

**Experiences in the field of education: How perceived experiences lead to teacher exit**  
by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The ongoing teacher shortage has created major concern across the nation. While much research has sought to understand sources of teacher dissatisfaction, less attention has been paid to how general education (GE) and special education (SE) teachers differentially experience workplace challenges. To construct a more detailed and domain specific approach to teacher retention, this case study examines the experiences of ten special education (SE) and general education (GE) teachers. In order to add to our existing body of research, a more personal approach was employed: studying recently exited teachers to assess self-reflective understandings of leaving the profession. Following interviews of these recently exited teachers, this research asks how workplace (dis)satisfaction was experienced for SE and GE teachers who left the profession, and in what ways did teaching domain contribute to differences in perceptions of workplace (dis)satisfaction? Following a series of in-depth interviews, major themes of (1) lack of support, (2) lack of autonomy, (3) respect of time, and (4) unclear/unmet expectations carried across both GE and SE teachers. However, SE teachers were more likely to experience both satisfaction and dissatisfaction through their student-centered experiences, while GE teachers were more likely to experience satisfaction when they felt supported by their administration and dissatisfaction when they did not feel respected by their peers. These findings help construct a more detailed picture of how teacher turnover operates and allow for more specific strategies to be employed to address the teacher shortage. This research concludes with a series of recommendations, both practical and theoretical, for improving the conditions and retention rates of GE and SE teachers.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this case study is to examine how workplace dissatisfaction is differently perceived by Special Education (SE) and General Education (GE) teachers. Specifically, this multi-case study aims to add to the literature by gathering the experiences of recently exited SE and GE teachers to provide post-classroom reflections on dissatisfaction and exiting. While turnover rates among public education teachers have consistently increased over the years, the field of special education has seen a comparatively higher increase in turnover and decrease in entry (Peyton, et al., 2021). Utilizing Herzberg's (1966) motivation-hygiene theory, this study hopes to recognize how sensitivity to dissatisfaction (hygiene) and satisfaction (motivation) is differentially experienced across SE and GE teaching domains. Moreover, it proposes to do so with a unique sample of former public educators, offering more impartial reflections on working conditions. Such reflections may be used to strategically calibrate school-level retention strategies and address the growing teacher shortage in Alabama and beyond.

Amongst the growing body of literature on teacher dissatisfaction and turnover, researchers have noted that certain types of teachers exit at much higher rates, specifically SE teachers (Carver-Thomas et al., 2019). Amongst GE teachers, research has shown that poor professional development, lack of autonomy, salary, accountability mandates, and student discipline issues lead to turnover (Kopowski, 2008). However, special education teachers are seemingly faced with a plethora of specific issues within the field (Sutcher et al., 2019). Special education teachers (SETs) are in a field that is overpopulated with students with behavioral problems (Prather-Jones, 2011), overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students based on race and SES (Shippen, et al, 2009), legislative difficulties (McQuat, 2007), and unequal status

amongst teaching peers (Tran, et al, 2020). There are additional and stringent certification requirements (Bettini, et al., 2020) and typically higher levels of stress due to following federal guidelines under IDEA (Conley & You, 2017). In many cases, SETs must work closely in other classrooms with teachers and require a level of efficacy that can be problematic at times (Miller, 1998).

## **Background**

Heyns (1988) studied a concerning trend of an increasing number of “former teachers.” The study determined dissatisfaction began to grow among teachers after budget cuts, declining teacher education program enrollments, and lack of separation between school improvement and teacher retention practices (Heyns, 1988). Heyns (1988) found the most qualified teachers in the highest performing schools were electing to leave the profession due to the lack of administration understanding of the needs of teachers. Following the same trend, Billingsley & Cross (1992) collected data from the late 1960s through late 1980s and found teacher satisfaction was directly correlated to attrition. The growing rate of teachers leaving the field completely was, in large part, due to the additional requirements states put in place for current and upcoming teachers to maintain or receive certification (Billingsley & Cross, 1992).

*Rural Districts & Alabama* A RAND survey conducted in 2021 (Diliberti, et al.) focused on a representative group of teacher leavers of public schools after the start of the pandemic. The study found the characteristics of the representative group of leavers did not vary from previous studies of leavers (Diliberti, et al., 2021). The largest group of leavers pre-pandemic and pandemic were teachers from Southern states- 60 and 55 percent, respectively (Diliberti, et al., 2021). Fuller & Pendola (2020) reported teacher demand in Pennsylvania balanced with teacher supply in most areas but did not follow the same trend in special

education, especially in rural areas. Fuller & Pendola (2020) indicated the demand would decrease, but the data reflects the supply would continue to fall further behind the demand leading to dire circumstances for rural districts. Purcell (2021) reported the same trend for most schools in Alabama, especially those in rural areas. The need for teachers in Alabama is at such an alarming high, many school districts are relying on emergency certifications in order to meet the need. Purcell (2021) found more than 1700 teachers in the secondary setting (grades 6-12) and over 30% of all classroom teachers are teaching outside of their program of study. The demand continues to increase, but the supply has consistently decreased as indicated by 40% fewer enrollments in teacher preparation programs in Alabama since 2010 (Purcell, 2021).

*Special Education Teachers* Research has been clear about teacher retention among teachers nationwide for many years and provided potential strategies to decrease teacher turnover, but the focus of specific areas in education lacks the same depth (Parker et al., 2009; Hong, 2012; Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2019). Billingsley (1993) found special education teachers were leaving the profession at higher rates than their general education counterparts but could not find sufficient empirical data to support the findings of the research (Billingsley, 1993). However, recent research has confirmed that special education teachers leave at higher rates than general education peers (Fuller et al., 2020). With the early research of Davis & Billingsley (1993) indicating special education teachers were exiting the profession at higher rates and new special education teachers were entering at lower rates, the status of special education teacher attrition is alarming. NPR.org (2022) reported Hawaii's special education teacher shortage was so severe, schools were relying on teachers and individuals not certified in special education to attempt to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Though this temporary solution seems to be a better option than an empty classroom, the need of students in

special education are specific and, when they are not met, an already disadvantaged population become further disadvantaged than their peers in the general education setting (Gaines, 2022).

This research has worked to explain why special education teachers are leaving at higher rates: preparations and qualifications (López-Estrada & Koyama, 2010), school culture and climate (Sutcher et al., 2016), working conditions such as administrative support (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), co-teacher cohesiveness (Bettini, et. al, 2017), student behavior (Conley & You, 2012), and teacher requirements (Cleveland, 2003) to name a few. Hagaman & Casey (2018) interviewed three groups of individuals- preservice special education teachers, special education teachers within their first three years of teaching, and administrators- to determine how different the perceptions of the needs and roles of special education teachers would be. Even with research indicating the correlation between caseload and special education teacher attrition, school leaders did not indicate caseload (size, needs, etc.) as being a reason special education teachers would exit the profession (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). School leaders also indicated the importance of building relationships with coworkers as a necessity to ensure retention, but neither preservice nor new special education teachers determined that to be determining factor in the final decision; several teachers explained it would simply be an additional task to do rather than enjoy (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

Extensive research has been conducted to determine the cause of the rapidly growing number of teachers leaving the field. Studies have been conducted to pinpoint geographical connections, economic connections, and teacher preparation connections. Teacher retention and attrition have been studied, some may say extensively, but the problem continues to grow with

almost no solution. In one of the greatest areas of need, special education has seen a drastic drop in retention with very little research to determine why (Fuller et al., 2020).

## **Purpose**

As the researcher, I intend to develop necessary insight to the experiences of special education teachers, compare those experiences to general education teachers, and develop a case study to juxtapose their experiences in order to provide special education teachers the voice to express the dire situation and begin discussion on how to address the multi-faceted needs of these teachers. While both teaching groups experience difficult components of their jobs, the research has largely centered around general education teachers. By allowing the experiences of special education teachers to remain at the forefront of this study, the practice of acknowledging the need to provide differentiated strategies to retain special education teachers may become a discussion point for school leaders in hopes to quell the rising attrition rates among special education teachers.

## **Research Questions**

The literature clearly indicates a concern across the nation for the growing attrition rates in the education system (Sutcher et al., 2016). Substantial and in-depth research has been conducted to determine the cause of teacher attrition among teachers as a whole group. Some literature reflects research regarding specific teacher groups including elementary/secondary, mathematics and science, teachers in high need areas (high poverty, large numbers of FRL, etc.), and special education teachers. The depth of the research, though, is focused on GETs as a whole group. Using the current literature, it is evident a lack of data exists on understanding the perceptual reasons *why* special education teachers are leaving the profession at such high rates, especially over the last decade. To address the growing concern and continued growth of attrition

rates among special education teachers, the following questions will serve as a guide to develop a specific data set to acknowledge the need for change:

RQ1: How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for special education teachers who left the profession?

RQ2: How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for general education teachers who left the profession?

RQ3: In what ways does teaching domain contribute to differences in perceptions of workplace (dis)satisfaction, and how might this contribute to differential exit rates?

These questions will not only guide the research, but provide an opportunity to parallel, compare, and juxtapose the experiences of GE and SE teachers. This insight will potentially create the verbiage to help educational leaders understand how to address attrition among special education teachers and begin to move towards higher rates of retention.

### **Significance**

The National Educators Association conducted a nationwide member survey in 2021. Of the 2960 members surveyed, 32% of teachers indicated intentions to leave earlier than planned when entering the field, compared to 28% of members in 2019 (NEA, 2021). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) determined districts are spending an average of \$20,000 per teacher to replace those exiting the profession (p 30). In the state of Alabama alone, over 50% of teachers plan to leave within three years of entering the field, well above the national average of 44% (ACES, 2022). As reported by the Alabama Commission on the Evaluation of Services, the projected cost to replace these teachers range between \$146 and \$652 million (2022).

In 2019, Billingsley & Bettini published a follow-up study and review of literature to determine how the attrition rates of special education teachers changed from their initial review in 1993. The researchers found very little improvement in retention of special education teachers: 17.1% of teachers left their current school and district, 10.5% of teachers moved to another school within their district, and 6.6% of teachers exited the profession (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019, p. 698). When compared to other sub-sections of teachers, special education teachers were only second to English Language Learner development teachers and 46% higher than elementary teachers combined (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019, p. 698).

Billingsley & Bettini (2019) indicated a lack of solution within the literature in spite of the consistently growing attrition rates of special education teachers. According to Petyon, et al. (2021), special education teacher shortages have increased since 2012 (the Great Recession) to 6.8%, equivalent to almost 23,000 special education teacher vacancies. Because of the shortages, the promises of IDEA and equitable and fair education opportunities are at risk of diminishing, increasing the risk of not providing adequate services to at-risk student populations (Gaines, 2021). A growing concern to meet the needs of the students has led many education leaders to create alternative pathways to certification. In January 2022, Alabama revised the language of the ALSDE certification site to indicate eight updated pathways to teacher certification, to include an alternate route for special education teachers (ACES, 2022). After comparing three groups (preservice special education teachers, new special education teachers, and school administrators), Hagaman & Casey (2018) determined a need for an additional study to help pinpoint how different the experiences may be of general education teachers and special education teachers:

“...future research should consider using the same questions with general education teachers to see whether they feel the same within their first few years or whether there are major differences between special education teachers and general education teachers and their perceptions...” (p. 290)

Additional findings of why special education teachers were leaving the field (lack of peer respect, climate issues, unmet expectations of job reality, etc.) further support research conducted ten to twelve years earlier, with no solution in sight (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

### **Conceptual framework**

The guiding framework for this study is the Motivation-Hygiene Theory, developed by Frederick Herzberg (1966) which, in short, explains satisfaction and dissatisfaction are on two separate planes of motivation, meaning one has satisfaction or no satisfaction and dissatisfaction or no dissatisfaction (Katt & Condly, 2009). According to Katt’s & Condly’s (2009) explanation of the motivation-hygiene theory, motivation comes from two sources: the desire to grow psychologically (motivation) & to avoid pain or unpleasantness (hygiene). Hygiene factors are considered neutral, non-factoring when present, but are de-motivating and adverse when absent (Katt & Condly, 2018). Motivation factors lean towards intrinsic needs (recognition, promotions, etc.) and are typically connected to job satisfaction; on the other hand, hygiene factors (extrinsic needs: quality of relationships, administrative support, working conditions, etc.) do not contribute to job satisfaction but hygiene factors must be in place to prevent dissatisfaction (Toytok & Acar, 2021).

### **Methodology**

According to Yin (2019), a case study explains a social circumstance- how or why some social phenomenon works- and attempts to illuminate why decisions were made within the social

phenomenon (p. 14). This study, a qualitative case study, works to create a triangulation of several sources to determine why special education teachers are leaving the profession at such higher rates than their peers. This triangulation will be served through questionnaires, interviews, previously reported data, and extant documents. The study will be approached as a multiple case study for the purpose of cross-case analysis to compare the perspectives of experiences of general education teachers and special education teachers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Potential participants will be sent a questionnaire to collect initial information, including person blogs, vlogs, and/or social media platforms. Though some research indicates using these forms of extant documents could potentially be unethical due to the personal nature of the information, the generational shift of sharing feelings and thoughts via blogs and other social sites is a more prevalent practice (Wilson, 2018). The extant documents will also provide additional key points to discuss during the one-on-one interviews. Interviews will be semi-structured to ensure all participants are able to address specific points to compare like-experiences. The questions will be used to guide the interview but also allow space for additional discussion points. The interviews will initially be coded using an online software (FreeQDA), followed by collecting like words in each interview and physically coding them. The data will be cross-analyzed to attempt to develop a foundational proposition of the event. Additional cross-checking will come by way of sharing the transcribed interview information and coding with individual participants through Box (a university approved online drive platform), utilizing extant document key word coding, and comparing to previously reported data presented in literature.

## **Limitations**

Because of my own experiences within the fields of general education and special education, it is imperative I practice constant reflexivity to ensure my own perceptions do not alter the interview procedures. When personally invested in a topic, the researcher brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. The final product of this type of study is yet another interpretation by the researcher of others' views filtered through his or her own. (Merriam, 1998, p. 22) Furthermore, understanding the experiences of special education teachers may not be as encompassing as teachers in general. The population is limited due to the focus of the study and is not a point of concern for all groups in education. Recognizing this, the study will work to provide a more personal response to the outlook of special education in a way that connects with multiple aspects of education.

As explained by Bloomberg & Volpe (2019), case studies may not have clear beginning nor end points (p. 51). It is important for researchers conducting case studies to acknowledge the findings may be different than what was initially expected, furthering the need for finding insightful and alternative perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p 51). When considering the uncertainty of the outcome, Bloomberg & Volpe (2019) explain collecting additional data is key in providing a rich, well supported study. By triangulating the data collected from interviews (which may not always be neutral), member checking, and document review (which may present biased results), the researcher demonstrates extensive practice to ensure credibility within the study and results of the data collection.

