

**FACTORS INFLUENCING PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC SCHOOL
SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS DESIRE
TO LEAVE TEACHING**

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by
Frederick A Froehlich
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Examining Committee Members:

Dr. Joseph DuCette, Advisory Chair, College of Education and Human Development
Dr. Judith Stull, College of Education and Human Development
Dr. Allison Gilmour, College of Education and Human Development
Dr. Joseph Haviland, External Member, Temple University

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ABSTRACT

Retaining qualified teachers is critical to the long-term success of students who receive special education services. Special education teacher retention is particularly important during the middle-school years, as this time is a marked period of transition between elementary and high-school that may place increasing demands upon teachers. Further, teachers in their first five years of working may be especially vulnerable to leaving their positions. I sought to identify the factors that contribute to public middle school special education teachers desire to leave teaching. Correlational analyses conducted on self-report data from 446 current public school special education teachers indicated classroom behavior, academic achievement, family involvement and communication, salary, potential for job advancement, and work attitude were significant predictors of whether teachers considered leaving. Based on the findings from the quantitative data, the original intent on focusing the research on middle-school became problematic as the statistical significance was not measurably different across grade levels taught. The qualitative information from open ended responses supports the quantitative results. The implications of these findings, future directions, and possible remediation strategies to improve retention are discussed.

DEDICATION

First and foremost, I want to dedicate this dissertation work to my wife, Julie, who spent countless days and nights handling the rigors of home life while I could have the time to follow through with my educational journey and write this dissertation. I also dedicate this work to my children, Leah, Freddie, and Danielle Froehlich, who have always been at the forefront of my mind and who inspire me every day. I pray they find their own paths to happiness in whatever field they desire. Finally, I dedicate this work to my mother and father. They were taken from me too soon but if they were here, I am confident that they would be supportive of all my hard work and dedication. I hope I have made them proud.

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BACKGROUND

My professional background and experiences in education influenced my desire to perform this research. I graduated in 2007 from Montgomery County Community College with an associate's degree in Social Sciences. I would then move to Temple University where I would go on to earn my bachelor's degree in Secondary Education with a focus in Social Studies and a dual major in History. At that point, I began working in the School District of Philadelphia where I was able to work with a diverse group of students with various educational needs. In 2013, I completed my master's degree in Educational Psychology once again through Temple University.

Through additional coursework, I gained Pennsylvania certification in the areas of middle school mathematics, middle school English language arts, special education, and ESL. In 2016, I transitioned into a special education position in the Norristown Area School District. This provided me with valuable interactions with learning support and emotional support students. In the summer sessions, I have worked with Cheltenham School District, Pennridge School District, and Central Bucks School District all incorporating learning support students into ESY and Summer School programs. In 2016, I took the position of Twilight Program Facilitator for Pennridge School District to work with at-risk students seeking alternative paths to graduation.

These and many other experiences have provided me with knowledge, firsthand experiences, and passion for the special education experience. I brought that passion to this research design.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

The issue of teacher attrition has permeated the field of education for decades. Attrition plays a part in the teacher shortage problem, and efforts to improve retention must be informed by an understanding of the factors that contribute to attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Each year, U.S. schools spend over \$7 billion on issues related to teacher turnover (Morettini, 2016) which has been cause for concern. With school districts attempting to make academic gains and to help to close learning gaps between the general education population and students with unique learning needs, the need for stability and a process that fosters long term investment in the desired outcomes is essential. Unfortunately, nationally, thousands of new teachers in grades K-12 permanently leave the profession of teaching within five years of employment. Up to one third of new teachers leave the profession within three years (Bowden & Portis-Woodson, 2017). This can be attributed to a variety of influences but what is clear is that job satisfaction is needed at a fundamental level to encourage individuals to continue with their career trajectory. This can be described as a positive orientation of an individual towards all aspects of their chosen career which includes the attitude resulting from a balance of many specific “likes” and “dislikes” experienced in connection with the job (Thiagaraj & Thangaswamy, 2017; Vroom, 1964).

To better understand the reasons that the middle school environment may present unique challenges to the teachers, a discussion of some of the differences between the grade levels provides perspective. The transition from elementary school to middle school can present some concerns for students as the changes in their academic programs can lead to an increased need for academic support; however, middle school typically provides a stricter and more academically demanding educational setting (Martinez et al., 2011). During this transition

natural changes occur as well. This can have a negative impact on students including stress, social problems, and physical changes (Onetti et al., 2019). For these reasons, a focus on the middle school grades offered the opportunity for a different experience for those teaching students who are experiencing these challenges.

Similarly, analyzing the elementary to middle transition, perspective on the differences between middle and high school presents similar possibilities. For some students, the transition to high school is especially challenging (Martinez et al., 2011). This is reflected in concerning behaviors including high absenteeism, failing courses, and struggling to attain required mandated graduation requirements (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). As they encounter changes such as forming new friendships, meeting new staff members, and entering new schools that do not offer the same level of comfort as they had in their previous building, adjusting can be difficult. The transition to high school can be more challenging, as middle school students tend to have shared peers throughout the courses and have less autonomy, as grade levels are usually located in the same vicinity within the campus (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). For these reasons, much like the transition to middle school from elementary school, the experiences for the teachers in these settings are different as well as they are tasked with addressing each level's needs based on the understanding of these stages in the educational journey.

With the vast quantity of previous research being focused on elementary and high school experiences, I felt that collecting data by surveying in-service teachers would provide an opportunity to examine the middle school environment and its unique experiences. The factors that may influence a public middle school special education teacher to leave the profession need to be investigated.

Information obtained through the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), indicated that there were 443,700 special education teachers in the United States during the 2019 school year. In an analysis reported by the National Center on Educational Statistics describing schools and staffing that was published for the 2014-2015 school year, it was reported that approximately 60% of teachers leave their current building prior to completing five years of service (NCES, 2015).

Research has sought to identify the methods that are necessary to prevent teacher attrition rates from increasing. These include initiatives to hire certified teachers, use salaries and bonuses as incentives to remain, develop responsive induction programs to support beginning special educators, and increase the level and quality of administrative support (Billingsley, 2002). Part of the concern surrounding these programs has been the evidence from previous studies showing numerous school districts and states that have implemented programs linking teacher compensation to student performance showing mixed results regarding their success (Imberman & Lvenheim, 2015). Despite the recommendation for these initiatives, attrition rates have remained stable or increased consistently. Work experiences are important to the commitment and satisfaction of workers in varied occupational groups (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Thiagaraj & Thangaswamy, 2017). Teacher turnover is the predominant source of vacancies in the teaching force. Understanding the reasons for turnover and determining actions that might be taken to improve retention requires data on variables predictive of turnover (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997) as discussions focused on school policy have shown that the disruption caused by high turnover presents a significant barrier to high-quality instruction (Hanushek, Rivkin, & Schiman, 2016).

This chapter discusses the issues that face early service public school special education teachers while identifying the scope of the issue of teacher retention. The research objectives will

be expressed with regards to both teacher retention as well as attrition while identifying the key question that is being posed by this investigation.

Statement of the Problem

With the shortage of qualified replacement teachers in fields such as special education (See & Gorard, 2016), there has been much interest among educators in making teaching a more attractive profession, to increase the stability of the workforce (See & Gorard, 2016; Boe, et al., 1997). With the demands of the teaching profession varying across grade levels combined with the lack of research studies primarily focused on the 5th through 8th grade, focused research is necessary to support this specific teaching subgroup. Because of this, the challenge is to identify the factors that encourage teachers to remain in public school special education classroom to lower the attrition rate and increase the numbers of teachers remaining in the profession. This is an essential need for school districts for staffing, scheduling, and other organizational needs but the most significant factor in the need for maintaining teachers in their roles relates directly to students as teacher retention has been shown to influence student achievement positively (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Turnover affects the distribution of teacher quality which then results in effects on student achievement over time (Hanushek, Rivkin, & Schiman, 2016). For this reason, there is a need for school administrators to identify and address the factors within their control that will most likely encourage longevity in the special education teaching profession (Henderson, 2014) and prevent these teachers from leaving teaching.

The identification of students with special education needs increasing and ever-changing criteria for identification, teacher perspective and experiences change. New challenges are presented as the views of what is considered a disability change (De Feo, 2015). This creates a need for qualified special education professionals who can design and implement instruction that

addresses the unique needs of the students that they service. With the increased number of students who are identified for special education services, ensuring that candidates remain in the profession will provide an opportunity for establishing routines and interventions that can be used to address this concern. With students needing to close academic gaps and to further support students to help them attain grade level performance, the retention of teachers can have an influence on student academic gains and making progress towards their specific learning goals (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009).

In addition, in Pennsylvania, the special education teaching subgroup includes educators who service students in gifted education (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014) which allows teachers to provide support to maximize student performance while best addressing their academic strengths. If we are to retain educators so that they can provide the full benefit to the academic successes of the students they serve, then the identification of best practices to encourage individuals to choose to remain in the profession is incredibly important. Research on attrition suggests that retention is the more significant problem associated with special education (Horrison-Collier, 2013) rather than the recruitment of new teachers (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Replacing teachers who move on from teaching is increasingly challenging and has posed an issue for administrations to find suitable staff to maintain academic progress (Nworie, 2016). The identification of factors leading to attrition may provide a window into best practices to retain individuals beyond their fifth year which would in turn increase educational outcomes as the teacher progresses through their teaching career (Kini & Podolsky, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

Teaching experience is positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher's career. The gains from experience are highest in teachers' initial years but continue for teachers in the second and often third decades of their careers (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). To that end, the need for the retention of the special education staff becomes more significant as administrators have experienced difficulty regularly in finding qualified applicants for special education positions (Nworie, 2016). This challenge poses a concern for the academic progress of the special education student population. To combat potential learning gaps in this student population, the identification of the influences that contribute to the teacher desire to leave teaching is imperative. The retention of teachers would provide an opportunity for their influence and impact on student learning outcomes to increase. In addition, a better understanding of the causes for teacher attrition would inform decision makers allowing them to plan accordingly resulting in higher retention rates.

