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# Staying Power: Examining Factors That Influence Educators' Decisions to Remain in Special Education

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STAYING POWER: EXAMINING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EDUCATORS'  
DECISIONS TO REMAIN IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

By  
Jill Woodley Douds

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2022

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Jill Woodley Douds under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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“Perseverance is not a long race, it is many short races run one after the other.”

Walter Elliott, Scottish politician

## **Abstract**

STAYING POWER: EXAMINING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EDUCATORS' DECISIONS TO REMAIN IN SPECIAL EDUCATION. Douds, Jill Woodley, 2022: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

This mixed methods study was designed to examine the factors that experienced special education teachers report as being influential in their decision to remain in the field of special education. The study collected data using surveys and interviews with experienced special education teachers to gather their perspectives and identify common themes that supported their desire and motivation to remain in the field. Results indicated that relationships with, and advocacy for, students and colleagues were the strongest factors in their motivation to stay in special education.

*Keywords:* special education teacher, retention, attrition, efficacy, motivation, job satisfaction, advocacy, collegiality, shared purpose

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Education has gone through a remarkable metamorphosis in the last century (Winstead, 2022). Education has transformed from our image of a simple one-room schoolhouse with a solitary teacher shouldering all the workload to centralized districts with thousands of students, employing legions of teachers, specialists, support staff, and administrators overseeing countless legalities, rules, and mandates. Schools are assigned the daunting task of providing children with the skills required for life and in the workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only are schools expected to provide the necessary differentiated and scaffolded content knowledge, but they also provide nutrition, social/emotional skills training, remediation and enrichment, and a plethora of other instructional services (Arvidsson et al., 2019; Bettini et al., 2019). In order to carry out this task, we need to employ an army of highly skilled and dedicated teachers. Garcia and Weiss (2019) further contended that without enough teachers, schools cannot adequately perform their job and in turn, this impacts the future of the nation. The country is struggling to recruit and maintain a stable workforce with particular concern for the specialties of math, science, and special education (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). This study examined the factors that inspire special education teachers to remain in the classroom long term and provide the consistency our children need and deserve.

### **History of Special Education in South Carolina**

Establishing the first schools in South Carolina in the 1700s was difficult. Our predecessors' momentum was frequently interrupted by wars, racial tensions, lack of funding from the state, and little support from the public (Bartels, 1984). In 1779, Lt.



Governor William Bull reported, “We have a provincial free school paid by the public, but their salaries are insufficient to engage and retain fit men” (Bartels, 1984, p. 2). State leaders continued to be plagued by issues of “teacher quality, student discipline, parental indifference, and school finance” (Bartels, 1984, p. 2) well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

By the early 1900s, education began to garner some attention and financial support from the government. Throughout this turbulent history, South Carolina has persevered to overcome great challenges while prioritizing the education of its children. Historic struggles regarding teacher training, a uniform curriculum, respect, and pay mirror some of our present-day concerns.

It took over 200 years for society to remove barriers that prevented marginalized groups, such as women, minorities, and disabled children, from having access to an education. It was not until 1954 that the state government first approved funding for students with mental and physical disabilities, sometimes referred to as “the forgotten children” (Bartels, 1984, p. 20).

Currently, there is a pervasive shortfall of qualified special education teachers, which can threaten the education that students with disabilities require (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The scarcity of special education teachers is reported by 49 of 50 states in the U.S. (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). With the passing of PL 94-142 (the Education for all Handicapped Children Act) in 1975, came a mandate that public schools provide an education for all students with disabilities. This law was strengthened and rebranded into the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, which ensures that the majority of children with disabilities are not only provided with an

education, but it is provided with their nondisabled peers in a general education classroom and in their neighborhood schools. This change in policy has intensified the need for special educators (Dewey et al., 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

“I’ve always said that special ed. teachers are like my Navy SEALs.... There’s something unique that they do that nobody else can do,” asserted James LaBillios, assistant superintendent in Hingham, Massachusetts (Samuels, 2018, p. 17). Teachers choosing to enter the field of special education have one of the most stressful and challenging jobs in public education (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2014). The problem is centered around concerns about teacher shortages and high levels of attrition in the teaching profession, particularly in the admittedly stressful job of special education.

### ***Teacher Shortages and Supply***

The current issue in education, which was the focus of this study, is comprised of two components: the supply of qualified teachers and the attrition of those teachers. In order to fully appreciate the drive and dedication required for teachers to remain in the classroom over an extended amount of time, it is important to explore the nature and depth of the deficit at hand. The gateway to exploring the teacher shortage is the supply or number of people entering the field of education.

The supply of certified teachers is dwindling. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016) reported that in 1975, 22% of all college students were majoring in education. From 1975 to 2015, the number of education majors dropped to 10%, and a study from researchers at the University of California in May 2017 found that only 4.6%

of college students wanted to major in education (Passey, 2018). Enrollment in teacher certification programs is at a historic low since NCES began collecting data in 1962 (NCES, 2016). Between the 2008-2009 and 2015-2016 school years, the number of education credentials awarded declined by 15.4%, and the number of candidates who completed a teacher preparation program declined by 27.4% (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). A *Washington Post* article stated that school districts across the country are facing dangerous shortages in the teacher workforce, especially in the subjects of special education, science, and math (Papay et al., 2018). Based on Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas's projections in 2003, it is expected that there will be a shortage of approximately 200,000 teachers by 2025 (Sutcher et al., 2016). Frontline Education conducted a study of 1,200 schools and districts and found that two of three reported teacher shortages. Of those districts with shortages, 71% identified special education as their most challenging position to fill; second place was substitute teachers (Buttner, 2021).

The scarcity of qualified teachers is detrimental to the stability of a school's workforce, negatively impacts student achievement, and diminishes the effectiveness of its teachers (Sorensen & Ladd, 2018). More than 30,000 teachers who do not possess appropriate teaching licenses are hired in the U.S. each year to teach students with disabilities. Lynda Van Kuren, Communications Director for the Council on Exceptional Children, suggested that an outward sign of the difficulties the educational community faces is evident in some rural schools where the number of unqualified special education teachers is approaching half (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Winterer, 2017).

Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, alleged that

there is a chronic and fundamental problem in the way we train and place teachers (Westervelt, 2015). Walsh maintained that it is important for school districts to be much more selective about what qualifications they expect of teachers who apply and seek employment with them (Westervelt, 2015). Walsh (as cited in Westervelt, 2015) expressed concern that this shortage will induce school boards to water down qualifications and requirements to teach, which she said, “is exactly what we don't need or want” (para. 4).

In South Carolina, a 32% decline has been observed in the number of students completing a state teacher education program since 2012-2013 (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement [CERRA], 2019). At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, 1,033 vacant teaching positions were reported in South Carolina districts, and by February 2022, that number rose to 1,121 vacancies. This signifies a 26% increase from 2019-2020 and a 12.5% increase from 2018-2019. Of those vacancies in 2021, 19.7% were in special education (CERRA, 2021). Former South Carolina Superintendent of Education Jim Rex commented that the state’s teacher shortage reflects the national issue of fewer people entering the teaching profession (Brack, 2022). He speculated that one reason may be the extra stress teachers face when having to address increased mental health issues (Brack, 2022).

CERRA (2021) further reported that there is a growing discrepancy between the rate at which teachers enter the profession compared to the rate at which they leave. Since the demand for traditionally trained teachers is higher than the supply, districts have to rely on alternative programs and pathways to provide teacher certification. Some of these, including the Program of Alternate Certification for Educators, the American Board, and

the Career and Technology Education Work-Based Certification program, can result in teachers who are qualified and can become permanent employees for districts. One program, SC-CREATE, is an abbreviated scholarship program specifically designed to target school employees with a college degree to be retrained as special education teachers in South Carolina.

### *Teacher Shortage and Attrition*

When addressing a reduction in supply and an attempt to hastily prepare teachers to enter the classroom, we now face the second prong of this dilemma, which is attrition. Almost 2 decades since Ingersoll (2003) warned about the “revolving door” in the teaching profession, retaining teachers remains a very real challenge. Both teacher transfers and teacher turnovers are costly to school districts. Excessive teacher turnover—or churn—can be detrimental to student achievement and can place demands on a district’s time and valuable resources (Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; Learning Policy Institute, 2017). Churn also impacts the country’s teacher shortages, since roughly 60% of new teachers hired each year are replacing experienced teachers who left early before full retirement age. The researchers’ estimates of how much teacher attrition costs America’s taxpayers vary greatly, with the highest estimate being \$7.3 billion annually, which includes the cost of recruiting, employing, and coaching new teachers (Learning Policy Institute, 2017).

The current issue of attrition, while expensive for school districts and unsettling for students, also promotes the continuation of inequality of educational experiences, since districts in areas of high poverty or crime have higher turnover rates and are less likely to attract the most effective teachers (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). A report in 2016

stated that in Title I schools, the turnover is 50% higher than average, and for teachers serving in schools with high percentages of students of color, the turnover rate is 70% higher. This leads to more change and disruption for those students who can most benefit from stability (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). However, as the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (as cited in Learning Forward, 2015) concluded, no matter your location, "it is clear that thousands of dollars walk out the door each time a teacher leaves" (p. 3).