**FIGURE 1.1: DEFINITION OF TERMS USED AND DISCUSSED THROUGHOUT THIS STUDY**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
SETs/SE	special education teacher; teachers who teach children with disabilities as defined in section 602 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (20 U.S. Code § 1003)
Case Manager	A special education teacher will be assigned as a case manager for a maximum number of student records to ensure the implementation of special education and related services for these students. The number of records to manage does not represent the number of students that a teacher will serve. Those numbers will be determined by the LEA by taking into consideration a number of factors including severity of the needs of the students, location of the services (e.g. general education classroom, resource room), the number of campuses a teacher serves, and whether all IEPs can be implemented as written. This rule does not apply to teachers providing special education services to students with disabilities in correctional facilities. The maximum number of records per teacher is 20; for a speech/language pathologist, the maximum number of records is 30. (Ala. Admin. Code r. 290-8-9-.11)
GETs/GE	General education teacher; Instructs all students in the general education classroom in core academic curriculum (IRIS: Glossary)
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as amended in 2004 (IDEA); used for all reauthorizations of the law that guarantees students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education in the least-restrictive environment. (IRIS: Glossary)
FAPE	Special education and related services necessary for the child to benefit from his/her educational program provided in conformity with the IEP. These services must be provided for

	children with disabilities in the age range from three to twenty-one at no cost to the parents. (IRIS: Glossary)
IEP	Individualized Education Program; A written plan for the provision of special education and related services for a child with disabilities. (IRIS: Glossary)
LRE	Least restrictive environment; Each public agency must ensure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities ages 3-21, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular education classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Ala. Admin. Code r. 290-8-9-.06)
OSEP	Office of Special Education Programs; supports projects that provide information and technical assistance to a wide audience of early intervention and special education stakeholders in order to strengthen programs and services to infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities (IDEA,
Teacher Attrition	Term used to describe any of a number of reasons that teachers leave the field of education for non-education work (e.g., change careers, stay home with children, retire from profession). (IRIS: Glossary)
Teacher Turnover	General term used to refer to any of a number of major reasons that teachers leave their immediate roles, including through attrition, transfer, or migration. (IRIS: Glossary)
Teacher Retention	Teachers remaining in the same teaching assignment and school as the previous year (Billingsley, 2004)

Special education	Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parent, to meet the unique educational needs of a child with disabilities. The specially designed instruction is at no cost to the parent but does not preclude incidental fees that are normally charged to nondisabled children or their parents as part of the regular education program. Special education includes classroom instruction, instruction in physical education, home instruction, instruction in hospitals and institutions, and instruction in other settings. The term includes speech-language pathology services, or any other related service, if the service is considered special education rather than a related service under State standards, travel training, and vocational education. The definition of special education is a particularly important one since a child is not disabled unless he/she needs special education. Related services also depend on this definition, since a related service must be necessary for a child to benefit from special education. Therefore, if a child does not need special education, there can be no related services.
General education	A typical (regular education) classroom and curriculum designed to serve students without disabilities (IRIS: Glossary)
Inclusion	a state of inclusivity (in the general education setting) in which all students are educated so as to reach their fullest potentials, regardless of ability or disability (IRIS: Glossary); Instructional arrangement in which heterogeneous (mixed-ability) groups are employed as a method of maximizing the learning of everyone in those groups; also helps students to develop social skills and has been demonstrated to yield especially favorable results for students in at-risk groups, such as those with learning disabilities.

Specially Designed Instruction	Adapting, as appropriate, to the needs of a child with a disability, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of the child that result from the his/her disability; and to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that he/she can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the education agency that apply to all children.
Co-teaching	two educational professionals working together to service a group of heterogeneous learners (IRIS: Glossary)
504	A plan that specifies the accommodations and modifications necessary for a student with a <u>disability</u> to attend school with her or his peers; named for Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities, ensuring that children with disabilities have equal access to public education; students with 504 plans do not meet the eligibility requirements for <u>special education</u> under IDEA. (IRIS: Glossary)
HQT	Highly Qualified Teacher; federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was in place, Alabama used The Alabama Model for Identifying Highly Qualified Teachers to identify highly qualified teachers. (Ala. Admin. Code r. 290-3-3-.01)
Self-Contained	A special classroom, usually located within a regular public school building, that exists only for students with exceptional learning needs. (IRIS: Glossary)
BIP	Behavior Intervention Plan; A set of strategies designed to address the function of a student's behavior as a means through which to alter it; requires a functional behavioral assessment and an associated plan that describes individually determined procedures for both prevention and intervention. (IRIS: Glossary)

FBA	A behavioral evaluation technique that determines the exact nature of problem behaviors, the reasons why they occur, and under what conditions the likelihood of their occurrence is reduced. (IRIS: Glossary)
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## Conclusion

The number of teachers exiting the profession has been a point of concern within the education community for a number of years. As reflected in more recent reports (ACES, 2021; Diliberti, et al., 2021; Fuller & Pendola, 2020), the attrition rate of teachers in public schools is no longer a point of concern but has become a sounding alarm. In a 2022 interview discussing the crisis of teacher exit (Noonoo), a research professor tracking teacher workforce, R. Ingersoll, explained the profession is becoming unstable and less experienced which indicates a coming surge that will be driven by attrition and turnover shortages. The growing rate of attrition and declining rate of teacher education program enrollment, paired with the need for qualified teachers to teach students already at risk, the promise of an equitable education to students with disabilities is becoming less attainable.

In hopes to provide new insight to an aspect of the teacher exit trend, the purpose of this study is to present the perspectives of general education and special education teachers from rural areas of Alabama to determine why special education teachers are leaving the field at higher rates than those of their peers. To do this, the study aims to address the historical data through the literature review in chapter two, provide the methodology and approach in chapter three, present the data from the research in chapter four, analyze and explain the data in chapter five, and offer recommendations and conclusions in the final chapter.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

The following is a review of literature focusing on the current issue of high attrition rates of teachers in public schools. Within the literature specific groups of teachers were examined to determine to discuss the rates and reasons for lack of retention among public school teachers. These groups include general education teachers, career technical teachers, elementary and secondary teachers, specific subject area teachers, special education teachers, etc. This review provides an examination of studies of the rate of attrition, the themes of the causes of attrition, and the potential prevention measures of attrition of public-school teachers, specifically general education teachers (GETs) and special education teachers (SETs).

The consistently growing need for teachers, specifically special education teachers in high need areas, supports previous research dating back to the early 1980s on teacher retention in public schools. The decline in teacher education program enrollment for special education teachers combined with the increase in special education teacher exits and growing number of students with exceptionalities (SWE), public education is on the precipice of a crisis for the substantial need for special education teachers.

### **Introduction to the Literature Review**

Billingsley & Bettini (2019) developed a critical analysis of literature that examined the retention and attrition of special education teachers. Within this analysis, researchers collected data from articles dating from 2002 to 2017, indicating a decades-old concern of special education teacher retention. Billingsley & Cross' (1992) research to determine variables the influence job satisfaction and commitment of teachers (both general education and special education) held on their intent to remain in teaching. Santoro (2018) indicates 1980 as the

beginning of a steady increase in teacher attrition and decrease in teacher retention in public school systems nationwide.

### ***Teacher retention and teacher attrition***

Teacher retention and teacher attrition, as explained by Kelchtermans (2017), can be used interchangeably but require a clear definition to understand the importance of determining how to combat the growing concern. When used under an educational lens, teacher attrition refers to “qualified teachers, leaving the profession for reasons other than having reached the age of retirement” (p 962). Retention, through the same educational lens, can be explained as “keeping teachers in teaching” (Kelchtermans, 2017, p 962). Kelchtermans (2017) continues to explain retention and attrition can be framed under a four-point problematization outside of the educational lens: *sociological, economical, public health, and human resources issue* (p 963-964). When focusing back through the educational lens, the concept of retention and attrition creates a problem and challenge; it is a problem by way of determining and developing insight on why ‘good’ teachers leave and a challenge by way of using the aforementioned insights to keep the ‘good’ teachers in place (Kelchtermans, 2017).

In both literature analyses conducted by Billingsley (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), common themes were found to determine the cause of high rates of teacher attrition in special education. In studies dating back to 1988, information indicated a decrease in teacher enrollment and an increase in need due to funding renewal of public schools (Heyns, 1988). In a study to determine the influences on special education teachers’ intent to leave, Conley & You (2017), reviewed and discussed key components of the alarming trend of research: attrition rates among special education teachers have been concerning for almost two decades and with the new concern of decreased enrollment in special education programs for

pre-service teachers, the data reflects a potential crisis within education. Since Heyns' (1988) study, countless researchers have studied the implications of teacher attrition, provided insight on how to combat attrition, and develop a commonality of all stakeholders to ensure the long-term effects of high attrition rates in public school teachers are avoided at all costs.

As previously mentioned, Heyns' study (1988) was developed to address a growing concern of what was deemed as "former teachers." This study utilized data from the NLS-72 (National Longitudinal Study) of the high school class of 1972 (Heyns, 1988, p 24). The group, originally interviewed the spring of 1972, consisted of twenty thousand students that provided data regarding their future plans; five follow-up interviews were conducted in 1973, 1974, 1976, 1979, and 1986 (Heyns, 1988, p 24). Coming off the heels of "declining enrollments and budget cuts," a teacher shortage concern began to emerge (Heyns, 1988). Through the data, it was determined the teacher shortage could be linked to dissatisfaction towards some aspect of the particular school or area (though the largest number of teachers choosing not to return to education came from the best schools and carried the highest qualifications) and it would only create higher attrition rates if school leaders were unable to separate school improvement and retention practices (Heyns, 1988, p 30).

In spite of the previous research, education systems continue to lose teachers, especially special education teachers, at alarming rates. Billingsley & Bettini (2019) collected 23 publications from as early as 2004 to more recent in 2019 and gathered input from additional professionals discussing the attrition and retention factors among special education teachers specifically. Billingsley & Bettini (2019) determined most of the studies utilized teacher intent rather than focusing solely on actual attrition in schools. In 25 different pieces of collected evidence, Billingsley & Bettini (2019) found only one study that considered the detailed

accounts of why teachers are leaving. Furthermore, not one study investigated the process teachers followed when decided to leave nor gathering information from entry to exit of teachers that left (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019, 733). While losing highly qualified teachers at a high rate is devastating to a learning community, students with disabilities are more likely to suffer great losses in learning when schools are faced with high rates of special education teacher attrition. Juxtaposing the findings of Billingsley (1993) and Billingsley & Bettini (2019) reviews, the evidence does not provide any improvement of the trend of attrition among special education teachers. It bears to question what the state of the classroom teacher may be when considering the current trends of attrition among GETs and SETs alike.

### ***Special Education***

In 1975, U.S. Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children to assist with supporting states in serving people with disabilities and providing rights to people with disabilities. Since the enactment of this law, followed by the reauthorization of EHA in 1990 becoming IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) and an additional amendment in 2004, children have been provided equitable educational opportunities and services designed to meet their needs (A history of the individuals with disabilities education act, 2020). These students require highly qualified teachers with training focused on one of the IDEA specified disabilities, as well as ever-growing social, emotional, and behavioral needs. The need for highly qualified teachers has continued to increase with the implementation of services such as Child Find and Early Intervention. Researchers have determined a continuous loss of special education teachers over the last 40 years (Billingsley, 2004; Williams and Dikes, 2015; Billingsley and Bettini, 2019; Hester, Bridges, and Rollins, 2020). Due to the overwhelming need and shortage, special education teachers are facing increased paperwork, decreased support, and increasing levels of

burnout (Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2019; Conley & You, 2017; Robinson, et al, 2019; Grant, 2017) because caseloads are larger and the diversity of exceptionalities for each caseload is becoming broader.

With the alignment of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) and IDEA in 2004, additional standards and accountability measures were put in place for special education processes and educators to include early intervention services for children not enrolled in school (ages 3-5) , higher qualification requirements for special education teachers in the classroom, and more specific accountability measures to ensure better outcomes for students receiving special education services (A history of...2020). Since 2004, there have been six additional reauthorizations and changes made to the special education processes through IDEA (A history of..., 2020) to include:

- 2006: requirement of schools to implement research-based interventions for students with disabilities; local educational agencies (LEA) held responsible for providing services to students in private schools located within their districts;
- 2008: parental consent must be obtained to continue special education services, non-legal representation in due process hearings, state monitoring and assistance, appropriate fund distribution, and clear procedures for increased employment measures of students with disabilities;
- 2011: clarification of language for children under 3 receiving services to ensure appropriate services are being offered;
- 2013: clarification of language regarding parental consent and support (specifically informed of legal protections regarding public benefits and insurance when utilizing insurance to pay for special education services deemed necessary);

- 2015: states could no longer define modified academic achievement standards; alternate assessments based on modified standards no longer developed by states;
- 2017: implementation of the use of the term intellectual disability, revised definitions to align with the implementation of the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* (ESSA);
- 2020: COVID-19 updates to ensure FAPE (free appropriate public education) regardless of chosen instructional delivery by the LEA

Amid each of the changes, special education saw a decrease in the number of SWEs (students with exceptionalities) by 4% because of the additional requirements and standards, but also saw a drastic decline in the number of SETs by 17% (Dewey et al., 2017). This discrepancy led to a significant shift in student: teacher ratio from 14:29 in 2005 to 16:43 in 2012 (Dewey et al., 2017). There were 942,466 SETs and personnel employed during the 2017-2018 academic year with 7,130,238 students being served (A history of..., 2020). With the clear language addendum to IDEA Part C (birth through age 2), 409,315 children were provided services in 2018-2019 increasing by 110,267 from the number of children serviced in 2005-2006 (A history of..., 2020). Although the number of students being serviced increased by 2018, Dewey et al (2017) recognized a decrease in SETs employment by 2012 and acknowledged that, because of the decrease in the number of SWEs identified, the number of SETs decreased as well, but could potentially lead to a negative outcome in future years in the event of an increase in identification of SWEs. It was noted by Dewey et al (2017) that ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorders) was not a major factor at the time, but it would become a factor in years to follow because of the slight increase (2.8%) that occurred over the course of one year.

### ***Teacher Requirements***

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), implemented in 2001 under the Bush administration, created requirements for individuals desiring to enter the teaching profession that would allow them to be considered highly qualified teachers (HQT) as determined by the federal government (*The every student succeeds act: "Highly qualified teacher" requirements*, 2016).

The NCLB HQT provision defined highly qualified as:

*one who met three criteria-*

*1) holds a least a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution;*

*2) holds full state certification;*

*3) demonstrates competence in each core academic subject in which a teacher teaches;*

and would apply to every teacher providing direct instruction in core content areas (*The every student succeeds...*, 2016). The federal requirements led to many school systems, specifically those in rural and urban areas, faced with teacher shortages. According to Hill and Barth (2004), 75% of secondary teachers and 33% of elementary teachers were more likely to leave the education profession because of the additional certification requirements they were facing. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was reauthorized in 2016 to provide state agencies the autonomy to determine what requirements deemed an individual highly qualified (*The every student succeeds...*, 2016) in an attempt to provide assistance to resolve the teacher shortage.

Almost twenty years ago, Billingsley and Cross (1992) used commitment and satisfaction to determine individuals' intent on remaining in education. Utilizing research dating back to the late 1960s to 1980s, Billingsley and Cross (1992) recognized a growing trend in losing educators to other professions, in part because of the requirements states put in place for teachers to remain

employed. Cleveland (2003) indicated a national shortage dating back to 1983, quoting the National Commission on Excellence in Education: “Not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; that teacher preparation programs need substantial improvement; that the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exists in key fields” (p 17).

### **Prevention & Implications**

Billingsley & Bettini (2019) argue over the course of 25 years there has been ample research regarding the need of change to increase teacher retention, but little progress has been made to avoid a teacher-shortage crisis.

#### ***Prevention***

Studies dating back to the early 1990s (which included data from even further back) indicate a direct correlation between the attrition of educators and the support of administration through various roles (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Billingsley, 1993). In addition to administrative support, the following were frequently given as actions schools might take to encourage teachers to remain in the classroom: better salary (65%), better student discipline (50%), more faculty authority (34%), and smaller class sizes (30%) (Ingersoll, 2006). The following were also given, though less frequently, as steps schools might take to retain mathematics and science teachers: less paperwork, mentoring for newcomers, more parental involvement, opportunities for merit pay, better classroom resources, higher academic standards, more opportunities for advancement, and tuition reimbursement (Ingersoll, 2006).

