some schools suffer from high annual turnover and chronic instability year after year, a phenomenon Ingersoll (2001) termed the revolving door. Furthermore, the long-term chronic instability of the teaching workforce may be one of the underlying mechanisms by which racial segregation and poverty consistently impact students negatively (Holme et al., 2018). The need for change requires radical and rapid revisions and resets of special education policies, practices, and laws (Billingsley et al., 2020; Conley & You, 2017; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).

By the year 2030, nearly one-fifth of the U.S. population is expected to be 65 years of age or older (Kozleski & Profitt, 2020). Dubbed “the Silver Tsunami,” the effect of the nation’s retiring workforce is just one of the areas of profound impact created by retiring teachers (Aguilar, 2014). A looming teacher deficit is expected to be seen with increasing teacher retirements and student enrollments. Ingersoll et al. (2018) found that the demand for teachers is predicted to dramatically increase due to the graying of the teaching workforce; “who will our new teachers be?”

Experts in the field of SET turnover have advocated for changes in the financial compensation policy (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Feng & Sass, 2015; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Other researchers cite more immediate impacts, with changes to administrative support (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Cancio et al., 2013, 2018; Conley & You, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019). Nevertheless, areas for future research remain. As the demand for SETs continues to exceed supply, researchers are left wondering how to staff classrooms. Mason et al. (2020) went as far as to ponder the following:

... whether there is an actual shortage of fully qualified SETs or rather a shortage of fully qualified SETs who are willing to work for the wages we are able to pay and under the conditions we currently are able to provide in schools. (p. 56)

The crisis of teaching students with disabilities has never been greater (Bettini et al., 2020, 2016). The inability of building leaders and policy makers to create amicable working conditions or provide adequate pay for SETs-LIDs is a moral issue. This morality challenge impacts the nation's ability to help those in greatest need and provide a free and appropriate education to all.

In addition to the graying of the teaching population, the shortage of SETs impacted the taxpayer at the local, state, and federal levels (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimated that the cost of teacher turnover was over \$7 billion annually (Carroll, 2015). While school districts in major U.S. cities spend tens of millions to combat teacher shortages annually, most school districts spent between \$9,000–\$23,000 on cost of training and loss of productivity for each teacher that left (Milanowski & Odden, 2007). Carroll (2015) described a situation where the nation continues to fund a cycle of poor teacher quality by asserting that “we will continue to engage in a costly annual recruitment and hiring cycle, pouring more and more teachers into our nation's classrooms only to lose them at a faster and faster rate” (p. 1). Carroll (2015) described the taxpayers bearing the costs of teacher turnover, and the economic and organizational costs of teacher turnover are greater for students with disabilities.

Traditionally, school districts across the United States used pay schedules to reward teachers with more experience and better credentials with more pay (Dee & Wyckoff, 2013). However, some districts had transitioned to merit pay systems, where teachers were evaluated

and then compensated based on measures of their abilities. This system compensated teachers based on a variety of external factors (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), and teachers in neighboring districts may earn significantly different salaries (Dee & Wyckoff, 2013). When all other factors were equal, teachers were more likely to leave poorer paying school districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Additionally, teacher salaries impacted the supply of teachers, where they teach, and their quality (Podolsky et al., 2017). However, competitive compensation may provide solace to the educational labor market (Espinoza et al., 2018).

In a report published by the Economic Policy Institute, Allegretto and Mishel (2016) coined the term “teacher pay penalty,” which asserted that there was a compensation disadvantage in being employed as a teacher. The authors used data from the Current Population Survey and the Employer Cost of Employee Compensation survey to analyze the wages and benefits of teachers and other related labor markets. Their findings described teachers earning 17% lower weekly wages than people in comparable labor markets (Allegretto & Mishel, 2016). Specifically, “[t]he relative wage gap ... has grown substantially since the mid-1990s: it was -1.8 percent in 1994 and grew to a record -17.0 percent in 2015” (p. 4). Worsening the teacher pay penalty, the authors described teachers earning \$30 less per week in 2015 as compared to 1996. Additionally, the comparative pay gap for male teachers increased from -15% to -24.5%, and the wages of most experienced teachers deteriorated from 1.9% to -17.8% (Allegretto & Mishel, 2016). While typical and equal merit careers have seen adequate pay raises, teachers have suffered pay losses and diminished marketability.

Administrative support and financial compensation need to be addressed by policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Mason-Williams et al., 2020, Scott, 2016). The attempts to increase the

quality and quantity of teachers through professionalization, merit, and policy has inadvertently created a smaller, less qualified workforce. For example, merit pay policies, where teachers are rewarded for student achievement on accountability and assessment measures, have driven teachers from the field (Hanks et al., 2020). Specifically, Ryu and Jinnia (2021) found a relationship between teacher salary and turnover. By using fixed effect models to analyze the impact of merit pay on individual teachers in North Carolina, the authors found an interesting correlation regarding the relationship between teacher salary and turnover: the distribution of frequencies steadily fell later steadily rose, creating a U-shaped distribution (Ryu & Jinnia, 2021). The authors asserted that “merit pay increases the likelihood of turnover of more qualified teachers as compared to less-qualified teachers’ turnover” (Ryu & Jinnia, 2021). Furthermore, teachers do not feel supported by their colleagues or administrators. Hanks et al. (2020) reported that only 53% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they worked in a trusting and supportive environment.

Providing administrative support to SETs is complex (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The constantly changing context of IDEA has increased demands on SETs. Special educators have been burdened with increases to standards-based reforms, increased instructional responsibilities, and changes to special education service delivery models (Billingsley et al., 2020). Additionally, the role of a SET is rarely clearly defined within a school, district, or state’s policy. Teachers often report frustration with administrators, who rarely comprehend special education practices, procedures, and policies (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). In fact, the CEC (2020) asserts that SETs should advocate and educate administrators at their school and district levels about ethical principles and practices for SWD. When SETs know how to appropriately self-advocate, build

effective relationships, rely on support networks, and seek understanding, they improve school camaraderie and student achievement (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2020).

While current compensation policies and practices vary between states and localities, teacher salaries are generally lower than that of other college graduate professions (Podolsky et al., 2017). Federal and state programs have been designed to provide teachers with tuition reimbursement, loan forgiveness, signing bonuses, and salary enhancements for hard-to-staff positions; these programs have been shown to support the retention of teachers (Feng & Sass, 2015). Regarding teachers who leave, Podolsky et al. (2017) found that these leavers could be drawn back to teaching with higher pay, less costly license renewal, and greater retirement benefits. However, teachers are generally required to assume large sums of college debt to increase their salary (Feng & Sass, 2017). When compared to professions that require similar professional accreditations, such as a master's degree, teachers are paid roughly 20%–30% less (Podolsky et al., 2017). Most compensation practices and policies restrict a teacher's ability to afford rent, even when controlling for standard of living salary increases. For example, an analysis of 680 California school districts revealed that roughly 40% of first year teachers would not earn enough money to pay rent for a one-bedroom apartment (Lambert & Willis, 2019).

Policy makers at all levels should work toward attracting new teachers, creating opportunities for veteran teachers, and creating compensation systems that adequately meet the standards set by the IDEA (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Hill & Jones, 2020). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found that with nearly a third of the teacher workforce over the age of 50, attracting and recruiting teachers to come to the field as well as stay in it is vital. This challenge becomes increasingly difficult for special education, as its turnover rate is higher than any other category of teacher. The gaps in policy and the inaction

of policymakers perpetuates the vulnerability of the most vulnerable students, namely, those with disabilities (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Summary

Even after identifying the major themes of SET turnover, policy makers have enacted very few successful changes to abate attrition, and the issue continues to grow in complexity (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2020; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Hill & Jones, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Scott, 2016). Stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels have the responsibility of improving administrative supports, increasing financial compensation, and aiding the most vulnerable, highest needs children (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Carroll, 2015; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Guardino & Okahara, 2016; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

When examining financial compensation, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) suggest that states and districts provide “compensation packages that are competitive with those of other occupations requiring similar levels of education and that are equitable across districts, so all schools can compete in the labor market for well-prepared teachers” (p. 32). Additionally, and as data from Feng and Sass’s (2015) study demonstrates, federal and state governments should offer financial programming that works to reduce teacher debts.

Although working conditions involve multiple aspects of teacher attrition and retention, administrative support is a key factor in determining teachers’ working conditions (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Bettini et al., 2016). Those teachers who negatively perceive administrative support intend to leave their schools at a much higher rate than those teachers who perceive a positive experience with administrators (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Yet, questions remain as to how administrative supports vary based on state and local policies and

how those policies impact SET attrition and retention (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2020). According to Billingsley et al. (2020),

[T]he most dedicated and qualified SETs may not be able to support their students' learning if they have unreasonable work demands, schedules that do not permit intensive instruction or collaboration, and if they are the only ones advocating for students with disabilities and improved working conditions in their schools. (p. 22)

When combined with the difficulties of financial compensation and poor administrative support, the environment surrounding SET attrition and retention is put into focus. Mason-Williams et al. (2020) went as far as to say that "Special education suffers from a shortage of teachers willing to work for the wages we pay and under the working conditions provided in schools" (p. 56). After considering the factors contributing to SET attrition, the current study identified why special educators continue to teach special education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of special education teachers of students with low incidence disabilities (SETs-LIDs). The study implemented phenomenological qualitative methodologies. Data were obtained through a demographic survey and independent interviews. The focus of this phenomenological qualitative research was understanding the employment factors that influence the retention of special education teachers (SETs), specifically those educators who continue to teach students with low incidence disabilities (LIDs).

This chapter describes the methodology and procedures of phenomenological research. The data were obtained through a demographic survey and independent interviews. Additionally, this chapter presents the research questions, descriptions of the participants, data collection procedures, instrument design and validation, interview questions, data management procedures, and data analysis processes.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study was “What factors impact SETs-LIDs who continue to teach in special education during difficult times?” Secondary questions were (a) “What are the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs that influence their retention?” and (b) “What are the challenges that impacted the work of SET-LIDs?”

Research Design

This qualitative research study was developed with a phenomenological research design. In examining the phenomenon of SETs who continue to work in the profession, this research found a “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 146). A qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study to better understand

the humanistic experience. A quantitative research methodology was not selected because of its failure to communicate the humanistic and lived experiences of individuals. This qualitative research interpreted the lived experiences of SET-LIDs by textually and structurally describing the “what” and “how” of their experiences. Creswell and Poth’s (2018) interview design were adapted to prepare for this study’s interviews. Details of the interview design are highlighted in Table 1. The data collection process is discussed in greater detail.

Table 1

Interview Design and Procedures with Narrative

Interview design and procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018)	Narrative
Determine the research questions that will be answered by the participants	The researcher sought and received permission to use the questions developed in the interview protocol (Appendix H). Questions were designed according to research and themes throughout this research and interview style (Appendix H)
Identify participants who can answer these questions based on one of the purposeful sampling procedures	Demographic survey (Appendix A) data allowed for criterion, purposeful, and convenience sampling. Participants were selected based on the demographic survey results (Table 2).
Distinguish the type of interview by determining what mode is practical and what interactions will net the most useful information to answer research questions	A semi-structured interview was conducted (Appendix H).
Collect one-on-one interview data using adequate recording procedures	Microsoft Teams allowed microphone and video usage as well as the inclusion of software to reduce interfering sounds. Participants were asked to answer the interview questions in a quiet space with freedom from distractions and the ability to speak freely. Microsoft Teams allowed for recording with multiple features, such as transcription generation.
Design and use an interview protocol or interview guide	The interview protocol (Appendix H) included details regarding the title of the research, the researchers, the expectations of the interview, and a greeting.
Locate a distraction-free place for conducting interviews	Interviews took place via the online platform Microsoft Teams
Obtain consent from the selected participants who agree to participate in the study	Consent was obtained (Appendix F), a research review committee application was completed and the institutional review board consent through Virginia Tech was granted.

As an interviewer, follow good interview procedures	The researcher maintained appropriate protocols by staying within the bounds and expectations of the interview and by being respectful, courteous, and a good listener.
Decide transcription organization ahead of time	Microsoft Teams transcribed the interviews while recording the video and audio. After each interview, the respective transcript was reviewed. Extraneous words and utterances were recorded but removed. The edited transcripts were shared with the participants, and they had an opportunity to provide their own edits. Two participants returned edited transcripts.

Sample and Setting Selection

This study was conducted in a large urban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The school division selected for this study had about 27,000 enrolled students at the time of the study. Of this student population, nearly 4,000 students were receiving special education services. This school district employed approximately 550 full-time special educators (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). A combination of criteria and convenience sampling was used to gather data. Data collected from the demographic survey (Appendix A) were used to determine whether the participants met the specific selection criteria to be eligible for the interviews. Table 2 provides the demographic survey items and criteria for participation in this study.

Table 2

Survey Items and Criteria for Participation Selection

Survey item	Criteria for selection
Current position	A special education teacher or related service provider in either elementary, middle, or high school
Years of teaching experience	Three or more years of teaching experience
Education level/endorsements	Special education endorsement with either a bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree.
Job specifics (service location and caseloads)	Varying degrees of job titles and service locations of SET-LIDs, including locations special education programs.
Age, race, and gender	Considered to ensure diversity of participants (variability in age, race, and gender identity)

Signed consent	The signed consent statement identified participants willing to be interviewed
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Convenience sampling was used because it was economical, simple, and efficient. However, convenience sampling is considered to limit generalizability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To compensate for this limitation, a larger sample size was used for this research. Specifically, while the typical phenomenological sampling size is between six to 10 interviews, this research conducted 15 interviews.

Data Collection

Prior to the data collection, approval was obtained from Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board (Appendix B). Additionally, Virginia Tech required completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative online courses, which were completed in August 2022 (Appendix C). In addition to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the school district selected for participation in this study required approval from its research review committee. As part of the school district's procedures for submitting a request to conduct research, a research study application was required. This application required a cover sheet, a study description, verification of IRB approval, the abstract of the study, a description of the study suitable for website, and written confirmation of authenticity, as well as an optional letter of support from the school district staff. The research review committee convened shortly after the application was submitted and responded by asking for the removal of two research questions related to financial compensation and financial incentives. After consulting with the primary investigator, the researcher removed the two interview questions and as requested. Additionally, the researcher agreed to obtain principal permission to interview participants, as requested. Once questions

were removed, the school district sent written confirmation of the review committee's approval of the research.

An introductory email with a link to the demographic survey was sent to all the special education coordinators in all the schools within the district (Appendix D). Each special education coordinator supported an individual school within the district. The special education coordinators then elicited responses from the special education staff at their respective school(s). The email was sent with a request for confirmation of receipt to ensure that each school received the survey. All special education coordinators provided confirmation of receipt. The demographic survey data were collected through a Google Form over two weeks and maintained in a Google Sheet. The study participants were selected based on the survey responses and the selection criteria described in Table 2. The special educators willing and eligible to participate in the interview were sent an individualized email soliciting their availability to take part in a 30–50 minute interview (Appendix E).

The request to participate in the one-on-one interviews was sent via email. The email contained a greeting, a description of the study, and an attached consent statement (Appendix F). The participants were given an opportunity to affirm informed consent prior to the interview. Additionally, the greeting of the interview protocol included an opportunity for verbal consent, which all the participants provided. The interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams. This platform was chosen due to the researcher's familiarity with it. The record function within Microsoft Teams automatically generated a time-specific text transcription. However, these transcripts required reviewing and editing to ensure accuracy. The participants were given edited copies of their respective transcripts within two weeks of their interviews. The researcher's notes were also recorded during each interview using participant-specific Microsoft

Word documents. The research notes attempted to objectively define and track keywords, ideas, specific phases, and expressions that were used during the interviews. The transcripts, research notes, and recorded audio were utilized for data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Table 3 provides a timeline of methodological events conducted for this research.