In a series of reports by the Economic Policy Institute, Garcia and Weiss (2019) proposed that the reduced pipeline of adequately trained teachers combined with an excessive number of educators leaving the profession is the genesis of the staffing crisis in the field of education. Many educational scholars and researchers have concluded that support in the form of mentors, professional development, and professional learning communities (PLCs) can increase a teacher's feelings of collegiality and efficacy (Graham & Ferriter, 2010). It is imperative that school districts acknowledge the need to support special education teachers to maintain a stable workforce.

The South Carolina Annual Educator Supply and Demand Report stated that approximately 6,000 teachers employed in the 2019-2020 school year did not go back to the same teaching or service position for the 2020-2021 school year (CERRA, 2021). The report went on to state that 42% of the teachers who left had teaching experience in South Carolina of 5 years or less, and 16% had 1 year or less. Given the immense responsibilities special education teachers face, it is no surprise that many leave, thus making one of the top areas of critical need in education the retaining of special education teachers. Since 1975, when PL 94-142 (IDEA) was first passed, national

teacher shortages in special education have been reported (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Attrition comes in many forms: those who move from a school, a district, or a state to go to another teaching position (the movers); those who leave the profession (the leavers); and those who retire. Another factor in South Carolina is that the Teacher and Employee Retention Incentive Program ended in June 2018. This program allowed teachers to continue working while their retirement benefits were collected in a bank account. There were 1,955 teachers participating in the program who were forced to leave, adding to the positions that districts had to fill (Self, 2018).

Of those teachers who graduated with proper certification and secured a teaching position, nearly half were no longer in the profession 5 years later (Abitabile, 2020). This statistic was corroborated by a large-scale study of 16 urban public school districts, which serve 2.5 million students across seven states, where just over half of new teachers were still in the classroom at the 5-year mark (Papay et al., 2018). This is cause for concern when compared with the attrition rates of pharmacists (14%), engineers (16%), or nurses and lawyers (19%) who left their chosen professions (Ingersoll, 2014).

Research indicates that attrition among U.S. teachers, at 8% per year, is higher than teachers from other countries (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) and higher than their contemporaries in other occupations. While some attrition is expected as teachers relocate, stay home to raise a family, make other career choices, or retire, this exodus from teaching is alarming, particularly as the overall shortage of teachers increases.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to focus on

teacher retention to better understand the reasons special education teachers are motivated to stay in the field of special education. Given the current dilemma facing education, it is not surprising that much of the research is focused on the reasons teachers are dissatisfied or are leaving the profession. While research about teacher burnout is valuable, it tends to focus on what is wrong with education. The goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors special education teachers report as satisfying and rewarding enough to keep them in this intense and specialized segment of education. By utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, I triangulated the data sources to increase the validity of the study.

### **Significance of the Study**

The need for, and scarcity of, qualified special education teachers pose a substantial threat to our ability to educate students with disabilities. This study investigated special education teachers' perceptions of what factors inspire them to remain in the profession in one South Carolina school district. This study sought to learn from teachers with 5 or more years of experience in special education. The resulting data and interpretations provide relevant information for all stakeholders who have an interest in providing support for special education teachers. Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data provided a more thorough understanding of the elements that motivate special education teachers to remain in the profession (Butin, 2010; Creswell, 2014).

Study results may have implications for teachers as they seek to better understand the stresses their colleagues face and look for ways to provide support and nurture relationships with each other. Administrators and school leaders can also use these findings to improve professional development, support PLCs, or use strategic scheduling



to improve opportunities for networking. This resulting support can have a positive influence on teacher morale, collegial relationships, a sense of shared purpose, job satisfaction, and retention. Beyond the nucleus of the school district, this research can inform elected officials and policy makers who have a duty to keep abreast of important trends in education that affect their constituents when making important decisions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession?
2. What strategies do special education teachers suggest that school districts could implement to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention?

### **Limitations**

The limitations of a study are those characteristics of design over which the researcher has little or no control. In this study, one limitation is the number of special education teachers in the district that I was able to survey. The finite number of special educators employed in one district in South Carolina fluctuates from year to year and is dependent on the population and needs of the children. From a pool of special education teachers, only those with 5 years of experience or more were invited to take the survey. From that group, a smaller subset of teachers who volunteered to participate in the interviews was chosen. For this reason, generalization to a larger or more urban district should be interpreted with caution.

A second limitation was my own bias as a special educator in this district. All researchers bring bias to their studies, which is influenced by their cultural and

socioeconomic background and history and their gender (Creswell, 2014). I was mindful of how I interpreted the findings of this study. This limitation was addressed by utilizing member checking by having a follow-up interview with respondents to allow them an opportunity to hear and make comments on the answers (Creswell, 2014). I also had a colleague cross-check my codes and themes to ensure intercoder agreement.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are those characteristics of a study that the researcher has purposefully set as boundaries to better focus the study and address the research questions. A delimitation of this study was the choices I made in designing or choosing the research methods: the use of a mixed methods approach involving a survey and interviews, as well as the questions contained in those instruments. I chose to use the Basic Need Satisfaction at Work Scale as written due to the scale being previously validated.

Another delimitation was the use of a convenience sampling involving the experienced special education teachers of one district in South Carolina. Because this study focused on participants who have been in the profession for 5 years or longer, the participant pool is naturally limited by that parameter.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### ***Advocacy***

The act or process of supporting a cause or proposal (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a).

#### ***Attrition***

The gradual reduction of a workforce due to people leaving their jobs. In education, it is the reduction of teachers and staff from resignations, relocations, or

retirements (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b).

### ***Collegiality***

The cooperative relationship of colleagues (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-d).

### ***Experienced Special Education Teacher***

A teacher who has been teaching special education for 5 or more years.

### ***Extrinsic Motivation***

The willingness to perform a task based on the desire to get a reward or avoid a consequence (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

### ***Intrinsic Motivation***

The willingness to perform a task for the inherent satisfaction of doing it (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

### ***IEP***

A personalized education program developed to meet the needs of each special education student. This plan is updated annually and provides a profile of the child including present levels of performance, specific goals, accommodations or modifications necessary, and services (therapy) the child needs (Wright & Wright, 1999).

### ***Motivation***

The internal process of providing a person with a reason for doing something (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-b). In education, a high degree of motivation is demonstrated through a person's behavior: to achieve more, work harder, or persevere longer. In this study, motivation is defined as the reasons someone chooses to remain in the teaching profession for more than 5 years.

### ***Retention***

Retention is from the word retain and is defined as the act of retaining, to hold secure, or keep in possession or use (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-e). In education, the term is used when describing the act of keeping a teacher in their position.

### ***Teacher Self-Efficacy***

Self-efficacy is the faith we have in our own capabilities, to have some control and influence over aspects of our lives related to our own performance. Self-efficacy impacts people's emotions and perceptions and how they behave and derive motivation (Bandura, 1994). For teachers, it is the belief they hold about their instructional and management capabilities.

### ***Teacher Shortage***

The inability to hire enough qualified teachers and fill vacancies to keep up with the demand (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

### **Summary**

The field of special education is experiencing both a shortage in the number of candidates interested in entering the profession and the number of teachers who are retained. Given the heightened responsibilities within special education, it is not surprising that there is a plethora of research focused on the topic of attrition and the many reasons why teachers leave the classroom.

This explanatory sequential mixed methods study investigated the factors reported by special education teachers that motivate them to stay in this specialized field of education. This study sought to understand better what supportive attributes within this district are recognized as important by the special education teachers and in turn improve

their outlook, motivation, feelings of efficacy, and desire to remain in the field of special education. An outcome of the interviews with these experienced special educators is a compilation of suggested strategies that school districts might implement to increase job satisfaction that leads to increased teacher retention.

Chapter 2 includes a review of motivational theories, how the theories have evolved over time, and how motivation impacts a teacher's attitude toward their job and subsequent job satisfaction. Chapter 2 unpacks these theories and draws parallels to illustrate how the theories relate to teachers and their educational responsibilities. The literature provides insights into those factors that influence educators to leave education or motivate them to remain in the field.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Overview

The history of developing a school system in our country was not without its challenges. Today we have an evolved model for our educational system, but new and unique challenges continue to persist. Educating our students with a rigorous curriculum while also managing the recruitment and retention of teachers is just one of the tasks necessary to keep our educational system moving forward.

Teachers are choosing to leave the profession at an alarming rate, and the area of special education has been affected to a disproportionate degree. Some reasons for the departure are an overwhelming workload, demanding parents, and the stress associated with teaching high needs students (Lambert, 2020). The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine the perceptions of experienced special education teachers with regard to their feelings about their jobs. A great deal of research has been conducted to investigate the reasons teachers leave education, but far fewer studies have been done to determine the factors that affect their job satisfaction and subsequently, their decision to remain in the classroom. One important factor that is consistently mentioned as being impactful to teacher retention is motivation.