Sutcher et al. (2016) describes a need for a systemic, nationwide approach to counter and correct the crisis of teacher attrition and offers four areas of focus: competitive and equitable compensation packages, increase training and high-retention pathways to enhance the amount of

qualified teachers, implement effective mentoring programs and improve working conditions, and develop a nationwide teacher supply market to ensure teachers are being utilized in areas they desire and are needed most (p 54). To echo those same sentiments, Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond (2017) explained the importance of teacher compensation packages, pointing out that teacher salaries have decreased over the last 30 years so much so that many teachers would qualify for multiple assistance programs after working 10 years in a school system (p 32). As with many professionals, student loan debt among teachers is much higher than anticipated. By providing additional loan forgiveness in some aspect, school districts and states have the ability to ensure teacher retention through longevity loan forgiveness and even promote enrollment in teacher preparation programs with forgiveness incentives (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

As previously stated, school administrators play a large role in both the attrition and retention of general education teachers and special education teachers. Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond (2017) suggested school leaders be required to attend additional rigorous training and leadership programs to provide them with the most effective strategies and practices as school leaders (p 34). Commitment of teachers can be increased by administrator support through feedback, encouragement, acknowledgement of achievements, allow teachers to participate in school decision making, and promote (through example) collaborative problem solving (Billingsley & Cross, 1992). By cultivating and providing a school culture that is supportive of the workloads of both GETs and SETs, school leaders are reducing the effects of the demands of teachers in the midst of rising responsibilities and accountability (Bettini et al., 2017).

## *Implications*

The consistent loss of teachers- whether through attrition or movement- creates an enormous loss and need for education systems as reflected in over thirty years of research (Bettini et al., 2019; Conley & You, 2017; Cancio et al., 2013; Hill & Barth, 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Heyns, 1988; Kelchtermans, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2016). As Kelchtermans (2017) explains, teacher attrition is disruptive to the ‘essential educational processes’ and reduces ‘instructional continuity.’ Furthermore, when teachers leave a school the culture building process and maintenance becomes even more difficult for school leaders to pursue (Kelchtermans, 2017, p 964). In most cases, researchers work studies around the impacts high attrition rates affect the student population. Sutchter et al. (2016), while addressing the ever-present teacher shortage crisis, explained stability, shared planning and collaboration, and increased effectiveness lead to higher rates of improvement among teachers in supportive and collegial working environments (p 41). When a school has a large number of new teachers, colleagues miss valuable opportunities to not only build a positive working environment, but also a strong support system for stakeholders:

...there (is) less of a knowledge base...(and) harder for families to be connected to the school because their child may get a new teacher every year...less cohesion on staff... (and) re-cover ground in professional development that had already been covered and try to catch people up to sort of where the school was heading (Sutchter et al., 2016).

Higher rates of teacher attrition also adversely affect school budgets. Research shows school systems spend anywhere between \$15,000 to \$25,000 per new hire (Santoro, 2018; Kelchtermans, 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-

Hammond (2017), teachers are leaving the profession altogether 8% annually and an additional 8% leave their current districts each year leading to an average of \$20,000 cost per teacher to replace (p 30). Moving at the same pace as the trends reported at the close of the 2014-2015 academic year, Sutchter et al. (2016) reported an estimated 300,000 additional teachers would be needed by the 2020 academic year and 316,000 additional teachers would be needed per year by 2025 (p 1). Using those same trends, the teacher shortage would potentially increase to 112,000 teachers annually by 2018 and continue on the same course in the years that follow (Sutchter et al., 2016, p 1). These figures, as teacher attrition grows, will continue to increase and create substantial financial burdens to school districts to ensure new hires are highly qualified by their state's standards.

### **Reasons for Attrition**

As indicated by previously outlined research, high rates of attrition and turnover adversely affect school systems far and wide (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kelchtermans, 2017). Jones et al. (2013) found that both groups of teachers indicated 'perception of fit' was a strong predictor of the level of commitment felt towards the school and the current assignment (p 377). The more connected teachers felt to their colleagues, the more likely they were to indicate a desire to remain in the field (Jones et al., 2013). Novice teachers are less likely to develop relationships with their colleagues without encouragement from school leaders through various programs, including mentorships (Webb, 2018). According to Mrstik et al. (2019), researchers believe teacher attrition can be narrowed to a few common themes: "teacher satisfaction, positive working conditions, collaborative school climates, administrative support, job-related resources, and quality induction programs with a mentorship component" (p 28).

Without these vital components, the likelihood of attrition among GETs and SETs increases drastically.

Although some themes overlap between GETs and SETs reasonings for leaving, others are more specific to each field of work. As shown in **Figure 2.1**, the experiences of both groups of teachers can be unique to their own profession. Burnout, explained as combining three components- depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and personal accomplishment- has been determined to be one of the most significant indicators of likely attrition among educators from both special education and general education groups (Robinson et al., 2017). The long-term effects of burnout not only hinder a teacher's effectiveness within the educational setting, but also in their personal lives as well which adds to the feeling of despair that could have been potentially avoided (Robinson et al., 2017). Conley & You (2017) found some aspects, such as demographic variables and teacher characteristics, cannot be changed but factor into the decision-making process when determining to remain or leave. Furthermore, aspects of the job (lack of influence and respect, lack of autonomy for working conditions) have become widely accepted as unchanging but factor into higher rates of turnover among both general education and special education teachers (Keltchermans, 2017; Kopowski, 2008). While both SETs and GETs have some similar reasonings for leaving the profession, both have very unique experiences that lead to high rates of attrition among teachers.

### ***General Education Teachers***

General education teachers (GETs), as explained by Bettini et al. (2017), are considered to be responsible for all students and provide general instruction based on grade-level standards (p 246). In most systems, GETs are additionally responsible for providing Tier 2 interventions

(direct, grade-level instruction to students that are not meeting standards through Tier 1 instruction) while focusing on grade-level curriculum (Bettini et al., 2017). When considering workload, GETs indicated having a clear and assigned workload led to a lower likelihood of burnout and attrition but when expectations are not clear and administrators did not communicate the job responsibilities clearly, GETs demonstrated a 63% higher likelihood of attrition (Bettini et al., 2017). Furthermore, GETs were more likely to voluntarily leave the profession at a rate between 19% and 30% within the first five years of teaching due to personal reasons, low salaries, poor working conditions, and some sort of job dissatisfaction related to the physical condition of their environment (Sutcher et al., 2016).

**FIGURE 2.1: THE FIGURE INDICATES THE DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS AND GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS BASED ON THE CURRENT LITERATURE.**

Special Education Teachers		General Education Teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Conley &amp; You (2017)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• working conditions</li> <li>• prep/qualifications</li> <li>• higher levels of stress</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Miller (1999)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teacher-team efficacy</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Billingsley &amp; Cross (1992)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• higher likelihood to leave edu when compared to gen ed teachers</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Bettini, et al (2020)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• certification requirements</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bettini, et al (2020)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student behavior</li> <li>• hours working</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Conley &amp; You (2017)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teacher characteristics</li> <li>• backgrounds</li> <li>• demographic variables</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Kelchtermans (2017)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• professional relationships (teacher with-students, colleagues, leaders)</li> <li>• emotional belonging (teachers have no or very little control over crucial working conditions that deeply affect their practices and yet they still have to enact their job through engaging practice that they are being held responsible,(p 970)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Madigan &amp; Kim (2021)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• burnout leads to attrition</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Kopowski (2008)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• burnout leads to attrition</li> <li>• lack of influence and respect</li> <li>• lack of support</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Kopowski (2008)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student discipline issues</li> <li>• accountability mandates</li> <li>• underpaid/underfunded</li> <li>• lack of autonomy</li> <li>• perceived PD usefulness</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Kelchtermans (2017)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• performance driven results</li> <li>• lack of CAREER (no moving up, very flat)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Madigan &amp; Kim (2021)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• burnout leads to attrition</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Bettini, et al (2020)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• number of grade levels (preps)</li> <li>• # of FRL students</li> <li>• collegial support</li> <li>• access to instructional materials</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Throughout research, attrition has been viewed through the lens of resilience and job satisfaction. Some studies have determined the exit can be attributed to lack of resiliency, but

Kelchtermans (2017) argues that the decision to exit the profession or specific system leans more towards a display of resiliency:

Qualified teachers who decide not to stay in teaching may do so because they don't feel there is enough of a fit between themselves, their personal professional goals, and ambitions on one hand, and the ambitions and goals of the school or wider educational system on the other hand...this decision does not necessarily reflect...lack of resilience, or incompetence, but may—on the contrary—in fact be a positive choice for an alternative career.

According to Bettini et al. (2020), GETs were more likely to experience lower rates of resiliency when encountered with 'frequent instructional interactions'(p 311). Furthermore, GETs were more likely to express intent to leave the career when they were expected to teach multiple grade levels and encountered student discipline problems (Bettini et al., 2020).

While resiliency can be argued, the research is clear regarding the attrition of GETs in schools where retention is needed most. According to Sutchter et al. (2017), schools with a higher number of students of color have an overall attrition rate of 64%, with teachers of science and math leaving by 19%, novice teachers at 24%, and at 50% in Title 1 schools. Sutchter et al. (2017), continues, "Historically, teachers of color and white teachers have left the workforce at similar rates but teachers of color have moved schools at noticeably greater rates for the last two decades...three-quarters of all teachers of color teach in schools with most students of color...which are often under-resourced and plagued by poor working conditions."

### ***Special Education Teachers***

Special education teachers (SETs) follow the same teacher education preparation pathway as general education teachers (GETs) but require additional training to be considered highly qualified to teach students with exceptionalities. When using the HQT explanation provided by the U.S. Department of Education, “the term ‘highly qualified’ has the meaning given the term in section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, except that such term also (i) includes the requirements described in subparagraph (B); and (ii) includes the option for teachers to meet the requirements of section 9101 of such Act by meeting the requirements of subparagraph (C) or (D)” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The publication proceeds to detail the additional certification requirements of full state certification, not temporarily or provisionally certified due to an emergency need, certification in all content areas teaching, and other additional requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) not required of GETs.

As explained by Bettini et al. (2017), SETs have ambiguous roles in the education setting. SETs are typically responsible for developing accommodations and modification for students requiring Tier 3 interventions in the general education setting, implementing interventions specific to the needs of the individual student (based on their IEP), collaborate with the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) Team to ensure students are receiving the most beneficial and appropriate services, and make decisions about necessary curriculum without clear guidance due to the number of individualized needs for each student (Bettini et al., 2017). According to Emery and Vendenberg (2010), SETs make up approximately 10% of public school teaching personnel and, though needed, only 10% of the employed meet the certification requirements to be fully certified in special education. Special education teachers are responsible for working closely with students diagnosed with exceptionalities under IDEA as well as various

behavioral and emotional disorders, which may lead to additional stressors if they are not adequately supported (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Support can be provided by way of peer teachers, GETs, parents, and administrators, but the strongest influence and indicator of SETs intent to leave the profession is lack of support from administrators (Conley & You, 2017). Cancio et al. (2013) found lack of administrative support is one of the most discussed causes of attrition among SETs and associated job satisfaction could be determined based on the SETs perception of administrative support. Conley & You (2017) explained previous research revealed many other factors such as lack of resources and lack of central office support were assumed under the school building administrator per teacher input. SETs were four times more likely to stay in the profession when they reported that their building administrator exhibited support through action both in the school and outside of the school building in which they were employed (Conley & You, 2017).

Teacher team efficacy is a characteristic of social collaboration that leads to informal support, offers essential information, fosters work coordination, and helps with buffering potential role conflict among team teachers (Conley & You, 2017). This particular concept is unique to the experiences of special education teachers because of the role conflict many contend with due to unclear job descriptions (Bettini et al., 2017), especially when working with co-teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as additional administrative-level duties because of the nature of their job. Teacher team efficacy provides the opportunity for teachers to co-plan and collaborate with their colleagues which leads to lower levels of stress and increased levels of satisfaction and commitment (Conley & You, 2017). SETs who experience lower levels of satisfaction tend to experience higher levels of burnout when compared to their peers (Robinson et al., 2019).

## Theories/Frameworks

There has been a multitude of theories and frameworks used to research attrition within the educational setting. These theories and frameworks allow researchers to guide their own understanding of the problem at hand. Bloomberg & Volpe (2019) explained the theory and/framework not only creates the focus of the research, but it also is “informed and shaped by it” and “offers a source of thinking, planning, and conscious action throughout the research process, helping to situation the study within its appropriate context, grounding the researcher’s philosophical stance, and articulating how all key methodological elements are related” (p 104). The following frameworks, as depicted in **figure 2.2**, were found throughout the literature (*noted- the theories and frameworks listed below were found in research relating to the attrition of teachers, specifically SETs; the origination of the theories and frameworks will only be discussed as it pertains to the literature*):

**Relational-Cultural Theory** The school setting, by nature, is rooted in a socially driven context. When school personnel build relationships within their learning community and school community, the chances of retention increase greatly (Webb, 2018) Working to determine how resiliency and relationships potentially lead to higher rates of teacher retention, Webb (2018) utilized relational-cultural theory (RCT) to guide the study. As Webb explains, “RCT arises from women’s lived experiences and may be applied to understand the ways in which women specifically, and people generally, work in and through relationships” (p 3) and continues that with RCT “all growth occurs in connection...all people yearn for connection...and growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment” (p 3). Using RCT to frame teacher retention as it relates to resiliency, Webb (2018) explains by looking closely at relationally focused environments and providing opportunities for people to thrive

even in moments of hardships, it lends to seeing resilience as the ability to connect, reconnect, and avoid complete disconnection during hardship (p 4). Furthermore, this framework constructs the concept that resiliency (which leads to retention) can be developed through relationships (Webb, 2018, p 4).

***Conservation of Resources Theory*** Working to develop predictors of GETs and SETs to continue working in the classroom, Bettini et al. (2020) used conservation of resources (COR) theory. COR is a motivational theory that suggests people utilize limited resources to meet the demands of their jobs (p 311). To be clear, resources can be any a number of things that lend to employees' capabilities to meet the demands of their job, to include social supports, material resources, and internal resources (Bettini et al., 2020). The more balanced demands of a job and resources are, the more likely employees are to stay; contrary to balance, when demands and resources are unbalanced the intent to leave increase substantially (Bettini et al., 2020).

***Affective Events Theory*** Jones & Youngs (2012) utilized affective events theory (AET) to determine the connection between teacher burnout and job satisfaction with attitudes and emotions. AET is a psychological model developed within the organizational behavior research field to explain the connection between emotions and feelings in the workplace and job performance, job satisfaction (Jones & Youngs, 2012). Jones and Youngs (2012) specifically focused on emotional responses such as positive and negative affect, perception of ability, and fatigue and how well each one presented intent to stay within the profession. Prior to their study, no other research utilized AET to determine teacher commitment and potential burnout (Jones & Youngs, 2012). Through this framework, Jones & Youngs (2012) were able to assess various emotional responses from their focus groups and collect substantial data that would provide

relevant information to ensuring higher rates of job satisfaction and commitment, leading to higher attrition rates among both GETs and SETs.