Table 3

Timeline of Methodological Events

Date(s) of Events	Events
April 5, 2023	IRB approval letter received (Appendix B).
April 12, 2023	School district research review application submitted.
August 8, 2023	Feedback received from school district regarding research review application. Questions regarding financial compensation removed. Researcher agreed to obtain principal permission prior to interviewing teacher(s).
August 11, 2023	Application approval letter received from school district
September 11, 2023 – September 25, 2023	Introductory email requesting participation in demographic survey sent to special education coordinators (Appendix D). Survey results collected over two weeks.
September 12, 2023 – September 26, 2023	Principals contacted and permission received. Introductory email sent to potential participants (Appendix E). Informed consent obtained (Appendix F).
September 20, 2023 – October 16, 2023	Interviews conducted.
October 21, 2023 – January 3, 2023	Data coded using deductive codes, Atlas.ti, and inductive coding.

Instrument Design and Validation

Preparing the interview instrument used for data collection in this study was the first step in determining the interview questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To support the interview protocol development, research on stay interviews was conducted. Additionally, interview questions from previous articles, dissertations, and studies surrounding teacher resiliency and retention were identified and reviewed. Shields and Mullen's (2020) veteran teacher interview protocol formed the basis of this study's interview instrument. The interview instrument was modified to include questions from Finnegan (2015) and Kaye and Jordan-Evans' (2015)

research on stay interviews. The added questions were aligned with multiple pieces of literature (Appendix G). In accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), the interview questions were designed to be open ended to better understand the phenomenon. Additional follow-up questions were developed to be evolving and nondirectional.

The interview questions were designed using a variety of resources. They were designed to align with the literature on teacher attrition and retention, and additional research associated with stay interviews also informed the creation of the interview questions. Furthermore, the interview questions were strategically developed in accordance with the instrument design discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018). Similar to Shields and Mullen's (2020) interview protocol development, the interview questions used in the current study were developed to address the central and secondary research questions guiding it. Interview questions one through three were designed for participants to "open up and talk" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164) and to build trust (Finnegan, 2015). These three questions were aimed at answering the primary research question on the retention factors impacting SET-LIDs. Questions four through seven were aimed at eliciting the textual and structural factors that impact SET-LID retention. These questions specifically aligned with the secondary research questions and aimed to understand the essence of the phenomenon: the "what" and "how" of those individuals impacted by the difficulties of SET-LID attrition. Appendix G identifies the themes related to each question and presents the corresponding supporting literature, and additional supporting literature related to each question and theme can be found throughout this study's literature review.

Interview Protocol

The interviews with the participants took place via the online conferencing platform Microsoft Teams. This software allowed for the interviews to be recorded and simultaneously

transcribed. However, the transcripts generated by Microsoft Teams were based on assumed speech and required editing to ensure accuracy. The following introductory statement and subsequent questions were used as the protocol for the interview.

Thank you for your willingness to take part in this study about special education teachers. This interview should take 30 minutes and consists of seven questions. The purpose of this study is to achieve a better understanding of the lived experiences of special educators of students with low incidence disabilities. This research will focus on the employment factors that influence special education teachers, specifically those educators who continue to teach in special education.

I will be recording this interview session using Microsoft Teams. Only the audio and transcription of this interview will be used for data analysis. I will share the edited transcript for your review. You may make any changes to the transcript that you deem necessary. The video, audio, and transcription will be stored in a secure Microsoft and Google account. After the successful completion of this research, all files will be stored for two years. After two years, all files will be deleted and destroyed. Only I and the principal investigator will have access to this data.

Do you agree to participate in this interview? Do you agree to be audio-video recorded during this interview? If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable or do not wish to answer any question(s), please let me know. All questions are open-ended questions. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. What do you look forward to when you come to work every day? (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015)
2. Why did you initially pursue a career in special education? (Stephens & Fish, 2009)

3. What factors keep you in special education? (Shields & Mullen, 2020)
4. Can you describe factors about your current position that might make you consider leaving? (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015)
5. What are some aspects of your current role that you would like to see changed? (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015)
6. What are your perceptions regarding your school district's efforts to retain special educators? (Harrington & Walsh, 2022; Stephens & Fish, 2009)
7. What do you wish your assistant principal and/or principal knew that would help them better understand your job? (Shields & Mullen, 2020)

Data Treatment and Management

All data related to this research were stored securely. All electronic data, including consent forms, demographic survey data, recordings, transcripts, coding data, and identifiable data were and will continue to be maintained in a password-protected Microsoft Drive account and a password-protected Google Drive account. All the data and research results will continue to be stored electronically for 2 years then deleted and destroyed. All physical data, including the consent forms, handwritten notes, or electronic documents that were printed and turned in physically were scanned and converted to electronic records then uploaded to the Microsoft Drive account. These will be maintained in the researcher's Virginia Tech online drives or locked file drawer at work for 2 years.

Upon completion of the interviews, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. This research had minimal impact on and risk to the participants, not exceeding that of typical everyday life. The primary investigator and the researcher were the

only people involved in this research. No additional identifiers were created to provide recognition to the participants.

Summary

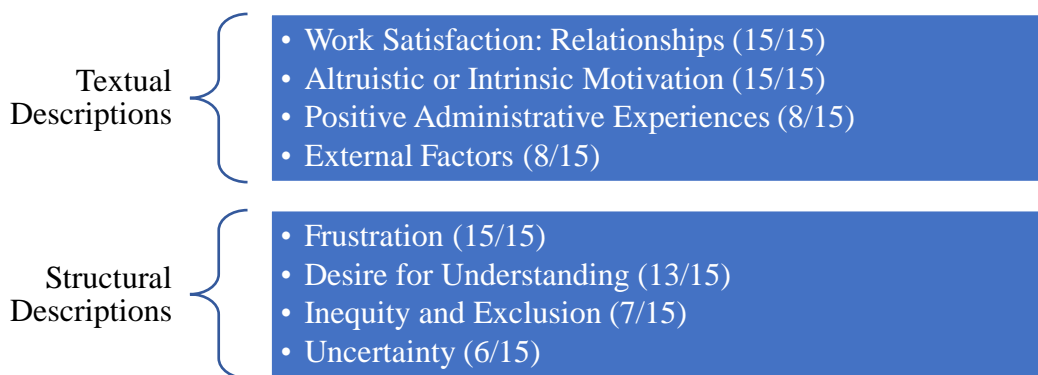
The purpose of this study was to understand why special educators continue to teach special education in the face of difficult working conditions. Data were collected using a demographic survey and independent interviews. The interviews were the main source of data for the study. The interview questions were designed to answer the study's research questions, and their validity and basis in literature were described in this chapter and can be found in Appendix G. The research questions guiding this study sought to better understand why special educators continue to teach special education during difficult times. Data were collected through a demographic survey and interviews. The demographic survey indicated which participants were eligible for participation in the interviews based on specific criteria. Interviews were conducted with 15 SET-LIDs. These were transcribed using Microsoft Teams and edited for accuracy. The data analysis procedures are described in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter describes the study's data analysis process and presents the findings. The profiles of the interviewed participants, which provide detailed descriptions of them and their roles and responsibilities, are also presented. Themes emerged upon review of the interviews, and these were separated based on textual and structural descriptions. The textual descriptions outline the "what" of the studied phenomenon: why SETs-LIDs continue to teach during difficult times. The structural descriptions outline the "how" of the studied phenomenon: what SET-LIDs overcame while teaching. Figure 3 is a visual representation of the textual and structural descriptions for increased understanding of the themes that emerged.

Figure 3

Textual and Structural Descriptions of Why 15 SET-LIDS Stayed in the Classroom



Data Analysis Process

Demographic data collected through the demographic survey were organized in a Google Sheet. The data were then filtered based on the participant responses. The survey received a total of 96 responses, with 58 respondents affirming their willingness to be interviewed. Of the 58 willing participants, the selection criteria described in Chapter 3 were used to identify a diverse pool of participants eligible for interview. Furthermore, participants were selected based on job-

specific data related to LIDs: the survey responses were filtered to include the teaching environment, specifically identifying those who taught in a special education program.

A sample of 15 participants was used for this research. Individual interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. After each interview, the respective transcript was edited for accuracy and shared with the respective participant. Once shared, the participants had an opportunity to edit the transcripts. Two participants provided edited transcripts to the researcher. The profiles and results of the SETs selected from the demographic survey are identified in Table 4.

Table 4

Names and Profiles of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Race and/or Ethnicity	Level of Education	Years of Teaching Experience	Current Position/Grade Level(s)	Special Education Program
Audrey	Female	40–49	White or Caucasian	Master’s	10–20	9th–12th	X
Brooke	Female	30–39	Black or African American	Master’s	4–10	9th–12th	X
Christy	Female	40–49	Asian or Asian American	Master’s	4–10	6th–8th	X
Debra	Female	40–49	White or Caucasian	Master’s	4–10	Occupational Therapist	
Eva	Female	30–39	White or Caucasian	Master’s	10–20	Speech Language Pathologist	
Kimberly	Female	50–59	White or Caucasian	Bachelor’s	21 or more	6th–8th	X
Jennifer	Female	40–49	White or Caucasian	Master’s	10–20	K–5th	X
Lesley	Female	40–49	White or Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino	Master’s	21 or more	Pre-K	X
Liz	Female	29 or younger	White or Caucasian	Master’s	4–10	K–5th	
Melody	Non-binary	30–39	White or Caucasian	Master’s	10–20	K–5th	X
Myra	Female	40–49	White or Caucasian	Master’s	4–10	K–5th	

Noel	Male	30–39	Middle Eastern	Master’s	10–20	6th–8th	X
Pam	Female	60 or older	White or Caucasian	Master’s	21 or more	6th–8th	
Paul	Male	30–39	White or Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino	Master’s	10–20	9th–12th	
Rosa	Female	50–59	Hispanic or Latino	Master’s	10–20	9th–12th	X

The diversity of the participants, as identified in Table 4, indicated a range of genders, races and/or ethnicities, levels of education, years of teaching experience, current positions or grade levels, and whether a participant was teaching in a special education program or not. Of the 15 participants, 11 identified as being White or Caucasian, 2 identified as male, 12 as female, and 1 as not specified. All the participants but one identified as having a master’s degree. Two of the participants were related service providers and nine taught in a special education program. The remaining four were special education resource teachers. All the participants had 4 years or more of teaching experience.

The use of a phenomenology methodology required bracketing prior to conducting the interviews. Moustakas (1994) described bracketing as a process in working towards “receptiveness.” To suspend judgment and biases prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher dedicated time and attention to reflections before, during, and after the interviews. For example, during their pre-interview reflections, the researcher engaged in self-dialogue to reduce preconceived notions. Then, during each interview, the researcher attempted to ask neutral and nonjudgmental follow-up questions to better understand the phenomenon. Lastly, during the data analysis, the researcher engaged in phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation: processes to understand the “what” and “how” of the phenomenon. By continually pursuing phenomenological reduction, the researcher was able to concentrate on the “essential nature” of

the phenomenon, or “what participants experienced.” The researcher made corrections to their understandings, continuously adjusting and analyzing them until an understanding of “what” the phenomenon was, was achieved. Through imaginative variation, the researcher was able to tie the “what” of the phenomenon to the “how.” Analysis through imaginative variation explained the “how” of the phenomenon in structural contexts.

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended phenomenological analysis and representation using a specific chronological and methodological process that uses practical approaches to understand qualitative data. The following data analysis procedure was used by Creswell and Poth (2018):

- Describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study.
- Develop a list of significant statements.
- Group the significant statements into broader units of information.
- Create a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon.
- Draft a description of “how” the experience happened: the structural description.
- Write a composite description of the phenomenon: capture the “essence.”

Through the descriptions provided and garnered from the participants, categories, codes, and themes were created and classified in relation to the research questions. Once the interview transcripts were approved by the participants, they were uploaded and analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software that utilizes artificial technology to code data and identify key terms, resulting in a total of 342 in-vivo codes. The researcher matched deductive codes (Appendix I) to the codes generated by Atlas.ti. All the codes generated by Atlas.ti were reviewed and edited. Codes generated by Atlas.ti that were inconsistent with educational

research or the deductive codes were eliminated. Inductive codes were generated to fill gaps not satisfied by the deductive codes or codes generated by Atlas.ti.

Each code was reviewed and edited within the context of the interview. Data were analyzed through the phenomenological methodology of understanding the employment factors that impact the retention of SETs-LIDs. Using methods discussed by Moustakas (1994), significant statements and quotes were highlighted to better express the experiences of SETs-LIDs. This was done to organize and analyze data based on what the participants experienced and how they experienced it; Moustakas (1994) described this step as horizontalization.

Following horizontalization, themes were generated by the frequency and commonalities found within the codes from each interview. Once themes emerged, the researcher labeled them as code groups. This allowed the researcher to identify themes within the interviews using codes grouped by likeness. Organizing the data in this format allowed for the verification and analysis of the data. Lastly, intercoder reliability was verified by two school administrators with experience in analyzing qualitative data (Appendix J).

Participant Profiles

In the following subsection, each participant's profiles are provided to better understand the background of the SETs-LIDs. Additionally, insight into the special programs that were relevant to the participants and this research is provided. A description of the special programs outlined in each participant's profile provides general demographic information of the students in those programs, including the types and diversities of disabilities. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' names and any names mentioned during the interviews.

Special Education Teacher #1: Audrey

Audrey taught in a special education program designed to support students with post-secondary transitions and job training. The students eligible for this specific special program had completed grade 12 but had not graduated with a high school degree. Audrey's program supported students in building work readiness skills and the transition to employment after public education. The program allowed students to receive internships, certifications, or college credits to lead to employment opportunities. Students had to meet certain criteria to enter Audrey's program. Those who entered the program demonstrated LIDs, including mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities. At the time of the interview, it was Audrey's first year teaching in the program.

Audrey was licensed as a special educator, with an additional endorsement in educational leadership. The educational leadership certification allowed her to work as an educational administrator. Audrey did not initially study special education in her undergraduate studies. Describing her experience upon leaving undergraduate school, Audrey stated, "I didn't really know what to do and I thought, 'Oh, I could be a teacher'". Shortly thereafter, she began teaching with a provisional license in special education prior to going back to graduate school to earn her master's degree in special education.

As Audrey described why she pursued a career in special education, she recalled students with disabilities in her middle school: "There were a couple students who had disabilities, and they were included in our classes, and I was always drawn to them, and I really was able to connect with them." Upon reflecting on her career, Audrey described student growth as a reason she looked forward to coming to work every day. She specifically relied upon the noise level of the classroom to describe student growth, "...verbal participation the first few days, it was very quiet... and each week, literally my classroom has been getting louder and it's been really fun."

While describing her career path, Audrey reflected on her ups and downs as a special educator. After Audrey started as an elementary SET, she transitioned to the role of a special education coordinator. This role allowed her to oversee special education at multiple school sites within the school district. However, while serving as the special education coordinator, a principal at one of Audrey's sites suddenly passed away. Having obtained her licensure in educational leadership, Audrey assumed the role of the missing administrator.

Audrey further recalled her experience as a former de facto assistant principal and remembered being "voluntold" to act as such for an elementary school. This caused her to express "a bit of career whiplash" as a factor that would make her consider leaving education. Audrey reflected that the de facto administrative experience "was good because I've been able to figure out what I like about things and what I don't like." Audrey's tone indicated that she was unhappy with her experience as an administrator. However, she noted that special education was where she was comfortable.

From Audrey's perspective, special education provided her with desired flexibility: "I am the kind of person that I like change, I don't mind it because I am certified pre-K through ages 22 and can try different things." Ultimately, Audrey found her role satisfying and did not foresee any major career changes: "I guess deep down, I still feel like I have things to offer that can make a difference for students."