Many theorists distinguish between intrinsic or internal motivation and extrinsic or external motivation. An intrinsically motivating activity is one in which the reward is in the activity itself. When teachers experience perceived competence (mastery), feel vital in making decisions within their work environment (autonomy), and have a sense of belonging by caring for others and feeling as if others care for them (shared purpose), their intrinsic motivation is sustained (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In a series of qualitative surveys and interviews, Ashiedu and Scott-Ladd (2012) sought to understand what motivated individuals to choose the teaching profession and what impacted their decisions to stay. The practicing and retired teachers stated that their commitment to teaching was intrinsically motivated. They gained satisfaction from working with the children and the positive influence they could have on them, as well as the contributions they could make to society.

An extrinsically motivating activity is done to get a reward or avoid a consequence. Those activities that are extrinsically motivated can be complicated since it requires that the conditions or reward for the behavior be duplicated each time the behavior is expected. For this reason, many theorists have concluded that extrinsic motivation is not sustainable (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Pink, 2009).

This chapter reviews the work of several theorists who have studied motivation, viewed from the perspective of how these theories pertain to the field of education and how this motivation influences teachers' decisions about leaving or staying in the field of special education. This chapter also reviews factors that affect teacher burnout and ways the educational community can support and retain teachers.

### **Research Questions**

The answers to the research questions for this study are intended to provide an enhanced understanding of the factors that have been influential in keeping special education teachers in the classroom. Equally as important as hearing their experiences and perspectives is to discover what these seasoned teachers feel districts could do to improve teacher job satisfaction and retention. The two research questions that guided my study are as follows:

1. What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession?
2. What strategies do special education teachers suggest that school districts could implement to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention?

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework helps to shape the design and direction of a study while guiding its development (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The foundation of this study merged theories from Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg, Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, and Daniel Pink to create a conceptual framework. This conceptual framework provided a vantage point for viewing the ways teachers are motivated by both internal and external factors and how that motivation impacts their job satisfaction. This study investigated how different types of motivation influence a teacher's sense of perseverance and grit in the workplace. This framework is the lens through which teacher motivation and retention were examined.

Deci (1972) as well as Pink (2009) believed that internal motivation best determines a person's sense of fulfillment and satisfaction on the job. Using both an online survey and interview responses, I looked for themes of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose as indicators of job satisfaction for those who have remained in the classroom for 5 or more years.

### **Hierarchy of Need**

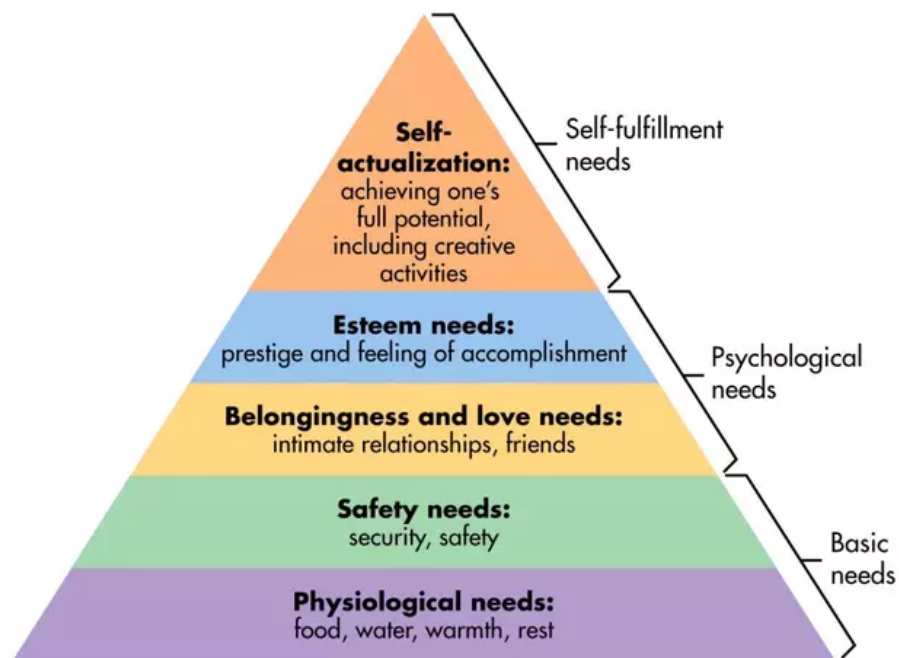
Abraham Maslow was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1908 and is believed by some to be one of the most influential psychologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Celestine, 2017).



He rejected many psychological theories of his era because they focused on mental illnesses and the shortcomings of personality. Maslow wanted to understand what signified positive mental health. His best-known contribution was the creation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Figure).

**Figure**

*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



Maslow believed that the physiological needs at the bottom of the pyramid were most important and would “monopolize consciousness” (Celestine, 2017, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs section, para. 5) until they were met. The second level of need is for safety and security. The safety needs are focused on ensuring we do not put ourselves in harm’s way and fulfil an innate desire for control and predictability in our lives. The most common needs people experience at this level include feeling safe in one’s own house or workplace. Within the context of the classroom, there are two kinds of safety and security. First, having a nonjudgmental environment where people feel safe to learn and

make mistakes is one form of security (Smith, 2021). A second form of security is being safe from physical harm while at school. This topic is prevalent in the news today and will be discussed later in the chapter.

When the physiological and safety needs are satisfied, a person can move their attention to the next level of need (Celestine, 2017): belongingness and love needs. This is the need to feel close to others, have interpersonal relationships, and a sense of belonging. When this need is not met, isolation, anxiety, and depression can be present and a person can experience a deterioration in their psychological well-being (Channell, 2021). When applied to education, this third level of needs corresponds to relationships such as the collegial relationships and support that are vital to a teacher's success at school (Smith, 2021).

The fourth level, esteem needs, focuses on feelings of accomplishment. This need is tied to a person's self-esteem or sense of self-worth and typically aligns with a person's ability to live up to their self-imposed expectations or standards.

Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist, first coined the term self-efficacy to mean a person's belief in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives (Lopez-Garrido, 2020). In education, these feelings of accomplishment may occur when seeing students demonstrate academic proficiency or by feedback received during a teacher evaluation. The pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy pyramid is self-actualization, which is best described as achieving your full potential. School leaders and administrators can use the hierarchy of needs in strategic planning to create a positive work environment and increase employee motivation. Maslow believed that as needs were met, motivation increased (McLeod,

2020).

### **Motivation Hygiene Theory**

Frederick Herzberg was an American psychologist and one of the early researchers who studied motivation in the workplace. He developed the Herzberg motivation hygiene theory (also called Herzberg's two-factor theory). Herzberg (1968) discovered that certain intrinsic or creative characteristics of a job consistently correlate with job satisfaction and motivation, while other factors, which he calls "hygiene factors," are extrinsic elements of the work environment and are associated with job dissatisfaction. The two-factor motivation theory has since become one of the most commonly used theoretical frameworks in job satisfaction research (Dion, 2006). Table 1 outlines the characteristics that Herzberg concluded promote job satisfaction or job dissatisfaction.

**Table 1**

*Factors in Herzberg's Motivation Hygiene Theory*

Characteristics	Factors of satisfaction	Factors of dissatisfaction
	Achievement	District policies
	Recognition	Supervision
	The nature of the work itself	Relationships
	Responsibilities	Working conditions
	Opportunities for advancement	Salary
	Opportunities for growth	Status
		Security

Herzberg (1968) determined that job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction do not represent opposite concepts. If one fixes the sources of dissatisfaction, they do not necessarily create satisfaction. Conversely, adding the factors of job satisfaction will not eliminate job dissatisfaction. For example, if you have an unpleasant or hostile work

environment, giving an employee a promotion does not make them satisfied.

Within a school environment, some of the factors of dissatisfaction are not within the purview of the district, such as status and salary. Status is a function of societal views, and salary is often dictated by the state budget. Several job characteristics are within a district's control such as the opportunities to form relationships, sincere recognition given to its employees, the style of supervision and leadership, and opportunities for growth. These factors can improve motivation and encourage workers to be more productive, creative, and committed (Robinson et al., 2019).

In an educational environment, many of Herzberg's (1968) factors can be addressed by the school system and/or administration through PLCs, mentoring programs, collegial interactions, and the positive atmosphere created within the school. These practices can mitigate some feelings of isolation and uncertainty that teachers face throughout their careers, thus increasing job satisfaction (Robinson et al., 2019; Soini et al., 2019).

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan began working together in the 1970s. By 1985, they introduced the self-determination theory. Deci and Ryan (2018) were interested in studying how “biological, social, and cultural conditions either enhance or undermine the inherent human capabilities for psychological growth, engagement, and wellness” (p. 3). Self-determination theory research involved the study of motivation and what moved people to action. Initially, their theory discussed degrees and types of human motivation. As the theory evolved, they focused on universal psychological needs, the relationship of culture to motivation, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Self-determination theory

was different from other theories of its time because it focused on the effect that social experiences have on performance and motivation. They proposed that people were motivated by three psychological traits or needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Autonomy is behavior that is internally driven; it is authentic to that person and is based on personal intentions rather than outside factors (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Autonomous behaviors are grounded in a person's own intentions and will. Autonomy motivates employees to think creatively without needing to conform to strict workplace rules (Pink, 2009). When a person perceives that they have autonomy, they are more invested in their work and feel that they have the trust of their leadership (Wooll, 2021).