***Houses' Theory of Social Support*** Recognizing the overwhelming number of studies that attribute administrative support to teacher retention, Cancio et al. (2013) developed a clear definition of support through House's theory of social support. This theory defines support for teachers in four areas: emotional support (administrators show), instrumental support (administrators directly assist), informational support (administrators provide), and appraisal support (administrators lead) (Cancio et al., 2013, p 73). By using House's theory, Cancio et al. (2013) was able to provide clear language to help teachers understand what administrative support is and how it should be provided.

***Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework*** Examining the experiences of veteran SETs through a phenomenological approach, Lesh et al. (2017) guided the research by Bronfenbrenner's framework that was adapted by Brownwell and Smith (Lesh, et al., 2017, p 13). The framework combines four systems believed to be interconnected- microsystem (immediate setting including the teacher characteristics and students), mesosystem (relationships among workplace variables), exosystem (formal & informal structures), and macrosystem (cultural beliefs and ideologies of the dominant culture, economic conditions)- that offers a perspective of the individual teacher within a larger context (Brownwell & Smith, 1993).

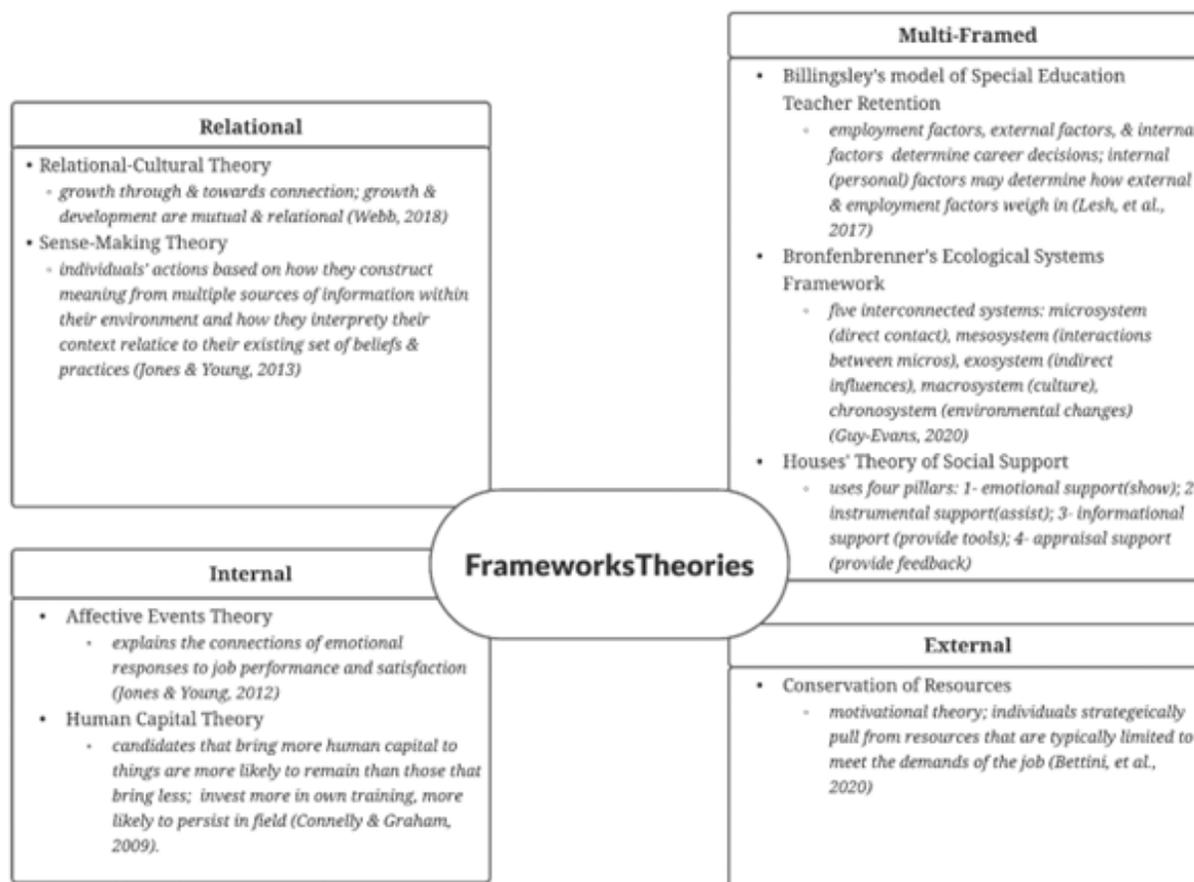
***Human Capital Theory*** Connelly & Graham (2009) aligned preservice (student) teaching and retention among special education teachers. The study encompassed three aspects known to attribute to the attrition of SETs- Human Capital Theory (HCT), rigor of training programs, and experiences levels (Connelly & Graham, 2009). HCT reflects the more time an individual invests in training the higher the likelihood of retention within the field of special education (Connelly &

Graham, 2009). In essence, HCT suggests special education teacher training programs may increase the retention rates among SETs, but the larger responsibility remains with the individual within the program (Connelly & Graham, 2009).

***Sense-Making Theory*** Jones, et al. (2013) explained the correlation of school-based relationships between new teachers and veteran teachers with overall satisfactions and retention. Through the use of sensemaking theory, researchers determined the ability to accurately interpret expectations and roles was demonstrated at a higher success rate when teachers expressed positive support and relationships with their colleagues (Jones et al., 2013). Sensemaking theory implies that actions of individuals are based on how they understand and develop meaning from sources within their environment and paralleled with existing beliefs and practices (Jones et al., 2013). As Jones et al. (2013) explained, sensemaking theory demonstrates the importance of colleague relationships for new teachers to ensure messages that are not always clearly conveyed are understood without being clouded by their own personal experiences existing beyond their current environment.

***Billingsley's model of special education teacher attrition*** (1993) As an early researcher of SETs attrition factors, Billingsley created a specific conceptual framework that would provide the most accurate guideline to understanding attrition among SETs (Billingsley, 1993). The model encompasses the belief that the decision to remain or leave is determined by three factors- personal, social, and economic (Lesh et al., 2017). Billingsley (1993) further explained how the framework shaped the study of attrition among SETs: "(a) identify the primary variables that are hypothesized to influence teachers' career decisions; (b) suggest possible relationships among the major variables; and (c) provide the reader with a framework for interpreting the research findings that follow" (p 146).

FIGURE 2.2 DEPICTS THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE PREVIOUSLY USED FRAMEWORKS



## Framework

For the purpose of this study, *Herzberg's Double Factor Hygiene Motivation Theory* works as the guide to develop and understand how the experiences of special education teachers are leading to higher and longer-lasting attrition rates than the experiences of their peers serving in the roles of general education teachers. According to Toytok & Acar (2021), Herzberg's theory focuses on factors that satisfy and dissatisfy the individual. The theory takes two factors- hygiene and motivational- and delves into the interaction of each factor with the individual as two separate concepts (Toytok & Acar, 2021). Motivation factors lean towards intrinsic needs

(recognition, promotions, etc.) and are typically connected to job satisfaction; on the other hand, hygiene factors (extrinsic needs: quality of relationships, administrative support, working conditions, etc.) do not contribute to job satisfaction but hygiene factors must be in place to prevent dissatisfaction (Toytok & Acar, 2021). Using Herzberg's Double Factor Theory allows researchers to study not only what motivates people, but also the processes in how behavior begins, guides, and continues (Toytok & Acar, 2021). This theory "focuses on factors that cause employees to be pessimistic, quit the job and be dissatisfied and satisfying motivation factors that connect employees to the organization and make them happy in the workplace (Toytok & Acar, 2018, p 95).

### **Summary**

The findings within this literature review indicate extensive data regarding the attrition crisis of teachers. A substantial portion of the research has been focused on general education teachers and teachers as a whole (Robinson et al., 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017; Heyns, 1988; Croasmum et al., 1997; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Webb, 2018; Sutchter et al., 2016). Special education teacher attrition has been researched more in the last decade (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Lesh et al., 2017; Hester et al., 2020; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Dewey et al., 2017; Cancio, 2013; Conley & You, 2017), providing additional insight to the unique experiences of special education teachers.

The data set this research intends to focus has very little supporting research (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Bettini et al., 2017; Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley, 1993) over the course of the last few decades. This not only indicates a need for additional research, but when combined with the current rate of special education teacher attrition, also offers a sense of urgency in attempting to understand why special education teachers are leaving at much higher (and sooner) rates that

those of their general education peers. Working under the framework of Herzberg's Double Factor Theory, this study aims to differentiate the experiences of special education teachers and general education teachers and promote understanding of how school systems can begin to combat attrition with special education teachers.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study is to present the experiences of special education teachers in the classroom and to explain how those experiences have led to higher rates of teacher exit within the special education teacher community. When juxtaposed against the experiences of general education teachers, this study may offer a detailed description of how special education teachers are experiencing workplace challenges and dissatisfaction differently than their general education counterparts. Special education teachers are in a field that is overpopulated with students with behavioral problems (Prather-Jones, 2011) that would not typically qualify for services, overrepresentation and underrepresentation (Shippen, et al, 2009) with no resolution, fighting against legislature (McQuat, 2007) pushed without consultation, and attempting to equalize professional relationships among their peers (Tran, et al, 2020) with little administrative support. Each of these themes within the literature reflect the commonality of special education teachers experiencing poor support from school leaders, low trust for leadership, and high levels of burn-out. Through this study, I will work to bring light to how the specific experiences of dissatisfaction amongst special education teachers differ from those of general education teachers.

### **Method**

Case study, as defined by Creswell (2018), involves the “study of a case (or cases) within a real-life, contemporary context or setting...such as an individual, a small group, an organization, or a partnership (p. 96). According to Yin (2018), case study research requires the researcher to have constant interaction with the subjects being studied (p 82). Having minimal biases to the data and being flexible for data shifts are imperative to ensuring a concrete study. Case study research requires researchers to be inquisitive during the data collection rather than at

the end when the data is complete (Yin, 2018, p 83). Previous qualitative research on teacher retention and attrition utilized mostly surveys and questionnaires to develop and analyze data. To meet the standard of previous case study research, a more personal approach was necessary to develop the most detailed experiences of the teacher groups. This approach will be conducted through multiple interviews with open-ended and specific questions, document review from previous studies, and extant documents (blogs, vlogs, and other social sites) to ensure a thick description is created to provide reliable and valid data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

### **Reflexivity**

Yin (2018) explained a unique trait of case study research requires a quick interpretation of data almost immediately to determine if new information or potentially contradicting information has been given during the study (p 85). This requires a “firm grasp of the issues” to ensure the most accurate inferences are being made when interpreting the data (p 85). I have been provided the opportunity to develop a genuine understanding of the current plight of teachers nationwide, especially special education teachers.

My career as an educator began as a general education teacher working with grades 6-12 on the secondary level. After teaching general education four years, I moved to special education. Over the last ten years as a special education teacher, I worked alongside strong special education teachers with promising careers. Those same teachers exited the profession long before retirement. Through my own experiences and watching as colleagues have moved to different professions, the passion for retaining effective teachers in special education and creating a culture that promotes retention among special education teachers has grown extensively. I recognize, because of my own experiences within the field I am researching, I bring additional knowledge and potentially biased feelings to the study. While it may appear this

could present a skewed perspective, it could also provide opportunity for reflexivity within the study. To avoid bias within my own research and analysis, I will work closely with participants to co-construct their stories.

### **Research Questions**

This study was developed to bring attention to the differences in experiences among special education teachers and general education teachers in order to describe why attrition rates are higher among special education teachers. The research questions were developed to explore further into teacher exit and provide detailed experiences among both special education teachers and general education teachers:

**RQ1:** *How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for special education teachers who left the profession?*

**RQ2:** *How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for general education teachers who left the profession?*

**RQ3:** *In what ways does teaching domain contribute to differences in perceptions of workplace (dis)satisfaction, and how might this contribute to differential exit rates?*

### **Sampling**

The participants of this study are individuals that have exited the public education setting. These individuals have been classroom teachers in kindergarten to twelfth-grade settings and are considered to be HQTs (highly qualified teachers). Each pair- one special education teacher and one general education teacher- will have worked in the same school district and school. This will provide the study with two perspectives of the same leadership environment. The individuals

may currently serve in education through alternate positions that are not within the confines of the classroom in the public education setting. Those that have exited the public education setting entirely may currently serve in the classroom of a private education setting.

Initially, I will utilize previously formed connections with my peers to create a potential list of candidates. After contacting potential candidates, I will utilize the snowball technique to develop connections with additional candidates. The snowball technique, as defined by Creswell & Poth (2017), allows a small group of candidates to reach out to other potential candidates that may meet the requirements of the study. Leaning on the connections of peers may offer a foundational level of trust among candidates and myself as the researcher, leading to a more organic and open response.

### **Data Collection**

The attrition rate of public education teachers has consistently been an issue for many years (NEA, 2020). The trend has consistently continued to rise, providing years of collected data on the issue of teacher attrition and turnover. Through document review, previous input of teachers that have exited the field will provide a guiding point of questions when conducting the study. This review will also provide a foundational beginning to the depth of the study.

*Document analysis* The literature and document analysis provides a beginning point of data, creating a linear pathway of recurring trends leading to high rates of attrition among special education teachers and general education teachers. By identifying the trends, questionnaires can be developed to collect the most appropriate groups of participants. The questionnaires will provide a general overview of questions that will assist in developing more specific, personalized questions for the participants. The use of this particular extant document may also provide connections to additional data collection points, specifically blogs, vlogs, social media video

platforms, or journals. Each aspect will offer details that assist with developing interview settings that offer the most organic, natural experience possible.

**Interviews** The final method of data collection will be conducted through a series of 30-60 minute interviews. Each interview will lead with the following semi-structured interview protocol:

1. *How long were you teaching in your field?*
2. *What aspects of education did you serve outside of the classroom?*
3. *What aspects of your current job do you enjoy most?*
4. *What aspects of your current job are more appealing than teaching?*
5. *Do you feel like you were treated equally with other teachers in the building?*
6. *What was the moment you knew you wanted to leave teaching?*
7. *What about teaching bothered you?*
8. *What about teaching did you like most?*
9. *What encouragement would you give someone going into teaching/special education?*
10. *What warnings would you give someone going into teaching/special education?*
11. *In what order would you rank the top three most difficult aspects of your role in education?*

Using these questions, I will allow the interviewee to guide the remaining interview through their answers. This will allow the interviewee to feel most comfortable and prevent the interviewer from allowing a preconceived idea to lead the questions. This approach has been previously field tested on non-related participants for a research class. The intent of sharing the interview questions and questionnaire was to allow an unbiased trial to occur to create the most appropriate, clear interview. The feedback was used to make changes to the introductory interview questions and a few minor changes to the questionnaire, which included the demographic information of potential participants.

The interviews will be recorded on an electronic device and uploaded to a university-approved cloud service (Box) in folders private only to the interviewer and interviewee. The

private folders will be specific to each participant, no two participants having access to the same folder. Each folder will contain the recorded portions of the interviews, collected data from blogs or vlogs the participant created (with written consent), and complete questionnaires. This will also allow both participant and researcher to continuously review and member-check responses and analysis of the responses. The Box folders will be kept confidential and only shared with the participants. When the data is collected, the identities of the participants will be presented as numbers. *Participant 1* will be the only identifying source within the published data. This will ensure participants will remain confidential. All identifying information of former employers (location, name of individuals, school name, etc.) will be removed from the published information. Only information such as the economic level of the school, generalized location (southern US, Midwest, etc.), and grade levels of the school will be shared.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Bloomberg & Volope (2019), data analysis should include descriptions of the case or cases, including themes and cross-case themes, and utilizing analytic categories to establish patterns or themes (p. 282). Yin (2019) explained the importance of starting small when analyzing the data to build the strongest, most foundational approach to address the research questions. For example, the data analysis of this study would first address a simple question: *What was the last, singular event that you (the teacher) remember prior to leaving the profession?* Because the question provides a concrete answer, the outcomes will be easier to determine, leading to additional questions that eventually point back to the research question and assist with explanation building (Yin, 2019).