This study sought to identify the factors that influence special education public middle school teachers desire to leave teaching with the results providing insight into factors that can be addressed to encourage teachers to remain in teaching. This analysis is designed with respect to previous research models that have identified common factors in the general teaching profession. Though many aspects of teaching share similar requirements, the unique experiences of the special education classroom allow for a more focused approach to this targeted teacher population.

The primary objective of this study is to identify the factors that contribute to special education public middle school teachers desire to leave their classroom position. The findings from this study will provide insight into the needs of the early service special education teaching

staff allowing the leadership teams in the public-school setting to implement policy that encourages teachers to remain in the profession. In addition, the findings will identify potential areas of concern that may lead to teacher attrition which will serve to inform administrations about how they can manage the factors that lead to teacher attrition.

Summary

There is a great need for special education teachers. Identifying the influences that encourage them to leave the profession is paramount. School Districts benefit from addressing the increasing numbers of individuals leaving the profession which has led to the shortage of special education teachers (Berry et al., 2012). It is also imperative to identify potential influences that encourage teacher retention to better inform institutional practice and encourage teachers to remain in the profession to enhance the learning outcomes of their students. For that reason, this study is focused on determining the factors that influence public middle school special education teacher's desire to leave teaching. To accomplish this goal, this study will utilize the information gathered from survey responses that include quantitative and qualitative data related to various segments of the public middle school special education teaching profession.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

The need for qualified teachers throughout the educational system is a necessity for the success of any school. Going beyond simply acquiring teaching talent, the need to retain high quality teachers is essential. Schools throughout the United States have expressed concerns related to teacher shortages. Ninety-eight percent of school districts nationwide have shortages, and the situation will get worse as teacher retirements increase (Bergert & Burnette 2001; Boyer & Gillespie 2000; Hanushek, Rivkin, & Schiman, 2016). Roughly one in ten new teachers leave their first placement to teach in a different district in the first four years of their career. In contrast, approximately 30 percent transfer to another school in the same district within four years, and with one-third leaving the public-school system altogether (Feng & Sass, 2017). This leaves schools with classrooms needing teachers for students whose needs require specialized instruction.

Attrition.

Previous research by Heyns (1988) has indicated that roughly 30% of early service teachers leave teaching after two years and roughly 40% leave the profession at some point in their first five years. This is supported by more recent research by Newberry and Allsop (2017) indicates that 30-46% of new teachers stop teaching within the first five years. In addition, between 8% and 14% of all teachers leave teaching in any one year. The identification of the relevant factors that have had an influence on this trend provides an opportunity to address the issue.

Research has been done to identify potential reasons early service teachers leave the profession. Much of the research has been focused on the elementary and high school levels

without specific results that are representative of the middle school environment. Prater et al. (2007) analyzed a dataset including special education teachers, school psychologists, and speech language pathologists. They compared the attrition rate in Utah rural school settings with those of urban schools. The results indicated that special education teachers who were employed in rural districts were less likely (7.8%), to leave the profession when compared to the average teaching job attrition rate in the state (11.4%). The urban district teachers showed nearly double the percentage of teachers leaving the profession when compared to their rural counterparts with an attrition rate of 13.6% (Prater et al., 2007). Despite the significantly lower attrition rate for the rural special education professionals, there was still a significantly higher rate when compared to general education teacher attrition across the country which has been reported at 7% as of 2013 (Goldring et al., 2014).

With the numbers of teachers needed for the growing special education population, teacher preparation programs have not graduated enough special education instructors to fulfill the needs of the K–12 system (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). When teachers enter the profession, they are met with a variety of factors that can complicate the early service experience. Thornton et al. (2007) identified several factors that influenced the teacher's decision to leave the profession. Results from their study identified six categories of influences that led to teacher attrition. Among those were employment issues including salaries, economic impact, job design, and certification status. In addition, working conditions were cited that included class loads, job stress, job assignments, paperwork, lack of empowerment, and school climate. Personal issues were identified as social, family, lifestyle, and relocations. Student issues were another factor which included low student movement, discipline problems, behavior issues, and lack of student progress. Lastly, teachers stated that they left teaching due to retirement or better

jobs elsewhere (Thornton et al., 2007). Despite the research into new special education teacher attrition, the factors related to teacher attrition in special education is limited when compared to the field of general education (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

In Contrast Liu (2007) conducted research that examined attrition from a different perspective. Liu identified two separate thematic categories dealing with teacher attrition research. One focused on teacher demographics, individual characteristics, and salary. The other strand considers school characteristics, governance, and work conditions (Liu, 2007). The primary investigation in Liu's research focused on first year teachers, teachers whose propensity to leave teaching is almost 3% higher than that of other teachers in a 1-year period. He attributed the 3% increase to the lack of experience in many new teachers entering the teaching force every year versus veteran staff (Liu, 2007).

Clandinin et al. (2015) examined factors to better isolate specific details that resulted in higher attrition rates for early service teachers in the urban, suburban, and rural setting. Under "support", which referred to program put in place to provide aid for teachers, Clandinin and colleagues explained differences between specific factors including the use of formal induction programs, the type of school, chosen mentors or no formal mentoring, whether these programs provided collaborative support or collegial support as well as a statistical analysis of participants' desire to remain in the profession. They investigated various other categories including identity and belonging, contract tensions, will do anything, balance, trying not to let teaching consume them, can I help doing this, and is this teaching (Clandinin et al., 2015). These categories cover terms that emerged from interviews allowing teachers a voice to express their perspective in an experience based reflective manner.

Retention.

Teacher attrition and the factors that have resulted in early service professionals leaving the profession have dominated the research. Thus, researchers have focused on those factors prompting early service movement out of the profession at the expense of those factors supporting staying. This is a perspective that is referenced briefly by Liu when he analyzed the probability of first-year teacher attrition. His research revealed that teacher attrition can decrease from 19% to 4%. The motivation behind this decrease was related to the amount of teacher influence in their schools. As their influence changed from having no influence to having greater influence, attrition decreased (Liu, 2007). However, this analysis highlights only one characteristic of the teaching profession that contributes to retention. The work of Harrell, Leavell, van Tassel, and McKee (2004) emphasizes that the strongest influence on job satisfaction for early service teachers was principal support. This would support the notion that the identification of key factors in teacher retention can have a profound impact on the decision to stay or leave.

Gallant and Riley (2014) have investigated the complexities of the early service teacher's decision to leave the profession using qualitative analysis which revealed several key terms that can be attributed to various aspects of the teaching profession. These provide insight into potential factors that would be relevant to research of teacher retention. Included in their findings were elements including administration support, student behaviors, working conditions, and a lack of colleague support. Inman and Marlow (2004) identified factors that contribute to teacher retention among general education teachers. These factors include working with teacher education mentors, with colleagues with similar ideas about teaching in collaboration, working for administrators who encourage ideas, and a positive school community (Inman & Marlow,

2004; Newberry & Allsop, (2017). In addition, Shen (1997) has expressed a need for the development of specialized programs and incentive systems to provide a basis for fostering teacher retention. Another potential concern would be special education teachers who leave to pursue general education positions. The work of Billingsley and Cross indicated that those who transferred from special to general education positions did so because of administrative factors and the stress involved in working with students receiving special education services (Billingsley & Cross, 1991).

Though this research provides a starting point, the identification of factors including salary, professional development, administrator support, and various other considerations is necessary to best address the needs of early service teachers. More specifically, with the growing number of special education professionals needed in schools throughout the country, the desire to develop programs that both encourage special education teachers to remain in the field but also to provide pathways to increased academic productivity because of the increased years of service must be a priority. There is a lack of significant evidence focused on this segment of the teacher population. I have documented concerns related to the number of teachers leaving the profession. In addition, the anticipated increases in the special education population create a need to better understand what factors influence this decision to stay or leave the profession. For these reasons, the research question for this study is, what factors contribute to special education public middle school teachers desire to leave teaching?

Shortages.

Research in teacher retention has highlighted several concerning trends throughout the profession. Across the United States, approximately half a million teachers leave their schools each year with only 16% of this attrition being attributed to retirement. The remaining 84% of

teacher turnover can be attributed to teachers transferring between schools and teachers leaving the profession entirely (Boyd et al., 2011). In the United States, the National Commission on Teaching and America's futures (2003) called teacher shortages a national crisis. This crisis has continued to grow with the research of Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver indicating that the high rate of attrition is a primary factor in shortages across the United States. In addition, they indicated that attrition accounted for almost 90% of teacher demand (2019). They also found that less than one-third of attrition is the result of retirements. Their explanation for this situation was that schools in the United States hire tens of thousands of teachers due to beginning and mid-career teachers leaving the profession.