Competence is feeling mastery over tasks that we find important. Feedback from others can impact our feeling of competence. Positive feedback may increase a person's motivation and increase social engagement, while negative feedback can decrease a person's motivation or engagement.

Relatedness is the idea of belonging and having a connection to others. The need for connection can be fulfilled by caring or advocating for others and feeling that other people care for you. Deci and Ryan (2008) believed if these three needs were met, a person would have a sense of well-being and motivation. Conversely, if these needs were not met, a person would feel unfulfilled and lack motivation.

One critical assertion that is made in self-determination theory is that humans are social beings. Ryan and Deci (2018) stated that beginning in infancy, humans demonstrate intrinsic tendencies to understand the world around them. They believed that the traits of autonomy, competence, and relatedness "support the need for curiosity,

creativity, productivity, and compassion” (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 5).

### **Motivation 1.0 and 2.0**

One of the more recent theories on motivation was articulated by Daniel Pink (2009) in his book, *Drive*. Pink provided an inside look at his theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Pink discussed some of the earlier, rudimentary theories about motivation and explained how current research has illuminated a more complex way of understanding the factors that influence people’s behavior.

Pink (2009) coined the term Motivation 1.0 to describe a person’s biological needs that come from within. This idea can be equated to the basic needs described in Maslow’s hierarchy. Pink felt that this undeveloped operating system was adequate until people began living in more complex societies. Pink stated that while humans have basic needs that drive behavior, he also believed that “humans are more than the sum of their biological urges” (p. 16). Pink soon realized that this self-serving behavior system needed to be modified, and Motivation 2.0 was born.

Some previous theorists credit the extrinsic component of seeking reward and avoiding punishment as the driving motivation for behavior. In Motivation 2.0, Pink (2009) categorized these motivators as “carrot and stick” (p. 57) methods and indicated that they usually do not work and can actually diminish performance. Pink believed that there was more to motivation than rewards and punishments.

Pink’s (2009) concepts are based on research studying human behavior, such as that of Harry F. Harlow from the University of Wisconsin in the 1940s and Edward Deci from Carnegie Mellon University in the 1960s. They ran parallel experiments, approximately 20 years apart involving the solving of a puzzle. Their results showed that

human motivation appeared to operate in a way that was contrary to what most scientists believed: We are driven by either biological factors or rewards and punishments. The subjects in each study solved the puzzles with no extrinsic reward being offered. The researchers determined that there was a third type of motivation they called intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) concluded that humans inherently “seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise their capacities, to explore, and to learn” (p. 70). He went on to suggest that anyone who wants to develop or enhance intrinsic motivation “should not concentrate on external-control systems such as monetary rewards” (Deci, 1972, p. 120).

Pink (2009) augmented this idea by asserting that there are Type I (intrinsically) motivated people and Type X (extrinsically) motivated people. The main concept of Pink’s theory is that extrinsic motivation is short-lived and is inferior to intrinsic motivation. Pink stated that Type I motivated people typically realize higher achievement than their reward-seeking counterparts; are their own renewable resource; and demonstrate higher self-esteem, better social relationships, and greater well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Pink, 2009).

### **Motivation 3.0**

Much of the research that Pink (2009) incorporated into the next iteration, Motivation 3.0, reflects a more current and deeper understanding of what steers human behavior. Pink indicated in his theory that there are three elements to motivation that can improve performance and deepen satisfaction in the workplace: autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

### *Autonomy*

Autonomy is the first component of Pink's (2009) Motivation 3.0 theory and is defined as our desire to make independent decisions in life and to have control (Deci et al., 2001; Pink, 2009). Pink believed that people are by nature curious and self-directed. Pink went on to describe autonomy as "acting with choice – which means we can be both autonomous and happily interdependent with others" (p. 88). Pink's ideas of autonomy run parallel to other research conducted in self-determination theory. One such example was research done by Baard et al. (2004) where 320 small businesses were studied. Half of the companies allowed their workers to exercise autonomy, while the other half used a top-down supervisory approach. The results showed that the businesses that gave choice and autonomy grew exponentially faster than the growth rate of the control-oriented companies and had two-thirds less turnover (Baard et al., 2004).

In one of Pink's (2009) illustrations, he quoted a manager in a results-oriented work environment who proposed that "management isn't about walking around seeing if people are in their offices, it's about creating conditions for people to do their best work" (p. 84). Within the field of education, teachers are generally given some control regarding the delivery of lessons, but with the increased pressure to perform well on high-stakes assessments, some school and district administrators have tightened their grip on the reins and decreased teacher autonomy (Knight, 2019). In Pink's Motivation 3.0 theory, he talked about four essential elements – the Four Ts – that increase motivation. Pink described the elements as autonomy over task (determining what you work on), time (working when you want as long as the job gets done), technique (how you get the job done), and team (who you work and collaborate with).



### ***Mastery***

Pink (2009) described the second component, mastery, as the desire to continually improve at something that matters. While Motivation 2.0 was interested in compliance, Motivation 3.0 is more concerned with engagement. Pink made a keen distinction between complying to get a routine task completed and truly engaging in one's work to solve complex problems and gain personal fulfillment. Pink believed that only engagement can produce mastery.

According to Pink (2009), mastery is comprised of three elements. The first is a positive mindset that understands that setbacks help you learn and grow. Carol Dweck (2000), a psychology professor at Stanford University, labeled this positive attitude as a "growth mindset," noting that people who embrace this mindset believe that brain power is not a fixed entity and that if they work hard, they can become smarter.

The second element is the ability to dig deep and have perseverance in the face of challenges. This is also called "grit" (Pink, 2009, p. 124). People who are highly motivated understand that they need to practice (and fail) at the skill they are trying to perfect, and they need to be dedicated to it.

The third element is the realization that you will never achieve perfection, and that is alright. It is knowing that there are always ways to improve your craft. Pink (2009) noted, "The joy is in the pursuit more than the realization" (p. 125).

To underscore Ingersoll's image of the revolving door, studies indicate that attrition rates are more concentrated in the first 5 years of a teacher's career (Bettini et al., 2017). Many would argue that teachers leave before they can form meaningful relationships or become an expert and achieve mastery in their craft.

### *Purpose*

Purpose, the third component of Motivation 3.0, is defined as the desire to be a part of something greater than ourselves. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi said that “purpose provides activation energy for living” (Pink, 2009, p. 132). When young teachers set out on their careers, some may be driven by a “profit motive” – the idea that summers off and a pretty good salary are appealing. Pink (2009) theorized that people who are deeply motivated are those who “hitch their desires” (p. 131) to a cause greater than themselves.

Deci, Ryan, and Niemiec (Pink, 2009) completed a study with college seniors and asked them about their life goals. They noticed that some of the college students had extrinsic or profit goals, while others had intrinsic or purpose goals. The researchers followed up with the students 1 to 2 years after graduation. They found that those students who had purpose goals were reporting much less depression and anxiety and higher feelings of well-being and satisfaction. Many of the students who had profit goals had attained their goals but were not happier, and some had increased levels of depression and anxiety.

When applying these traits to education, we see that teachers need to have three elements to be satisfied with their career choice. They need to have the autonomy to make decisions, they need to feel that mastery is something to work toward and that they have support to become better, and they need to be motivated by and connected to a shared purpose larger than themselves.

Table 2 aligns the terminology used by several of these prominent theorists. This illustrates the common traits that they deemed as important in motivation.

**Table 2***Common Concepts Within Motivational Theories*

Theorists	Trait 1	Trait 2	Trait 3
Maslow	Self-actualization	Esteem needs	Belonging
Herzberg	Opportunities for growth	Responsibilities	Relationships
Deci and Ryan	Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
Pink	Autonomy	Mastery	Purpose

Together, these theories contain three basic tenets that are the underpinnings of my conceptual framework: (a) growing to be your best while exercising some control over your work environment, (b) being seen as capable and knowing your craft, and (c) belonging to a group while serving a higher purpose.

**Factors Affecting Retention**

Research on today's schools is fraught with concern about the decline in preparation for the classroom that teachers receive through traditional college programs (NCES, 2016; Passey, 2018), the worries about abbreviated preparation programs for alternately prepared teachers, and the advanced age of those teachers who are currently employed and making their way toward retirement (CERRA, 2020). These factors exacerbate the current crisis in staffing our schools and heighten our need to determine the causes of attrition.

***Job Responsibilities***

Special education teachers must be prepared from the first day they enter the classroom to teach students who present with one or more of the 13 disabilities defined by IDEA. These disabilities may involve challenges in one or more of the following areas: cognitive, adaptive, social, emotional, behavioral, communication, speech articulation, vision, hearing, physical delays, or medically fragile conditions which can

range from mild to severe in nature (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). Special education teachers are also accountable for creating and documenting progress on a legally binding document called an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). They need to teach social skills, use group management practices, provide effective academic instruction, and implement function-based intervention plans (Bettini et al., 2019; Greenberg et al., 2016). They are required to be well-versed not only in their state standards and assessments but also in the alternate standards and assessments that have been developed for disabled students.