Special Education Teacher #2: Brooke

Similar to Audrey, at the time of her interview, Brooke was in her first year of teaching in a special education program. Brooke's special education program operated at an independent secondary school. This school was designed to educate students with intense disabilities in 6th–12th grade. Brooke's students had disabilities that ranged from moderate to severe. Typically,

individuals that demonstrate moderate to severe disabilities have a verbal, performance, or full-scale intellectual quotient of 59 to 21. A typical student who demonstrates moderate and severe disabilities requires support with independent living skills and self-care (Committee to Evaluate the Supplemental Security Income Disability Program for Children with Mental Disorders et al., 2015). The students in Brooke's program required significant curricular accommodations and modifications so they could access their education. In her position, Brooke provided daily instruction and case management to students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Brooke described her background as it related to special education. She drew upon her personal experience to answer why she became a teacher: "My mom is actually a special education teacher. She taught for over 30 years, and I went to her elementary school, so I was a buddy for her students... and just had a connection with them." When talking about her motivation for coming to work every day, Brooke revealed that she looked forward to observing the "small things" in student growth:

So, with working with the low incidence population, it's those small things that you can see students be able to do throughout the course of the year, whether it's finally being able to put their folder away without an adult having to tell them to or being able to get their lunch without needing support.

For her undergraduate studies, Brooke initially pursued psychology before transitioning to the field of education. Toward the tail end of her undergraduate studies, Brooke began to take courses in special education and enjoyed them. She gained additional experience by babysitting and nannying children with disabilities. This motivated her to go back to school and get her teaching license.

When thinking about what she looked forward to in her position, Brooke said she gained satisfaction from seeing student growth and working with her colleagues and coworkers. Positive feelings and satisfaction from collegial and student relationships were reiterated throughout Brooke's interview: "I enjoy coming to work and seeing them [the students], also just working with my coworkers. I have a great team that I work with, as far as teachers as well as support staff and related service providers."

Special Education Teacher #3: Christy

Christy was a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing. Her special education program was specifically tailored to provide instruction and resources to students who were deaf or hard of hearing. Students in Christy's special program required access to communication and language. Some students used American Sign Language (ASL) and interpreters, while others used assistive technology to access their speech and/or language. Christy was fluent in ASL and utilized this skill to teach the students in her program. Throughout Christy's interview, she discussed the impact of the deaf culture and community and how it influenced her career.

Christy initially pursued a career in special education because she was a sibling of a deaf adult, or a "SODA." She grew up with a sister who was deaf and learned signed language as a part of her childhood and upbringing. Christy attributed much of her initial pursuit of becoming a special educator to her sister. As Christy discussed the drive to become a SET, she described multiple positive benefits of teaching. First, Christy's sister was a middle school teacher of the deaf. The combination of two teachers, who were siblings, teaching the deaf created a joint family experience within teaching. Additionally, Christy's sister helped her identify positives about teaching, such as having summer vacations or holidays.

However, Christy was not originally a special educator. Initially, she studied and was employed in the field of business communication. However, she did not find that world satisfying and instead listened to her encouraging words: “Hey, you should become a teacher.” Their shared vision and the future prospect of shared vacation days prompted Christy to pursue a career in special education.

At first, Christy started as a teaching assistant for students who were deaf or hard of hearing. She found the job enjoyable, and this led her to go back to school to pursue her degree in teaching. Upon becoming a teacher within the deaf and hard of hearing program, Christy connected with her colleagues and students. Christy identified these as factors keeping her in special education: “Just reaching out to Ms. Wooster in the morning because Ms. Wooster is deaf herself... It’s just nice to have a community of my teachers, my colleagues.” When the researcher asked for more details about the factors that keep her in special education, Christy responded, “There are not many deaf and hard of hearing teachers and there’s a big need for them, so it’s just our population is 1) very small, but then 2) our teaching population is even smaller.”

Special Education Teacher #4: Debra

Debra, an occupational therapist with experience as a SET in previous jobs, was one of the two related service providers interviewed for this research. Her role at the time of the interview was that of an occupational therapist at various elementary schools. However, Debra pointed out that she had experience providing occupational therapy to students at all levels of education. In past roles, Debra worked in various special education programs throughout her school district. She was expected to provide occupational therapy services to students with LIDs, including those students with autism, physical impairments, and intellectual disabilities. To

provide a better understanding of her job, Debra outlined a general perception of the role of an occupational therapist:

Our goal is to try and help students access their curriculum ... it can start from the most fundamental environmental changes to looking at specific strengths and perhaps disabilities that the child has that might either enhance or detract from their ability to participate functionally.

Debra discussed the wide-ranging considerations and practices that fall under the purview of occupational therapy: “I think my discipline is very broad ... every therapist ... comes to the table with different skills and certifications that make them more comfortable in certain areas as opposed to others.”

When asked about what she looked forward to in coming to work every day, Debra mentioned working with the students, their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and working with fellow staff: “I think a collaborative approach is really helpful in trying to embed those IEP goals throughout the day.” Throughout her interview, Debra expressed a passion for helping students and a desire for greater understanding from school administrators.

Special Education Teacher #5: Eva

Eva, a speech and language pathologist, was the second related service provider interviewed for this research. Eva described the role of a speech and language pathologist as providing: “therapy to address either receptive or expressive language, articulation, fluency, or pragmatic language.” Part of Eva’s work as a public school speech and language pathologist was weekly sessions with students with LIDs in special programs’ classes. “I push in weekly into my fundamental life skills class to support language needs while they’re doing core academic stuff.”

Eva also described supporting students in a pull-out setting, or a setting separated from peers and typically in a small group of two to four students.

Eva initially started as a speech and language pathologist in the medical field, supporting families through insurance providers. Eva reflected on the freedom in the private sector to work specifically on the needs of the child, “in the clinic, I’d be like, this is a concern that the parent has, it is something that can be addressed by speech therapy, let’s do it.” Conversely, Eva described a less than ideal level of support for students in the public school setting. Eva seemed to express frustration with the boundaries and regulations of IDEA. When identifying the differences between the private and public sectors, Eva stated, “in special education there has to be an educational need.”

However, Eva was confident when identifying a negative aspect of her clinical role and how it led her away from the private sector: “In the clinic, I was getting frustrated because parents weren’t always able to receive the services they needed, due to financial needs or they were unable to bring their kid into the clinic because the parents worked.” When asked if she would consider returning to the private sector, the response was: “that’s not something that’s on my radar.” Eva described seeing her students and coworkers as a positive part of her job: “I look forward mostly to seeing my students ... and seeing some coworkers that I’ve gotten to know and have become friendly with.”

Special Education Teacher #6: Kimberly

Kimberly was a veteran teacher with more than 25 years of special education teaching experience and was the only participant whose highest certification was a bachelor’s degree. At the time of the interview, she had recently changed to a new SET position. She was teaching in a special education program designed for students on the autism spectrum who demonstrated

average to above average academic achievement when compared to their grade level peers.

However, this program specifically addressed the students' significant weaknesses in executive functioning and social skills.

Kimberly's role required unique training, experiences, and skills to teach students expected social norms and organizational skills. Her program explicitly taught middle school students study habits and executive functioning. This included metacognitive skills, social skills, and instruction on cognitive behavior therapy. As Kimberly reflected on her career path, she recounted that her brother had special education needs while they were growing up. She discussed how he would run away from school and how he was emotionally and cognitively impaired. Her experience watching him turn into a typically functioning adult with children of his own made her want to become a teacher. Although Kimberly initially wanted to study art, she ended up "going for special education."

Kimberly found a career in special education "one of the most difficult and challenging jobs." She described the role of a special educator as managing laws, parents, and student needs. Nevertheless, Kimberly liked the challenge: "You work with a small population of students, you build strong relationships ... and I just think it's a fun job." Kimberly described the immense effort and time required to support children with these complex profiles: "One day, everybody is perfect, and they did everything the way they should have, then the next day it just crashes." The difficulties of achieving a work-life balance came up multiple times in Kimberly's interview.

Special Education Teacher #7: Jennifer

Jennifer taught in an elementary school's special program designed for students with LIDs. Her program operated in a comprehensive elementary school rather than a separate day school. Jennifer's program was tailored to students with moderate to severe disabilities. Most of

the students in her program required significant support with daily functions of living and were given an alternative curriculum due to the nature of their disability. Other students were medically fragile and would be wheelchair bound for life or accompanied by a nurse at school. Jennifer recounted that during her tenure as a teacher, she endured the deaths of seven students. Although some of the late students had passed away when they were no longer in her class, she had close bonds with them and attended each funeral or celebration of life. Jennifer's compassion for her students was a driving force for her staying in special education: "I look forward to getting the students off the bus ... I love to read to my students ... I love to sing and dance with them."

Jennifer reported that the significant needs of the students helped build relationships with their families:

I go to their birthday parties. I'm looking forward to another baseball game of a former student, I go try and visit at their new school. I message them. I have a message to myself to message a parent just to check in, even though their daughter's 18.

Initially, Jennifer did not consider education as a career. While in her undergraduate studies, Jennifer knew she wanted to return and receive a master's degree. But as she prepared to exit her undergraduate studies, Jennifer came upon a volunteer opportunity with children with LIDs. Jennifer's passion and inspiration for education came from that volunteer experience. Jennifer also identified that she had a family connection to special education: "I at the time had one nephew who had overcome incredible odds and is special needs and now I have another who is also my Godson." In describing why she stayed in special education, Jennifer identified that her students: "need an advocate. You don't know how difficult it is to walk into that room, surrounded, at a giant table."

Special Education Teacher #8: Leslie

Leslie was the only participant who taught pre-kindergarten. Leslie's special program specifically focused on supporting students through the special education process prior to enrolling in public school. Students enrolled in Leslie's special program were typically identified through the Child Find process. Child Find, according to the IDEA (2017), is the process where local school divisions maintain an active program in identifying and evaluating children in need of special education. The children in Leslie's class were three- or four-year-olds with a range of different disabilities, as identified through the Child Find process. At the time of her interview, seven students were enrolled in Leslie's program, two of whom were in wheelchairs. Leslie noted, "those two students in particular have a lot of various medical needs. One comes to school with a personal assistant. The other comes to school with a personal nurse. There's visually impaired. There's non-ambulatory, nonverbal." The range of needs and disabilities present in Leslie's program came up throughout her interview.

During her undergraduate studies, Leslie initially pursued elementary education. She then transitioned to a newly created university program that combined early elementary education and early elementary special education. Her internship and student teaching experience provided her with the opportunity to teach in the special education setting. During the student teaching experience, she found herself "gravitating and always going towards the special education students." Leslie described her team of colleagues as part of what she looked forward to coming to work every day. "We've been working together for a long time, so we're a very strong team, so I enjoy coming to work with people that are not only my colleagues but are my close friends."

Throughout her interview, Leslie focused on the home-school relationship. She noted that she and other colleagues in her program would complete home visits, all to improve the home-

school relationship. “I feel strongly about home-school relationships ... I’m really big on family engagement ... a lot of these students come in and it’s their first [school] experience.”

Special Education Teacher #9: Liz

Liz was one of the four teachers interviewed who did not teach in a special program. Liz supported children with LIDs in the general education environment. Identified as a special education resource teacher, Liz’s primary responsibility was supporting students who required a mixture of inclusion and exclusion instruction in various inclusion environments. She provided special education services to students with autism, with visual impairments, who were deaf and hard of hearing, and who had developmental disabilities. Some of the students Liz supported had high-incidence disabilities, such as a specific learning disability or emotional disorders. However, the interview specifically discussed students with LIDs.

At the time of the interview, Liz was assigned as the special educator to students in kindergarten and first grade. Liz was the only special educator in her building who was assigned to service multiple grade levels. Part of Liz’s job was to provide specialized instruction to students in academic and social skills: “I do most of the academics for my caseload and then also social skills.” When prompted for further information about social skills, Liz shared the following:

I have so many kids that have social/emotional goals, whether it’s self-regulation, play skills, the ability to participate in the group plan. So, we’ve now carved out an intentional time of the day where we’re working ... on identifying feelings, then we’re talking about feelings while playing, or the big one this week has been following a group plan, which is tough for most of them.

Liz had always gravitated toward special education. During the interview, she recalled time in elementary school when there were special program classes. Her elementary class would participate with the students in those special programs, and she became “more familiar with people with disabilities.” Liz began as a general education major then transitioned to a special education major with the guidance of her advisor. She then became endorsed to teach interdisciplinary studies within special education from kindergarten to 12th grade.

Special Education Teacher #10: Melody

Melody was a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing and was the only participant who identified as non-binary and preferred the pronouns they/them. In contrast to Christy, who taught at the middle school level, Melody was an elementary school teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing. However, there were many similarities between Christy and Melody’s special programs. In Melody’s program, students used ASL or interpreters as their primary means for communication. Melody was fluent in ASL and used it to communicate with students. Another notable similarity between them and Cristy was that while Melody was not deaf or hard of hearing they closely associated with the deaf community and culture.

Melody had graduated from college with a degree in marketing and no career direction. At the time, they went to live on the campus of a school for the deaf in Mexico. They saw how the school was poorly run and how the students were poorly educated. Melody decided that they wanted to learn how to teach deaf children. Meldoy went back to school, earned their master’s, and “just started doing it.”

After Melody’s experience in Mexico, they began working in a private school that exclusively taught children who were deaf or hard of hearing; here, Melody saw a world that valued its own language, community, and culture. They wanted to share that experience with

children in the public school system, so they then switched to teaching in public schools “because I thought that students that didn’t have access to those schools also deserved a quality education.” Interestingly, when asked about why they specifically decided to teach students who were deaf and hard of hearing, Melody indicated that teaching students with LIDs was an issue of civil rights and freedoms. Students who are deaf and hard of hearing have the right “to have access to language and instruction. It’s not that I enjoy teaching because I don’t, but I enjoy them [the children] and I think they have a right to quality education.”

At the time of the interview, Melody explained that they were working to achieve their doctoral degree through American University’s anti-racist program. They mentioned that they were studying the “disparities between White deaf children and Black and Brown deaf children and how achievement outcomes are desperate and what are the reasons for that.” In expressing their concerns regarding the teachers teaching students with LIDs, Melody reported, “I don’t want to leave [the students] with a teacher that doesn’t know how to teach them.” Repeatedly, Melody indicated their concern with teachers who were bad; the thought of leaving students with bad teachers was “terrifying.” However, when it came to working with students, Melody identified the power of their role: “So being in this program and having this specific job, there is an opportunity to actually work with students and know that what you’re doing is making a huge difference in their lives.”

Special Education Teacher #11: Myra

Myra was the only SET who self-disclosed a disability: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Her experience as a student with an educational disability led her to working as a special educator. “I did struggle a little bit in school with some ADHD and just not building the type of relationship with my teachers that I wanted, where I felt that I was able to thrive.”

However, Myra did not initially go to college to study special education. She originally studied violin and then transferred to a special education undergraduate program. During her time in undergraduate studies, Myra completed an experiential learning opportunity to observe teachers. Afterward, knowing that she wanted to work with children, Myra began working in education.

Working as a resource teacher in the elementary school setting, Myra worked across three grade levels. Her primary responsibility was pulling out students from their general education environment. Her role was to provide individualization to a variety of students with varying disabilities. This also required Myra to work with a variety of staff and related service providers. Specifically, Myra identified that she worked with the building's speech pathologist and occupational therapist to support students with autism. Furthermore, when thinking about the students on the autism spectrum, Myra stated, "they need a more structured approach to meet their needs, a more clear schedule."

Throughout the interview, Myra reiterated the power of building relationships within her profession. For example, she would utilize a communication log to communicate with families and to keep lines of communication between home and school open. Additionally, when identifying what she looked forward to in coming to work every day, she reported, "Collaborating and building relationships with my kids."