Additional research has concluded that rates of teachers leaving the profession are particularly high among early-career teachers (Worth & De Lazzari, 2017). More recent research suggests that the percentage of teachers leaving the profession after five years of service is declining to a rate of 17% (Papay et al., 2017). Though the percentage of teachers leaving the profession has shown a downward trend, there is an ongoing need to identify methods for retaining even more teachers. With the retention of additional staff, more teachers remaining in the teaching profession for longer periods of time would also strengthen the pool of leadership positions (Perryman & Calvert, 2019).

Training and Preparation.

The need to support special educators who may feel they are teaching beyond their training or area of focus is essential. After investing their energies in content areas that they are passionate about, special education teachers may be required to perform in a different content area than they initially chose. Additionally, whether it is the desired area of focus or an

alternative placement, the content and resources can change from year to year. Because of this, professional development and training are needed.

The use of ongoing professional development is often used by districts to support increased knowledge and skills that encourage teacher confidence and commitment to their positions (Berry et al., 2012). In addition, the use of ongoing professional development and training has also been investigated which has supported the notion that increased training has contributed to teachers remaining in the field. Upon investigating various methods of professional development, several specific kinds of induction supports and supportive communication from school administration, mentoring programs, and seminars predict lower attrition (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). The need for administrators to provide time for special education teachers to collaborate with one another is a critical factor that has a positive impact on new teacher professional development. With the use of ongoing induction, support, and guidance are less likely to leave the teaching profession (Moore et al., 2018). The information found in various research studies indicates that there is a relationship between teachers who remain in the profession and the level to which they are supported through the implementation of training and professional development.

Despite the previous research, further investigation is necessary. With the specific duties included in the special education position, an analysis as to whether a similar relationship exists between the special education teacher population as opposed to a traditional classroom teaching position is necessary. Despite many similar teaching responsibilities, the inclusion of special education policy and procedures and the use of individualized education programs for students who qualify for special education services creates a different perspective that needs to be addressed.

Student classroom behavior.

When examining the overall working conditions of the teaching position, student behavior has been associated with higher teacher attrition (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). This includes overall school climate, as well as the amount of stress related to student factors (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). The impact that student classroom behavior has on a teacher's desire to leave teaching has been identified in previous research. Given previous research, it is necessary to determine whether this is of similar value to those in the special education position. Greenlee and Brown (2009) identified a significant relationship between student behavior and teacher attrition. Teachers who reported concerns with negative student behavior were more likely to leave their teaching positions. Additional research performed by Prather-Jones (2011) indicated that a need for administrative and collegial support when this happens, especially during the first few years of teaching special education with students identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders was necessary to retain teachers and prevent them from leaving the profession (Prather-Jones, 2011). Papay et al. (2017) found that teachers are more likely to leave their careers if they are not having success with their students.

Further research also suggests that the determination to leave teaching based on student behavioral concerns can vary based on years of service. Referencing the research of Kukla-Acevedo, teachers who are in their first year of teaching were more likely to leave teaching than those with more experience (2009). The findings suggested that first year teachers were nearly 16 times as likely to leave teaching and more than two times as likely to switch schools when they believed that there was an increase in behavioral problems at their current school. Behavioral climate was identified as being the most critical factor affecting first year teachers and their decision to leave their current position.

Through an examination of this literature, the issue of student behavior has consistently been identified as contributing to the desire to leave teaching. It has also been linked to overall negative teacher outcomes and an overall feeling of job dissatisfaction (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Identifying these factors and the significance that it plays in the special education teacher's decision-making process related to leaving teaching is crucial.

School and District Administration and Professional Development

When analyzing the potential influences that lead public middle school special education teachers to leave teaching, research has indicated that administrator support and professional development have been shown to be significant in determining if teachers choose to leave. This research also identified that teachers who chose to leave teaching or change to a different placement often reported a lack of support from their administration and poor school community support in general (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Teachers who have fewer positive perceptions of their school administrators are more likely to transfer to another school and to leave teaching (Boyd et al., 2011). This is a concern as additional research by Grant (2017), indicates that these teachers, who feel as though they have not been provided the support and feedback necessary, were less likely to remain in the classroom and several leave teaching altogether.

Conversely, teachers who believe that their administrators and the school's climate are supportive remain in the field (Bonzonelos, 2008). Administrative support has been defined as tasks including but not limited to providing teachers with professional development opportunities and guiding them through the implementation of district mandates as well as providing feedback on best practices (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007). Though this research identifies support as a factor in the decision to leave teaching, it does not delineate the differences between various methods by which administrators would offer the support.

Additional research by Ladd (2011) sought to measure leadership quality of schools by basing her research on various elements which included whether the principal was viewed as supportive with regard to instruction and student discipline, maintaining high expectations for student learning and teachers' instruction, teacher trust for the principal, teacher involvement in decision making, and, at the elementary and middle school levels, teacher perspective on the validity of the evaluation process. This research concluded that working conditions were perceived by teachers as highly predictive of individual teacher intent to leave their current schools. Though this research combined various methods of gauging leadership quality, more specific terms would be necessary to align with the present research. In addition, it did not address the specific public middle school special education teacher population.

Summary

After analyzing the information included in the previous research, despite the proliferation of research studies in teacher attrition and retention, or those who leave versus those who remain in teaching, research studies that investigate the specific nature of the public middle school special education teaching position are less prevalent. With the duties associated with special education instruction including differentiation, the development of individualized education plans, evaluations or re-evaluations, the designing of interventions to address the diverse needs of various special education diagnosis, and the potential for due process litigation, an investigation of this segment of the teaching profession is necessary. The information gathered from this analysis provides perspective on both the factors that lead to public middle school special education teachers' decision to remain or leave teaching as well as identify the factors that relate specifically to the special education teaching position.

The primary objectives of this study are to identify the factors that contribute to special education public middle school teacher's desire to leave teaching using previously established potential factors as well as teacher responses to identify additional factors that may not have been identified in past research studies.

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This study was designed to identify and analyze influences that factor into public middle school special education teacher's desire to leave teaching while also providing perspective on retention. The information presented in this study represents Pennsylvania public schools servicing the fifth through eighth grade and across various demographics including urban, suburban, and rural teacher populations. To identify these factors, a survey was created and administered to schools in Pennsylvania that was composed of twenty-two Likert style questions that targeted building, social, and task related concerns for participants as well as student related influences. In addition, the survey provided qualifying questions and open response items allowing respondents to provide information about additional factors that may not have been identified by the previous research or that may be unique to a particular segment of the sample. The respondents to the survey were comprised of special education teachers whose teaching experience is currently taking place in Pennsylvania public middle schools.

Research Methods

This research study includes the use of a convenience sample consisting of special education professionals who work in public schools throughout the state of Pennsylvania that service students in grades five through eight. This definition was necessary due to the unique configurations found in various districts throughout the state. In Pennsylvania, alternative terms are used based on the size and makeup of a particular district. As originally designed, the respondents were intended to consist of middle-grade teachers meaning that they taught in grades 5 through 8. To produce this sample, schools identified with terms such as intermediate school, middle primary school, junior high school, and high school throughout Pennsylvania were considered the target population. As will be described later, this original intent needed to be

modified. To identify participants for the sample the survey was distributed by using an invitation process. Email requests for participation were sent to decision makers in Pennsylvania public schools that service fifth through eighth grade students throughout the state. These requests were sent to the administrator in each school requesting the participation of their special education professionals. In certain instances, based on a particular district's makeup, a superintendent or assistant superintendent were contacted whereas many of the administrators were identified as building principals.

The schools were identified through the Pennsylvania Department of Education Educational Names and Addresses (EDNA) Database which provides contact information for all public-school entities within the state of Pennsylvania with the specific search criteria being public school districts. Within each district, identification of each building that supports students in grades 5 through 8 was completed using school provided data on each district's contact information website. In the interest of transparency, the study's purpose was stated on the invitation for the administrator's review which included the methodology that would be implemented as well as a commitment to anonymity. The study posed questions in both quantitative and qualitative forms further defined in the data collection section. This allowed for both established potential influences as well as teacher identified influences. This provided an opportunity for factors that had previously not been noted in previous research and allowed the results to be driven by the data (Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

The following assumptions were accepted in this study:

1. The Wufoo survey items and the terms included within those items were designed in a manner that used industry accepted terms to allow the participants to respond appropriately.

2. Wufoo is a survey delivery software allowing for anonymous respondent participation using survey links. The survey results were stored on the WuFoo server (Wufoo, 2020).

3. The responses of the participants were offered honestly and without bias.

Measures.

The teachers responded to a series of questions being presented using a Wufoo Survey Questionnaire (Appendix A) to identify various aspects of their teaching practice. These items were identified using the factors identified in previous research. The survey items are included in Appendix A. Due to the closure of schools and the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, the use of an online format was necessary. Teachers were provided with the Minimal Risk Consent information. The questions presented in the survey were identified using previous research information which has identified twenty-two potential factors found in research focused on teacher attrition and retention. This combined with other considerations that could potentially provide additional perspective for the special education teacher population. Middle School special education specific items were more challenging to identify in previous research which influenced my desire to include aspects of this specific teacher population. As identified by my literature, these included 21 items to assess a teacher's desire to leave teaching (see Appendix A for comprehensive list). Factors were chosen due to their presence in previous research focused on teacher attrition and retention (Berry et al., 2012; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley, 2002; Boe et al., 1997; Clandinin, 2015; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Gersten et al., 2001; Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Henderson, 2014; Heyns, 1988; Horrison-Collier, 2013; Inman & Marlow, 2004).