Special education teachers need to be skillful at arranging their classrooms to accommodate all the physical and behavioral needs of their students. They may need to manage several daily schedules at once, since their students' ages and abilities may span two to three grade levels. Students travel in and out of the classroom to receive therapy, and they may need assistance to use the restroom or adult intervention to participate in group or individualized instruction (Bettini et al., 2019; Garwood et al., 2018).

These teachers may need to manage and delegate to other adults if they have assistants assigned to their classrooms. This may include modeling teaching or behavior techniques, data collection, or helping with managerial tasks of the day. They may be required to use specialized equipment such as gait trainers, light boxes, standers, communication devices, picture exchange programs, classroom microphones, or switches (Assistive Technology Industry Association, n.d.). This assistive technology requires additional training to be used proficiently. With all these responsibilities, special education teachers experience more stressors than their general education counterparts (Ansley et al., 2016).

Some special education teachers may be faced with the added pressures of being knowledgeable about community resources as they field questions about doctors, insurance, therapists, support groups, and recreational resources, and a great deal of paperwork. Parents are often exhausted and uncertain as they look to special education professionals for advice, resources, and support (Goedeke et al., 2019).

### *Attrition*

Attrition is described as the net loss of teaching staff due to them leaving or retiring. Countless researchers have investigated the reasons teachers leave the field of education. The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (2016) stated that six million students with disabilities receive special education services and went on to explain,

Educating students with special needs should be a top priority, yet critical shortages of special education teachers and specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) exist in all regions of the country. The demand for these highly qualified professionals is increasing at a time when the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates the shortages are “acute.” These shortages, as well as unfunded positions, impede the ability of students with disabilities to reach their full academic potential and hinder the work of districts to prepare all students to be college and career ready. (para. 1)

In March 2021, 42% of teachers surveyed said they had considered leaving or retiring from teaching, with over half giving COVID as the reason (Qualtrics, 2021). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) reported that other high-achieving countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada have approximately half the teacher

attrition of the United States. This complicated issue is the result of many interdependent drivers (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Some of the recurring factors within studies on attrition are stress and burnout, lack of respect and support, school safety, and increased accountability and workload.

For example, one study surveyed 363 public special educators from 34 states about their perceived connections between job satisfaction and teacher burnout (Robinson et al., 2019). The participants were predominantly White (91%) and female (81%), and almost half (n=179) had over 11 years of experience. This study utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory: Educator Survey, which found a high correlation between the level of burnout and satisfaction on the job experienced by special education teachers. The study indicates higher job satisfaction for teachers when they are supported by colleagues and administration and when they are provided with professional development opportunities (Robinson et al., 2019). The study went on to report that decreased job satisfaction is characterized by burnout due to physical and emotional exhaustion, a lack of personalization, and diminished personal accomplishment. Teachers facing these conditions are very likely to face burnout in the workplace and ultimately desert the teaching profession (Williams & Dikes, 2015). The study's recommendations stated that if school districts want their teachers to experience less burnout and remain in the classroom, they would need to increase job satisfaction by providing more support in the school environment.

It has been proposed in numerous studies that working conditions impact job satisfaction and together they can be predictors of attrition (Ladd, 2009; Tickle et al., 2011).

### ***Stress and Burnout***

Stress in the workplace is the umbrella term that overarches and intertwines with many of the other contributing factors of teacher burnout. It is often among the top reasons teachers leave their job (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Stress can come from any combination of factors, such as a large caseload and the managerial paperwork that accompanies it, handling behaviors that range from unruly to dangerously aggressive, lack of time for collaboration or relationship building, lack of support, contentious or needy parents, or managing other adults in the classroom (Bettini et al., 2017). Bilz (2008) concluded in his study that a challenging work environment and issues with student discipline are major contributing factors to a teacher's decision to leave education.

Burnout in teachers is characterized by psychophysical exhaustion, lack of positive relationships, professional inefficacy, and a feeling of hopelessness (Jurado et al., 2019). Emmer et al. (2013) described several types of burnout: Physical burnout can include chronic tiredness or the inability to sleep; intellectual burnout can include difficulty making decisions, processing, or controlling one's reactions; social burnout may include becoming withdrawn or cynical; and emotional burnout might be demonstrated by absenteeism, distrust, or feelings of inadequacy. It is also noted that teachers who experience burnout are often detached and less responsive to the needs of their students (Emmer et al., 2013).

In a study of 500 seventh- and eighth-grade teachers in Italy, the research found that one third of the teachers experienced a high level of burnout. The results from two instruments (Link Burnout Questionnaire and Assessment Questionnaire for Convictions

about Efficacy, Perceived Context, Job Attitudes, and Satisfaction in School Contexts) were scored on a Likert scale and reflected low professional commitment, low job satisfaction, and low scores for perceived efficacy (Jurado et al., 2019). The conclusions stated that feelings of professional efficacy and job satisfaction should be supported by the school districts by providing training and time to assimilate professional competencies.

In a study by Cancio et al. (2018), 211 special education teachers in four states were surveyed about the coping mechanisms they employed to deal with job-related stress. This study noted that burnout is a long-term natural consequence of continued stress (Cancio et al., 2018). Coping mechanisms can be avoidant (i.e., leaving the profession, attrition) or active (i.e., exercise, meditation, support group) and can reduce the effects of stress.

The conclusions acknowledge that there are difficulties with filling special education positions, and the focus should be on retention. The respondents recommended that school district administrators search for ways to reduce stressors, monitor the feedback from their special education teachers relative to job satisfaction, and provide them with effective support.

### ***Stress and Safety***

Reports of school violence are on the nightly news and in the newspapers every week. According to the Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety (Irwin et al., 2022), there were 93 school shootings at public schools during the 2020-2021 school year. This was more than any other year since data collection began. The annual report by NCES showed that cyberbullying in public schools increased from 8% in 2009-2010 to



16% in 2019-2020 (Irwin et al., 2022). While some forms of school violence categorized as discipline issues have declined between 2009 and 2020, the ripple effect of school shootings within the educational community evokes a great deal of stress.

When viewing school violence through the lens of Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, an individual's basic needs must be met before they can turn their attention to fulfilling others' needs. A teacher's need for safety and security must be met so they can focus their attention on relationships and teaching our young people.

Within the field of positive psychology, well-being is a fundamental need to help humans flourish (DeCordova et al., 2019). The literature confirms that teachers are increasingly exposed to inappropriate and/or aggressive behavior from students or their parents. This constitutes a serious work-related stress that can reduce a teacher's occupational well-being (DeCordova et al., 2019). In one study conducted in Italy, 475 teachers were surveyed regarding job satisfaction, levels of social support from administration and colleagues, satisfaction with teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships, and perceived levels of violence directed towards teachers (either witnessed or experienced (DeCordova et al., 2019). The results of this study showed that women seem to be more strongly affected by aggressive behaviors than their male counterparts, and women perceive themselves as more vulnerable. The study concluded that in order to improve well-being in the workplace and decrease perceived violence, schools must strive for an increase in job satisfaction, collegial and administrative support, and positive relationships (DeCordova et al., 2019).

In a survey from the American Psychological Association (Walker, 2022), one third of teachers stated that they experienced one or more incidents of verbal harassment

or threats of violence during the pandemic, and 29% reported an incident from a parent. Nearly half of the teachers surveyed reported that they have considered or have plans to quit or transfer their jobs due to school climate and school safety concerns (Walker, 2022).

In 2019, a study of over 1,500 teachers from a high-needs public school district looked at the factors that influence a teacher's commitment to the profession (Ford et al., 2019). The study concluded that the level of support provided to the teacher from the district helped teachers to feel psychologically safe and able to focus their efforts on supporting children (Ford et al., 2019).

### ***Stress From Lack of Respect and Support***

In one survey by Qualtrics (2021), the researchers found that of the 1,045 teachers surveyed, only 34% believed that the teaching profession is valued. In an article published by *The State*, a newspaper in Columbia, South Carolina, teachers reported that the lack of respect can come in various forms (Self, 2018). Many teachers recall that they had ideals of being part of a career that was once venerated, only to find that public officials and society place blame on teachers individually and the educational system as a whole. More than three dozen teachers and former teachers were interviewed. One teacher who left the classroom expressed that he did not feel teachers were treated as true professionals (Self, 2018). This lack of professional respect is also reflected in a teacher's pay.

An *Education Week* article (2017) cited a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development which stated that teachers in the U.S. are paid less than 60 cents per dollar when compared to people with the same level of education in

other professions (Viadero, 2018). When considering education, experience, and other factors that affect earnings, a teacher's weekly salary was 21.4% lower than that of their nonteaching peers and more than triple the deficit of 6.3% in 1996 (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Approximately 20% of teachers hold a second job during the academic year; this accounts for approximately 9% of their yearly income. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that teachers are approximately three times more likely to take on this burden compared to other workers (Walker, 2019).