Special Education Teacher #12: Noel

Noel was one of two male special educators interviewed for this research. He taught in a special program at the middle school level. Noel's transition to becoming a special educator was that of a career switcher. Initially working in retail, Noel reported that "the recession hit in 2008 and people were not buying fancy suit and shoes." He then sought financial consistency and "a steady paycheck." Through a connection, Noel went to work at a private day school. Private day

schools are typically designed for students who cannot be served within their public school district. Noel's particular school supported individuals with intense emotional and behavioral disabilities and disturbances. Finding the experience at the private school to be "an incredibly negative experience," Noel temporarily left education and went from job to job. One of his temporary jobs was as an in-home provider for two students with special needs. Noel specifically assisted the transition of one student out of the home and into a private day school setting. Subsequently, Noel followed the student to the private day school. At this new private day school, Noel "found [his] passion for individuals with special needs, specifically low incidence."

At the time of the interview, the special program Noel taught was in a public school setting. Moreover, this special program was specifically designed for students with intellectual abilities ranging from mild to moderate. However, Noel pointed out that there were students in his program with more severe disabilities, "I have two learners that definitely don't fit the demographics," and the disability discrepancies repeatedly arose during the interview. When asked about the challenge of working with a mix of disabilities, Noel stated, "In terms of my professional development, it is a positive challenge ... it challenges me to become a better educator and to be better."

Special Education Teacher #13: Pam

Pam was one of the three participants who had been teaching for 21 years or more. She was a special education resource teacher working with students with a variety of disabilities. Pam specifically provided reading instruction for students in sixth grade. This type of instruction requires students to receive specially designed instruction in a special education setting with other disabled peers. The students in Pam's reading class were at least two grade levels behind in their reading ability. However, the disabilities of Pam's students seemed to empower her, "I'm

giving them ... giving them more equity.” Pam explained that since college, she had been committed to improving the lives of people with disabilities. Starting as a freshman in college, she had the opportunity to volunteer with people with disabilities. At the time, Pam’s university required students to earn degrees in general education and special education, but her experience with people with disabilities changed her perspective: “I just kind of got hooked.” She subsequently decided to go into special education. Pam relied on her colleagues and coworkers to keep her in teaching even as she is nearing retirement. “My team is, I think, just an excellent team, they are really committed to the kids, committed to our craft, always wanting to improve on what we’re doing.”

Special Education Teacher #14: Paul

Paul was the fourth of the four resource teachers and the second of two male teachers interviewed for this research. He was an 11th and 12th grade special education resource teacher who provided individualized support within his magnet school. This magnet school employed a democratic process to schooling. Paul described this democratic process as one where the kids had a say in everything that happened within the school. He repeatedly acknowledged his satisfaction with the school because of its unique environment. He also jokingly remarked that the uniqueness of his school led it to be known as “hippie high.” This quip about his school reiterated his joy in working in such an environment, “I have a lot of autonomy and I think I’m trusted to do what I’m good at.”

Paul’s path into special education began with him going to school and graduating with a degree in sociology. He explained that he initially wanted to work as a social worker or with juvenile penitentiaries. However, a university professor guided Paul into high school teaching, which prompted him to go to graduate school. It was during his graduate studies that he decided

to be a SET. When probed further, he remarked, “My primary focus was with social studies and then special education was plan B, but there weren’t a lot of social studies jobs when I started out.” Paul further remarked on the marketability of special education, which is what drove him to get his license, “and then here we are, 15 years later, so this is where the jobs are.”

Special Education Teacher #15: Rosa

Rosa was a self-described career switcher. She began a career in dentistry in Colombia, South America where she worked in clinics and pediatric dentistry. She described her time during her pediatric residency as enjoyable, “I really like working with [children].” As a dentist, she then began treating children with disabilities. She reported, “parent will bring to us because nobody else wants to treat them or do any kind of procedures with them.” This led Rosa to choose to work with children over adults. Once she migrated to the United States, she earned her master’s degree in education and began working as a kindergarten assistant. As she continued her career, she was employed in a program specifically designed for students with severe emotional and behavioral disabilities.

At the time of the interview, Rosa had transitioned to teaching in a special program for students with severe emotional and behavioral disabilities. Her program supported students in sixth to eighth grade. Rosa’s relationship with her students was brought up throughout her interview. She explained, “I love hearing them, their issues or what they did. But during the weekends, I miss them.” Rosa described her program as “very fluid.” Students in the program earned their time in their typical classes when they demonstrated behaviors appropriate for those environments.

[S]ome of them go to other classes, some stay with me. So, it varies for every student every year. So, I can be teaching solely for like a whole six months and/or I might have students that go out to general education classes.

The dynamics of the special program and her work with students with LIDs continued to drive Rosa. “It is very rewarding to me. It is personally rewarding. I really like challenges. I like to work with this particular population.”

Textual Descriptions

Four textual themes that described the experiences of the participants emerged from the interviews. These are visually represented in Figure 4. The themes that made up the textual descriptions of this study are (1) work satisfaction: relationships, (2) intrinsic or altruistic motivation, (3) positive administrative experiences, and (4) external factors. These textual descriptions describe the “what” of the phenomenon of SETs-LIDs retention: what SETs-LIDs experienced.

Work Satisfaction: Relationships

A theme consistently described throughout the interviews by all the participants was the power of positive relationships. All the participants described relationships with students as being part of what they looked forward to in coming to work every day. Additionally, eight participants described the positive influence and impact of their relationships with colleagues on their retention. Literature supporting the theme of satisfaction through relationships is provided throughout this section along with textual descriptions of the experiences of SETs-LIDs.

Throughout the interviews, all the participants described feeling satisfaction from their work with students. They described their experiences of working with students as what they looked forward to in coming to work every day. Kimberly stated, “I look forward to the

challenge of the job, that it's never the same. Every day is different. I look forward to seeing the kids and seeing the progress they make." As Paul described what he looked forward to, he conveyed the nature of his relationship with his students, "All of my guys, you know the students and just helping out, interacting with them." Brooke explicitly stated her satisfaction in working with students with LIDs, "I also look forward to seeing student growth. So, with working with the low incidence population, it's those small things that you see students be able to do throughout the course of the year ... some of those little, small wins." When Noel was asked about what he looked forward to when he came to work every day, he similarly reported that he enjoyed the low incidence population, "I generally have the ability to find things I like about most people. All my kids are unique and interesting. I enjoy interacting with them. They're quirky."

In working with a younger population of students with LIDs, Liz described their joy as what she looked forward to, "I have the little guys, so they're still really gung-ho about school. And it's exciting to see them running into the school and that it's a new day for them every day." Myra communicated the importance of relationships with both parents and students. Myra described the benefits of conducting home visits to create a strong home-school connection, "We do home visits before the kids start every year to meet the families and really get to know them and their child's needs. That's why I really like working with this age group." Myra described the renewing of relationships each school year, "every kid, every year, you get new kids, and then I tend to keep some of the kids I had previously ... and I think their relationship building is really important."

In addition to the relationships with students, the influences of relationships with colleagues or coworkers were reiterated throughout the interviews. Collegial relationships

proved to be of importance to eight of the interview participants. Eva described “seeing some coworkers that I’ve gotten to know and have become friendly with” as being of primary importance in coming to work every day. Leslie stated, “I really like the people that I work with. We’ve been working together for a long time, so we’re a very strong team, so I enjoy coming to work with people that are not only my colleagues but are my close friends.” Christy continually described the positive impact of working with colleagues in her community, “The people that are my colleagues, that I see every day, my interpreters ... reaching out to Miss Coffee [ASL teacher] in the morning. It’s just nice to have a community of my teachers, my colleagues.” Kimberly expressed her satisfaction in working with her colleagues, “I look forward to just talking to my coworkers because I have great teachers here. Everyone’s really helpful. I love my job.”

The textual descriptions provided by the participants regarding satisfaction from working with students were multifaceted. In addition to describing student success and relationships with students as a part of work satisfaction, the participants also described the ability to create community as an additional facet of work satisfaction. When Rosa described her relationship with students, she described the benefits of working in a special program with students over consecutive school years and the impact of creating such a community:

I get them in sixth grade, most of the time I stay with them until they’re in eighth grade. So, I get to know them very, very well... I sometimes know them so much that I can read their physical language, I know when a kid is like rubbing their eyebrow, what’s happening, things like that are the consistency of having them for so long, it allows me to have these interactions with them. And to know more about them than any other

teacher... I like that interaction because it feels like I have my own kids... at school, it's like really good to have that interaction daily.

Interviews with Jennifer and Christy also described the satisfaction of building community. The togetherness of the communities described by both outlines the exclusivity of working with students with LIDs. As Christy stated, "We wear many different hats. We are not just educators...we're people in the community that know deaf community that know the culture, and that know the language, and that [deafness] it's not just a disability." Jennifer reflected on the growth of her community, "So, like I said, we've been very fortunate, the teachers, the community here, have been incredible ... I started the ... the Special Olympics and Tubman Buddies and now we're Best Buddies."

Evidence of the importance of relationships and job satisfaction was found throughout the literature. Workplace relationships have been reported as positively affecting job satisfaction in multiple studies. For example, in research examining special education teacher retention, Ansley et al. (2019) found that 91% of teachers surveyed in high-need schools described themselves as being either satisfied or very satisfied with their relationships with students. Ansley et al. found a significant correlation between work satisfaction and retention of special educators in high-need schools. Using a Spearman correlation coefficient, Ansley et al. (2019) found a positive r_s value of 0.255 and a statistically significant p -value of 0.049 ($p < 0.05$).

In a study of teachers of students who were deaf or hard of hearing, Luckner and Dorn (2017), aiming to find factors of job satisfaction among teachers of students who were deaf or hard of hearing, determined similar findings as those described above. The authors conducted a survey of 495 such teachers, of whom 94% reported being satisfied or very satisfied by the

“importance and challenge” of the job and 87% reported being satisfied or very satisfied by “working with students from diverse cultures” (Lucker & Dorn, 2017).

Shields and Mullen (2020) described the power of relationships with colleagues or workers as being greater than “mere acquaintanceship.” Similarly, the statements from the current study’s participants above described the meaningfulness of collegial relationships. Many of the participants described a bond between colleagues that extended beyond the boundaries of work. Furthermore, the concept of community was reiterated by the participants, “veteran teachers described their colleagues as an extended family to which some even attributed much of their success” (Shields & Mullen, 2020, p. 47).

Intrinsic or Altruistic Motivation

The participants consistently described motivations to remain in teaching due to either intrinsic or altruistic values. Intrinsic motivation, or the motivation to fulfil or seek satisfaction from the activity of teaching rather than receiving an external benefit (American Psychological Association, 2018), was a consistent theme among the SETs-LIDs. For the purposes of this research, intrinsic motivation is described as a generalized motivation when compared to altruism. Altruism, or the motivation to serve others at a cost to oneself (American Psychological Association, 2018), was also mentioned throughout the interviews. However, altruism requires motivation toward the sacrifice of oneself. Therefore, although altruism was demonstrated, it was to a lesser degree when compared to intrinsic motivation, which was probably demonstrated to a greater degree because it required lesser sacrifice of oneself than altruism. Textual evidence was provided throughout the interviews and supported the claim that SETs-LIDs were motivated by internal values rather than external motivations.

All the participants identified some form of motivation based on intrinsic values. Although none of the interview questions directly asked for a participant's motivation, when discussing factors keeping participants in special education, all the participants indicated some form of intrinsic motivation. Interview questions one and three ("What do you look forward to when you come to work?" and "What factors keep you in special education?") provided insights into the participants' motivations. For example, Liz communicated that she valued the "little victories" as a motivation to stay in special education. These "little victories" provided Liz with the satisfaction from teaching that extrinsic motivation would not provide. Liz's experience of "little victories" was communicated in various ways by the other participants throughout all the interviews.

Christy reflected that her satisfaction with special education was based in being a contributor to the community of people with LIDs:

I'm in it to help [the students] and to help them learn more about not just their academics, but learning more about their culture and providing them access to life, what it's like life outside of school, things that they can learn, how they can advocate for themselves to how they can find resources, and find their community.

Audrey indicated that, "I still feel like I have things to offer that can make a difference for students. I feel like working directly with students is where I feel most impactful." Brooke communicated that she wanted all her students to build their independence. Eva reported a desire for advocacy and remaining in the field of special education for the students who need her, "becoming this trusted partner with them." These examples of intrinsic motivation further demonstrated the participants' satisfaction with the activity of teaching.

Themes consistent with altruistic motivation were communicated in six of the interviews. For example, Kimberly explained that she was always thinking about her students, “I can tell you there isn’t a minute where I’m not in my brain thinking about a kid or a problem they’re having ... and even when I tell myself not to do that, I still find myself doing it.” However, Melody’s experience consistently demonstrated textual evidence of altruistic values within teaching. Throughout their interview, Melody also repeated altruistic sentiments, “I don’t want to be a teacher if I’m not teaching deaf kids ... it’s a terrible job, and no one should do it. Only Saints do it.” Melody communicated a struggle between the education they provided and the education any other students received. Thus, a sense of altruism was consistently relayed as part of their navigation of the differences between the education of typically developing students and LID students.

These differences between the education of typically developing students and LID students was connected to why Melody switched professions. Melody indicated that they had begun teaching in public schools because “I thought that students that didn’t have access to [deaf and hard of hearing] schools also deserved a quality education. So that’s why I made the switch.” They further explained their experience of altruism as their reason for remaining in special education, “It’s not that I enjoy teaching, because I don’t ... I don’t wanna leave [the students] with a teacher that doesn’t know how to teach them.” Melody’s experience was specifically driven to support the students who were deaf and hard of hearing. Melody’s persistence in providing education was expressed as an experience of altruism. They sacrificed their wellbeing to ensure that students with LIDs received a quality education.

The literature supports the findings of intrinsic and altruistic values as a factor of teacher retention. In research conducted involving teachers with 10 or more years of experience of

teaching in England, Chiong et al. (2017) found intrinsic and altruistic motivations outweighed other forms of motivation in reasons for entering and staying within the field. They discovered that as the years of teaching experience increased, motivation to remain in the profession was increasingly influenced by intrinsic and altruistic values. For example, 62% of teachers with 20 or more years of teaching said that they were motivated by the difference they made in their pupils' lives. That same 62% reported enjoying teaching their students to learn, further demonstrating the motivation to remain in the profession being driven by intrinsic and altruistic values.

Positive Administrative Experiences

The next theme that emerged from the interviews was the influence of positive administrative experiences. The participants were asked questions directly regarding administrative support and its impact on their jobs. Eight of the participants described the positive impact of their experiences with administration. There was a difference between the described experiences with school-based administrators and district administrators. Melody was the only participant who called out a district level administrator by name and spoke positively about them.

The eight participants who spoke positively about their school-based administrators, which included Melody, communicated themes that were consistent with the literature and explicitly addressed the perceptions of building level administrators. District level administrators and perceptions regarding district level administrations will be discussed in the following section.

The participants described positive rapports with building administrators as being fundamental in their satisfaction with being SETs-LIDs. Jennifer spoke positively about her

building administrator and the experience of someone who was willing to “go to bat for me.” She further outlined a scenario where during one school year, she had four non-ambulatory students in her class who were in wheelchairs, which caused them difficulties when trying to navigate the school building. Jennifer was expected to navigate the school building with the four non-ambulatory students and an additional two students who were mobile. However, she was not allotted the appropriate staffing to navigate the school building: she was allotted only two paraprofessionals, resulting in three adults to navigate four wheelchairs and two additional students. “Well, do the math. There’s not enough people to push,” Jennifer remarked. Not having the necessary staffing, Jennifer went to her principal and advocated for additional staffing for her classroom. She then described how her building level administrator advocated for the additional staffing and then received the additional staffing to support the needs of the students in Jennifer’s program.