The two-factor theory (Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory) explains job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction of employees exist on two different planes that are independent of each

other (Nickerson, 2021). Herzberg argued that motivators (satisfiers) are factors such as recognition, opportunities for advancement, achievement, performance, and the work itself (Nickerson, 2021). Hygiene factors (dissatisfiers) are considered salary, working conditions, relationships with supervisors, relationships with colleagues, policies, and rules (Nickerson, 2021). The initial analyzing strategy will use this theory as analyzing framework to reflect how the data mirrors the collected literature and provide relevant starting points to organize the analysis.

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, then uploaded to an online qualitative data analysis program (FreeQDA). This program will find commonly and/or repetitively used words and phrases, sort them into pre-set color-specific categories, and create tags to sub-categorize the themes further. Yin (2019) explains computer tools can be helpful but must always be considered an “able assistant and reliable tool” (p 166). The program provides initial and simplified patterns, but I will develop a rich description by working through the coding and presentation of possible patterns through like words that could lead to like experiences. Due to the nature of the study, building an explanation through the data will guide the process of analyzing the patterns both within-case and cross-case analysis. Yin (2019) indicates explanation building is both deductive (using the initial propositions) and inductive (using the data collected from the study) and is an iterative process (p 181). Through cross-checking of the data using an initial proposition, the study may not lead to a conclusion but will offer the potential to develop ideas for additional studies and action plans (Yin, 2019).

The concept of explanation building could be seen as potentially using a bias to form the path of data analysis. To avoid this and provide reflexivity, an interpretation outline tool will be used to question each pattern and theme while also developing and strengthening the findings

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Practicing cross-case analysis through a classification matrix as a third round of analysis will reflect how the themes are interconnecting (or not connecting at all) and give an additional layer of support when determining the data of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). A final analysis will occur through explaining each of the connected or dissimilar themes found through the cross-case analysis by developing table to explain each theme with previously reported literature and aligned with the motivator-hygiene chart. Juxtaposing the data analysis with notes collected during interviews (behavior, body language indicators, memorable moments, etc.), the interpretation of the data will give a unique perspective to an ever-growing issue.

### **Validity of the Study**

Yin (2018) utilized four tests to ensure the validity of a case study: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. Construct validity focuses on identifying the most appropriate measures for what is being studied; internal validity seeks to create a causal relationship among the data; external validity develops ways the findings of the study can be generalized; and reliability indicates the same outcome of the study can be determined using various analysis tools (Yin, 2018, p 42).

The construct validity of this study is confirmed three ways: multiple sources of evidence represented by the participants of the study, extant data collection, and collected literature; creating a chain of evidence, provided through interviews and questionnaires; and data collection review through participant collaboration (Yin, 2018). The participants will be limited to individuals that have exited the career of public education educator. The specific nature of the previously held job descriptions will include general education teachers (responsible for teaching students with or without Individualized Education Plans) and special education teachers

(responsible for students specifically with Individualized Education Plans and the development of those plans). The participants will also conduct multiple member checks of the data collected and analyzed. These checks will occur at least two times during the collection stage and one time after the data has been analyzed.

The internal validity is confirmed predominately during the data analysis phase (Yin, 2018, p 45). This occurs through pattern matching, explanation building, addressing other explanations, and using logic models (Yin, 2018, p 45). The internal validity can also be confirmed through ensuring a specific event has been directly observed. As explained in previous chapters, the loss of teachers in general education and special education- is an event that has occurred over the last twenty years with no resolution in sight (Billingsley, 2018). Furthermore, I have witnessed first-hand the loss of teachers from special education moving into other career pathways. The external validity of this study is confirmed through the research questions and the purpose of the study- how are the experiences of special education teachers different than those of the general education teachers and why are the experiences leading to higher, more consistent attrition rates among special education teachers over the span of twenty years.

According to Yin (2018), the final validity test of a case study is through the lens of reliability (p 46). The reliability of a study can be determined through creating a thick description which will provide readers with the ability to have a clear lens of the study and setting (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 263). By using thick description, I will be able to clearly describe the details of each setting in order to ensure credibility in the experiences. This will also allow any future researchers to validate my own study through following the descriptions and procedures.

To ensure this inquiry is credible, I will practice active checking of reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p 261). As explained by Creswell & Poth (2017, p 18), reflexivity is being aware

of the nature of the findings and the impact of the researcher. Yin (2018) further explained the importance of being aware of how the researcher's perspective can influence an interviewee's responses, but also how the responses can influence the line of inquiry (p 120). This will occur through member checking as previously outlined.

### **Ethics**

Prior to the study, potential participants will be provided clear expectations of the use of the data collected during the study. The participants will be provided informed consent and confidentiality. Because of the narrative style of case study, all names will be changed in order to provide privacy of the participants. The participants will be provided the opportunity to withdraw without any consequences from the study at any point prior to publication. All of the participants will be at least twenty-three years of age or older and will sign a participant consent form prior to the collection of any data that is used in the study. None of the participants will have roles that conflict with the power role of the researcher.

### **Limitations**

This study intends to focus on how the experiences in education are different for special education teachers when compared to their general education peers and why those differences lead to higher attrition rates among special education teachers. This may present limitations in the sense of not providing the whole picture of experiences for teachers of both groups. While attrition rates among general education teachers are rising, the need for consistent special education teachers is dire. Without continued, consistent teachers in special education, many experts believe what IDEA mandated decades ago will be at risk due to lack of qualified individuals (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

**Positionality**

As an educator for thirteen years, I have experienced the constant ebbs and flow within education as a system. I began my career as a general education teacher, including the lead teacher in an inclusion, co-taught classroom. After five years, I transitioned to serve in special education once completing a master's degree program. I served as a case manager, co-teacher, resource teacher, and self-contained classroom teacher. Because of my own experiences that have shaped my perceptions of both roles, I am acutely aware of the biases that may arise during this process. By frequent member checking, I aim to avoid allowing any experiences of my own alter the way the data is collected. My experiences will also prove useful as a connection tool to those I am interviewing. Bringing my own experiences to conversations and using previously formed connections with colleagues will provide the opportunity to have a mutual understanding of the hardships each individual may have faced. Understanding both the general education setting and special education setting also provides neutrality in the way of recognizing the differences in experiences but respecting the difficulty of both.

**Significance**

The need for teachers is evident based on recent trends. Education systems are seeing teachers exit the field in record numbers, especially post COVID-19 (NEA, 2021). Although the need is clear and systems are recognizing a change must happen, little research has been conducted to determine what specific events and experiences led to teacher exit. Furthermore, even less research is available to determine why the attrition rate among special education teachers ranks at the top of the groups of teachers. The research reflects a need for change among practices in education systems to ensure teacher retention and yet systems are consistently in need of teachers. Losing special education teachers creates a stronger need of understanding due

to the needs of the learners specific to the population those teachers serve (Peyton, et al., 2021). This study will allow individuals that have exited the public education systems to explain why they chose to leave and give voice to former special education teachers on how their own experiences were unique to any other teaching group among educators.

Billingsley & Bettini (2019) collected data from 2012-2013 from both special education teacher attrition and general education teacher attrition. This study dates back two decades, indicating researchers recognized a potential crisis with attrition. The data found 17.1% of special education teachers left their schools, while 16% of general education teachers left their schools (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). In an additional study conducted the same year, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found attrition rates among special education teachers were second only to teacher of English language development teachers (ELL). The National Educators Association conducted a survey alongside a RAND survey in 2021 (NEA, 2021). The surveys, completed by 2690 members, reflected 32% of teachers anticipated leaving their current assignment or careers by the end of 2021, compared to 28% from 2019 (NEA, 2021). The RAND survey determined one in four teachers gave serious consideration to leaving their job by the end of the 2020-2021 academic year compared to one in six pre-pandemic (NEA, 2021). The Alabama Department of Labor indicated potential growth of 55% from 2014 to 2024 for secondary teachers not including special education and career tech for new positions and 295 replacement positions (Alabama Projections Statewide, 2017).

Special education teacher shortages have increased since 2012 (the Great Recession) to 6.8%, equivalent to almost 23,000 special education teacher vacancies (Peyton, et al., 2021). Though shortages have increased, the number of available positions have not. According to the Alabama Department of Labor, the projected growth from 2014 to 2024 is 55%, leading to the

opening of over 1,500 additional positions (Alabama Projections Statewide, 2017). Furthermore, the projected number of necessary replacements due to teacher exit is 1,275 (Alabama Projections Statewide, 2017). Because of the shortages and increased need, the promises of IDEA and equitable and fair education opportunities are at risk of diminishing (Peyton, et al., 2021). Hagaman and Casey (2018) found an extreme discrepancy among why special education teachers were leaving their field and the perceptions of the administration teams leading them. Hagaman and Casey (2018) focused their study on special education teachers specifically, but found the administrative perception was not as skewed among general education teachers. Because of this lack of data, Hagaman and Casey urged: "...future research should consider using the same questions with general education teachers to see whether they feel the same within their first few years or...major differences between special education teachers and general education teachers and their perceptions..." (p. 290).

## **Conclusion**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the loss of both general education teachers and special education teachers is a consistently growing phenomenon with no end in sight (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The previous literature indicates multiple studies reflecting the need for change to occur before the attrition rates rise above retention and recruitment rates (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Furthermore, the loss of special education teachers has become worrisome to leaders concerned with providing equitable learning experiences for students with IEPs.

Through introductory questionnaires and follow-up, in-depth interviews, special education teachers that have exited the profession will provide uncharted insight to the rapidly growing shortage. The four-step data analysis approach, aligned with using the Herzberg Two-Factory theory as a guiding point, the design of this study will offer relevant and strongly

supported evidence that will lead implications that cannot be ignored when considering how to combat the shortage of special education teachers in school systems across the nation.

## **Chapter 4: Data Review**

### **Overview**

The following questions are answered through case study research conducted to determine the experiences of individuals that exited the public school setting:

*RQ 1: How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for special education teachers who left the profession?*

*RQ2: How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for general education teachers who left the profession?*

*RQ3: In what ways does teaching domain contribute to differences in perceptions of workplace (dis)satisfaction, and how might this contribute to differential exit rates?*

The analysis of these questions is presented by coding participants' responses through free QDA to highlight keywords and themes that occur through each experience based on subject area (general education and special education). These common words and themes were cross-referenced between participants across subject areas. This cross reference provided the analysis of like and unlike experiences of both teacher groups.

### **Description of Samples**

The sample consisted of 10 participants and provides the opportunity to delve into each participant's experiences without overcrowding the data. This sample size represents former public school teachers from several aspects of education and provides a concise explanation of the experiences of each individual. Each individual served as an educator in the public school setting as a general education teacher or special education teacher. If the participant is currently

serving as an educator in the public school setting, the teacher formerly served as a special education teacher but moved into the general education classroom setting.

The participants representing the general education field of former public school classroom teachers are three individuals teaching in the private school setting. The participants worked in rural school districts all within 30 miles; these participants also worked within the same school district but not within the same time frame. Two of the participants are highly qualified elementary school teachers (grades K-6) and one participant is highly qualified secondary school teacher (grades 6-12). Two of the participants are females in the 30-33 age range and one participant is male in the 34-36 age range.

**TABLE 4.1. DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS/SAMPLE**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Current Setting</b>	<b>Former Setting</b>	<b>Certification</b>
<b>General Ed (GE)</b>	Participant 1	private	Public / GE	6-12 general science
	Participant 2	private	Public / GE	Elementary (K-6)
	Participant 3	virtual private	Public / GE	Elementary (K-6)
	Participant 4	STEM private	Public / GE	6-12 general science
	Participant 5	ministry	Public / GE	6-12 general science
	Participant 6	medical	Public / GE	K-6 health & fitness
<b>Special Ed (SE)</b>	Participant 7	homemaker	Public / SE	K-6 Special Education
	Participant 8	public/gen ed	Public / SE	6-12 Math; Special Education
	Participant 9	office	Public / SE	K-6 Special Education
	Participant 10	public/gen ed	Public / SE	6-12 ELA; Special Education

**Current Educators- private** The participants representing the group of individuals currently teaching all served in the general education classroom setting. Participant 2 and Participant 3 are females, Participant 1 is male. All three individuals fall within the age range of 27-36 and two, Participant 3 and Participant 1 have more than 10 years of experience, Participant 2 with 6. Participant 1 is considered highly qualified in secondary education (6-12) in general science. Participant 2 and Participant 3 are considered highly qualified in elementary education (K-6). All

three individuals worked within the same school district but at varying times, as well as districts within 30 miles of each other. All three individuals are currently teaching in their field of choice within the private education setting.

***Current Educators- public*** Two of the participants currently serve as teachers in the public-school setting in the general education classroom. Both Participant 8 and Participant 10 worked within the special education setting, 8 and 10 years, and are highly qualified in two areas. Participant 10 is highly qualified in both English Language Arts and Special Education, both in Secondary Education (6-12). Participant 8 is highly qualified in both General Mathematics and Special Education, both in Secondary Education (6-12). Both educators remain in the public-school setting with 15 or more years of experience.

***Exited educators- general education*** Three of the participants exited the field of education and entered non-education based jobs. Of the three, Participant 6 and Participant 5 exited pre-COVID and Participant 4 exited at the start of the pandemic. All three participants had more than 10 years of experience in the classroom but less than 25 years (retirement). Participant 5 and Participant 4 were both considered highly qualified in Secondary Education (6-12) and General Science. Both of these participants held Master's degrees in their respective fields. The third participant, Participant 6, was highly qualified in Elementary Education (P-6), Health and Fitness. All three participants are females and fall within the age range of 41-50.

***Exited educators- special education*** The four participants within this category served as educators in the field of special education for more than one year. Two of the participants, Participant 8 and Participant 7 served in the resource setting (75% of the students' day is in the general education setting); Participant 9 and Participant 10 served in the self-contained setting (<49% of the students' day is in the special education setting). Participant 8 and Participant 10

are current educators in the public-school setting while Participant 9 and Participant 7 no longer serving in education. All four participants are highly qualified in the field of special education. Both Participant 9 and Participant 7 are certified in grades P-6 and Participant 8 and Participant 10 are certified in grades 6-12. All four participants are female. Participant 9 is within the age range of 22-26, Participant 7 and Participant 10 are within the age range of 27-36, and Participant 9 is within the age range of 47-45.

### **Assumptions**

The researcher brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. The final product of this type of study is yet another interpretation by the researcher of others' views filtered through his or her own. (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). The participants in this study will be honest and forthcoming during the interview process.