Pink (2009) contended that fair and ample pay is so essential that when workers are compensated adequately, it moves their focus away from money and allows them to put their energy and expertise into the work itself. Pink said, "The best use of money as a motivator is to pay people enough to take the issue of money off the table" (p. 77). Pink cited examples of simple if-then tasks (if you do this, then you get that) where extrinsic motivation may work, but when the work is more complex and requires dedication and creativity, extrinsic motivation distracts us from the job. Pink stated that it is best to get the money right as a threshold and then people will work because they have an interest in the work, it is enjoyable, and it matters to be part of something important.

Specific to special education teachers is the feeling that they and their students are often marginalized by administrators and other teachers in the building (Mockovciak, 2018). The administration often does not have the expertise or feel effective in interacting with or disciplining special needs students (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). This factor can range from a mild sense of isolation on one end of the continuum to a hostile work environment on the other. In a study of 2,060 nationally represented secondary special education teachers, Conley and You (2017) used structural equation modeling to link

interpretations of workplace conditions, job fulfillment, and commitment to teachers' attitudes about leaving. Conely and You's conclusions stated that district-level and school-level administrative support had the greatest impact on special education teachers leaving the profession. Conley and You also observed that a teacher's age was the most influential demographic indicator, with more experienced teachers having higher intentions to stay. This corroborates other research findings that beginning teachers are keenly affected by this stress and are most likely to leave before completing 5 years on the job (Cancio et al., 2018).

Support can also come in the form of administrative support. Several studies make a significant correlation between administrative leadership and teacher attrition. Teachers who believe that school leaders have their best interests at heart are more likely to return to the classroom and remain in the teaching profession (Boyd et al., 2011; Ladd, 2009). Tickle et al. (2011) found that administrative support is the most significant predictor of teacher job satisfaction and influences their intent to continue to teach. The teachers in this study were willing to overlook less than ideal working conditions when they had effective leadership. Administrative support is the workplace condition that is most predictive of teacher turnover. When a teacher strongly disagrees that their administrator is supportive, they are more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

### ***Stress From Increased Accountability and Workload***

Many teachers who left their jobs said that pressures from federal and state mandates translated into tighter controls from administrators: an increase of required data and paperwork (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), evaluating teachers based on testing results

(Westervelt, 2015), top-down managerial styles, and not having an influence in the school-wide decision-making process (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Special educators report stress from feelings of inadequate professional preparation and lack of efficacy (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

Special education teachers are often faced with larger-than-recommended caseloads, paperwork, and tough school environments where they fear for their personal safety, especially in schools of high poverty (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). For many of these teachers, 50% of their workday is spent on paperwork (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010).

Bettini et al. (2017) found that being stressed and overwhelmed by their workload influenced a teacher's career intentions and predicted emotional exhaustion. One in 20 teachers (4.9 %) said the stress and disappointment inherent in teaching are not worth it, and 27.4 % of teachers reported that they have thought about leaving teaching at some point (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Bettini et al. (2017) utilized the conservation of resources theoretical framework in a study with novice teachers. The conservation of resources theory operates with the assumption that individuals possess limited time and energy. When they are faced with protracted periods of elevated demands and declining resources, workers can demonstrate lower energy and the inability to meet responsibilities (Hobfoll, 2011). Their study found that increased workload was predictive of emotional exhaustion and stress which influenced the teacher's job commitment and career intentions (Bettini et al., 2017).

### **Teacher Retention Strategies**

Many educational scholars have written about the high number of teachers leaving the profession and the effects this has on student achievement and stability. With

an acknowledgment of increasing demand and great concerns with supply, it is imperative that job satisfaction and retention of our teacher workforce become a priority. Penn State University and the nonprofit Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently reported that within similar professional occupations, teachers rate among the lowest in the perception that their opinions are valued on the job (Greenberg et al., 2016). Greenberg et al. (2016) cited deficits in leadership, climate and culture, autonomy in decision-making, social/emotional competence, and an increase in job demands as the reasons for their stress.

Still, others write about the ways we can improve our practices and create a positive work environment that sustains our teachers: an environment in which teachers have a voice (autonomy), are encouraged to hone their skills (mastery), and feel connected to the people and mission of educating our children (shared purpose).

### ***Mentoring and Induction***

One intervention strategy that has proven to increase teacher retention is to provide mentoring and support during an induction period for new teachers. Mentoring is generally the pairing of an experienced master teacher with a new teacher in their first or second year on the job. Goldrick (2016) suggested a 2-year induction program that provides support and collaboration that includes professional development specific to the needs of a new teacher and coaching to ensure progress on teaching standards. Mentors should be assigned at the beginning of the year and should be given time during the school day to collaborate, observe, and interact with the new teacher (Goldrick, 2016). Mentors provide the professional relationship that encourages continuous support and reflection and can solidify a young teacher's professional identity (Meyer, 2021). The

lack of mentoring support may increase the likelihood of a new teacher leaving the profession (Goldrick, 2016).

In a study by Hagaman and Casey (2018), focus groups were used to gather perceptions about attrition from three groups: college students attending a teacher preparation program, special education teachers in their first 3 years of teaching, and school administrators whose job it is to hire and support these novice special education teachers. In this study, all three groups identified mentors as having a positive effect on retention.

During the 2007–2008 school year, a study conducted by NCES, which is part of the U.S. Department of Education, involved 1,440 beginning teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The study revealed that 77% of the beginning teachers who had a trained mentor were still in the classroom during all 5 years of the study, contrasted to a retention rate of 64% for those who did not have a trained mentor (Raue & Gray, 2015). High-quality induction and mentoring programs better prepare teachers for their roles and offer a cost-effective way to reduce teacher attrition (Donley et al., 2019).

### ***PLCs***

A PLC is a cohort of teachers and administrators who share a common vision; trust one another; communicate honestly; and as a team, are dedicated to critically reflecting on their teaching practices and tolerate the growing pains of team building to improve teaching and learning (Graham & Ferriter, 2010). Richard DuFour was a public school educator for 34 years and one of the leading authorities on PLCs. DuFour and Eaker (1998) believed that PLCs operate using three big ideas: a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results. DuFour and Eaker also stressed four

guiding questions: (a) What do we want children to learn; (b) How will we know if they have learned it; (c) How will we respond when some students do not learn; and (d) How will we enrich and extend learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?

Proponents of PLCs acknowledge that this is a continuous, collaborative process in which the team works in cycles of collective inquiry using research and data to achieve improved results for their students (Miller, 2020). Belknap and Taymans (2015) conducted interviews with special education teachers who expressed feelings of isolation. Many special education teachers work in self-contained classrooms, which limits the amount of time they have to interact with other teachers throughout the day (Mrstik et al., 2019).

PLCs are critical in promoting collegial working relationships, which decrease isolation in the work environment (belonging). They provide intentional sharing of ideas and best practices during which teachers are discussing what is working and what is not (esteem needs, autonomy, mastery). The PLCs encourage this cyclical process of data collection and reflection with the goal of improving student achievement (shared purpose; DuFour, & Eaker, 1998). Deci and Ryan (2000) contended that interpersonal practices such as communication and feedback that promote feelings of proficiency can enhance intrinsic motivation because they address the basic need for competence. The more successful a teacher is in their attempt to meet their needs and develop necessary skills, the harder that individual will strive to attain greater improvement (Woolfolk et al., 2009). PLCs provide ample opportunities to meet the needs of teachers and therefore increase job satisfaction and motivation. Kraft et al. (2021) found that teachers whose schools facilitated meaningful collaboration with colleagues were more likely to



experience overall job satisfaction, which influenced their decision to stay or leave a teaching role.

### ***School Climate***

A key factor that influences teacher success and retention is school climate. A harmonious school climate boosts self-efficacy, enhances teacher job satisfaction, improves teacher-student relationships, and reduces burnout and attrition (Lee & Louis, 2019). A positive school climate has long been tied to student achievement, but it also has an impact on a teacher's sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and likelihood to remain in the field of education (Swisher, 2022). School climate is evident when observing the interdependence between the environment and the individual as well as through perceptions of self and group interactions (Preite, 2015). When President Barack Obama replaced the No Child Left Behind Act with the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, it included increased funding for special education and preschool and a focus on improving school climate (Johnson et al., 2019).

One study of the Chicago Public Schools reported that schools in which teachers reported a greater sense of collective responsibility (shared purpose) had significantly higher retention rates than schools with a weaker climate and sense of unity (Swisher, 2022).

In order to be responsive to their teachers, districts can gather survey data to track how teachers feel about the school climate to assess patterns or areas in need of improvement. Principals need to be approachable and supportive of their teachers. A study from the University of Chicago concluded that a principal had the greatest influence on student learning through their impact on school climate (Allensworth &

Hart, 2018). Other studies found that teachers are less likely to leave when they have trusting relationships with their principals and view them as strong and collaborative instructional leaders (Swisher, 2022).

### ***Relationships***

One attribute that ties the other retention factors together is relationships. The need to belong is a basic need for all human beings. Each of the theorists mentioned in this chapter uses some term to represent the importance of relationship: belonging (Maslow), relationships (Herzberg), relatedness (Deci & Ryan), or purpose (Pink). In a school setting, teachers can have relationships with their administrators, colleagues, students, and families. Relationships with colleagues and administration might take place in a PLC. One of the core understandings of PLCs is that the best relationships are built on trust (Graham & Ferriter, 2010). When teachers work together and form strong interpersonal relationships, it allows for meaningful change to occur. Barth (2006) stated that teacher relationships in a school have “a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else” (p. 8). When teachers view their colleagues as compassionate towards them, demonstrating higher levels of organizational commitment, positive emotion, and job satisfaction, they are better able to cope with stress and are less likely to experience burnout (Cortez et al., 2021).