The SETs-LIDs also described positive administrative experiences when it came to building administrators understanding their role as special educators. For example, Brooke described multiple situations in which she worked under administrators who understood special education, “I’ve actually been very lucky ... the majority of the places that I’ve taught, the person directly above me has been a special education teacher. Which means that they’re understanding.” When the participants described positive administrative rapport and understanding of their role as special educators, they also pointed out the respect toward SETs that administrators share. Audrey described her ideal administrators as those who “are really good at respecting their special education teachers and honoring their expertise.” Melody spoke about the process of creating a positive administrative experience, “since the current administration began, we’ve had so many conversations and so many exploratory idea sessions

where we really discuss what is deaf education.” These positive experiences with building level administrators were a consistent theme in the research. However, there were differences in perceptions regarding school-based administrators and district level administrators. Of the eight participants that described positive perceptions of administrators, only Melody specifically named a district level administrator who was supportive or who they had a positive experience with. After describing aspects of their role that they would like to see changed, Melody stated that they were happy with the supervisor of special education, “I do love Katrina Klose. She is on point.” Otherwise, all positive experiences described by the participants were with school-based administrators.

The literature supports the positive experiences of administrators and special educator retention. In O’Brien et al.’s (2019) study, special educators of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities were more likely to communicate job satisfaction when they shared a positive view of their administrator. The authors explicitly examined the nature of the working condition of teachers in self-contained settings, specifically those who taught students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This national sample of data surveyed 171 SETs-LIDs (O’Brien et al., 2019). The results of this research were consistent with previous literature: perceptions of positive administrative support yielded positive outcomes in job satisfaction, job commitment, and an intent to stay (Bettini et al., 2020; Conley & You, 2017; O’Brien et al., 2019).

External Factors

Billingsley (1993) explained that factors impacting retention and attrition that extended beyond the realm of employment factors were considered external factors. External factors were consistently mentioned by the participants. The participants who discussed external factors

influencing their retention in special education provided topics, such as societal, institutional, and economic influences, consistent with Billingsley's (1993) findings. For example, Liz and Audrey expressed that they felt trapped by the economic and institutional influences of education. Liz said, "I have spent so much time and money getting into this profession that I can't just drop it all now." Audrey seemed more indifferent about the profession and factors leading to retention, "I think where I am in my career... I'm in a place where I can't leave." Paul explained that his retention in special education was less due to a specific plan and more a result of happenstance. Throughout his interview, Paul discussed the influences of his personal life on his work life. He initially described living within the school district's boundaries before moving to a suburban area. The move was consequential in his life but did not alter his aspirations to remain a SET: "I didn't know we'd be so far out in the burbs, and even with the commute ... the whole school environment, the whole administrative support, keeps me where I'm at." Although the interview questions and the theoretical framework associated with this research were designed to explicitly examine employment factors, external factors such as physical proximity and personal factors continued to arise as a theme.

Structural Descriptions

Throughout the interviews, the participants described structural experiences that influenced their retention. These structural descriptions outlined the "how" of the phenomenon: what SETs-LIDs experienced while in the job. The participants specifically discussed the concepts of (1) frustration, (2) a desire for understanding, (3) inequity and exclusion, and (4) uncertainty. These structural experiences capture the essence of the phenomenon of SETs-LIDs retention.

Frustration

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed frustration with the difficulties of working as SETs-LIDs. Frustration was most often expressed toward work challenges and demands, which is consistent with the literature. Although the literature provides a wide range of definitions for work challenges and demands, the participants in this research most notably reported frustration with building and district administrators, a lack of resources, difficulties with student disabilities, overwhelming workloads, a lack of time, and difficulties with colleagues or collaboration, to name a few. Every participant expressed some form of frustrating experience with work demands. The descriptions provided by the participants expressed “how” each participant experienced the frustrations of work challenges or work demands.

The participants were asked questions directly related to retention efforts by the school district and their perceptions of their school-based administrators. They consistently communicated frustration with decisions driven by district-level administrations. Frustration ranged from explicitly calling out administrators by name to speaking generally of the practices and bureaucracy experienced within the school district. Although there were shared experiences of participants speaking positively about building administrators, much of the frustration expressed during the interviews was related to a general lack of support. Audrey seemed to express an impact that extended beyond frustration and into the realm of burnout. When asked about the retention efforts of the school district, her response expressed experiences with the school district that seemingly worked against the retention of special educators:

I don't think [the school district] are doing a great job. I don't know who's to blame. At one of my last elementary schools ... we had two, two good special education teachers leave education last year ... they just felt like it was that they were being asked to do too much with too little support ... I think just responding to student need – there's so much

student need, and the needs are so different and we're working off of models for ratios and staffing that are pretty antiquated and don't respond to these pretty big significant needs that we're seeing.

Audrey's experiences conceptualized frustration with bureaucracy and the lack of support experienced at the district level. She expressed a sense of frustration, both within herself and also with her former colleagues. It is important to note that Audrey was interviewed at the beginning of a new phase in her career, when she had transitioned to a special program explicitly designed to support students with LIDs.

A profound expression of distaste toward district level leadership, Melody's response to a probing question regarding district level administration stands as a perception of the structural differences between district level and school-based administrators. When the researcher asked about Melody's perception of the actions of the upper-level district administrators, they responded, "What do I think that the upper echelon thinks? I don't know, where to get their designer suits fitted. It seems like they care a lot about the numbers ... I think they're just managing the day-to-day/making sure the numbers fit what they want them to fit." Melody's reaction, experience, and perception of district level administrators provided weight to the structural theme of frustrations of SETs-LIDs.

Pam explicitly expressed her dissatisfaction and frustration with building level administrators. She felt that she was not being heard by her building level administrators and that frustrated her. Pam had worked in the same building and position for 15 years. Her frustration rose to the point where she discussed retirement and attrition. "I'm really going to retire as soon as I'm able, and I'm not gonna go for six more months, I'm gonna do it the day of." Her frustration continued in a similar vein throughout her interview. She further expressed her

frustrations with the lack of assistants in her classroom, a poor allocation of resources, and negative experiences with building administrators. “Oftentimes I don’t get anything but lovely pieces of data from our assistant principals.” Pam’s frustration encapsulated the general structural description of frustration arising from challenges beyond the control of the SETs-LIDs.

Debra’s interview provided a structural understanding of the difficulties of working with a lack of resources. She expressed the frustrations of working with students with LIDs and the physical resources needed to support such students. Debra described how she persevered through the expectations of her role as an occupational therapist and found ways to sidestep the lack of resources. She recalled spending “\$700 out of my pocket last year...,” and to avoid that expectation, she didn’t “want to do that this year.” Debra’s experience as an occupational therapist detailed how she was not granted budgets and resources for the role and responsibilities of her position. “I am not given a budget with which to buy adapted paper and likewise if there are kids who need sensory tools ... I’m not given any money to get those sensory tools.” Although Debra’s description dipped into financial difficulties, she described a general lack of resources for students with disabilities, including those with LIDs.

In terms of the participants’ experiences of difficulties that arose from their students’ disabilities, Leslie thoroughly discussed the difficulties of teaching students with LIDs. She taught three- and four-year-old students with LIDs. These students ranged in disabilities and needs. During her interview, Leslie expressed concerns regarding the intensity of the needs of the students in her classroom and how to best support them. At the time of the interview, Leslie was teaching seven students, two of whom had medical needs that required them to remain in wheelchairs. Each of those students came to class with a personal assistant or a nurse. In addition to the students who were non-ambulatory, the remaining students in her class had autism,

developmental delays, speech and language impairments, and were non-verbal and visually impaired.

The diversity of the disabilities in Leslie's classroom required her to have a unique understanding about each disability and how that disability impacted the respective students. Additionally, Leslie needed to be well versed in the levels of support from the various related service providers to ensure that the students were having their needs met. Leslie expressed her frustration with the diversity of needs and their role in her special program, "I feel like it would be nice to have a setting where all of the kids have similar needs and similar goals ... if [the students] were together in one or two locations, [the school district] could have staff helping everyone..." Although Leslie's frustration somewhat arose from the inappropriate allocation of resources, her experience pointed out the difficulties of teaching students with multiple types of LIDs.

Regarding the structural experiences that captured how SETs-LIDs worked through the frustration of the job, overwhelming workloads consistently came up as a point of frustration throughout the interviews. The participants recounted various hindrances arising from the responsibilities and expectations aligned with special education paperwork and workloads. The participants expressed angst about IEPs, their respective timelines, the redundancy around the paperwork, and the time needed to develop these documents. Explaining the experience of frustration with paperwork, Kimberly described special education paperwork as anxiety inducing, "I would like it if the IEP paperwork, if that was taken off our shoulders. I think it's a lot to ask someone to manage legal documents and teach classes ... it causes a lot of anxiety."

When Eva described the pressures of completing paperwork, she reported that her likelihood of leaving the profession would increase if the workload were to rise. "If my caseload

increased dramatically, I think that would be really difficult because not only is that more kids to have meetings for, it's more kids to evaluate, more kids to do paperwork, and more kids to file Medicaid for, it kind of compounds." Although the paperwork expectations of SETs-LIDs seemed contingent on many other factors, it was repeated as a point of irritation for the participants. Both Jennifer and Melody described the paperwork as an act of "tedium" or redundancy. During Audrey's interview, she reflected on how the workload impacted the profession, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. "I feel like we came back from the pandemic ... very drained already and it does take much when you're already so depleted to give up."

A Desire for Understanding

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed a desire for understanding or recognition, with all the participants describing administrators' or colleagues' lack of understanding of the ways and means of providing special education. For example, throughout the interviews with Christy and Melody, who taught deaf and hard of hearing students, they referred to the deaf culture and community. They defined the exclusive, disability-driven community as having norms that were different from those of other communities. Christy stated that she was more than just an educator; she was a member of an exclusive community and culture. Christy's perspective indicated how SETs-LIDs are expected to become engrossed in the culture and understanding of a community. However, Christy's frustration was an explanation of how that deeper understanding is not expected of other teachers. She expressed this desire for more understanding because of the monumental task of teaching students who were deaf or hard of hearing. Other colleagues and administrators were not required to have the same competencies and understandings, and Christy expressed those difficulties.

Eva described a similar desire for understanding as a speech therapist. In her role as a related service provider, Eva described a desire for understanding specifically from her administrators and evaluators. Eva described how the school district had a lead speech therapist, but this person did not have any evaluative authority. Additionally, because Eva's job was as a related service provider, she felt as though her building administrators did not have a shared understanding of her role and difficulties. "I just feel like I'm a lower priority on the scale ... I got moved to an office where I can't really hold groups anymore ... I would love for [building administrators] to just come and see what I do and have a better understanding." Eva then described how her sentiment was shared by other speech therapists in the school district. Eva seemed to recount typical conversations between other speech therapists in her school district regarding the difficulties they each experienced. "That's the big joke with school speech therapists, 'Where are you this year?' 'Oh yeah, I'm under the stairwell.' 'Oh, you know, I got put in the janitors closet.' We do what we gotta do because we love the kids." Eva's experience explained how she overcame the difficulties she commonly experienced. And of note, she found a way to positively express "how" she overcame those difficulties: through the love she had for her students.

Similar to Eva, Noel positively expressed how he overcame his desire for understanding and the difficulties of the job. Noel had taught at a private day school that had explicitly taught students with similar LIDs. Noel communicated that there was a greater sense of understanding from the administrators and colleagues at his previous job. Noel's expression of the need for a greater sense of understanding was a comparison of his current position to his previous job as a private day schoolteacher.

I think if [administrators] had a better idea of educating [low incidence] students ... the reason why it's effective in a private day school is because it's the entire population. So, people who are working in that building have a strong understanding of working with those students, with that population.

However, in the same response, Noel attempted to rationalize the lack of understanding within his public school job by describing how students with LIDs made up roughly one percent of the entire student population at his school. He explained that an administrator's level of understanding should equal the percentage of students that make up the LID population. "We're right at the 1% population, 1% of the entire student body population. I'm realistic, I don't fit ... in the whole overall pie of the school." This complex desire for understanding expressed by Noel seemed to come at the cost of minimizing the needs of the students he taught, a difficult battle of altruistic values.

Inequity and Exclusion

Although structures of inequity and exclusion came up in seven of the interviews, the concept of inequity and exclusion was highly driven by negative perceptions of systematic wrongdoing. The general sentiment among the seven participants that communicated issues of inequity and exclusion was that there was a gap between the needs of students with LIDs and what was provided for them. For example, Jennifer described the lack of systems to support the students in her special program. She explained that the system lacked simple structures such as a continuous inventory of disposable gloves to help students with medical or toileting needs. "You still don't know exactly where to go to get a question answered or a resource supplied."

Although a disposable gloves supply seems like a minor inconvenience and easy fix, the inequity of the system extended into impacting the physical access the students had to the educational

environment. Jennifer went on to explain that the school district was consistently allocating capital improvement projects to creating new and improved facilities. However, at Jennifer's school, she had a handicap door that had been broken for two years. In her interview, Jennifer gave the impression that no matter how much she advocated for her students, the system was consistently working against their needs. She concluded that she felt "like we're the land of misfit toys."

Issues of inequity extended into the expectations within the roles and responsibilities of SETs-LIDs. Although LID students struggled to access equitable resources when compared to their general education peers, the inequitable practices reflected how the system perceives and supports SETs-LIDs. Liz explained a sentiment that was expressed by multiple SETs-LIDs, namely, that they are subject to different expectations in their roles and responsibilities compared to general education teachers. "The expectations are getting larger and the resources aren't." Liz went on to explain how the school district was expecting SETs-LIDs to meet the needs of students without the appropriate resources, professional development, and guidance. She described how the school district expected SETs-LIDs to use the structured literacy program as the reading curriculum for students with LIDs. However, SETs-LIDs were unable to provide the structured literacy program without professional development in a phonologically based intervention. So, even though Liz underwent training in the structured literacy program and the phonological intervention, she was not provided the resources to implement either with fidelity. "I'm constantly trying to grab things from different people so that I'm supposed to be delivering this with fidelity, but they don't provide me the tools that I need."

When conceptualizing inequity and exclusion as "how" SETs-LIDs overcame the difficulties of the job, a sense of justice or civil rights was expressed as a motivation. Melody

and Pam explicitly described how their efforts were acts of overcoming inequity and exclusions. Pam's specific job responsibilities were to teach students with LIDs how to read. She saw this as an issue of justice, "You know that people, everybody deserves to have a good education and to learn the basics – to read; to become readers." This sense of social justice and separating the barrier of inequity for those who cannot read was repeated throughout Pam's interview. "My God, people are getting so tired of me. I just want people to do what is legal and just ... my little tagline, 'legal and just,' people." In understanding the altruistic values of working as a SET-LIDs, Pam described how those values clashed with her colleagues and were further enabling a system of inequities. Like Pam, Melody's sentiment was altruistic in value and aimed to break barriers of inequity. Both participants described how they and their students received the same curricular information and guidance from the school district. Specifically, Melody stated the following:

I don't think that some random lady in the English department at [central office] should be creating a PowerPoint that every kindergarten teacher is going to use ... Do you even know their students? Do you know anything about their students' lives? Could that be any Whiter? ... the idea that you can make one PowerPoint and send it to every kindergarten teacher is the epitome of White supremacy ideology.

Although Melody's perspective can be considered controversial and divisive, the perspective of inequity and exclusion remains. They expressed how students with LIDs are expected to meet the criteria and expectations of their general education peers, without the understanding of their lives, abilities, or backgrounds.

Uncertainty

Six of the participants expressed uncertainty about the expectations of their roles and job responsibilities. Additionally, uncertainty was expressed as it related to career decisions. Special program teachers recalled not having explicit support or a supervisor who could be called upon to answer questions regarding students with LIDs. For example, Christy stated that there was no leader or head of her special program, which specifically targeted deaf and hard of hearing students. She described uncertainty about making decisions regarding students without the guidance of an expert in the niche area. Additionally, Christy described uncertainty and mistrust of the district's ability to hire the correct personnel for such a position, "I don't feel like [district administrators] know what type of resource to look at because it's a very niche disability..." Christy's mistrust and uncertainty seemed to arise from a lack of guidance and her job's uniqueness. She continually advocated for an expert at the district level to support her understanding of deaf and hard of hearing students. Additionally, because of the low incidence of deaf and hard of hearing students, she felt like she was on an island when making her decisions. "I'm alone at this school," she remarked. The isolation and loneliness seemed to add to her uncertainty and mistrust.