### **Policy Context of Research**

Alabama Department of Education State Superintendent, Dr. E. Mackey, created the Alabama Teacher Shortage Task Force in 2019 to address the teacher shortage through a multi-faceted, long-term commitment focus on recruitment and retention (AL Resolution, 2019). In his resolution, Mackey described 30% of classrooms in Alabama public schools are led by teachers outside of their field with no educational training in the subject area in which they are teaching (AL Res, 2019). He also indicated 123 of 138 of the school districts hired teachers individuals on provisional or emergency certificates and areas of math, science, and special education experiencing the most critical shortages (AL Res, 2019). Mackey also began meeting with the Alabama Teacher Quantity and Quality Roundtable (TQ2) to continue a more focused approach to the findings of the task force. The TQ2 reviewed a multitude of documents to provide

solutions to the growing concern of teacher shortage. The TQ2 Roundtable presented the Teacher Pathways, Support, and Advancement pilot program to provide better support for teachers in early years, additional routes for individuals in Alabama to try teaching as a career with pay, and create more opportunities for teachers to lead from their classrooms with compensation (Alabama teacher quantity and quality roundtable: Final report, 2020). Though the TQ2 Roundtable group was able to find trends among previously published reports and policies, the group determined to develop additional policy and spend additional time training school districts to become better prepared to fund the program in order to retain and recruit teachers. The lack of action and solution through the policy development and resolution creation reflects the current trend of alarming rates of teacher attrition and few solutions in sight.

The US Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics published a report on the condition of education in 2021 reviewing data collected in 2018-2019 academic year and the fall semester of 2019, prior to the coronavirus pandemic (Report, iii). The NCES utilized the Condition of Education Indicator System which is organized into five sections: family characteristics; preprimary, elementary, and secondary education; postsecondary education; population characteristics and economic outcomes; and international comparisons (Report, 1). The report reviewed trends in enrollment trends: traditional public schools reflected a decrease of 0.4 million from 2009 to 2018, public charter schools reflected 3.3 million in 2018 which doubled from 1.6 million in 2009, and private schools increased from 5.5 million in 2009 to 5.7 million in 2017 (Report, 11). Public schools saw an increase from 6.5 million students served under IDEA in 2010 to 7.3 million students in 2019. At the end of the 2017-2018 academic year, there were 3.5 million teachers according to Report of the Condition of Education 2021 (p 16), making the national average for student/teacher ratio 15.9:1 in the public school

classroom (NCES: Teacher characteristics and trends). Private schools reflected a 11.4:1 student/teacher ratio (NCES).

The Alabama Commission on the Evaluation of Services found a slight increase of total teachers (2.4% since 2014) but a severe decline in the number of individuals graduating from teacher prep programs by 26% since 2003 (ACES, 2021). Using the data, ACES determined the percentage of teachers teaching outside of their field will be 8.5% by 2026 (p. 5). When considering the amount of weight placed on the outcome of assessments paired with at least 38 schools in Alabama with 30% or more of their teachers teaching out of field, it presents an alarming trend considering student retention and school failure lists (ACES, 2021). The Alabama Department of Education reported districts with the highest turnover rates averaged 70% higher than state average of teacher attrition among teachers with less than 3 years in the classroom (ACES, 2021). Of the 143 Alabama public school districts, only 18 have a first-time teacher retention rate above 60% (ACES, 2021).

## **Interviews**

The individuals participated in an interview with 11 guiding questions but room to move and flow organically as needed. I watched the body language and listened to the tone of voice with each participant to ensure comfort and honesty. I also reassured each participant of the confidentiality of the interview and their answers. Of the 10 participants, only 2 were unsure of how honest they could be. As the interviews proceeded, the two unsure seemed to become more comfortable as they began to provide insight to their experiences. The following will include excerpts from each interview that were integral to the research questions.

The experiences of teachers from special education and general education have parallel themes. Without analyzing, it may even appear the experiences are the same. Lack of support

from administration, lack of autonomy, lack of respect of time, and unclear and/or unmet expectations were experienced in both groups but in very different ways. The research questions provide a detailed answer to indicate how each group experienced the same dissatisfaction within the public school setting.

***RQ 1: How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for special education teachers who left the profession?***

Across the interviews, special education teachers echoed the experiences of their peers in special education in both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Experiences in satisfaction were grounded in student success. Each participant discussed their most rewarding moments taking place when students were able to experience school as their non-disabled peers. Question 8 (What about teaching did you like most?) offered the opportunity for participants to focus solely on a positive memory. As indicated in the interview excerpt below, Participants 7-10 indicated their students were the most positive memory they could recall:

*Participant 7- When my students were able to experience something for the first time and love it. My students were all below a 55 IQ level and on all areas of the spectrum [Autism]. When they loved something, it was clear. Those moments when their eyes lit up made everything else worth it.*

*Participant 8- I saw their [students] lightbulbs come on. In my current setting, I am still able to experience it, but in special education, when a lightbulb comes on and something clicks, it means a little more because our kids have to work a little harder than most.*

*Participant 9- My students made it all worth it. Teaching them was not hard. They made teaching fun and exciting.*

*Participant 10- I loved seeing my students experience learning about a new thing. They were sponges and loved everything about learning.*

As explained by Toytok & Acar (2021), motivation factors build on intrinsic needs and are typically connected to job satisfaction and hygiene factors build on extrinsic needs but do not contribute to job satisfaction. However, hygiene factors must be present to prevent job dissatisfaction. Of the four special education teachers, none of them recalled a positive memory that was focused on their own recognitions or awards. When digging deeper into the foundation of the motivation of this group of participants, their motivation was watching their own students learn and grow. This group continued to work in difficult environments (as mentioned in several interview segments) simply to see their students become successful. Initially, this can seem like an extrinsic motivator-the teachers are motivated by an outside source. A more specific definition of intrinsic motivation indicates that it is inherently satisfying or enjoyable and is non instrumental in nature and not contingent upon any outcome separable from the behavior itself (Legault, 2016). When considering this and the responses from the interviews, special education teachers are more likely to find their motivation intrinsically based motivators but lack the hygiene factors that prevent job dissatisfaction.

When considering the negatively worded responses from this group questions 5, 6, 7, & 10 offered some clear negative responses, but also using their body language and tone as tools to gauge their overall experience, it was clear these questions were unfavorable topics and difficult to discuss. One question in particular- if they were treated fairly and equally with their peers- unearthed more frustration for the teachers in the special education areas more so than the general education areas.

Participant 9 and Participant 10, both having spent time in the self-contained environment, immediately answered ‘no’ when asked if they were treated equally with their peers. With no hesitation (and at different interviews), both began to explain their experiences of being overlooked because of their setting. Participant 9 discussed how rarely she ever saw her administration outside of the required observations, the frequency of her name being left off of school-wide events and functions, and not having the same opportunities as the other teachers because of her setting. Participant 10 also described similar experiences:

*“My room was moved to the back of the campus, away from all other classrooms. Our closest neighbor was a teacher that was there a half-day. In the event of a weather drill, we were required to move our students, including two in wheelchairs, outside, across two sidewalks, into a second building, out of the second building, and into the third. It was a very stressful experience for my students and teachers. My students were also left off field trip rosters, my teachers and I were not always included in training, and very few times were we given the option to provide input for our schedule.”*

Though each participant could recall difficult moments, most of them could not detail the exact moment they chose to exit special education. Many of them discussed several moments that led to their exit or even just a culmination of things both within and outside of education. Participant 7 explained there was no one specific moment. She “left teaching with a love for the profession, but a stronger love for my own babies.” Participant 8, a current general education teacher, explained the requirements of the general education classroom were much more flexible than those of the special education setting. Because special education is federally regulated, there was very little flexibility in the more difficult aspects of the job (scheduling, paperwork, etc.)

and, as she explained, “*left very little room for creativity, which is one of the ideals that drew me to education.*” Participant 9, a self-contained teacher in the elementary setting, explained her moment was the culmination of several behavioral incidences. As she explained, several of her students had communication needs and many times, those led to difficult behaviors because the students could not express themselves. One student kicked, hit, and bit her several times during a 2-hour window. She said:

*I went to my administration and explained my student needed additional help. I was spent and had nothing left. The administration told me I was the only person trained on campus to handle it (which was incorrect) and they expected me to do so. I had to go find them and not once during our conversation did they ask what the behaviors were or indicated.*

She went on to say she attempted to explain the needs of the student and the need to keep her paraprofessionals safe in the classroom, but the administration refused to listen or understand her concerns. “*I knew, at the end of that conversation, I would not be able to return. Not because of the behavior, but because my school leaders never took the time to understand the why.*”

Participant 8, on the other hand, could pinpoint the exact moment-

*I explained to my administration the general education teacher was not meeting the needs of my student and refused to allow me to assist in any way in her classroom. My student was not the only student struggling and yet, the administration refused to address it because she was a veteran teacher. I realized if she couldn't help the students, I would do everything I could to help them, so I returned to the general education setting the following year.*

Although the hygiene factors needed to avoid dissatisfaction were clearly not in place, none of the participants in this group exited with any ill-will nor demonstrated lingering regret about what led to the exit. When asked what they enjoyed most about their current career, all five participants that exited the profession smiled. Participant 7, a homemaker, seemed to be most at peace with her answer- *“I am able to see my own kids grow and meet milestones. I don’t have to trust someone else to do that for me. I don’t have the pressure of doing that for someone else’s child, either. I can focus on my own children.”* Participant 9 currently works in the business world, spending most of her time around other adults. She explained how foreign it was to not be held to unreasonable expectations. As she said, *“As simple as it sounds, I genuinely appreciate the ability to use the restroom or take a mental break at my own will.”* This concept was a point of discussion in multiple interviews. All 5 individuals that exited the education career appreciated the ability to move and function as professionals and trusted adults.

**TABLE 4.2: RECURRING THEMES FROM EACH INTERVIEW & THE DETAILS OF EACH THEME WITH THE PARTICIPANTS THAT MENTIONED OR INDICATED THE THEME**

<b>(Dis)satisfaction Statement</b>	<b>Specific Experience</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Lack of administrative support	1. Unknowledgeable about the needs of the students	1. 8, 9, 10
	2. Unknowledgeable about the IEP process & implications	2. 7, 8, 9, 10
	3. Unknowledgeable about exceptionalities and the students in general	3. 8, 9, 10
Lack of autonomy	1. Requiring permission to implement new ideas	1. 7, 8, 10
	2. Consistently defending decisions for student success	2. 7, 8, 9, 10
Lack of respect of time	1. Attending unnecessary trainings	1. 7, 8, 9, 10
	2. Specific meeting date/time	2. 7, 10
Unclear/Unmet expectations	1. Low standardized test scores	1. 7, 10
	2. School-wide schedules may/may not include special education	2. 7, 8, 9
Student centered	1. Understanding concept	1. 7, 8, 9, 10
	2. Enjoy education setting	2. 7, 8, 9, 10
Understood Expectations	1. Paperwork is a part of the process	1. 8, 10
	2. Behavior outbursts are expected	2. 7, 9, 10

***RQ2: How was workplace (dis)satisfaction experienced for general education teachers who left the profession?***

As indicated in the data discussed in previous chapters and sections above, the experiences of general education teachers and special education teachers present like-themes but very different specifics when comparing the two. Analyzing the data from this group reflected responses that varied based on each individual experience instead of like-experiences. The answers provided insight into several problematic areas discussed in previous research, though.

The participants of the general education group (Participants 1-6) offered the most details when answering question 6 (*What was the moment you knew you wanted to leave education?*). Participants 1, 2, & 3 are currently educators within the private setting. Their experiences left them dissatisfied with the public education setting but not teaching. Participant 2 initially responded to explain she had not left teaching, but when asked the follow-up question applying it to exiting the public setting, her answer was much more specific regarding the differences of the two:

*In my current classroom, I have a cap of 15 students. All grades have a cap of the same number. We don't have additional paperwork for testing or special education and our administrator has more freedom to deal with behaviors since parents sign contracts in order for their students to come to our school. In my classroom before I left public school, behaviors were not dealt with- most of the kids were sent back to my room with some kind of reward. It [classroom behaviors] was hard to manage on top of everything else we had to do [paperwork]. I realized I couldn't keep teaching that way and knew I needed something different.*

The other participants currently working in the private setting had similar responses, indicating the need for consistent support for behaviors and autonomy to make the decisions in their classroom. Participant 1 explained his experiences with student behaviors within the public school setting became unbearable. He detailed multiple scenarios when a student presented violent behaviors and were allowed to re-enter the classroom setting with little to no punishment. He went on to explain how unsafe the environment had become due to the lack of meaningful consequences from administration for the behaviors. When discussing behaviors in the private setting, he explained the administration has more authority to enforce meaningful consequences due to the signed contract and tuition requirements. Participant 3, currently serving as an online educator through a private group, explained she became passionate about teaching again because *“I am not mentally drained at the end of the day...I am teaching tier 2 & tier 3 interventions without managing an additional 20+ behavioral needs at the same time”*.

Interestingly enough, none of the participants that exited education entirely (Participants 4, 5, & 6) nor the ones currently in the private setting (Participants 1, 2, & 3) mentioned COVID-19 as the reason why they exited. Only one participant- Participant 4- even mentioned COVID and it was used as how she experienced lack of administration support when she became sick with COVID two different times. She exited mid-COVID, but indicated COVID-19 was not the reason she exited. Participant 6 exited pre-COVID and explained her process for exiting education was simple- apply for nursing school and if she were accepted, she would leave education. When asked what pushed her to consider applying, she said, *“Leadership within the school and central office not holding teachers accountable for providing the education our students deserved.”* She indicated she began to see a pattern over the last three years of her tenure and recognized the change was not a positive one for her nor her students. Participant 4

echoed that sentiment: “...because of fighting against administration to get anything I asked for.” She spent most of her time in Title 1 schools and recognized the need for students to learn in different ways. She explained she requested tools that would promote learning and, even after being told she would receive it, was never provided what was requested.

The GE teachers discussed the unclear expectations that led to unfair treatment factored into their dissatisfaction. Participants 2, 3, 4, and 6 all pinpointed moments in their career those unclear expectations led to them feeling as if they were treated unfairly compared to their peers. Participant 4, a former chemical engineer, felt as if her position within her department and being the only female led to unnecessary support, which left her with feelings of inadequacies she knew she did not have and lack of respect from her colleagues. Participant 6 explained the expectations of her administration changed so quickly and differed from each colleague, it was difficult “as an educator, because the expectations changed so frequently I was worried I would make the wrong decision because I wasn’t sure what to expect from day-to-day.”

The individuals currently serving as teachers in the private setting demonstrated difficulty recalling an experiencing they enjoyed within the public setting. Initially, the participants were encouraged to consider the public setting only, but when 2 out of 3 participants could not easily recall, I suggested to recall an experience from their current setting. Participant 2 immediately answered when she was named as teacher of the year for her school. She explained how appreciated she felt because of the recognition the award carries. She indicated she never considered herself good enough for the award, but always worked hard to give her students her best and the greatest chance of success. Participant 1 discussed the climate of the current school (private) made every aspect of the job easier to maintain. He discussed that, while he continued

to have paperwork, the appreciation and support of the administration made his job enjoyable again.

**FIGURE 4.3 RECURRING THEMES FROM EACH INTERVIEW & THE DETAILS OF EACH THEME WITH THE PARTICIPANTS THAT MENTIONED OR INDICATED THE THEME**

<b>(Dis)satisfaction Statement</b>	<b>Specific Experience</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Lack of administrative support	1. Discipline & behavioral issues unresolved	1. 1, 2, 5
	2. Required interventions	2. 1, 4, 5
	3. Parental overreach	3. 1, 3
Lack of autonomy	1. Dictated lesson plans	1. 3, 5
	2. Student achievement growth track	2. 1, 4, 5
Lack of respect of time	1. Parent control/contact	1. 1, 2, 3
	2. Unnecessary paperwork	2. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
	3. Additional meetings & trainings	3. 1, 3, 4, 5
Unclear/Unmet expectations	1. Changing expectations	1. 3, 5, 6
	2. Expectations not equitable or fair among staff	2. 3, 5, 6
Positive School Climate	1. Consequences for behaviors	1. 1, 2, 6
Respect among peers	1. Decision-making ability	1. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
	2. Acknowledgement of skill level	2. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6

***RQ3: In what ways does teaching domain contribute to differences in perceptions of workplace (dis)satisfaction, and how might this contribute to differential exit rates?***

Comparing the experiences of both groups, the initial picture seems to be like themes and experiences (Figures 4.2, 4.3, 4.4) of the participants. Once comparing the specific details of each experience, though, it becomes evident the themes are alike but how each group experienced the themes are very telling of what led to the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the workplace, eventually leading to their exit.