Thematic analysis of the items indicated that they could be grouped into three subscales:

1) job factors, 2) student factors, and 3) issues in the profession. The survey items were

identified using three sections of the survey. The first section of test items used a Likert Scale with possibilities that included very important, somewhat important, neither important or unimportant, somewhat unimportant, and very unimportant. The second section of test items used similar Likert Scale methodology that included significant problem, somewhat of a problem, not really a problem, and not a problem at all. The final section of test items provided the respondent with a scale from 1 to 5 and ranging from least important to most important. The survey also included three open-ended response questions. These questions asked respondents to use their own words to describe the primary factor in their choosing to leave or remain in teaching and if there were additional factors that may not have been included in the survey. The purpose of the open-ended questions was to allow for previously unidentified factors to be presented by the respondents based on their unique experience as well as the clarification of individual respondent perspective.

Population and Sample

The research survey was distributed to 751 schools throughout Pennsylvania that service the 5th through 8th grade. The responses represent various school settings that include urban, suburban, and rural districts which is one of the limitations of the study. The experiences of different educational settings could result in a shift in the results which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. In addition, the response to this survey could potentially have significantly different results in other locations throughout the country based on the needs and resource needs of other areas.

The administrators for the institutions were requested to share the survey with their special education teacher population. This resulted in 446 respondents who met the survey criteria. The respondents included 4.3% males and 95.7% females (see Table 4.1). This disparity

in the teacher's identified gender is consistent with reported national trends regarding the number of males vs. females in the special education teaching profession. In 2019, it was reported that males make up 13.7% of the special education teaching positions nationally while females represent the remaining 86.3% of the special education teaching positions (DataUSA, 2020).

In the descriptive statistics for the survey, respondents were asked to identify several aspects prior to their completion of the survey. These questions included teacher's race/ethnicity (see Table 4.2) and educational level attained (see Table 4.3). I felt that this information would allow for additional analysis to identify the most common respondent characteristics in future research.

Data Collection

After agreeing to informed consent, participants completed the Wufoo survey in a fixed format consisting of demographic items, Likert-scale items, and three open-ended responses (see Appendix A). The survey was distributed via email distribution to the educational decision makers for each school in June of 2020 for further distribution to special education staff. Responses were accepted until September 2020 to allow for the unique circumstances experienced across Pennsylvania in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in March of 2020, schools across Pennsylvania began adhering to mandatory school closures which limited access to district email. Similarly, each district's return to school plans to start the 2020-2021 school year also limited teachers from email access.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data.

To analyze the results from the survey responses, all factors were summarized into the three emerging subscales which were job factors, student factors, and issues related to the

profession. These subscales were then analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha to determine if there was internal consistency among the variables (see Table 4.14). This analysis would confirm the internal reliability of the survey items. Once the subscales were analyzed, the independent factors were then analyzed using Spearman correlations being reported (see Table 4.14). This identified which aspects of the survey showed the strongest correlation with regards to the desire to leave teaching. This was followed by a multiple regression analysis to identify significant variables in a teachers desire to leave teaching.

Qualitative data.

The data received from the qualitative survey questions was analyzed using frequency distribution. Because of the autonomy presented in the questions, using frequency distribution allowed for the creation of a visual representation of common items identified in the respondent surveys (see Figure 1). This provided insight into both previously established as well as newly identified factors that influenced a teacher's desire to leave teaching. In addition, question 8 addressed a teacher's desire to remain in teaching which provides insight into potential for future research (see Figure 2).

Summary

With the Wufoo Survey and the distribution of the study to Pennsylvania public schools serving grades 5 through 8, there was an opportunity for a sizable sample. There was a portion of district or building level administrators who responded indicating that they were not interested in their teachers being included in the study. There was a total of 446 respondents to the survey who indicated that their current position was a Pennsylvania public middle school special education teacher, servicing students in grades 5 through 8. Survey responses included 3 open response items. These items were not required to be completed but allowed for participants to

clarify their responses and provide additional information for further analysis. These questions identify new and previously accepted factors influencing a teacher's desire to leave teaching and provide opportunities for future research.

With the use of the Wufoo Survey and the identification of additional factors identified with the three open response questions, this research design allows for repetition. This would provide a framework for additional attempts that could be applied to a future investigation of Pennsylvania. In addition, the use of this methodology could be used to assess other geographical locations to provide insight into potential differences in experiences based on variation in job responsibilities and expectations.

There is a concern that respondents may introduce self-selection bias as those who look on the profession favorably could potentially choose to participate more freely as opposed to a teacher who may be disenfranchised and less likely to participate in the research study. The opportunity for unknown personal motivations presents an opportunity for self-selection bias to be represented in the respondents or lack thereof.

CHAPTER FOUR RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter 4 will be presented in three sections. Section I will include descriptive data on the respondents who returned the questionnaire. Section II will answer the major research question. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be presented. Finally, Section III will present a summary of the results.

1. Descriptive Data on the Respondents

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the survey was sent to 751 schools throughout Pennsylvania that service the 5th through 8th grade. There were 446 surveys that were returned. Table 4.1 illustrates the sex of the respondents. The respondents were overwhelmingly female (N=427, 95.7%), which when compared to the national data is representative of the overall special education teacher population (DataUSA, 2020).

Table 4.1: Sex of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	19	4.3
	Female	427	95.7
	Total	446	100.0

Table 4.2 illustrates the race and ethnicity of the respondents. Of the 446 respondents, White respondents were the significant majority (N=364, 81.6%) while African American (N=46, 10.3%) and Hispanic (N=18, 4.0%) respondents were the highest represented.

Table 4.2: Race/Ethnicity of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent of Sample
African American	46	10.3
Asian or Asian American	4	.9
Hispanic	18	4.0
Native American and Pacific Islander	5	1.1
Other	5	1.1
White	364	81.6
Missing	4	.9

Table 4.3 illustrates the various educational background for the respondents. The most common educational level reported was Masters (N=328, 73.5%) followed by a Bachelors (N=95, 21.3%).

Table 4.3: Education

	Frequency	Percent of Sample
Bachelors	95	21.3
Masters	328	73.5
Doctorate	15	3.4
Missing	8	1.8

As shown above, the respondents were primarily white females with a master's degree. This sample, therefore, seems characteristic of special education teachers (DataUSA, 2020).

The respondents were asked the first year that they began teaching. Since the questionnaire did not directly ask how many years the respondent had been teaching, the answer

to this question will be used as a proxy for how many years the respondent had taught. These data are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Years Teaching

	Frequency	Percent of Sample
1 – 5 years	82	18.4
6 – 10 years	90	20.2
11 – 15 years	59	13.2
16 – 20 years	65	14.6
21 – 25 years	58	13.0
26 years +	82	18.4
Missing	14	3.1

They were also asked if their first teaching experience was in special education. These data are in Table 4.5 with the overwhelming majority (N=325, 73.5%) indicating that special education was their teaching experience.

Table 4.5: Was Special Education First Teaching Job

	Frequency	Percent of Sample
No	117	26.2
Yes	325	72.8
Missing	4	0.1

Finally, the respondents were asked which grades they had taught. These data are in Table 4.6. It is evident from the above that the sample is diverse in terms of the years they had been teaching. In addition, a majority had taught special education as their first teaching job. Finally, it is evident that special education teachers teach a wide variety of grades.

Table 4.6: Grades Taught

Grade	Number Who Taught	Percent Who Taught
Kindergarten	228	51.1
1	235	52.7
2	249	55.8
3	255	57.1
4	258	57.8
5	260	58.2
6	263	58.9
7	258	57.8
8	254	57
9	292	65.5
10	184	41.3
11	181	40.6
12	169	37.9
Other	91	20.4

It became evident after the analysis of the survey data that the original intent of the research to focus on middle grade teachers was not consistent with the distribution of teachers across the grade levels. As shown in Table 4.6, many special education teachers have responsibility across a wide variety of grades, with many teaching across all the elementary and others across all the secondary grades. Consequently, the distinction between middle grade teachers and non-middle grade teachers is unclear and does not adequately represent the

population. It was decided, therefore, to answer the research questions using the data from all the respondents. A secondary set of analyses was conducted which attempted to focus only on those teachers who reported teaching in middle grades. These analyses will be presented at the end of the chapter.

II. Research Question

Research Question # 1: What factors contribute to special education public school teachers' desire to leave teaching?

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive Data

The primary question in the survey that asked about the teachers' desire to leave teaching was: "On a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (All of the time) have you seriously considered leaving teaching?" The responses to this question are presented in Table 4.7. It is evident that many of the special education teachers have considered leaving teaching at some time with only 20% (N=89) indicating that they had "never" considered leaving. The remaining respondents have considered leaving teaching to various degrees.

Table 4.7: Responses to Seriously Considered Leaving Teaching

Response	Number	Percent of Sample
1 (Never)	89	20%
2	109	24.4%
3	119	26.7%
4	80	17.9%
5 (All of the Time)	45	10.1%

The teachers were then asked to evaluate how important several factors were in their consideration to continue as a special education teacher or to leave teaching. The survey divided

these into three types of factors: factors relevant to the educational aspect of the job; issues relating to students; and general issues about the teaching job. In terms of educational factors relevant to remaining in teaching, the items identified are related to processes that lead to or prepare a teacher for instruction. These range from having access to appropriate curricular materials which are typically provided by the individual school districts to mentoring and colleague support which provide guidance for teaching practice.