The uncertainty of the role of SETs-LIDs was also expressed as role ambiguity. Four participants described role ambiguity and difficulties associated with their roles' lack of definition. Both Christy and Melody expressed a desire for a deaf and hard of hearing expert to help identify their role, and each expressed uncertainty about making decisions without the leadership of such an expert. Christy said, "there is no professional learning that is guided for just deaf and hard of hearing teachers. So, we have to go out and find that ourselves." As an occupational therapist, Debra described her role as being varied. She noted, "In the school setting I think it can be really hard to clearly define my role to staff ... every therapist might actually

define our role a little bit differently or comes to the table with different skills and certifications.” These expressions of uncertainty arising from ambiguity specifically pertained to the lack of definition of the participant’s roles. Additional expressions of uncertainty were demonstrated in feelings of loneliness.

Under the theme of uncertainty, four participants expressed isolation or loneliness as SETs-LIDs. These participants each reflected on their feelings of being the only staff member within their school to be an expert on their students. Rosa stated, “I feel like a hermit,” when reflecting on how she felt within her school. Liz expressed a detailed experience of isolation. She described how she felt like an afterthought when changes or supports were given to students. Specifically, when the team or administration made decisions that impacted Liz’s schedule or expectations, she described isolation within the decision-making process. “I’m kind of just left to problem solve on my own.” The participants expressing feelings of isolation and loneliness were each relied upon as the lone staff member who needed to solve problems associated with students with LIDs.

The participants were further asked to share their experiences and perceptions regarding the school district’s efforts to retain special educators. Many of the responses indicated that the participants were unaware of any specific efforts to retain special educators. However, when they provided thorough or more detailed responses, there was a general uncertainty, lack of awareness, or even dissatisfaction with the retention efforts of the school district. Rosa claimed, “I truly have not seen anything being done... I see a lot of turnover, especially among the younger teachers... So, if they’re doing something, I don’t know what it is they might be doing.” The negative experiences and perceptions regarding retention efforts of the school district heavily impacted other participants to the point of career uncertainty. When describing factors

keeping them in special education, Myra and Melody described uncertainty with special education and potential career transitions. Myra said, “In some way, shape, or form, I want to keep teaching, I don’t know if I always want to keep doing special education, but I’m happy right now.” This uncertainty seemed to lead Myra to consider job or career prospects outside of special education. Melody’s career uncertainty seemed to pertain more to fear. They reported, “I think a big reason of why I stay ... there’s so many bad teachers and ... you don’t know who’s going to be taking over that role, that’s terrifying.”

Themes

Themes that frequently arose from the analyzed interviews were categorized as impacting either attrition or retention. As the participants discussed specifics within their roles as SETs-LIDs, they described themes that aligned with the literature. These themes aided in the creation of the textual and structural descriptions presented and discussed above. The participants consistently mentioned the aspects of their roles that influenced them the most. Tables 5 and 6 outline the specific frequency of themes from interviews.

Table 5

Themes Linked to Retention

Themes Linked to Retention	Teachers (N = 15)	Sample SET-LIDs responses
Working with students	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking forward to working with kids • Seeing students’ progress over time • Daily interactions with students, talking with students, listening • Having unique and meaningful relationships • Reading, dancing, or planning other fun activities with students • Coaching or mentoring students
Positive administrative support	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of special education teachers and students • Seeking and/or hiring staff to support special education • Willingness to gain understanding or engagement in special education • Providing access to resources or professional development

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigating difficulties with other colleagues
Positive colleague relationships	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction from working with colleagues • Developing friendships, years of relationships • Seeing coworkers • Having teammates • Working with “good people”
Satisfaction from professional development	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thorough onboarding process • Opportunities to develop within teams and through collaboration • Provided trainings on various disabilities • Knowledge of differences between language acquisition and language disabilities
Positive impact of external factors	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to flexible schedules, set time, and summers • Personal health leading to better teaching
Autonomy	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to trust and let SETs-LIDs teach and be the expert • Enjoyment in being able to create and build to meet students’ needs
System or special program structures	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uniqueness of programming addressing students’ needs

Table 6*Themes Linked to Attrition*

Themes Linked to Attrition	Teachers (N = 15)	Sample SETs-LIDs Responses
Workloads/paperwork	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Like two jobs crammed into one” • Special education meetings on top of regular school meetings • The redundancy, “tedium,” or “nonsense” of paperwork associated with special education • Caseload management and numbers • The legal binding aspects of IEPs: paperwork accuracy, meeting service hours, progress monitoring, etc.
Limited resources and staff	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of physical resources, curriculum resources, and accommodated or modified materials • Lack of staff knowledgeable of the needs of students or the specific needs of a low incidence disability • Staff lacking the medical or educational certification or knowledge needed for students
Challenges in collaboration or with colleagues	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship issues when collaborating or co-teaching • Lack of consistency with co-teaching pairs • Difficulties navigating leadership of paraprofessionals/assistants

Negative administrative support (current administrators or experience with previous administrations)	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of support, autonomy, or understanding • Lack of interactions with special education teachers or students • No experience working with students with special needs • No/lack of considerations for student needs or cost-effectiveness
Diversity of student needs	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classrooms have undefined diversity • Diversity of disabilities create a larger range of student needs • Intensity of student behaviors or challenges
Desire for time	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time to complete the required workload • Needing to protect time within the workday • Having to work outside of contract hours • Lack of availability to co-plan
Desire for inclusion	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of community • Isolation from typically developing peers • Stereotyping of students with disabilities
Negative district admin	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New initiative – consistent with a lack of training in those initiatives • Lack of understanding of low incidence disabilities • Disassociation: schools versus district • Lack of presence in classrooms • Inconsistent expectations from school to school and program to program
Curricular inconsistencies	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not having or needing to make a curriculum, no guidance • Curriculum that does not address the needs of the students
Language or cultural barriers	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to bilingual staff or resources • Disabilities present in students with English as a second language • Diversity in communication abilities: American Sign Language, communication devices
Role ambiguity	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undefined roles, specifically with how to teach/support low incidence disabilities • Lack of consistency identifying students eligible for special programs
Lack of accessibility	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties navigating physical environments: inoperable doors, lack of accessible playground equipment
Negative impact of external factors	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long commute • Navigating family and work balance, time away from family due to work • Finding supplemental income • Physical toll of the job on the body
Desire for professional development	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of professional development specific to the low incidence disabilities • Support staff/paraprofessionals lacking the training or understanding of low incidence disabilities

Summary

This study captured the essence of the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs. The research followed phenomenological qualitative methodologies and focused on the employment factors that influence the retention of SETs. The participants interviewed for this research were specifically defined as educators who continue to teach students with LIDs during difficult times. In this chapter, the participants' profiles were presented. The themes emerging from the interviews were discussed and analyzed. The textual descriptions identified why SETs-LIDs continued to teach, and the themes were 1) work satisfaction, 2) intrinsic or altruistic motivation, 3) positive administrative experiences, and 4) external factors. The structural descriptions defined what SETs-LIDs overcame while teaching. Those structural patterns included 1) frustration, 2) a desire for understanding, 3) inequity and exclusion, and 4) uncertainty. Quotes from the participants and support from the literature were provided as evidence, and tables provided frequency data related to the themes consistent with retention or attrition.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter discusses the findings of the research and their implications for practice and future research. The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs. This research implemented phenomenological qualitative methodologies. The lived experiences of special educators were gathered using two research instruments: a demographic survey and interviews. These research instruments were designed to better understand the phenomenon of SETs who continue to teach students with LIDs during difficult times. The interview questions for the study were generated by the research, and their validity was discussed. Additionally, data analysis procedures and processes were identified. This study focused on the retention and attrition factors that impacted special educators who continued to teach special education. By addressing a disparity in the literature of retention and attrition factors impacting SET-LIDs, this study explored the reasons why SETs, specifically SETs-LIDs, continue to teach in special education, even during times of high turnover. Additionally, this research examined the details surrounding the employment factors that impact SETs-LIDs.

Findings

This study captured the essence of the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs. It followed phenomenological qualitative methodologies and focused on the employment factors that influence the retention of SETs. The participants interviewed for this research were specifically defined as SETs who continue to teach students with LIDs during difficult times.

The participants' profiles were presented in Chapter 4, where the themes that emerged from the interviews were discussed and analyzed. The textual descriptions identified why SETs-LIDs continued to teach, and the textual themes were the following: 1) work satisfaction, 2) intrinsic or altruistic motivation, 3) positive administrative experiences, and 4) external factors.

The structural descriptions defined what SET-LIDs overcame while teaching, and the structural patterns included the following: 1) frustration, 2) a desire for understanding, 3) inequity and exclusion, and 4) uncertainty. Quotes from the participants' interviews and support from the literature were provided as additional evidence. The frequency of the themes related to attrition and retention was described, and the following findings were presented: meaningful relationships are fundamental, administrators influence attrition and retention, SETs-LIDs have a sense of virtue, SETs-LIDs desire resources, work conditions directly impact attrition, job ambiguity adds to the challenge of teaching students with LIDs, and SETs-LIDs desire appropriate professional development. Table 7 provides support from the literature for these findings as well as implications of the findings.

Table 7

Findings, Supporting Data and Literature, and Implications

Findings	Data Supporting Findings (N = 15)	Literature Supporting Findings	Implication of Finding
#1. Meaningful relationships were fundamental	All the participants looked forward to seeing the students, and eight participants looked forward to seeing their colleagues.	School social contexts show strong relationships and positive school culture contributes to retention (Billingsley, 2004; Conley & You, 2017).	Stakeholders and educational leaders are tasked with creating and maintaining relationships and positive school cultures. As educational leaders create and maintain meaningful cultures and relationships, teachers are more willing to stay and support their students. Research surrounding the impact of positive school cultures is extensive. However, additional research on the impact of meaningful relationships is needed to address its impact on special educators and student outcomes. Additionally, research examining the impact of creating and maintaining meaningful relationships for educational leaders is needed.
#2. Administrators influenced attrition and retention	Ten participants described the positive influence from school administrators, one detailed a positive impact	Administrators control many factors related to work conditions and student outcomes and are often viewed as directly	Administrators remain a key factor in the attrition and retention of special educators and SETs-LIDs. School administrators who better understand the roles and

	of a district administrator, eight described negative experiences with either a current or former administration, and six outlined negative district administrator experiences.	impacting teachers (Bettini et al., 2020; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).	expectations of SETs-LIDs are more likely to create systems that retain SETs-LIDs. Conversely, school administrators who lack the awareness and understanding of the expectations of SETs-LIDs are more prone to create systems of attrition. District administrators are generally observed as out of touch and lacking in understanding. District administrators lack consistent strategies in retaining SETs-LIDs, yet influence policy and practices that impact SETs-LIDs. District level administrators who connected with SETs-LIDs were considered in a high regard. All levels of administrators would benefit from professional development or direct experiences with SETs-LIDs or students with LIDs.
#3. The SETs-LIDs' empathy improved retention	All the participants described being motivated by intrinsic values, and six participants identified being motivated by altruism.	Feelings, motivation, and job satisfaction were described as factors for retention (Fuller et al., 216; Prather-Jones, 2011; Stephens & Fish, 2010).	Educational leaders are more likely to retain teachers when hiring those that express passion and empathy for the profession. When considering retention, SETs-LIDs are highly impacted by their feelings and motivation.
#4. The SETs-LIDs desired appropriate resources	Eleven participants stated the need for more resources, time, and staff.	Research reported that SETs desire resources such as time, instructional resources, and physical materials (Bettini et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2019).	Stakeholder and educational leaders who provide access to resources were perceived to influence the retention of SETs-LIDs. More research is needed to understand what specific resources and materials SETs-LIDs lack and desire. This qualitative research collected data indicating the desire for time, staff, and physical resources. Yet, there were no specific indicators of how much of these or which specific resources would create satisfaction.
#5. Work conditions directly impacted attrition	Eleven SETs-LIDs described changes in caseloads, student disabilities, tedious paperwork, and the numbers of meetings they had to attend as negative aspects of the job.	Increases or added complexity to work conditions was strongly associated with attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2020).	Research regarding work conditions and their impact on special educators is expansive, with educational leaders being tied directly to impacting work conditions for SETs. However, additional research needs to examine the impact of work conditions on related services providers, SETs-LIDs, and special education programming.
#6. Job ambiguity	Nine participants described challenges with	Related service providers and special educators	Historically, job ambiguity related research has been extensive.

added to the challenge	ambiguity due to a lack of definition of student disability in special programs or in their specific role/job.	reported perceptual difference between role and ambiguity of expectations (Giangreco et al., 2013; Gilmour et al., 2022).	However, there was a lack of updated research in this area. Updated research regarding the ambiguity of roles and responsibilities for special educators, specifically SETs-LIDs, is needed. This research would provide a better understanding of what role ambiguity is and how it impacts SETs-LIDs, their students, and educational leaders.
#7. SET-LIDs desired appropriate professional development	Three participants desired greater access to relevant professional development, and four participants described satisfaction from relevant professional development.	Special educators expressed intentions to stay because of professional development (Cancio et al., 2013; O'Brien et al., 2019).	When SETs-LIDs were provided with appropriate professional development, they expressed a greater sense of retention. Educational leaders, including district level administrators, are tasked with finding relevant professional development for SETs-LIDs and creating systems of retention. Without systems to identify and implement relevant professional development, SETs-LIDs are more likely to express frustration. Additional research regarding the impact of job-specific professional development for SETs-LIDs and their impacts on attrition or retention is needed.

Meaningful Relationships Were Fundamental (Finding #1)

All the participants described some form of relationships as a fundamental aspect of their retention as SETs-LIDs. The relationships described by the participants ranged from relationships with colleagues, who were sometimes referred to as friends, to positive relationships with administrators. Every participant described relationships with their students as being essential to their retention in special education. Eight of the participants described positive relationships with colleagues. The description of student relationships specifically aided in multiple participants' communication of work and career satisfaction. Student and colleague relationships frequently featured as what the participants looked forward to each day and how they expressed their willingness to remain in the field of special education.

Conversely, eight participants described frustration with relationships with colleagues or collaboration. The participants who expressed concerns with colleagues or coworkers did so in the vein of expressing frustrations with co-teaching and collaboration, which led them to report dissatisfaction with their job or work. Specifically, frustration was voiced regarding ineffective co-teaching pairs, poorly trained paraprofessionals, and staff unaware of the students' needs.

Administrators Influenced Attrition and Retention (Finding #2)

Of secondary importance to the participants were their experiences with administrators. Those who reported positive administrative experiences also expressed work or career satisfaction. Conversely, those who expressed negative administrative experiences expressed job dissatisfaction. All but one participant expressed dissatisfaction with district level administrators, whereas 10 participants reported positive relationships with their direct administrator. The experiences and perceptions of the participants who reported dissatisfaction with an administrator differed between school-based administrators and district level administrators; these participants typically spoke of experiences from previous jobs and were not speaking of their role at the time of the interview. Also, they expressed that their dissatisfaction negatively impacted their retention and positively impacted their attrition.

SETs-LIDs' Empathy Improved Retention (Finding #3)

Of additional significance were the motivations of the SETs-LIDs. The participants expressed intrinsic or altruistic motivation regarding their work. This was further communicated through the participants' idealizations toward equity and inclusion. Seven participants described or identified structural descriptions of inequity and exclusion. The structures of inequity or exclusion were expressed as intrinsic or altruistic motivation. For example, Melody described the complex sentiment of wanting to only teach students who were deaf or hard of hearing but also

wanting to satisfy a sense of justice and civil liberties. The SETs-LIDs expressed that they were motivated by the opportunity education provided students who would otherwise not receive opportunities or lacked the advocacy to meet their potential.