Because Participants 1, 2, 3, 8, & 10 did not exit the education setting, starting with their experiences will provide a foundation for those that exited education altogether. When analyzing the responses of Participants 1, 2, & 3, their experiences of satisfaction were, in large part,

related to their own needs. For example, Participant 3 indicated she could pinpoint the moment she knew she wanted to exit public education and the traditional setting. It occurred when an administrator restricted what she would be able to teach because of the timeline that was provided at the beginning of the academic year. She continued to explain the micromanagement of her classroom made her feel inadequate and unnecessary, something she did not feel comfortable with sitting with as a teacher. Participants 1 & 2 both expressed concern with lack of support from their administrators when they would send a student that displayed concerning and/or unsafe behaviors only to receive the student back in class within minutes. Both participants felt as if their credibility was questioned, and the word of the student was taken over theirs.

Participants 8 & 10 both re-entered the general education setting within the same school (public) they were serving in as special education teachers. Their experiences of dissatisfaction were student-support centered. Both recalled experiences that included their students being left out of a school-wide event, administrators never visiting their classrooms, and the needs of their students being overlooked in the general education setting. Both Participant 8 & 10 expressed when their students were included in the general education setting, they (participants) received more frustration from their peers instead of acceptance. Participant 10 mentioned the report card system because, as a special education teacher, her students counted against the overall academic growth score of the school. *“I want my students to be involved and included, but I had to listen to several comments throughout the years about how the special education kids were the three bottom scores, so if they were removed, our growth would look better. My kids gave their all but because it didn’t fit in the box of the report card, it hurt our school. It was a difficult place to be*

*in.*” Both participants found satisfaction in autonomy and inclusion once they moved back into the general education setting.

Participants 4, 5, 6, 7, & 9 exited education entirely and moved into different career roles. GE teacher participants (4, 5, 6) moved into a career that provides the opportunity to make decisions on their own without fear of being micromanaged. Participants 4 & 5 began a career based in outreach of people and continued to include a form of teaching- one through faith-based teaching and one through STEM based teaching. Both participants discussed experiences within the classroom that prevented them from teaching and leading in a way they felt most confident in. Participant 6 left because of unclear guidelines and expectations to enter a career that operates on very strict, clear guidelines regardless of what location she is working. Participants 7 & 9 exited special education and education completely, opting for roles that allowed them to “function as adults” (Participant 9). Their work environments are not so overwhelming that they are unable to give their home environments their best effort. While Participant 9 recalled school specific experiences that led to her exit, Participant 7 indicated her experiences were based on home. Though she did not have any negative experiences in the workplace, she recognized the amount of stress and anxiety special education placed on her and prevent her from being a good mother and wife.

Comparing the experiences of GE teachers and SE teachers, concern for self and concern for students is the most evident difference in the responses of both. (It should be noted when concern for self is mentioned, it does not indicate there is no concern for students nor should it be a negative connotation.) GE teachers recalled experiences that left them, as individuals, feeling unseen or unimportant, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction. Satisfaction more often occurred when they were given adequate support from their administration in areas of discipline,

time management, and recognition. Within GE teacher participants, they recalled moments of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction that could be considered relationally based. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 recalled experiences of dissatisfaction due to unmet expectations by their peers and/or administration.

SE teacher participants recalled experiences of satisfaction that were student centered. When the students succeeded, SE teachers used them as points of motivation to continue teaching. Moments of dissatisfaction were also student-centered. Some of the responses indicated the administration did not recognize their students as equal participants in many events, while others indicated their students were seen as points of frustration when considered school-wide success. The participants, as a whole, were more likely to recall moments of dissatisfaction when they felt their students were unsupported. Unlike the other participants in their group, Participants 7 & 9 did recall events and realizations that were self-centered instead of student-centered. While they found satisfaction with student success, neither felt adequately supported by their administration. When Participant 7 expressed her emotional well-being failing to her administration, she was met with an unconcerned response and indication she should do what she thought was best for herself. Even as she discussed the exchange, she seemed to continue to process the difficult experience.

When juxtaposing the experiences of both groups, as **Figure 4.5** shows, participants detailed similar events but in very different experiences. Two questions from the interview provide insight to how the teachers experience both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the same themes from different details. Question 9- *‘What encouragement would you give someone going into teaching/special education?’* and question 10- *‘What warnings would you give someone*

going into teaching/special education?’ offered participants the opportunity to express their own motivators and hinderances to their jobs.

The participants that were former special education teachers pondered this thought a little longer than others. Participant 10, current general education teacher former special education teacher, said, *“Special education and general education are not the same, but both have such huge rewards. Both have paperwork, but both also have students that need good teachers. There will be difficult days, but remember your why.”* Participant 1 and Participant 3 both encouraged people to enter into education, but with limitations and boundaries. According to Participant 3, *“Set boundaries and hold onto and appreciate the moments of students’ eyes lighting up.”*

Participant 5, currently serving in a ministry role, had the most insightful and detailed response, incorporating her faith as well as her why:

*Pray a lot. If you aren’t a believer in Jesus, think long and hard about changing your mind! You can’t do it though Him. Find good people who will become a great support system for you at the school. Make sure you love it - the good is really great. The bad is absolutely exhausting at times. You have to be able to truly love the kids - the good and the bad ones & realize that the actual position as a teacher has such a bigger calling attached to it than just the content you are responsible for giving the students. Learn how to separate your emotions and personal life from the classroom environment. The kids you teach need - the good, kind side of you more than you know!*

Participant 6’s encouragement aligned with the sentiment of many- education can be a thankless job and difficult at times. The thanks often times comes much later in life: *“It is difficult and thankless, but can be very rewarding as well. You usually don’t see the impact you*

*have immediately and, in many cases, it is not until years later when you encounter a former student and learn of the impact you truly had.*” The simplest, yet most agreed upon encouragement as indicated by most of the interviews, was provided by Participant 2- “*Remember your why.*” Considering each response pointed to education being student-centered, it provides context to the SE teachers’ sentiments regarding dissatisfaction within their workplace.

While question 9 provided the chance for participants to be lighter and less tense, question 10 posed the opposite. Hard truths began to come out by way of warnings and, through our conversations, light was shed on some of the most difficult aspects of education. Participant 1, the coach and science teacher, kept his initial warning very simple- research the administration of the school prior to accepting a job. When asked how that could or would serve as a warning, he continued:

*I have worked for many administrators in different sized schools. No matter the type of students or school, all of my negative experiences and the negative experiences of my peers could be traced back to poor leadership. In the last public school I worked in, one of my colleagues mentioned how much headache could be avoided if she had just reached out to people who were familiar with the leadership before accepting the job. I realized I had never thought to do the same thing and put all the pieces together to figure out if I had done that, I would have a better understanding of who I was working for before going into the situation. Kids are universal, they all need and want the same kinds of things. But leaders are so different and have so many different expectations. It would have been much easier coming in knowing their expectations from another teacher.*

The responses from the other participants were just as forward and truthful, holding nothing back when warning future teachers or individuals considering entering into education as a lifelong career. Participant 10 warned others to be flexible in all circumstances. *“Education is probably one of the few careers the leader of the setting has the least amount leeway to make a decision based on their expertise.”* When asked what that looks like, she described someone standing in the middle of a large crowd at a concert trying to tell a first responder from across the crowd how to find you to render medical aid. She explained you try many ways to direct them to you but they are either not listening, cannot hear you, or want to do it the way they think is best without listening to you. She said, *“In the end, they find you, but you’ve given them all of your energy, your voice, and your time and now the concert is over.”* I asked how she would tie that to being a teacher and she continued- *“Teaching is like that. You see a student that needs help and you know all of the ways to do it, but you have to go through all of their [administration] steps before they listen to yours. Sometimes the student makes it, sometimes they don’t, but at the end, you are just tired.”*

Participant 2 focused on being wary of the personal connections that are made, stating, *“Just be careful who you trust.”* When I asked her if she had personal experiences, she said she encountered too many to count, learning the hard way that most administrators will *“tell you what you want to hear so they can get what they want out of you.”* According to Participant 4, *“...it is a hard life.”* Participant 3 mentioned the mental load teachers carry and the number of decisions, especially elementary teachers, make on a daily basis. *“I read teachers make as many, if not more, decisions than a brain surgeon makes in one minute.”* She went on to explain it is why it is so hard for teachers to be anything other than teachers, but most are mothers, wives, and significant others, and have to carry another mental load once going home. Participant 7

expressed the mental exhaustion is something she wished someone warned her about. *“The mental exhaustion is real. I went home at the end of my day and just wanted to sit in silence but couldn’t because I have a toddler at home that needs me, too.”* She expressed how much she loved teaching but realized it was a load she was not able to bear and wanted others to be wary of the mental exhaustion that comes with teaching.

After comparing their experiences and the details of each through the warnings they offered (depicted in **figure 4.4**), it stands to reason that teachers alike begin teaching to make a difference for students. Being treated as experts within their field and classroom are common practices and expectations. As those expectations are not met, dissatisfaction begins to increase. The center point of teaching is students. Without students, teachers have no purpose. When the needs of the students that are recognized by the experts within the setting (teachers) are not met and, at times, ignored, the dissatisfaction continues to increase. Students within special education have specific, individualized needs that may not only be for the academic setting, but also for health and living concerns. Most of these students are already considered high-risk students both academically and functionally. The teachers within this setting not only recognize this need, but also develop the plans to help meet those needs. As the focus point of their job is ignored or forgotten, dissatisfaction can become overwhelming, as expressed by multiple SE teacher participants. When 3 of 10 participants have continued their desired career and within their subject area of choice in a private setting (GE teachers) and only 2 of 10 participants continued in their desired career but not in their subject area of choice, it goes to reason the rate of special education teachers exiting the profession is higher and more likely due to their experiences within their desired career.

**FIGURE 4.4 COMPARING THE COMMONLY DISCUSSED EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS, CONNECTING HOW EACH GROUP ALIGNED THEIR EXPERIENCES**

<b>(Dis)satisfaction Statement</b>	<b>Specific Experience</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Lack of administrative support	1. Discipline & behavioral issues unresolved	1. 1, 2, 5
	2. Required interventions	2. 1, 4, 5
	3. Parental overreach	3. 1, 3
	4. Unknowledgeable about the needs of the students	4. 8, 9, 10
	5. Unknowledgeable about the IEP process & implications	5. 7, 8, 9, 10
	6. Unknowledgeable about exceptionalities and the students in general	6. 8, 9, 10
Lack of autonomy	1. Dictated lesson plans	1. 3, 5
	2. Student achievement growth track	2. 1, 4, 5
	3. Requiring permission to implement new ideas	3. 7, 8, 10
	4. Consistently defending decisions for student success	4. 7, 8, 9, 10
Lack of respect of time	1. Parent control/contact	1. 1, 2, 3
	2. Attending unnecessary trainings/meetings	2. 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10
	3. Specific meeting date/time	3. 7, 10
	4. Unnecessary paperwork	4. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8
Unclear/Unmet expectations	1. Changing expectations	1. 7, 10
	2. Low standardized test scores	2. 7, 8, 9
	3. School-wide schedules may/may not include special education	3. 3, 5, 6, 7
	4. Expectations not equitable or fair among staff	4. 3, 5, 6
<b>Satisfaction Statement</b>	<b>Specific Experience</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Student Centered	1. Learning something new	1. 1, 2, 5
	2. Success later life	2. 1, 4, 5
Autonomy/Respect among peers	1. Expert of field	1. 3, 5
	2. Decision-making ability	2. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10
Positive School Climate	1. Consequences for behaviors	1. 1, 2, 6
	2. Inclusion of students/others	2. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10

## Conclusion

The reoccurring theme from the interviews can be narrowed to a short phrase: Lack of. The connotation of the word itself presents negative thoughts. Of the 10 participants, 7 of them used 'lack' at least once and the remaining 3 used words that could indicate lack, such as 'no' and 'not enough.' Of the 11 times 'lack' was used, 5 times was used in conjunction with 'support'. The phrase 'no support' was also used to express the lack of support. There were additional areas of difficulties discussed by participants to include insufficient training (especially for general education teachers that teach special education students), low standards and accountability to uphold those standards, micromanagement, workload, meetings, and the report card system.

Educators and former educators have clearly indicated education is lacking. Students are lacking appropriate parental support, teachers are lacking appropriate administration support, and as shown from the interviews, the experiences of teachers from both special education and general education are rich with negative undertones. As shown in **figure 4.5**, the negative far outweighs the positive teachers are asked to talk about their experiences. The experiences of these individuals are the driving force behind their decisions to exit the public-school setting or the special education setting.

**FIGURE 4.5: FREQUENCY COUNT OF TOP 3 CHALLENGE RESPONSES.**

<u>Word</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
lack (of)	11
support (lack of/no)	6
discipline (lack of support)	3
paperwork (meaningless)	3
resources (not enough)	3
administrative (lack of support)	2
autonomy (lack of)	2
expectations (lack of/unrealistic)	2
meetings (excessive)	2
parental involvement (lack/excessive)	2

**FIGURE 4.6. WORD CLOUD OF DIFFICULT EXPERIENCE TERMS. LARGER WORDS INDICATE INCREASED FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE**



## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Overview**

This case study was conducted to examine how Special Education (SE) and General Education (GE) teachers perceived workplace dissatisfaction. In hopes to add to the literature, this multi-case study collected the experiences of exited SE and GE teachers to provide post-classroom reflections on dissatisfaction and exiting. Using Herzberg's (1966) motivation-hygiene theory, this study juxtaposed how dissatisfaction (hygiene) and satisfaction (motivation) was experienced within SE and GE teaching domains. Additionally, the study offered a unique sample of former public educators, offering more impartial reflections on working conditions. The results of the data indicate (1) SE teachers are not experiencing satisfaction within their professions; (2) GE teachers are experiencing more satisfaction, but less motivation; (3) the interpretation of like-experiences lead to different outcomes. The data reflects concepts that have been researched and analyzed in previously published research, but Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory provides a unique data-set of how the experiences of SE & GE teachers are leading to their respective attrition rates. In this chapter, we place the data within the framework of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory to discuss the like experiences and reflect on the different outcomes for each group. Such reflections may be used to strategically calibrate school-level retention strategies and address the growing teacher shortage in Alabama and beyond.

### **Discussion**

The initial sample consisted of participants 1-10. For consideration of data and comparing the experiences among the sample, Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6 are referenced as 'GE Teachers.' All participants are former general education teachers from the public-school setting. 'SE Teachers' were composed of Participants 7, 8, 9, &10. All SE Teachers are former

special education teachers in the public-school setting. The participants were selected using previously formed connections and the snowball technique. A formal email with the information letter and questionnaire link was sent to potential participants. The questionnaire collected demographic information, including years of service in the public education setting, subjects and grade levels taught, and current employment status. Once the participants completed the questionnaire, a follow-up connection was made based on the preferred method of contact of the participant. The interviews were conducted face-to-face so I could observe the body language of the participants while collecting data. Once the interviews were transcribed and checked by each participant (specific to their own interview), commonalities aligned through hygiene and motivation were determined to pinpoint themes within the data.