The subsequent questions identify factors relevant to leaving teaching in terms of the students. This includes behavioral considerations, the student’s attitude towards their work, student academic achievement and the level of family involvement and communication related to the student. The next section addresses general duties and responsibilities required for teaching and that relate to the teacher’s experience and the level of importance each item has on their decision to leave or remain in teaching. The responses to these questions are presented in Tables 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10.

Table 4.8: Educational Factors Relevant to Remaining in Teaching

Evaluate the following factors as they apply to your continuing as a special education teacher.	Very Unimportant 1	Somewhat Unimportant 2	Neither Important nor Unimportant 3	Somewhat Important 4	Very Important 5
Access to appropriate curricular materials	15	9	19	95	303
Access to appropriate classroom materials	15	6	19	107	294
Induction program quality	35	35	126	132	110
Mentoring program	29	40	80	148	144
Colleague support	16	11	14	101	295
Continuing education reimbursement	28	31	93	126	162
Teaching preferred subject	7	28	82	146	181
Teaching Preferred Schedule	14	30	131	155	105

The results indicate that factors including access to appropriate curricular materials, access to appropriate classroom materials, and colleague support resulted in the highest frequency of importance while factors like induction program quality, mentoring programs, continuing education reimbursement, and teaching both preferred subject and schedule were less important.

Table 4.9: Student Factors Relevant to Leaving Teaching

Below are some issues relating to students. Think about the students and their families you have taught in general, not just those in the past year. Have any of these been a factor in your considering leaving special education teaching?	Not a Problem at all 1	Not Really a Problem 2	Somewhat of a Problem 3	Significant Problem 4
Classroom Behavior	61	114	147	118
Work Attitude	57	154	147	82
Academic Achievement	111	186	110	28
Family Involvement and Communication	66	124	161	87

When analyzing the student factors, classroom behavior had the highest frequency which illustrates that it is viewed as a significant problem with a combined 265 responses between somewhat of a problem and significant problem. This was followed by family involvement and communication which was represented with a combined 248 responses between somewhat of a problem and significant problem. This was followed by work attitude represented with a combined 229 responses between somewhat of a problem and significant problem.

Table 4.10: General Factors Relevant to the Respondents' Teaching Experience

Please rate the following issues as they relate to your teaching experience conditions.	Very Unimportant	Somewhat Important	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Somewhat Important	Very Important
	1	2	3	4	5
Salary	0	8	34	206	191
Required Special Education Paperwork	2	5	33	156	246
Grading Responsibilities	16	39	163	167	54
Potential for job advancement	0	8	34	206	191
Retirement plan offered	7	12	38	154	208
Progress monitoring plan	7	14	119	194	101

The subset identified as general factors relevant to the respondent's teaching experience indicated salary (N=397), required special education paperwork (N=402), and potential for job advancement (N=397) as the most common responses while grading responsibilities, progress monitoring plan, and retirement plan offered were less important to this teacher population.

The respondents were also asked about three specific aspects of the job and how important these aspects are. These items are more localized to each respondent's personal teaching preferences as opposed to general experiences. These data are presented in Tables 4.11, 4.12 and 4.13.

Table 4.11: Importance of the Schedule of Classes

(On a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (most important), how important is the schedule of classes you are asked to teach?)

Answer	Number	Percent of Sample
1 (Least Important)	60	13.5
2	64	14.4
3	144	32.4
4	116	26.0
5 (Most Important)	60	13.5

Table 4.12: Importance of Grade Taught

(On a scale of 1 (Least important) to 5 (Most important) how important is the grade you are asked to teach?)

Answer	Number	Percent of Sample
1 (Least Important)	63	14.2
2	52	11.7
3	130	29.3
4	127	28.7
5 (Most Important)	71	16.0

Table 4.13: Importance of Subject Taught

(On a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (most important), how important is the subject you are asked to teach?)

Answer	Number	Percent of Sample
1 (Least Important)	55	12.4
2	50	11.3
3	121	27.3
4	110	24.8
5 (Most Important)	107	24.2

When analyzing the educational variables related to a teacher’s desire to leave teaching, I believe that the items included in the survey represent separate components that relate very closely to responsibilities of school-based teacher leaders and administration as well as other district level personnel. The factors with the highest number of responses scoring 4 (somewhat important) or 5 (very important) supports that these variables are important to the respondents but does not necessarily contribute to the desire to leave teaching. There are several aspects of the data presented in Tables 4.8 to Table 4.13 that are informative. While all of the topics in Table 4.8 have high numbers of responses scoring 4 (somewhat important) or 5 (very important) indicating that they all have relevance to staying in teaching, the three with the most frequent

scores of a 4 or 5 rating were access to materials needed for teaching, access to curricular materials, and colleague support. It is especially interesting that support from colleagues is mentioned since special education teachers are sometimes not as well integrated into the community of teachers as regular teachers. This was further investigated using subscales and Cronbach's Alpha which will be addressed in the Quantitative Analysis: Correlations section.

The variables identified as student factors in the survey showed more evenly distributed ratings. Though these scores are lower than the educational variables, this does not verify their impact on a teacher's desire to leave teaching. Perhaps the most interesting set of results are those presented in Table 4.9 that relate to students. The responses to the issues mentioned in this table are the most negative of any of the factors listed in these tables. For example, over 60% of the respondents indicate that classroom behavior is "somewhat" or a "significant" problem that affects their decision to remain in teaching. Further analysis was used to assess the correlations for each variable.

Variables identified in the General Job Responsibilities portion of the survey had ratings that were more neutral with less ratings of 4 or 5. The data in Table 4.10 demonstrate that all of these factors are important in the respondents' teaching experience with the highest ratings being for required paperwork, salary, and possibility for job advancement. Finally, it appears that the schedule of classes taught, the grade taught, and the subject taught are somewhat less important than most of the other factors. This indicates that these variables are important to the position but despite the strong ratings, do not verify that these variables are significant contributing factors in a teacher's desire to leave teaching.

This information validates the importance of these variables which supports their use in the survey to determine which influence a teacher's desire to leave teaching. With this analysis, I

can state with confidence that the selection of variables represents aspects of the teaching position that the participant population can identify with and speak to with regards to how these variables may contribute to their decision to leave teaching which will be further analyzed in the

Quantitative Analysis: Correlations

As an exploratory analysis, Pearson correlations were computed using the question asking if the teachers had ever considered leaving teaching. As a reminder, this question is scored using the scale 1 = Never and 5 = All of the Time. The responses to this question were correlated with all the variables presented in Tables 4.8. to 4.13. It is recognized that all of these variables can be considered ordinal, and as such, Pearson correlations are not appropriate. However, these analyses were considered interesting enough as a way to extend the data analysis. The questions in Tables 4.10 to 4.13 were considered as one block. As an initial analysis, the questions in each of the three blocks were summed to produce a total score. These categories were then analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha to determine if there was internal consistency among the variables. The educational factors subscale consisted of 8 items ($\alpha = .86$), the student factors subscale consisted of 4 items ($\alpha = .79$), and the general job factors subscale consisted of 9 items ($\alpha = .76$). All of these Alpha coefficients are considered adequate to support the use of the summed score as one type of predictor. These correlations are presented in Table 4.14.

Table 4.14: Spearman Correlations of Factors Affecting Leaving Teaching

"On a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (All of the time) have you seriously considered leaving teaching?"

Table 4.14: Continued

Question from the Survey	Spearman Correlation
Educational Factors (Alpha = .861)	
Access to appropriate curricular materials	.009
Access to appropriate classroom materials	.023
Induction program quality	.011
Mentoring program quality	.043
Colleague support	.054
Continuing education reimbursement	.021
Teaching preferred subject	.034
Teaching preferred schedule	.002
Total of Educational Factors	.006
Student Factors (Alpha = .788)	
Classroom behavior	.323**
Work attitude	.254**
Academic achievement	.159**
Family involvement and communication	.234**
Total of Student factors	.319**
General Job Factors (Alpha = .761)	
Salary	.131**
General special education paperwork	.027
Grading responsibilities	.025
Potential for job advancement	.137**
Retirement plan offered	.007
Progress monitoring plan	.005
Schedule of classes	.041
Grade you are asked to teach	.012
Subject you are asked to teach	.015
Total of General Job Factors	.049

It is evident from Table 4.14 that the only consistently significant set of issues involved students. For all the issues relating to students, the more the issue was a problem, the more likely it was for the teacher to consider leaving teaching. The significant correlations identified were with classroom behavior (.323), work attitude (.254), academic achievement (.159), and family

involvement and communication (.234). The only two other significant variables were representative of the general job factors subset and included salary (.131) and potential for job advancement (.137).

As an additional analysis, the three summed scores were entered into a multiple regression. This analysis is considered appropriate since summed Likert scores are considered to have interval properties. The results of this analysis are presented below:

Table 4.15: Model Summary for the Multiple Regression

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.341 ^a	.117	.109	1.174

Table 4.16: Regression Results

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.788	.508		3.517	.000
Educational Factors	-.017	.011	-.076	-1.489	.137
Student Factors	.144	.021	.340	6.738	.000
Job Factors	.003	.023	.007	.137	.891

As shown above, the multiple regression accounted for 10.9% of the variance. Consistent with the univariate results, the only variable that was significant related to student factors.