Teachers also nurture relationships with students and families. O’Shea’s (2021) study, conducted using the Teaching and Learning International Survey which was given to 2,560 teachers in 166 schools in the United States, demonstrated the importance that relationships with students have on teacher job satisfaction. Based on O’Shea’s teacher

sample, relationships are shown to be a significant predictor of job satisfaction in the United States. These findings corroborate the work of other studies which found that teacher-student relationships play a significant role in teacher well-being (O'Shea, 2021). Another study of school climate and teacher retention in Chicago Public Schools found that elementary schools where teachers report a high level of trust with parents had a staff retention rate of five percentage points higher than those schools reporting low trust (Swisher, 2022).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the literature relevant to this proposed study. A conceptual framework was outlined that combines the theories of several well-known researchers. Parallels were drawn between Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, Herzberg's (1968) factors of job dissatisfaction, and Deci and Ryan (2000) and Pink's (2009) characteristics of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Furthermore, Herzberg's factors of job satisfaction, such as opportunities for growth, achievement, and the nature of the work itself, are reflective of Pink's characteristics of intrinsic motivation. These are the factors that we have opportunities to influence which can improve job satisfaction and retention for teachers. This chapter also suggested possible ways to support our special education teachers. Teachers who are trained and enter the workforce require support that will equip them with the tools necessary to navigate this complex profession and motivate them to want to stay.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology used to collect data from teachers about motivating factors that have kept them in the field of special education. Chapter 3 provides a rationale for the proposed data collection methods and analysis while

reviewing how each step is aligned with the research questions.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The focus of this mixed methods study was to gain a deeper understanding of the common themes expressed by experienced special education teachers that motivate them to remain in the classroom. This chapter describes the methodology that was used during the study. The research questions and parameters of the study are reviewed. Information about how study participants were selected, data collection and analysis, the role of the researcher, and a description of how data were validated are provided.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession?
2. What strategies do special education teachers suggest that school districts could implement to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention?

### **Summary of Methodology**

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to collect data from experienced special education teachers in one South Carolina school district to determine the common motivating factors that have kept them in this challenging profession for 5 or more years.

### **Data Collection and Interview Plan**

Table 3 outlines the procedures that were utilized and the resulting products that were obtained from each phase of the data collection process.

**Table 3***Method and Procedure for Data Collection*

Phase	Procedure	Product
Phase 1 Survey	Survey distributed to all experienced special education teachers	Quantitative data
Phase 1 Wave analysis	After 1 week, examine survey returns	Preliminary data to be compared to final responses
Phase 1 Survey	After 2 weeks, close the survey window.	Final numeric data
Phase 1 Respondents for interview	Send letter to participants to obtain names and contact information of those who agree to be interviewed.	Interview list
Phase 1 Data analysis	Use of descriptive statistics	Frequency distribution, mean, and mode
Integration of Phase 1 and Phase 2	Interview questions will be edited or added based on Phase 1 results	Interview protocol
Phase 2 Interview data collection	Schedule and hold virtual interviews	Interview transcripts and videos
Phase 2 Interview Data Analysis	Coding and thematic analysis	Codes and themes
Phase 2 Follow-up interview	Member checking to ensure validity of data	Clarification of codes and themes
Integration of Phase 1 and Phase 2 data	Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results	Conclusions and implications for future research

The quantitative phase of data collection included an online survey (Appendix A)

taken by a convenience sampling of all experienced special education teachers in the district. In a separate email, I thanked all participants and requested the name and contact information of those who would be willing to take part in the interview phase of data collection (Appendix B). Since I had a larger response than needed, interview participants were selected using a random selection website.

The survey results informed an in-depth qualitative data collection phase. Interview questions had already been scripted (Appendix C), but follow-up questions were added when necessary to clarify motivational factors that might impact a teacher's decision to remain in the profession. A sampling of five to six voluntary participants was invited to participate in a virtual interview about their lived experiences and perceptions of their school environment as well as factors that have influenced their decisions to remain in the profession. These interviews allowed me to gather information personally and engage with the participants (Crotty, as cited in Creswell, 2014). The interview data were analyzed to determine common themes and draw conclusions based on the respondents' input. I used a priori themes derived from the conceptual framework as well as inductive coding to uncover themes that do not fit into the existing framework but are prevalent in the data.

### **Participants and Setting**

The voluntary participants for this study were comprised of experienced special education teachers who have taught in the classroom for 5 years or more. All participants were experienced preschool through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers from one public school district in South Carolina. This purposeful selection is intended to “best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2014, p. 189).

The setting for my research was a public school district in South Carolina that serves students 3 to 21 years of age. The district has 17,057 students and 1,350 teachers in 20 schools. There are 100 administrators and 721 support staff employed by the district. During the 2020-2021 school year, the district offered a virtual academy that served approximately 5,000 students. Within this district, there are 137 special education teachers, 37 with under 5 years of experience and 100 with 5 or more years of experience.

Prior to conducting the survey and interviews, participants were provided with an explanation of the process and informed that they had the option to withdraw from the study or decline to answer any question if they so chose. They were told of the time commitment if they agreed to be interviewed. I explained that throughout the process, identifying information in the written documents would be removed and all information would be confidential. All files are secured in a locked storage cabinet and will be destroyed 3 years after the completion of the study, per Institutional Review Board requirements.

Permission to conduct this research was given by the district superintendent. Participants were invited to participate through an email distributed to all experienced special education teachers which contained a link to the survey. All survey responses were anonymous. A second email was sent to thank all participants and ask for their contact information if they were willing to participate in the interview portion of the research.

### **Role of the Researcher**

While this research was done in my district, I was not in a supervisory position, nor did I have any relationship with the participants. My role was to design the study and



invite and select participants. I sent the survey out to all experienced special education teachers in the district using Qualtrics, which ensured anonymity for the quantitative phase of this study. After the survey was complete, I sent a letter of thanks to the participants and asked for the contact information of those who would be willing to participate in the interview portion of the study. In the qualitative phase, my role in this research was to build a sense of trust with the participants and serve as a facilitator for the interviews. I interviewed participants and transcribed the interviews to better analyze them for common themes.

I have been a special education teacher for 35 years, and it was important that I guard against any potential influence on the interviews and interpretation of study results. To reduce bias, I adhered to my open-ended interview questions, listened carefully, and was aware of my body language, as I conducted interviews with the participants. I made a second contact with interview participants and asked them to verify the themes I coded to increase validity and reliability. During the study, I ensured confidentiality for the participants and the data they provided.

### **Quantitative Data Collection**

Quantitative research is employed when a researcher chooses to use an instrument to gather statistical data which is then used to examine the relationship between variables (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative phase of data collection in this mixed methods study included administering the Basic Need Satisfaction Survey (Deci et al., 2001; Ilardi et al., 1993; Kasser et al., 1992). This survey is based on the self-determination theory and has 21 Likert scale items that use a 7-point rating scale ranging from “not at all true” to “very true” (see Appendix A). This survey is intended to provide a quantitative description of

the attitudes or opinions “of a population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell, 2014, p. 155). The survey was found as an open-source document for public use on the University of Washington website. A suggested citation for use was provided.

The survey questions addressed teachers’ levels of job satisfaction and feelings of efficacy with their current assignment. The questions were answered using a 7-point Likert scale. Table 4 presents the items that were used to analyze data related to job satisfaction and motivational factors and were utilized to aid in the categorization of responses and data analysis. The survey was not presented in these categories but will be listed in numeric order.

**Table 4***Alignment of Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work Survey With Motivational Factors*

Motivational factor	Survey item
Autonomy	1. I feel like I can make a lot of inputs to deciding how my job gets done. 5. I feel pressured at work. 8. I am free to express my ideas and opinions at work. 11. When I am at work, I have to do what I am told. 13. My feelings are taken into consideration at work. 17. I feel like I can pretty much be myself at work. 20. There is not much opportunity for me to decide for myself how to go about my work.
Mastery	3. I do not feel very competent when I am at work. 4. People at work tell me I am good at what I do. 10. I have been able to learn interesting new skills on my job. 12. Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from working. 14. On my job, I do not get much of a chance to show how capable I am. 19. When I am working, I often do not feel very capable.
Shared purpose	2. I really like the people I work with. 6. I get along with people at work. 7. I pretty much keep to myself when I am at work. 9. I consider the people at work to be my friends. 15. People at work care about me. 16. There are not many people at work that I am close to. 18. The people I work with do not seem to like me much. 21. People at work are pretty friendly towards me.

The survey was uploaded to Qualtrics and distributed via email to all experienced special education teachers in one public school district in South Carolina. The respondents were given 2 weeks to complete the survey. A reminder email was sent out after 1 week. To monitor response bias, I used wave analysis to examine survey returns at the end of each week to determine if common responses changed (Leslie, 1972).