SETs-LIDs Desired Resources (Finding #4)

The needs of students with LIDs were emphasized throughout the interviews. The participants consistently described requiring the resources to support the needs of their students. The desire to meet students' needs ranged from requesting additional staffing to ensuring physical facilities were accessible for their students. In addition to the demand for physical resources, SETs-LIDs also expressed the desire for time.

Work Conditions Directly Impacted Attrition (Finding #5)

The participants identified that work conditions and work demands impacted their perspective on attrition. Eva specifically stated that if there were an increase in her caseload numbers, she would consider transitioning back to the private sector. Additionally, of the SETs-LIDs that described previous work experiences, poor work conditions or intense work demands contributed to their attrition from the job. For example, Noel's previous experience working at a private day school was seen as a negative experience and temporarily drove him away from teaching. Lastly, the participants consistently identified that the range of disabilities in a single LID classroom was overwhelming and difficult to navigate.

Job Ambiguity Added to the Challenge (Finding #6)

Participants expressed frustration with ambiguous roles as SETs-LIDs. Within their school building, the SETs-LIDs were considered experts on the disability they taught, which encouraged expressions of loneliness and isolation. They added that there were no staff able to identify or define their role. The perceived expectations SETs-LIDs experienced within their

program or class varied based on the needs of the students. The SETs-LIDs pointed to this inconsistency as adding to the ambiguity of their role.

SETs-LIDs Desired Appropriate Professional Development (Finding #7)

Lastly, the SETs-LIDs consistently mentioned that opportunities for professional development fell short of meeting their needs. When describing the opportunities for professional development offered by their school district, the SETs-LIDs described that those opportunities were not relevant to their students or did not specifically address their curriculum and instruction. They described having to find professional development opportunities that related to their students or job to have meaningful professional development opportunities.

Discussion of Findings

Financial compensation and policy related to the retention of SETs were discussed in Chapter 2. However, the school district used for this study requested the removal of a question addressing financial compensation. The question removed from this was “How does financial compensation impact your work?” The school district provided no explanation for their request to remove this question.

Historically, the literature surrounding the impact of financial compensation on the retention of SETs is scarce. In the research that specifically measured the impact of financial compensation on SET retention, a causal relationship between financial compensation and retention was found (Conley & You, 2017). Therefore, and due to the scarcity of the literature on financial compensation on SET retention and attrition, the researcher initially intended to seek qualitative data regarding the impact of financial compensation on SETs-LIDs. However, with the removal of the related question, no clear qualitative impact could be identified.

Nevertheless, the removal of the question specifically related to financial compensation did not prohibit the participants from providing responses in which teacher pay or finances were discussed. Eight participants discussed how teacher pay or finances impacted their work as SETs-LIDs. Of these participants, five indicated that special education or roles specific to SETs-LIDs should receive some form of additional pay compared to other teachers. For example, Melody indicated that there should be incentive pay for the specific skills needed as a SET-LIDs. “I had asked at one point about language pay, is there incentive for teachers that sign [American sign language]?” Melody went on to indicate that they were not given financial incentives for the skills and knowledge related to their work. The frustration communicated by them went on, “We [the school district] has some American Sign Language interpreters that earn more money than our deaf and hard of hearing teachers, like it’s nuts; absolutely insane.” In short, Melody perceived that the personnel who use sign language for the benefit of students received greater financial compensation than the SETs-LIDs who directly instructed those same students.

Melody’s frustration regarding salary disparities and the lack of financial incentives was evidence of the meaningfulness of financial compensation to SET-LIDs. Their frustration with financial compensation was provided in response to a question about the school district’s efforts to retain special educators. Of the eight participants that described financial compensation as impacting their job, teacher pay, or financial incentives was a proposed consideration for increasing efforts to retain SETs-LIDs.

When responding to questions regarding the retention efforts of the school district, four participants indicated that SETs should receive more pay. Yet, these four participants (Liz, Noel, Paul, and Rosa) did not specifically identify a structural source for the increased financial compensation and only spoke generally about the need to pay SETs better. Rosa indicated that

“there should be more money, like special education should get a little bit more because they do more paperwork.” Liz spoke similarly about the increase or differentiation of pay between SETs and general educators. “They [the school district] redid the pay scale, but it doesn’t seem like there’s any specific thing to retain special educators, even though there’s a huge need.” Melody was the only participant to identify structures for additional financial compensation. They identified incentive pay or pay increases specific to SETs. Overall, the participants expressed that the work of SETs-LIDs was unique and different but there were no financial incentives to identify those differences.

Implications for Practice

The population of students with LIDs in the United States is small, especially in relation to the population of a comprehensive school. However, the expectation to meet the demands of the students and their educators falls on school leaders. School leaders must understand the implications and responsibilities of serving students with LIDs. Students with increased needs require teachers who are well versed in the unique aspects of the job. School leaders must take additional care and consideration when attracting, preparing, and retaining teachers for these students. Listed below are three practical implications for educational leaders and stakeholders to support SETs-LIDs (Ansley et al., 2019; Bettini et al., 2022; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2020; Buttner et al., 2015; Cancio et al., 2013; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Johnson, 2013; Office of Special Education Programs, 2021; Podolsky et al., 2017; Shields & Mullen, 2020).

- 1) Build a culture of meaningful relationships: create a supportive work environment; communicate trust, respect, and appreciation; create and model teams of effective

- instruction; support a culture of togetherness, inclusivity, and a sense of success; and hire passionate teachers.
- 2) Modernize and improve work demands: empower employees; identify and close the gaps in resources; provide accessibility; seek and be open to feedback; and reduce tedium and/or paperwork.
 - 3) Address perceptions and policy: address and change public perceptions of special education and fund compensation packages and loan forgiveness.

As school districts examine ways to increase inclusion, special educators are required to adapt to changes in service delivery models and collaborate with general educators. As such, SETs-LIDs require continued support in developing effective models of service delivery. However, administrators must also work to create and maintain effective communities and cultures for students and teachers.

The school district used in this research has the responsibility of supporting SET-LIDs. SET-LIDs require trust, professional development, and resources to improve their practices and the education of their students. Participants consistently identified dissatisfaction with district administrators. A remedy to improve satisfaction would be identifying meaningful professional development for SET-LIDs. As a start-up, district stakeholders and administrators could identify professional learning goals for the district and determine methods for ongoing professional development (OSEP, 2020). By identifying systems that support teacher progress and learning needs, administrators are more likely to impact perceptions that positive influence retention (CEEDAR, 2020).

Educational leaders perceive special education as a responsibility that falls beyond their purview (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). To support special educators, including SETs-LIDs,

educational leaders must invest in the betterment of special educators and the students they teach. Cancio et al. (2013) identified that when administrators communicated trust, respect, and appreciation to their SETs, the SETs were more likely to intend to stay in their job. The data gathered from this research identified similar findings. When the SETs-LIDs discussed positive relationships with their administrators, they were more likely to express sentiments of retention. Additionally, the SETs-LIDs who expressed frustrations with previous administrators were no longer working under said administrator at the time of the interviews. This could be due to the lack of meaningful relationships built under these previous administrators. Prather-Jones (2011) identified that special educators of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders who stayed in the field for six years or more were more likely to describe a “fit” between their personality and the demands of the job. In a phenomenological examination of deaf and hard of hearing programs, Engler and MacGregor (2018) found that teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing expressed commitment to the profession, proficiency in practice, and the impact of learning. Teachers who consistently exemplified these personal qualities were more likely to align with the school or program’s culture or philosophy.

Administrators directly impact school culture and the perceptions of SETs (Bettini et al., 2022). Teachers who described “fitting” into their school or special program were more likely to communicate sentiments of retention (Buttner et al., 2015; Prather-Jones, 2011). Data from the present study communicated consistent findings; teachers who experienced satisfaction were more likely to express signs of “fitting” into their school or program. Therefore, administrators should be familiar with their special education programs, the needs of the students in those programs, and the type of teacher those students need. An administrator’s hiring practice extends into the effective hiring of instructional assistants and support staff for special education

programs. Experienced or highly qualified instructional assistants are needed to support SETs-LIDs and students.

Participants in this study consistently discussed the importance of professional development. Although there was praise regarding specific support provided by the school district, the participants described a lack of support designed to address their specific needs or an inability to develop professionally. Both teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students specifically expressed frustration with the lack of professional development specific to their students and needs. In a study addressing continued preparation and professional development for teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing, Johnson (2013) identified that models of teacher programs were inconsistent, fluctuating, and susceptible to cost-benefit business models. Policy makers and stakeholders must empower systems of opportunity for SETs-LIDs to professionally develop.

Financial compensation was discussed throughout the interviews and expressed as both points of frustration and satisfaction. However, the literature regarding financial compensation indicated a causal relationship between increases in financial compensation and SET retention. Policy makers and stakeholders must continue to examine educational funding mechanisms that impact special educators. The systems and mechanisms that impact SETs and SETs-LIDs' pay were described as obsolete. Leaders in education are tasked with better understanding the impact of financial compensation on teachers and the role of these systems and mechanisms in this impact.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from this research identified the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs within one school district in urban Virginia. This research used an expanded sample size when compared to

other phenomenological research studies. However, future research could include a sample size spanning an entire state or within a specific disability population. Additionally, future research could include the examination of various demographic areas, such as suburban or rural areas, and novice teachers or teachers with more than 10 years of experience. This research did not control for race, which has a significant impact on factors associated with retention and attrition.

Teachers of color were more likely to communicate concerns with emotional support, autonomy, and negative experiences of school culture. Additional research is needed to specifically examine special educators of color who teach students with LIDs.

At the request of the selected school district, the research question specifically addressing financial compensation was removed from this research. Therefore, research regarding the impact of financial compensation and pay incentives is needed to better understand the structures and systems that enhance SET or SET-LIDs retention. Lastly, policy analysis regarding financial structures and their disparities would provide greater clarity as to which policies influence attrition or retention.

Throughout this research, attempts to align textual and structural concepts to previous research were made. However, disparities in the literature regarding the definition of relevant concepts exist. The nuances of each textual and structural concept require additional analysis and research. Continuation of the research and additions to the knowledge base are necessary to improve teacher retention and understand the factors influencing teacher attrition. For example, this research specifically avoided external factors and their impact on SETs-LIDs. However, to better understand the entirety of the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs, future research considerations beyond employment factors should be considered to better understand the lived experiences of SETs-LIDs.

Although this research specifically focused on the development of SETs-LIDs, there is no known research addressing the hiring practices, retention, and attrition of instructional assistants of students with LIDs. Additional research is needed to understand the impact of instructional assistants on SWD, including students with LIDs.

The current literature regarding financial compensation lacks thorough understanding of the policies and mechanisms that influence SET attrition and retention. Although research by Conley and You (2017) identified a positive causal relationship between increases in financial compensation and SET attrition and retention, the research lacked specifics as to which programs, practices, and policies influenced SETs.

Conclusion

This research provided a phenomenological approach to the ongoing and pervasive issue of SET attrition and retention. Although additional research on employment factors and their impact on SET attrition and retention remain, specifically the impact of financial compensation, this study provided practical tools and strategies for retaining SET-LIDs. The findings exemplified the need for stakeholders and policymakers to bear the brunt of the responsibility for implementing practical changes for the betterment of SETs and SWD. The most vulnerable students need meaningful and foundational supports to ensure their success and future achievement.

Literature regarding the impact of financial compensation on the retention of SET-LIDs is limited. Upon completion of this research, the original intention was to gather data specific to the impact of financial compensation. However, with the school district's request to remove the question regarding financial compensation, SET-LIDs' perceptions of the phenomenon were limited. Although participants naturally discussed financial compensation during the interviews,

qualitative research is needed to understand the impact of financial compensation on SET-LID retention. Additionally, school districts throughout the United States are trying incentive pay to attract and retain teachers (Bettini et al., 2023). The timing to understand the impact of financial compensation is now.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

The purpose of this study involves better understanding the lived experiences of special educators. This research will include phenomenological qualitative methodologies. Data will be obtained through a demographic survey and independent interviews. The topic of this phenomenological qualitative research request is understanding the factors that influence special education teachers, specifically those educators who continue to teach special education.

Please answer the following demographic questions:

1. Current position:
 - a. Elementary School Special Education Teacher
 - b. Middle School Special Education Teacher
 - c. High School Special Education Teacher
 - d. Related Service Provider (Speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, etc.)
2. Where do you support students during this school year (select all that apply)?
 - a. In a general education classroom
 - b. In a special education classroom
 - c. Non-classroom space (office, therapy room, etc.)
 - d. Special program (Functional Life Skills, Interlude, etc.)
 - e. Other
3. What are the disabilities of the students you are responsible for case managing or case carrying (select all that apply)?
 - a. Autism
 - b. Hearing Impairment, Deafness, or Deaf-Blindness
 - c. Developmental Delay
 - d. Emotional Disability
 - e. Intellectual Disability
 - f. Multiple Disabilities
 - g. Other Health Impairment
 - h. Orthopedic Impairment
 - i. Specific Learning Disability
 - j. Speech or Language Impairment
 - k. Traumatic Brain Injury
 - l. Visual Impairment
4. How many students with IEPs were you responsible for case managing (or case carrying, caseload, etc.) during this school year?
 - a. 1–5
 - b. 6–10
 - c. 11–15
 - d. 16–20
 - e. 21–25

- f. 25 or more
5. Number of years in current position:
- a. Less than 3
 - b. 4–10
 - c. 10–20
 - d. 21 or more
6. Number of years of teaching experience:
- a. Less than 3
 - b. 4–10
 - c. 10–20
 - d. 21 or more
7. Level of education:
- a. Bachelor's
 - b. Master's
 - c. Education Specialist
 - d. Doctorate
 - e. Other
8. Please list your teaching endorsements:
-
9. Age range:
- a. 29 or younger
 - b. 30–39
 - c. 40–49
 - d. 50–59
 - e. 60 or older
10. Gender:
- a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Not specified
11. Race and/or ethnicity (select all that apply):
- a. Black or African American
 - b. Asian or Asian American
 - c. White or Caucasian
 - d. Hispanic or Latino
 - e. American Indian
 - f. Alaska Native
 - g. Other
12. Please provide your name and email address if you would consider participating in a 30-minute interview for this study. The interview will be conducted, transcribed, and recorded through Teams. Upon selection, you will be contacted through email to provide additional information and consent for your review.

Name: _____

Email: _____

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



Division of Scholarly Integrity and
Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
<http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 5, 2023
TO: Carol Ann Mullen, Matthew Gavin
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Why Special Educators Stay: Examining Employment Factors Impacting Public School Retention in Urban Virginia
IRB NUMBER: 23-198

Effective April 5, 2023, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category (ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
 Protocol Determination Date: **April 5, 2023**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Invent the Future

Appendix C: CITI Training



Completion Date 20-Aug-2022
Expiration Date 19-Aug-2025
Record ID 44986274

This is to certify that:

Matthew Gavin

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Basic Responsible Conduct of Research Course

(Curriculum Group)

Basic Responsible Conduct of Research Course

(Course Learner Group)

1 - RCR

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w20a18bb3-7091-4dbc-86ee-7cd27d02f9a4-44986274

Appendix D: Introductory Email Requesting Participation in Demographic Survey

Dear Special Education Teacher,

Hello! I am Matthew Gavin, a doctoral candidate at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program under the supervision of Dr. Carol A. Mullen, my advisor and committee chair. I am sending this email to inquire whether you would consider participating in my current research on understanding why special educators of low incidence disabilities stay in their profession during times of high attrition and turnover. I have been approved by the research review committee to conduct this study.

As a special educator in your district, your input would be valuable in helping leaders, stakeholders, and policymakers understand why special educators continue to teach. This research may be used as a resource for current and future scholars and practitioners when hiring and/or retaining special educators. Please click on the link below to access the survey. Based on your responses, you may be invited to participate in interviews. Participation is voluntary, yet greatly appreciated.