Quantitative Analysis: Middle Grades

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the original intent of this research was to focus on middle grade special education teachers. As shown in Table 4.6, there are very few special education teachers who teach solely in the middle grades as defined by grades 5 – 8. However, since this was the original intent, the sample was divided into those who only taught in grades 5 – 8 versus all others. There were 58 respondents who could be considered exclusively middle grade teachers. This group was compared to the remaining respondents on the variable asking whether they had ever considered leaving teaching. The responses of these teachers did

not differ significantly from the remaining teachers. Several additional analyses were conducted on this subgroup and there was no evidence that they were different.

Qualitative Analysis

There were three open response items in the survey that were analyzed using a frequency distribution based on like terms in the participant response. This allowed for the respondents to clarify or add depth to their submissions and help to identify which factors were most significant to individuals. Additional analysis beyond frequency was not performed. Instead, these questions were designed to provide perspective on other responses in the qualitative section.

The first two questions addressed specifically the desire to leave and remain in teaching. This was accomplished by requesting that they describe in their own words which aspects of their special education teaching experience most influenced their desire to continue teaching or which aspects of their special education teaching experience most influenced their desire to leave the teaching profession. These questions provided additional insight into the importance of various aspects of their positions. Despite the survey sample size being 446 individuals, only 394 respondents, representing 88.3% of the total participant pool, chose to respond to question 9 which asked which factor most influenced a teacher's desire to leave teaching. These responses resulted in several items. The five most common factors are found in Figure 1. These included a lack of administrative support representing 25.4%, special education paperwork representing 24.6%, a lack of appropriate resources representing 6.9%, a lack of respect for special education staff representing 6.1%, and a lack of colleague support which represented 5.3%.

Question 8 asked which factor most influenced a teacher's desire to remain in teaching. This question received 407 responses, representing 91.3% of the respondents. Likewise, the five most common factors are represented in Figure 2. These included teaching or bonding with students representing 40%, witnessing student growth or achievement representing 24.8%,

making a difference in someone’s life representing 7.9%, colleague support and camaraderie representing 6.9%, and administration support representing 3.9%.

Figure 1

Teacher Reported Most Significant Factor in the Desire to Leave Teaching

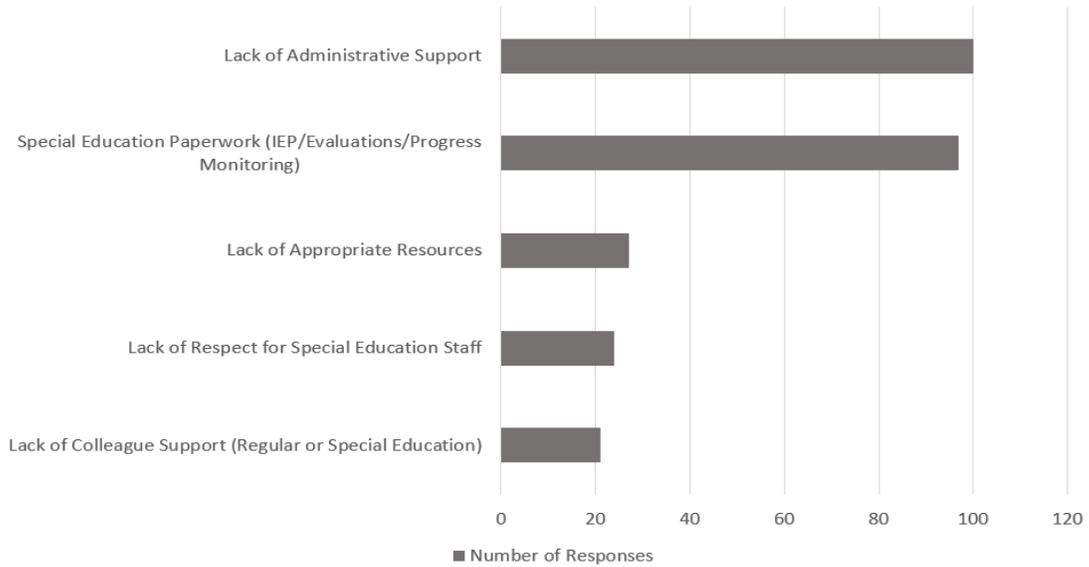
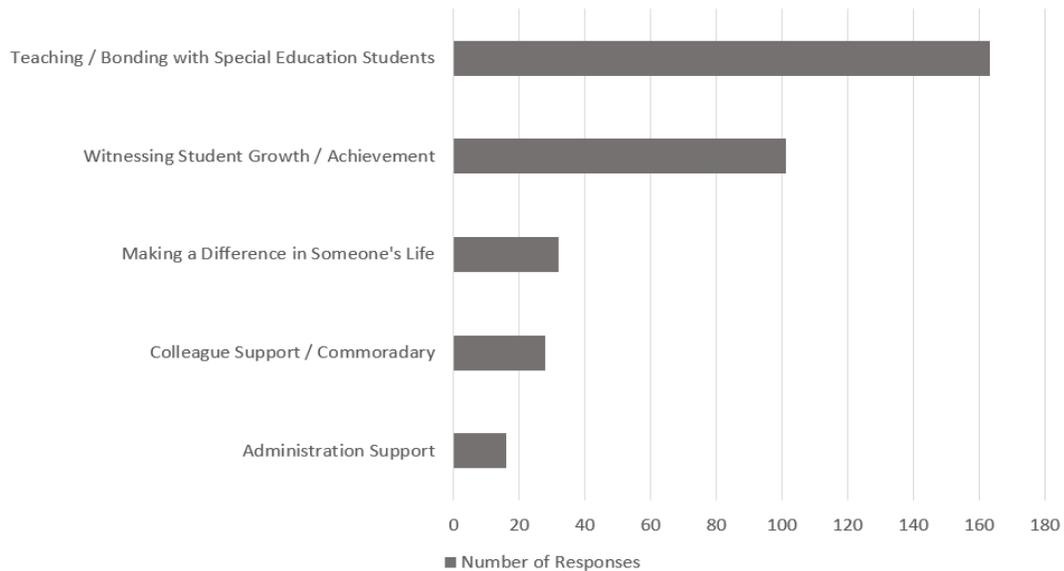


Figure 2

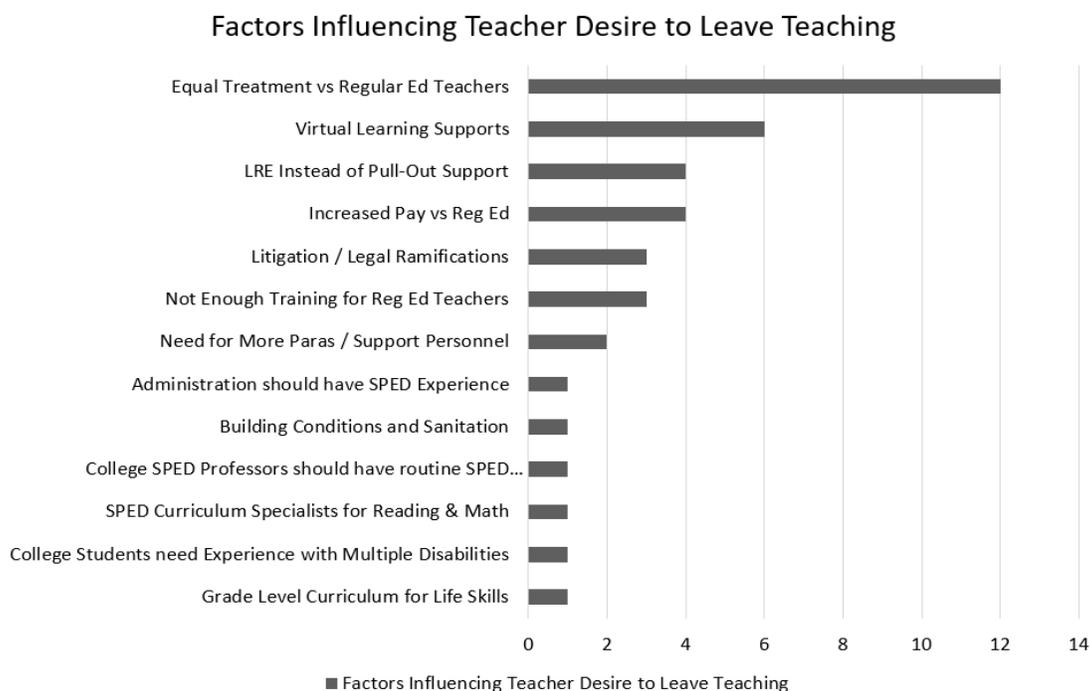
Teacher Reported Most Significant Factor in the Desire to Remain in Teaching



Using the final open response question, additional factors that contribute to the desire to leave or remain in teaching could be identified that may not have been included in the survey design. There were 79 teachers who chose to respond to the prompt which provided several topics for future consideration. This represents 17% of the total respondent sample. Though the items listed in the qualitative response do not currently indicate significant factors, they do provide additional items that should be considered in future research as they propose many elements that, if provided to the full sample, may have been identified as more significant.

The items that were identified in the final open response question (see Figure 3) provided insight into potential areas for investigation in future research. Of the teachers completing the qualitative open response question, 15% included a desire for special education teachers to be treated as equal members of the school community. In addition, 7.5% of teachers responding to the open response question indicated concerns about virtual learning supports for teachers.