Several themes that surfaced throughout the interviews aligned with themes discussed in previously published research. Inadequate administrative support (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), protection of both professional and personal time (Pendola, 2022), job expectations (Bettini et al., 2017), and lack of autonomy (Kopowski, 2008) were all reoccurring talking points across the interviews. At first glance, the participants in this study described similar experiences in education. SE Teachers described student-centered dissatisfaction. Participants 9 and 10 both described experiences in which their students were not remembered or treated differently than students in the general education setting. All four participants discussed how often they felt overlooked as teachers within their campus. While the paperwork was tremendous at times, none of the special education teachers (Participants 7-10) indicated dissatisfaction with their paperwork load. Participants 1 and 5 from the GE Teachers both mentioned the workload of special education teachers, however, and described the amount of paperwork involved with special education.

Reviewing answers from SE Teachers, the need for autonomy and appropriate support are two points that reoccurred in several discussions. While all participants mentioned lack of administrative support contributing to dissatisfaction, 5 out of 6 participants from the general education sample mentioned the need for autonomy in their classroom. In addition to autonomy, Participants 1, 2, and 4 discussed the behavior concerns of the students through lack of support from administration. When comparing the experiences of both GE and SE Teachers, SE Teachers discussed the behaviors of their peers leading to their dissatisfaction.

Lack of appropriate administrative support was a common theme for both GE Teachers and SE Teachers. Initially, phrases such as “excessive meetings,” “extra activities,” “unclear expectations,” and “unnecessary requests” were keywords guiding to dissatisfaction with administration. The dissatisfaction with administration from both GE Teachers and SE Teachers was experienced in different ways. GE Teachers expressed more dissatisfaction with administration overall through lack of general support (resources, discipline, clear expectations) in their areas. SE Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with more specific dissatisfaction through lack of knowledge of the needs of special education, indicated by phrases such as “lack of inclusion,” “low scores,” “lack of understanding,” and “unnecessary trainings.”

### **Implications**

Conley & You (2017) followed Billingsley’s (2002) framework to determine the key influences of SE teacher exit. Of the five themes found within the context of work environment factors, four of them were mentioned in our study by the SE teacher participants: administrative support, teacher team efficacy (trusting peers to be effective), job design/autonomy, and poor socioeconomic/human conditions (environmental factors, including behaviors related to disabilities) (Conley & You, 2017). Across our interviews, GE teachers and SE teachers alike

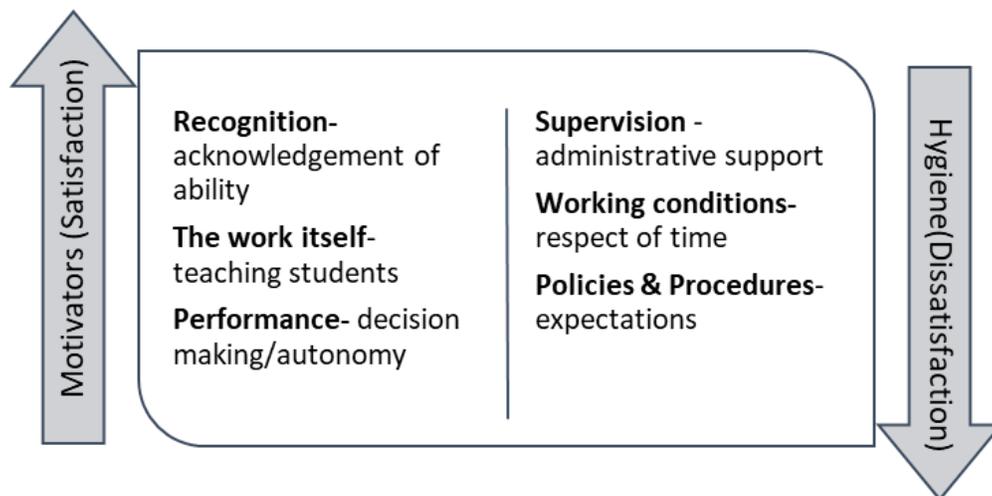
discussed the need for adequate administrative support as well as the need for autonomy and trust among staff. In more recent research, Macedonia, Snow, & et.al (2023) discussed the importance of relationships within schools for special education teachers. The research followed a program that included a “four-step cyclical process to plan, design, implement, and evaluate efforts” to combat the teacher shortage in rural areas (Macedonia, Snow, et. al, 2023). The program focused on the necessity for building positive relationships, specifically with mentorships, and provided a detailed plan, including a monthly meeting agenda (Macedonia, Snow, et. al, 2023). The program provided SE teachers with positive support from peers and meaningful meetings that offered strategies that could be applied to their own classroom experiences. When considering the explanation for the implementation of the program as outlined by Macedonia, Snow, & et. al (2023), the data from our study reflects the same desire from both GE and SE teachers. Both groups expressed dissatisfaction after recalling unnecessary meetings (unclear purpose); SE teachers recalled feelings of dissatisfaction when peers did not understand the requirements and necessities of their job.

Billingsley has been a staple within research and support of teacher retention, specifically special education teacher retention. In her earliest research over 4 decades ago, Billingsley reported teachers were leaving special education and transferring to general education because of administrative factors and the stressors of teaching students with disabilities (1991). Her most recent research was conducted with Rock, Dieker, et. al (2023), offering an alternate approach through ‘systems thinking’ to combat the longstanding shortage of special education teachers and offered clearly defined four-stage process to implement the change and begin retaining special education teachers. Billingsley’s forty years of research reflect a “chronic and pervasive shortage” of special education teacher (Rock, Dieker, et. al, 2023). Billingsley’s review of the

literature (2004) found three reoccurring themes across the research from 1992- 2002, two of which occurred within our own research- affective reactions to work (job satisfaction) and work environment factors (peer relationships, administrative support, and student behavior). She found a plethora of definitions and approaches to determining teacher exit which made it difficult to determine reoccurring themes because of the differences (Billingsley, 2002). Her literature review (Billingsley, 2002) provided a common ground for future research, including reoccurring themes (now described with common language) and a framework to position within a study.

Using Herzberg's Double Factor Hygiene Motivation Theory as the guide to develop and understand how the experiences of special education teachers are leading to higher and longer-lasting attrition rates than the experiences of their peers serving in the roles of general education teachers, focusing on how teachers in special education experience satisfaction and dissatisfaction is key. Motivation factors lean towards intrinsic needs (recognition, promotions, etc.) and are typically connected to job satisfaction; on the other hand, hygiene factors (extrinsic needs: quality of relationships, administrative support, working conditions, etc.) do not contribute to job satisfaction but hygiene factors must be in place to prevent dissatisfaction (Toytok & Acar, 2021). Considering Katt & Condly's (2009) use of the Two-Factor Theory, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are on two separate planes of motivation, meaning one has satisfaction or no satisfaction and dissatisfaction or no dissatisfaction.

FIGURE 5.1 OPPOSING IDEAS OF MOTIVATORS & HYGIENE FACTORS WITHIN THE EDUCATION SETTING.



As depicted in **Figure 5.1**, motivators in this study are the acknowledgement of ability, teaching student, and decision making/autonomy within the classroom. The hygiene factors are administrative support, respect of time, and expectations. Some studies that utilize Herzberg's Theory included salary, but none of the participants in our study indicated salary and/or benefits as an indicator to their dissatisfaction.

The key indicator of satisfaction of special education teachers was found within the work itself- *teaching the students*. Two different participants from the special education group did indicate the ability to make decisions for their students' needs was an important aspect of their job. The key indicator of satisfaction among general education teachers was found within the recognition- *acknowledgement of ability*. The teachers felt if the administrators recognized their ability as a teacher, they would be provided with the ability to make decisions and have unwavering support from their administrators.

As explained, the Motivator-Hygiene Theory requires Hygiene Factors must be in place to prevent dissatisfaction, but they do not lead to satisfaction. GE teachers lacked satisfaction

within the work itself and the performance but did experience more administrative support and respect when compared to the SE teacher participants. SE teachers experienced satisfaction from teaching their students but lacked two hygiene factors- administrative support and respect of time. This not only ensured SE teachers would be ultimately dissatisfied with their administration, but also lead to their exit because their motivators did not carry enough weight to overcome the lack of the hygiene factors.

### **Recommendations**

As shown through years of research and data collection, teacher attrition among special education teachers is not a new concept. Teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rates and without a solution public education will continue to lose teachers and potential teachers. Decision makers and policymakers are not listening to the perceptions and experiences of teachers. Pendola (2022) expressed this, indicating there is a *“much deeper set of concerns that go beyond school amenities and even relations with coworkers or school administrators. Rather, they emphasize a pervasive sense that the political, administrative, and bureaucratic directives surrounding teaching are disconnected from—and conflicting with—the core goals of the job.”* The changes needed, as indicated by this study, are not changes that require substantial amounts of money or pose the need for an entire restructuring of education programs. The changes are small and can be implemented immediately with appropriate communication from state-wide leadership to school leaders. Pendola (2022) offered suggestions and actions for site-level leadership that could be implemented without delay and, with the exception of one suggestion, required no financial approval. The suggestions are both practical and necessary as evidenced through the data in several studies. Though the list in **figure 5.2** is not a full list of the

suggestions, the data from this study was referenced and paralleled to provide a list of solutions that would be beneficial to both GE and SE teachers.

**FIGURE 5.2 ADVERSE EXPERIENCE & SOLUTION VIA PENDOLA (2022)**

<u>Experience</u>	<u>Solution</u>
Lack of respect of time ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Positive School Climate ( <i>satisfaction</i> )	protect planning periods and provide protected time for collaboration/co-planning,
Lack of respect of time ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Lack of administrative support ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> )	incorporate non-instructional responsibilities into specific times/routines
Unclear/Unmet expectations ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Positive School Climate ( <i>satisfaction</i> )	additional responsibilities will be offset with the removal of other responsibilities
Unclear/Unmet expectations ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Positive School Climate ( <i>satisfaction</i> )	ensure staff and leadership share workload
Lack of respect of time ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Lack of autonomy ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Autonomy/Respect among peers ( <i>satisfaction</i> )	simplify daily procedures, including receipting, discipline, and sign in/out
Unclear/Unmet expectations ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Autonomy/Respect among peers ( <i>satisfaction</i> )	clearly define and regularly outline teachers' job duties
Unclear/Unmet expectations ( <i>dissatisfaction</i> ) Student Centered ( <i>satisfaction</i> )	acknowledging and provide support for conflicting role directives (e.g., manage 30 students in a classroom while giving individualized instruction to each student, ensure high achievement while teaching to each student's needs)

Rock, Dieker, & et. al (2023) described SE teacher shortage as 'chronic and pervasive,' hindering the recruitment of potential teachers and retention of current teachers. The research analyzed the utilization of a Systems Thinking (ST) approach in addressing the dire outlook of special education teachers. The approach requires stakeholders from every level to be involved with the change and altering their perspective on the overall picture of the crisis (Rock, Dieker, & et. al, 2023). The ST analysis broached the topic by identifying four stages: (1) *establish readiness for change*; (2) *face existing realities*; (3) *commit to change*; (4) *bridge the gap for*

*better outcomes*, and provided clear expectations and desired outcomes for the shift (Rock, Dieker, & et. al, 2023). By offering clear expectations and communicating desire outcomes of the new way of thinking, the needs of teachers are met through understanding the purpose and necessity of a new program. Not only does this provide teachers with a level of trust their administrators will respect their time, but it also provides opportunities for teachers to build positive relationships with their peers by working together to find solutions. Both concepts were points of conversation in multiple interviews for this study.

As research (Billingsley, 1992; Billingsley, 2002; Billingsley, 2020) has consistently reflected will continue to exit the profession at a substantial rate. A more alarming consideration is how a continuous increase in teacher attrition adversely affects our learners state-wide. Rural schools are continuing to place individuals in the classroom setting that have little to no education based training and are placed with the expectation to ensure student success (ACES, 2021) When considering the federally based requirements of IDEA, schools are at an increased risk of not meeting the needs of their students with exceptionalities. These students are already faced with an achievement gap and, when placed in the hands of an untrained teacher, may face an increased gap. As ACES (2021) described, the ALSDE recognized the alarming trend of teacher shortage and began implementing programs with no measurable outcome and no long-term solutions. ACES (2021), Billingsley (2004, 2019), and Macedonia, et. al (2023) indicated the increase of emergency and provisional certifications for teachers, especially special education teachers, would adversely affect student outcomes in the long-term. Each study offered suggestions of incentives for current teachers rather than removing the current requirements to serve as teachers. This would increase the likelihood of retaining current teachers and potentially

increasing recruitment of potential teachers when recognizing the district level support of educators.

**FIGURE 5.3 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE**

<b>Research</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
Rock, Dieker, et. al, 2023	Explore what a ST framework offers and how it might inform a new research agenda centered on interventions to improve teacher recruitment, preparation, retention, and effectiveness.
Macedonia, et. al., 2023	Engage key partners from all stakeholder positions to address the need, have a structure program to follow, set & communicate clear expectations for program, and follow-up on schedule.
Pendola, 2022	Site-level changes- protection of teacher time (planning, collaboration, balance of duties), centralized duties (office completes paperwork, substitutes, simplified sign-in), clearly communication expectations, promote & communicate shared responsibilities, administration supporting teachers foremost
ACES, 2021	Increase funding for teacher loan forgiveness, monitor and report job vacancies, provide clear & measurable outcomes for teacher recruitment & retention program, scale back emergency certification procedures (particularly for special education)
Billingsley, 2019	Use the data & provide assistance to find more data; higher institutions prepare school leaders to support all teachers; district leaders constantly assess school environments; build relationships for early teachers; carefully monitor demands on SE teachers & balance demands with outcomes; consider financial incentives for retention
Conley & You, 2016	Provide positive administrative support; promote collegial work relations; & honor teacher autonomy
Billingsley, 2004	Facilitate better work environments; Holistically assess the needs & balance with workload & requirements/expectations

### **Future Research**

This study included participant pairs from the same districts, it may provide telling data if participants are from within the same district. While some districts across the state have continually increased their teacher retention rates (ACES, 2021), many are continuing to struggle with retention and have been faced with a consistently increasing attrition rate. By moving to a district specific study, especially when comparing one district with a higher retention rate and one with a higher attrition rate, additional strategies may be developed to ensure retention is occurring in all districts.

While the effects of COVID was briefly discussed in this study, additional research may provide insight to determine how the experiences of pre-COVID exiters and post-COVID exiters are common and address the commonalities. This will not only provide additional data on more recent exiters, but also offer the opportunity compare experiences from each group. If the experiences are consistent between both groups, reasons for attrition can be more accurately addressed to prevent a continuous increase.

### **Conclusion**

This study supports previous research regarding teacher attrition in public schools in rural areas of Alabama. When considering the impact this attrition has on the learning experience of some of our most at-risk students, it is an alarming trend that can no longer be ignored. Special education teachers are leaving at higher rates within the education setting because, as identified through this study, school leaders are not meeting the needs of these students and teachers alike. Special education teachers are a necessity to public schools and should be considered as such. If school leaders at school and district levels do not begin to make the necessary changes to provide special education teachers with both motivating and hygiene factors, the attrition rate will become unrecoverable and pose a detrimental loss to the exceptional students within our state.

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