[Special Education Teacher Questionnaire](#)

Educationally,

Matthew Gavin,
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program

Appendix E: Introductory Email for Interview Form

Dear Special Educator,

Hello! I am Matthew Gavin, a doctoral candidate in the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Educational Leadership Program under the supervision of my advisor and committee chair Dr. Carol A. Mullen. I am sending this email to ask if you would participate in my current research on understanding why special educators stay in their profession during times of high attrition and turnover. I have been given permission by the research review committee to conduct this research.

As a special educator in your district, your input would be essential to providing leaders, stakeholders, and policy makers with understanding as to why special educators stay. This research may be used as a resource for current and future scholars and practitioners when hiring and/ or retaining special educators. Please complete the attached consent form if you would consider participating in a 30-minute one-on-one interview for this study. Each interview will be conducted, transcribed, and recorded through the online platform, Teams. Participation is voluntary, yet greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance for your consideration in the participation of this research.

Educationally,

Matthew Gavin, terminal degree
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix F: Informed Consent for the Demographic Survey and Interview

Title of research study: Why Special Educators Stay: A Phenomenological Examination of Factors Impacting Special Educator Retention in Northern Virginia’s Urban Public Schools

Principal Investigator: Dr. Carol A. Mullen, PhD; College of Liberal Arts & Human Science, School of Education, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Doctoral Candidate Researcher: Matthew Gavin; Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Key Information: The purpose of this study is to achieve a better understanding of lived experiences of special educators by focusing on the employment factors that influence special education teachers of students with low incidence disabilities, specifically those educators who continue to teach in special education. This research will adopt phenomenological qualitative methodologies. Data will be obtained through a demographic survey and independent interviews.

To whom can I talk? If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you think the research has caused harm, you can talk to Dr. Carol A. Mullen, PhD; College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences, School of Education, Educational Leadership Program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if

- you have questions about your rights as a research subject;
- your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team;
- you cannot reach the research team; or
- you want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research.

How many people will be studied?

We plan to interview ten to 15 people for this research study.

What happens if I agree to participate in this research?

- Upon consent, the survey link will be sent to you. The survey will collect demographic information on teachers.
- The demographic survey will be used to select potential interviewees, based on a set of criteria: must be a special education teacher; must teach in an elementary, middle, or high school, must have three years' experience or more, must teach students with low-incidence disabilities. Participants selected for the interviews will receive a letter

describing the format and purpose of the study. It will also include a request to participate and the consent form.

- Data will be collected during a one-on-one 30-minute interview. Interviews will be conducted through the online platform Teams. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time, for any reason, and it will not be held against you. If you decide to leave the research, all data collected through your responses will be destroyed by the co-investigator. If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator, Dr. Carol A. Mullen, at camullen@vt.edu. The investigator will contact the co-investigator, who will destroy all data collected prior to the withdrawal.

Is there any way participating in this study could be bad for me?

There are no known risks to participation in this study.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

We will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect your information include the IRM, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech.

Your private information, with the identifiers removed, or any samples that are collected during this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for the same purpose without additional consent from your side.

The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, reports to the sponsor, academic papers, and as part of a thesis/dissertation. Federal law provides additional protections to your medical records and health information. These are described in an attached document.

Can I be removed from the research without my approval?

The person in charge of the research study or the sponsor can remove you from the research study without your approval.

What else do I need to know?

We will offer to share your individual test results with you. You may accept or decline these results.

Statement of Consent

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research. We will provide you with a signed copy of this form for your records.

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

Please notify the co-investigator if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Appendix G: Interview Question Correlation Table

Factors to attrition/themes	Informed by literature	Interview Questions
Administrative Support	<p>Administrators and administrative support are seen as highly influential in the attrition and retention of SET (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).</p> <p>Key influences into SET leaving the profession; Less likely to understand the roles and responsibilities of SETs; create and influence working conditions; investment in self-advocacy; workplace or work condition improvements;</p>	<p>5) What are some aspects of your current role that you would like to see change? (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015).</p> <p>7) What did you wish your assistant principal and/ or principal knew to deter understand your job? (Shields & Mullen, 2020)</p>
Policies, Practices, Laws	<p>Efforts by policy makers at all levels should work to entice new teachers, create opportunities for veteran teachers, and create compensation systems that adequately meets the standards set in IDEA (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019, Hill & Jones, 2020, Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).</p> <p>Cultural stigma surrounding teaching; increases to standards-based reforms; increased instructional responsibilities; changes to special education service delivery models; standards of living; teacher engagement</p>	<p>5) What are some aspects of your current role that you would like to see change? (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015).</p> <p>6) What are your perceptions regarding your school district's efforts to retain special educators? (Stephens & Fish, 2009; Harrington & Walsh, 2022)</p>

<p>Stay Reasons – deeper understanding</p>	<p>Stay interviews have been proven to be an effective retention strategy in various fields (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015).</p> <p>Affect for job satisfaction; influences on career decisions; increases in employee engagement; increases in retention employees; stay understand factors that retain valued employees</p>	<p>1) What do you look forward to when you come to work every day? (Finnegan, 2015; Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015).</p> <p>2) Why did you initially pursue a career in special education? (Stephens & Fish, 2009).</p> <p>3) What factors keep you in special education? (Shields & Mullen, 2020).</p>
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Appendix H: Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Thank you for your willingness to take part in this study about special education teachers. This interview should take 30 minutes and consists of 7 questions. The purpose of this study is to achieve a better understanding of lived experiences of special educators of students with low incidence disabilities. This research will focus on the employment factors that influence special education teachers, specifically those educators who continue to teach in special education.

I will be recording this interview sessions using Microsoft Team. Only the audio and transcription of this interview will be used for data analysis. I will share the edited transcript for your review. You may make any changes to the transcript that you deem necessary. The video, audio, and transcription will be stored in a secure Microsoft and Google account. After the successful completion of this research, all files will be stored for two years. After two years all files will be deleted and destroyed. Only I and the principal investigator will have access to this data.

Do you agree to participate in this interview? Do you agree to be audio-video recorded during this interview? If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable or do not wish to answer any question(s), please let me know. All questions are open ended questions. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. What do you look forward to when you come to work every day?
2. Why did you initially pursue a career in special education?
3. What factors keep you in special education?
4. Can you describe factors about your current position that might make you consider leaving?
5. What are some aspects of your current role that you would like to see changed?
6. What are your perceptions regarding your school district's efforts to retain special educators?
7. What do you wish your assistant principal and/or principal knew that would help them better understand your job?

Appendix I: Interview Questions with Deductive Codes

1. What do you look forward to when you come to work every day?
 - Colg (colleagues)
 - SWD (students or students with disabilities)
 - SS (student success)
2. Why did you initially pursue a career in special education?
 - NI (not initially pursued)
 - CT (career transfer/ career switch)
 - PE (personal experience)
 - CS (career satisfaction)
3. What factors keep you in special education?
 - Colg (colleagues)
 - SWD (students or students with disabilities)
 - SS (student success)
 - CS (career satisfaction)
 - Ben (benefits, financial stability)
4. Can you describe factors about your current position that might make you consider leaving?
 - SAdmin (school administration)
 - DAdmin (district administration)
 - CC (competitive compensation, financial instability, poor pay)
 - WW (work demands, caseloads, paperwork)
 - DS (difficult student, disability challenges)
 - CS (career satisfaction)
5. What are some aspects of your current role that you would like to see changed?
 - SAdmin (school administration)
 - DAdmin (district administration)
 - CC (competitive compensation, financial instability, poor pay)
 - WW (work demands, caseloads, paperwork)
 - EdStru (greater educational structures)
 - CS (career satisfaction)
6. What are your perceptions regarding your school district's efforts to retain special educators?
 - InDiff (indifference, unknown)
 - PAS (positive administrative support)
 - NAS (negative administrative support)
7. What do you wish your assistant principal and/or principal knew that would help them better understand your job?
 - Know (increased or greater knowledge)
 - PAS (positive administrative support)
 - NAS (negative administrative support)

Appendix J: Interrater Reliability Using Deductive Codes Table

Participants Quotes	Researcher	Intercoder #1	Intercoder #2
<p>So, what do you look forward to coming to work every day?</p> <p>Jennifer 0:10 I look forward to getting the students off the bus. To the actual teaching and challenges of it. I love to read to my students and to make it come to life for all their needs. I love to communicate with them as I'm learning to listen differently, learning from them and as they're growing. I love to have fun with them. I love to sing and dance with them. So the students</p>	<p>SWD</p> <p>SWD</p> <p>SWD</p> <p>SWD</p>	<p>SWD</p> <p>SWD</p> <p>SS SWD</p>	<p>SWD</p> <p>SWD</p> <p>SS SWD SWD</p> <p>SWD</p>
<p>Why did you initially pursue a career in special education?</p> <p>Jennifer 0:58 Initially it was not special education, but looking at it and what I wanted to do, and also I knew I was going to go back for my master's before I began teaching, I don't have my undergrad in education and it was actually something I did not have any interest in going into college. I wouldn't have considered it, or maybe that was the point. I didn't consider it, but volunteer experience at Notre Dame with the professor, "There are Children Here," is what it's called, based off the book, "There are No Children Here," that inspired me. And then I at the time had one nephew who has overcome incredible odds and is special needs and then and now I have another who is also my Godson.</p>	<p>NI</p> <p>PE</p> <p>PE</p>	<p>NI</p> <p>PE</p> <p>PE</p> <p>PE</p>	<p>NI</p> <p>PE</p> <p>PE</p>
<p>So this is are those the reasons why you stayed in special Ed?</p> <p>Jennifer 2:03 I stay because I know the need. I know my family being in a state and county with very limited resources or experience; and I stay for the students and families. I not only think the students need an advocate, and the parents need to learn how to advocate for their children, but I think the families do. My sister in law said to me multiple times, "You don't know how difficult it is to walk</p>	<p>SWD</p>	<p>SWD</p>	<p>SWD</p> <p>SWD</p>

<p>into that room, surrounded at a giant table.” And she's like, “I've been alone before, where your brother hasn't come with me,” and she feels intimidated. So she has agreed to things that she doesn't necessarily agree with. And Andrews, mom; Andrew my homebound student, wrote to me just yesterday and he's graduated, he graduated last year, she said, “You are that teacher and I thank you for that. Be the teacher in the IEP meeting who tells the parent what their child is doing well. They just showed up to a meeting expecting to hear all the ways their child isn't measuring up.” And that's one thing, I only speak to the positives. We talk about needs, but these children have been diagnosed or hopefully diagnosed or identified and have gone through evaluations and a doctors and whatnot and, and the parents are just constantly hearing, can't or, has this or even the physical, the emotional, the mental, the health till we focus on the positive and that's, I, want to be in this field for them and that and advocate for that, that they feel comfortable sitting down at the table with me they feel they trust that their child is in good hands and their child trusts me. You talk a lot about, especially with our children and the deaf blindness, but it really pertains to all of them becoming this trusted partner with them. So sorry if I went off track there. Researcher 4:15 I imagine it makes parents feel good to have kids in your class. Jennifer 4:26 Yeah. I feel lucky to have them and I think it, it speaks to the fact of I go to student’s graduation. I go to their birthday parties. I'm looking forward to another baseball game of a former student, I go try and visit at Shriver. I messaged them. In fact, I have to message I wrote an I have to write a note to myself to message that parent just to check in even though their daughter's 18, because I've been in touch with them, and I like to do that so.</p>	<p>CS/SS SWD CS</p> <p>SS SWD SWD</p>	<p>CS CS SS SS SWD</p>	<p>SS CS SS CS</p>
<p>Can you describe factors about your current position that make you consider leaving? Jennifer 5:05 A new factor that's a personal factor is the commute and the change in our school time going to a later school, getting home later, and feeling like my day starts at the same time because of avoiding traffic. So time away from family and a rush, that's a piece,</p>		<p>WW</p>	

<p>personally. What keeps me is the students and their families, I have been fortunate enough since coming to Springfield; every admin has been supportive, every admin has backed me; but let me, Let me do my own thing. Eventually the emotional and physical toll. I mean, I've lost uh, seven students now, so that piece is hard; and physically the wanting to do more. I still love teaching and I love being here, but I, I, I, want to do more for these students and families.</p>	<p>WW DS CS</p>	<p>CS/WW</p>	<p>SAdmin (opposite of question) DS??</p>
<p>What aspects of your current role would you like to see change? Jennifer 6:44 More support for low incidence disabilities. I feel like everything is still hard. You still don't know exactly where to go to get a question answered or a resource supplied. You're still jumping through hoops, as our parents do, and it, it I've been teaching for almost 15 years; it shouldn't be that way. We should have better answers. It shouldn't still be unclear who's purchasing gloves for our classroom for the students changing. The accessibility where our county is creating these schools that are incredible and beautiful, yet we have buildings where we are housed and aren't accessible, even though our admin is fighting for them. I've had a handicap door that's been broken for two years. Uh, a playground that is better, and we now have the Community Center across the street, which is even better, but still if we if we can build these schools with these open classrooms or slides or personal yards, why can't we put in an adaptive playground for our students? So it's that piece, it's the, it's the feeling of, I hate to use this, but I've already said it like this, it's like we're the land of the misfit toys. And in some ways it, it, it's extremely, I think in some ways, I'm not as burnt out as others because I, as Meg Rose said, "I am the ambassador of my island." I am trusted. Now I can run my classroom. I know how to adapt the adapted curriculum. I know how to provide and do, but we still we, we it used to be that we had behavior, and MIPA [multi-intervention program for students with Autism], and then they changed it to low incidences, but they don't come to my room. I was once told because</p>	<p>EdStru EdStru EdStru EdStru CS</p>	<p>EdStru EdStru EdStru (CS) SAdmin DAdmin</p>	<p>EdStru DAdmin DAdmin SAdmin (opposite of question) EdStru</p>

<p>what you're doing, but I still have support I need. We go and we have these new curriculums and this new initiative and it's still not accommodating to physical needs. And it's not just my classroom anymore; there are five elementary life skills classrooms.</p> <p>There are kids who have physical, or hearing or vision needs beyond life skills. A lot of them.</p> <p>And, we're still, we're saying we're providing this access and then we're going into it, and there's not these accommodations. So, I have never met a curriculum that fully encompasses that; that's another thing I've thought about doing, creating and adapting curriculum for low incidence and it's frustrating and I still feel like when I go to a professional development or certain meetings that it's still targeted towards bigger programs. I mean, Melissa or Angie, someone was just asking me, they're like, maybe we should just, we should just create a position for you, because the low incidence. You must have someone in there who knows and is advocating and not just skipping by the classrooms, because maybe that year I don't have high behavior needs. Yeah, typically that isn't. The bigger need in our classroom, but as you have been with us, we get behavior needs so.</p> <p>Biggest things. It's opening her eyes.</p>	<p>DAdmin</p> <p>WW</p> <p>EdStru</p> <p>DAdmin</p> <p>Ed Stru</p> <p>DAdmin/ EdStru</p>	<p>EdStru</p> <p>EdStru</p> <p>DAdmin</p>	<p>EdStru EdStru</p> <p>DAdmin</p>
<p>What are your perceptions regarding your school efforts to retain special educators.</p> <p>Jennifer 10:59</p> <p>So I'm also the, the lead, I've been the lead special Ed teacher for a while, so I have some perspective on this, and I think, I think there's a lot of redundant paperwork for special education that frustrates educators and again limited resources or not, clarity of certain positions or not enough staffing.</p> <p>Even just on paras [paraprofessionals] or supports is the general consensus I get and, and then countywide programs I really feel like it depends where you are.</p> <p>So like I said, we've been very fortunate the teachers, the community here, have been incredible.</p> <p>I just wrote all my inclusion pieces to all the teachers.</p> <p>The ones I chose are like.</p> <p>I'm so excited we get to pair with you.</p> <p>I went in right away.</p> <p>I think I started the initiative with John about Special Olympics and Barrett Buddies</p>	<p>WW</p> <p>EdStru</p>	<p>WW EdStru</p> <p>EdStru</p>	<p>NAS</p>