Figure 3



Additional items identified in the open response included the need for better use of Least Restrictive Environment for learning support services as opposed to pull-out methods (5%), increased pay for special education teaching staff to compensate for the increased workload generated by special education paperwork (5%), concerns over litigation and potential adverse legal ramifications related to IEP implementation (3.8%), a need for regular education teachers to have required special education training (3.8%), the need for more paraprofessionals and support personnel (2.5%) , and the remaining factors all receiving 1.3% response rates which included a desire for building administrators to be required to have experience with special education, building conditions and sanitation, the need for college professors who teach SPED courses to have current and routine experiences in public school special education classrooms for perspective, a need for special education curriculum specialists in both reading and math, college students needing experience with multiple disabilities prior to certification, and grade level curricular materials for learning support and life skills students.

III. **Summary**

After analyzing the 446 responses to the Wufoo survey, both quantitative and qualitative data were identified. To analyze the quantitative information, the respondent items were organized into three subscales. These response items were analyzed using a Pearson Correlation analysis that identified statistically significant correlations between a teacher's desire to leave teaching and five factors from the survey including classroom behavior, student work attitude, academic achievement, family involvement and communication, salary, and the potential for job advancement.

Qualitative data were collected and organized for three questions including which aspects of a teacher's special education teaching experience most influenced their desire to leave the teaching profession, which aspects of a teacher's special education teaching experience most influenced their desire to remain in the teaching profession, and any other factors that the respondents felt should be included in the survey. The five most common factors for leaving and remaining in teaching were illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. The factors identified in the final question related to additional items to be included in this survey were illustrated in Figure 3.

When considering the information identified in the quantitative portion of the survey and cross referencing the data with the qualitative results, what becomes clear is that despite the variety of factors that were identified in the quantitative portion and considering the elements that were identified as being statistically significant, there is a vast difference in the items that were reported in the qualitative responses. The lack of administrative support was the most common influence identified in question 9 which does not align with the statistically significant factors. There are additional items of note as the relationship between items such as colleague support, lack of respect for special education staff, comradery are of a similar theme. This would be an additional area for further investigation. I believe that a significant reason for this disparity between the two data sources relates to the design of the questions. Several items that are identified in the quantitative portions of the survey are related to administrative support including access to appropriate curricular materials, access to appropriate classroom supplies, teaching your preferred subject, and teaching your preferred schedule. There are additional influences related to the administration that were not significant contributors in the literature review. This presents an opportunity for future investigation that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions

With the information revealed through both these quantitative and qualitative processes, factors that contribute to Pennsylvania public school special education teachers' desire to leave teaching have been identified. The items identified in previous research combined with the inclusion of new items identified through the qualitative response questions provide perspective and allow for better understanding of the degree to which each factor contributed to the decision to leave teaching. Through the designing of subscales addressing commonalities in the previously identified factors, I was able to support the internal reliability of the response items. With Pearson Correlational analysis, the most statistically significant factors have been identified. With the use of the open response questions, clarity and perspective related to respondent answers were provided which gave a glimpse into personal factors as well as an opportunity to inform future research with the identification of additional factors that could be analyzed for their influence on the decision to leave teaching.

Research Question 1 -What factors contribute to special education public school teachers desire to leave teaching?

Based on the factors included in the survey, the factors that contribute to Pennsylvania public school special education teachers' desire to leave teaching were classroom behavior, student work attitude, academic achievement, family involvement and communication, salary, and potential for job advancement. This aligns with the qualitative data as the most common factors identified by respondent open response items that contribute to a teacher's desire to remain in teaching were teaching and bonding with students, witnessing student growth and achievement, and making a difference in someone's life. This is consistent with research

presented previously that student-related factors have the greatest impact on a teacher's desire to remain in teaching. This would also support the previous research with regards to the challenges middle school teachers face with incoming elementary student transitions and rising middle school students preparing for high school transition. I also conclude that a shift towards more positive aspects of these items encourage teachers to remain in teaching.

Also rising from the qualitative data is a concern focused on the lack of administrative support. This factor was the most identified in the open responses related to a teacher's desire to leave teaching. This has provided for an opportunity for further investigation focused primarily on the role administration plays in the teacher's desire to leave teaching. The research of Hughes, Matt, and O'Reilly (2015) indicated that when special education teachers perceived administrative support as being present, it was a factor in retention while the lack of administrative support was found to be a cause for attrition.

When designing the survey, several variables that are related to administrative support were highlighted. However, the qualitative responses allowed for respondents to identify a collective variable related to the overall administrative support they receive. This provides a framework for future research that would seek to quantify different variables related to the administrative support provided and allow additional research to assess the significance of specific factors related to school administration. Limitations related to this research will be discussed in the Limitations section.

Implications for Practice

With the analysis of this information, intermediate units, school districts, and district administrative teams could use this research to inform their best practices in teacher recruitment and retention and seek to develop action plans to shift the perception around the identified

factors that influence teacher's desire to leave teaching. The information identified in this research suggests that implementing programs that encourage or reward positive student behaviors may influence student behavior and consequently a teacher's desire to leave teaching. One possible way that this could be implemented is to design academic progress plans that would monitor student achievement and progress that could provide an incentive for those who meet predetermined benchmarks for growth and improve the overall teacher perspective for student work attitude.

The results also pointed to the impact of family involvement. While the research did not address ways to increase this, it is possible that intermediate units, districts, and administrative teams could implement community outreach programs that target parental involvement which could include items such as resources for afterschool training to better support children, academic refresher programs to encourage families to embrace contemporary instructional pedagogy to better assist their children with their independent practice. In addition, the creation of events to bring families together with those who are educating their children could provide a gateway to communication and encourage a more team centered focus to addressing student achievement but also the relationship that exists between families and schools. Finally, the creation of non-educational experiences to bring families to the schools and foster informal social growth between teachers, administrators, families, and the children themselves could provide a method for increasing the overall relationship between educational entities and families which may also impact a teacher's desire to leave teaching.

Regarding salary, the issue is much more complicated due to the use of collective bargaining in the teacher contract process. Terms that are included in special education teacher contracts are not independent from the general education staff. To address this concern, I cite the

data from the open response items as administrative support and colleague support were both identified. Perhaps implementing professional development with targeted outcomes related to expanding the understanding of special education teacher requirements and the delegation of certain aspects of the current position to general education teachers could help to balance any perceived inequalities between the general and special education staff.

The discussion of the potential for job advancement is also a complicated one as there is not a uniform matrix used across districts that determines the necessary credentials for district level positions and expectations. Districts may offer a variety of positions that afford a certain number of individuals to seek additional positions beyond the classroom while other districts have the autonomy to consolidate certain positions. Some of the positions that are available include special education supervisor, curriculum specialists, school-based teacher leads, school climate officials, dean of student positions, and a variety of other potential position designations. Based on the significance of this response, working in a district that offers this sort of potential advancement may reduce the number of teachers who have a desire to leave teaching. Conversely, districts that do not offer these sorts of positions may encourage teacher desire to leave teaching.

After an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative results, there is a need for clarification with regards to the sample. It presents a question as to whether the responses from this sample of special education teachers would provide a different perspective if the sample had included only regular education teachers. As shown in Chapter 4, the set of issues that cause the most difficulty for this sample involved the students in general, and elements related to classroom behavior. With previous research indicating that behavioral problems have led to teachers' dissatisfaction with their jobs and as a result higher attrition (Geiger & Pivovarova,

2018) this possibility is not surprising. Teachers also consider administrative support and family involvement as issues that have an impact on their job satisfaction. In this way, therefore, these special education teachers are similar to all other teachers.

There are, however, issues related to these concepts that special education teachers face that represent more difficulties for this group. For example, special education teachers are required to hold individualized education program (IEP), IEP Revision, and Evaluation meetings with parents that are not as great a part of a regular education teacher's responsibilities. There are also requirements for documented attempts at parental contact that go far beyond what a regular education teacher must face. There are academic responsibilities beyond the general education requirements related to progress monitoring of IEP goals and observational requirements for functional behavioral assessments that must be met. This involvement or lack of involvement can lead to or prevent due process hearings with the potential for the suspension of licensure if protocols are not followed carefully.

Limitations

The survey attempted to address the factors that influence special education public school teachers' desire to leave teaching. Despite the use of both quantitative and qualitative questions in the survey, there may be limitations in the study due to several factors. The schools that received the survey were all located in the state of Pennsylvania. The regulations and methods of addressing special education vary between states. This is evident when assessing various requirements for the special education teaching certification and training. In the state of Pennsylvania, the requirements to become certified to teach include securing the recommendation for certification by an approved college or university, meeting all requirements of the approved preparation program, achieving the qualifying scores on the required tests which

include Praxis Exams and PECT Exams, and other requirements established by Pennsylvania's State Board of Education (PDE, 2020). The required scores and course requirements are not uniform across states. In contrast to the accepted process in Pennsylvania, California provides guidelines that do not include Praxis Exams or PECT assessments instead being required to pass the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment and the California Subject Examinations for Teachers (COTC, 2020). This is just one example of the differences between teacher preparation programs.

Across school districts in Pennsylvania, the job requirements can vary for special education teachers as well. There are special education positions that require teachers to exclusively provide classroom instruction, modifications to content, and additional supports as described in a student's individualized education plan. In other districts, the special education position requires the drafting and presentation of the individualized education plans. Still others require the special education position to draft both individualized education plans as well as all evaluations and reevaluations. Due to this difference in job requirements, the experiences of teachers from various districts could be significantly different. Also, when compiling the comprehensive list of schools servicing the 5th through 8th grades, there was an identification of schools that house all grades from kindergarten through twelfth grade, Pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade, fifth through eighth grade, sixth through eighth grade, seventh through eighth grade, seventh through ninth grade, seventh through twelfth grade, and other configurations that can also complicate both job responsibility and the methods that are implemented across buildings. This could also impact the perception of the overall school climate and what teachers identify as being included in their responsibilities.

Relating specifically to the lack of administrative support, the definition of administration needs clarity. This was not recognized when the survey was created. Consequently, the impact of administrative support cannot be thoroughly explored through this research. The complexity of this issue is daunting. There are district administrative positions including Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Supervisors of Special Education, and other district level positions that are significantly different from building level administration which could include Principals, Assistant Principals, Deans of Students, Teacher Leads, and other localized building titles. The use of grade level chairs or department heads may also fall within the scope of the term administration based on different teacher perspectives and the potential for unique building design from school to school and across districts throughout the state. This would need to be more specifically addressed to fully understand the intent of survey respondents to develop actions to address their concerns.

In addition, experiences related to the variables included in the survey may be different across the country including such items as salary considerations, terms of teacher retirement plans and requirements, tenure requirements and protections, curriculum, and induction program or ongoing professional development requirements.

Another area of limitation relates to accepted scores for educational testing to qualify for teaching certification. ETS is the provider of the Praxis Exams which are used in several states to determine eligibility of teacher candidates for teacher licensure. Despite the test being uniform across all states, the required scores to receive an endorsement to receive teacher certification vary from state to state. In Pennsylvania, at the time these data were collected, the required score for a basic teaching credential, referred to as *Core Academic Skills for Educators: Reading*, *Core Academic Skills for Educators: Math*, and *Core Academic Skills for Educators: Writing* are 156,

142, and 162, respectively. However, in states such as Vermont, Maryland, and Wisconsin, the required score for the *Core Academic Skills for Educators: Math* increases to 150. Special education certification in Pennsylvania requires the successful passing of the *Pennsylvania Educator Certification Test* whereas the requirements for special education certification in Virginia include additional Praxis Exams titled *Reading for Virginia Educators: Elementary and Special Education* (ETS, 2021; Pearson Educational Inc, 2021). This difference in both testing measure and scoring matrix presents a limitation to the generalizability of the survey as the test items are not consistent across differing educational programs and states.

Another consideration is the potential for self-selection bias. The survey was sent to various schools throughout Pennsylvania seeking public middle school special education teachers servicing the 5th through the 8th grade to take part in a research study. Based on a particular teacher's perception of their desire to leave teaching or remain in the profession, one could choose to respond to further support their position. In contrast, if a potential respondent perceives the survey to be of little merit or it not aligning with their beliefs, they may be less likely to respond. Should a teacher be very engaged in their position and passionately supports the field, they may be more likely to participate.

Recommendations for Future Research

After completing this analysis, several topics for future investigation have emerged. With regard to the factors that influence school public special education teacher's desire to leave teaching, the items identified in the qualitative responses provide opportunity for inquiry. The level to which the current virtual learning model has contributed to this decision offers a very tangible and contemporary glimpse into what affect this form of instruction has had on a teacher's desire to leave teaching.

The need to address the revelations related to the administration component in the qualitative data is another area that could be investigated. When considering the responses by those who chose to respond to the qualitative questions, I draw a connection between Figure 1 and Figure 2. Those in Figure 1 identified administrative support as their most significant factor in determining their intent to leave teaching. In Figure 2, very few respondents identified their administration as the most significant factor in determining their intent to remain in teaching. This illustrates the need for additional research focused on best practices for administrators to develop strategies to support teacher retention. As mentioned previously, this research would have to address the different forms of administration in the public school system to provide a more specific understanding of which administrators respondents are referring to. In addition, with the responsibilities of various administrative positions being vastly different across educational settings, the identification of specific variables would need to be completed.

With the quantitative research results illuminating several student-based factors that influence public school special education teacher's intent to leave teaching, a more substantial survey of teacher methods and administrative efforts to encourage the student body would be beneficial. As before, this study did not directly assess these possible efforts. However, examples that do exist include school initiatives like positive behavior support programs, after and before school student academic support options, the availability of and access to electronic devices and online learning tools to increase student performance, the inclusion of non-academic school experiences to support a positive overall school climate and attitude, and various other potential programs that would need to be identified.

Summary

This research originally sought to identify the factors that influenced Pennsylvania public middle school special education teacher's desire to leave teaching. Through an analysis of the data from the survey, limiting the research to middle school became problematic. It became obvious from the responses to the survey that special education teachers teach a wide variety of grade levels. As such, focusing only on those teachers who exclusively teach middle grades became unrealistic. However, to maintain some version of the original intent, the small group of middle grades teachers were compared to everyone else. This produced no noticeable differences between the two groups. This shifted the focus of the research to factors that influence Pennsylvania public school special education teacher's desire to leave teaching.

Through the use of a survey that included previously identified variables related to teacher attrition and retention, 446 special education teacher respondents from Pennsylvania public schools provided quantitative and qualitative responses. Using a Pearson Correlation, the student factors of classroom behavior, work attitude, academic achievement, and family involvement and communication as well as the general job factors of salary and potential for job advancement were identified as being statistically significant in predicting a teacher's desire to leave teaching. Upon the use of a multiple regression analysis, student factors were a statistically significant predictor of a teacher's desire to leave teaching.

The qualitative responses contributed to the investigation as they allowed the respondents to identify their most significant factor in determining their desire to leave teaching (administrative support) as well as remain in teaching (teaching / bonding with students). In addition, the final open response item allowed for an open discussion to identify any factors that

were not included in the initial assessment. The most common response to this question was equal treatment versus regular education teachers.

The results of this survey have provided both an opportunity to better understand the factors that influence Pennsylvania public school special education teacher's desire to leave teaching as well as illustrate the need for future research into the effects of administrative support on teacher desire to leave teaching. Another factor that was identified in the qualitative response data related to online or virtual learning. This is a factor that was not as widely prevalent prior to mandatory school closures in 2020. With the shift in educational delivery being cited in the responses, future research related to online or virtual learning would be beneficial to identify if this instructional model influences a teacher's desire to leave teaching.

In closing, the need to address teacher attrition and retention is necessary to decrease the costs associated with teacher attrition. Furthermore, the need to encourage teachers to remain in teaching beyond their first five years would impact the academic success of students (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Hanushek, Rivkin, & Schiman, 2016) as performance and proficiency have been shown to increase with more substantial teacher experience. With the challenge of finding qualified applicants for special education positions (Nworie, 2016), retention is crucial. With a shortage of special education teachers (Berry et al., 2012), identifying the predictive variables that encourage Pennsylvania public school special education teacher's desire to leave teaching so that the significant variables can be addressed with new initiatives and programs aimed at bettering the overall teacher experience and supporting more long-term teacher retention.

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Appendix A
Teacher Research Survey

Question 1: What is your Gender?

- Female
- Male

Question 2: What year did you first teach?

Question 3: What is your race/ethnicity?

- African American
- Asian or Asian American
- Hispanic
- Native American and Pacific Islander
- White
- Other

Question 4: Please check the educational degrees you have attained.

- Bachelor
- Master
- Doctoral (PhD. or EdD)

Question 5: What grades have you taught? Check all that apply.

- Kindergarten
- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd

- 4th
- 5th
- 6th
- 7th
- 8th
- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th
- Other

Please explain regarding to grade(s) taught.

Question 6: On a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (All of the time) have you seriously considered leaving teaching?

- 1 (Never)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 (All of the time)

Question 7: Evaluate the following factors as they apply to your continuing as a special education teacher.

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Somewhat unimportant	Very unimportant
Access to appropriate curricular materials	1	2	3	4	5
Access to appropriate classroom materials	1	2	3	4	5
Induction program quality	1	2	3	4	5
Mentoring Program	1	2	3	4	5
Colleague Support	1	2	3	4	5
Continuing Education reimbursement	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching Preferred Subject	1	2	3	4	5
Teaching Preferred Schedule	1	2	3	4	5

Question 8: In your own words, please explain which aspects of your special education teaching experience MOST influences your desire to continue in the teaching profession?

Question 9: In your own words, please explain which aspects of your special education teaching experience most influences your desire to LEAVE the teaching profession.

Question 10: Below are some issues relating to students. Think about the students and their families you have taught in general, not just those in the past year. Have any of these been a factor in your considering leaving special education teaching?

	Significant Problem	Somewhat of a problem	Not really a problem	Not a problem at all
Classroom Behavior	1	2	3	4
Work Attitude	1	2	3	4
Academic Achievement	1	2	3	4
Family involvement and communications	1	2	3	4

Question 11: Please rate the following issues as they relate to your teaching experience conditions.

	Very Important	Important	Neither important or unimportant	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
Salary	1	2	3	4	5
Required special education paperwork (e.g., IEPs, reEval, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Grading Responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5
Potential for job advancement	1	2	3	4	5
Retirement plan offered	1	2	3	4	5
Progress Monitoring plan	1	2	3	4	5

Question 12: On a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (Most important) how important is the schedule of classes you are asked to teach?

- 1 (Least important)
- 2
- 3
- 4

5 (Most important)

Question 12: On a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (Most important) how important is the grade you are asked to teach?

1 (Least important)

2

3

4

5 (Most important)

Question 12: On a scale of 1 (least important) to 5 (Most important) how important is the subject you are asked to teach?

1 (Least important)

2

3

4

5 (Most important)

Question 13: Item ratings: Is there something you want to add or explain about your ratings above?

Question 14: Is there something you think should be added?