When the survey period was over, the data were organized and analyzed. A

descriptive analysis was reported including the mean, mode, and frequency distribution of scores for each survey item. When scoring the survey, some items were scored just as the respondents answered them using the Likert scale. Other items that were worded in the negative were scored by subtracting the person's response from 8 (Deci et al., 2001; Ilardi et al., 1993; Kasser et al., 1992). The use of negatively worded questions can be debated, but survey developers have widely accepted the strategy of incorporating positively and negatively worded items in survey questionnaires to reduce response set bias (Chyung et al., 2018). Since the Basic Need Satisfaction at Work Scale (Deci et al., 2001; Ilardi et al., 1993; Kasser et al., 1992) had been previously validated, I chose to administer the survey as written.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

The second phase of data collection gathered qualitative data through individual interviews using Google Meet video conferencing. The audio portion of the interview was simultaneously transcribed using Tactiq Chrome Extension. Qualitative research is used when a researcher wants to understand how individuals or a group view a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative portion of the study took place following the survey and involved interviews with six of the survey respondents. All information gathered during this phase of the research was confidential and pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identity of each participant. The purpose of the interviews was to ask open-ended questions and collect a more detailed account of the lived experiences that have motivated these teachers to remain in the field of special education. I used a semi-structured interview format. A semi-structured interview is conducted conversationally using open-ended questions that allow the respondents to express their

thoughts and experiences without leading them or introducing bias on my part. It allows the discussion to naturally meander around topics on the protocol and will often be accompanied by more probing questions, such as “Can you tell me more about that” or “How did that make you feel,” to gain a more complete understanding of the interviewee’s experiences (Newcomer et al., 2015). Additional questions may be added once the survey data are collected and analyzed.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative (survey) data and the qualitative (interview) data were analyzed separately but then combined to answer the two research questions. The survey items were used to answer Research Question 1, “What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession?” To analyze the survey data, I looked at the raw numeric data as they relate to each one of the three a priori themes: autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose.

To score the survey questions, I derived three subscale scores by averaging the item responses within each subscale. In the scoring guide, certain questions are indicators of autonomy, mastery or competence, and shared purpose or relatedness. Some questions are worded in the negative, and these items would be scored by taking the raw score and subtracting it from 8. These raw data would provide a “score” for each theme which would then be converted into an average or mean. A higher average would indicate greater satisfaction in this area while at work. Data were also represented using descriptive statistics such as a frequency distribution table and mean and mode for each theme. I analyzed the quantitative data to determine if there were trends in the responses that might indicate a need to ask additional questions during the interview portion of the

research.

To provide a more complete understanding of the quantitative data collected to answer Research Question 1, “What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession,” Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 were asked. To learn more about Research Question 2, “What strategies do special education teachers suggest that school districts could implement to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention,” I asked Questions 3, 4, 5, 9, and 10 during the interviews. Table 5 shows the alignment between the interview questions, the research questions, and the traits listed in the conceptual framework.

**Table 5***Alignment of Interview Questions, Research Questions, and Conceptual Framework*

Interview question	Research question: Conceptual framework
1. Can you tell me about your own preparation to become a teacher? How and where you received your teaching credentials?	Question 1: Trait 2
2. What drew you to the field of special education? Did any personal experiences influence your decision?	Question 1: Trait 3
3. Can you describe the different roles and expectations for you as a special education teacher? How do you manage all these roles?	Questions 1 and 2: Trait 2
4. How would you describe your work with other team members at your school? With general education teachers? Administrators?	Questions 1 and 2: Traits 1 and 3
5. What are your greatest challenges in special education? What helped you overcome them?	Question 2: Traits 1 and 2
6. Why have you stayed in special education?	Question 1: Trait 2
7. Have you ever considered leaving the profession? If so, why?	Question 1: Traits 2 and 3
8. Does your salary have an impact on your decision to stay? Please explain.	Question 1: Trait 1
9. What advice would you have for pre-service teachers entering special education?	Question 2: Traits 1, 2, and 3
10. What recommendations would you offer to administrators to help retain special education teachers or make a special educator's job more manageable?	Question 2: Traits 1, 2, and 3

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using a hybrid of both inductive and deductive coding. Deductive coding involves the use of a codebook

containing possible a priori themes based on previous research, my research questions, and my conceptual framework. These codes were autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose. First, I transcribed all interviews thoroughly to become familiar with the responses. I highlighted words and phrases that represented the a priori themes from my conceptual framework. The purpose of highlighting significant statements provided during the interview allowed me to reduce the data into manageable groups. Inductive coding was used as new codes emerged from the interview transcripts. The qualitative data provided more depth and insight into the quantitative results (Creswell, 2014). I reviewed responses with respondents to ensure that the qualitative data were accurate and that I fully understood the respondents' answers. I called or emailed participants to share my findings from their interviews and provide an opportunity for them to add more in-depth comments or make clarifications to the findings as needed (Creswell, 2014).

### **Reliability and Validity**

By utilizing a mixed methods design, I collected diverse types of data to provide a well-rounded understanding of my research problem (Creswell, 2014). Validation of the interview questions was completed through a pilot study. Pilot studies are small-scale inquiries that precede larger studies to help the researcher to assess and refine research protocols and preempt possible challenges in the actual data collection (Williams-McBean, 2019). Pilot studies are also useful in increasing training and confidence in interviewing skills. Williams-McBean (2019) went on to say that in a mixed methods study, the validity of the quantitative phase depends on a robust qualitative phase. For my pilot study, two of my colleagues were interviewed in advance to allow an opportunity for me to become comfortable with the interview process and for them to provide



feedback and clarification of the interview questions.

Based on Interview 1, a grammatical error was corrected and Questions 3 and 5 were edited for clarity by adding the word “you.” The participant felt that without the word you, the respondent might not answer the question in a personal way but might instead provide an answer that they felt represented special educators as a whole. The second interviewee felt that this adjustment made the question clearer. Both respondents provided positive feedback on the questions and thought the responses would provide interesting feedback. They both said they would like to hear the recommendations the interview respondents might provide.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that motivate special educators to remain in the classroom for 5 or more years. The results could inform other school communities so they can perpetuate those positive characteristics. A mixed methods approach provided layers of data to better understand their lived experiences. Chapter 3 described the research purpose and methods, the setting and participants, and the role of the researcher. The quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis processes were described as well as the steps that took place to validate the study.

Chapter 4 outlines the findings of the study including the themes that emerged from the survey and interviews. Chapter 5 summarizes the conclusions based on the findings of this research and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Overview

Motivation has been studied for decades as theorists work to figure out what propels a person to act in a particular way. In this study, the focus was on those factors that contribute to job satisfaction and motivate special education teachers to stay in the profession.

Chapter 1 provided a brief history of special education in South Carolina, as well as the purpose and significance of this research and the research questions that framed the study. The limitations, delimitations, and definitions of terms combined to serve as guidelines to better understand the study. Chapter 2 reviewed the work of several theorists who contributed to the formation of the conceptual framework that was used. The framework formed the lens through which the research questions were answered. Chapter 3 described the methodology used to conduct the study. Information about the selection of study participants, data collection and analysis, validity, and the role of the researcher was outlined. This chapter reviews the purpose of the study and provides a more detailed description of the participants involved in the survey and interviews and the themes that evolved from their responses. The chapter concludes with an analysis and summary of the findings that provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession?
2. What strategies do special education teachers suggest, that school districts might implement, to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention?

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to gather information about teachers and their perceptions of their current work assignment, as well as the challenges they have faced and the motivating factors that have kept them in the profession for 5 or more years.

### **Review of Conceptual Framework**

My conceptual framework merged four theories from noteworthy theorists: Maslow (1943), Herzberg (1968), Deci and Ryan (2008), and Pink (2009). As theories about human needs and motivation evolved, similarities emerged. These common ideas provided the structure for my conceptual framework, as well as the a priori themes of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose that I used to guide my research.

### **An Overview of the Methodology**

This mixed methods study was comprised of two phases: a quantitative phase utilizing an online survey and a qualitative phase utilizing virtual interviews. Each phase is described individually with a data analysis section to follow.

#### ***Survey***

At the time of my study, there were 138 special education teachers in my district, and 37 of them did not meet the criteria to participate in my study since they did not have 5 years of experience in the classroom. The term “experienced” in this study refers to teachers with 5 or more years of experience in the classroom. The remaining 101 teachers meet the 5-year criteria. When removing myself, the pool of possible participants was 100 teachers. After IRB approval, the survey was emailed to all 100 experienced teachers. Three emails were undeliverable and were returned to me. Upon further investigation, it was determined that these three teachers had either left the district or

moved to a non-teaching role. The remaining pool for the survey portion of the study then became 97 experienced teachers.

The survey was sent out using the school email server. Voluntary participants were required to acknowledge the informed consent before proceeding to the survey. All survey responses were anonymous. The survey was completed by 27 experienced teachers during the first week. Preliminary data were collected at the end of 1 week. A reminder email was sent the next day to all participants to let them know that the survey would be closing at the end of the second week. The final total was 48 participants (response rate of 49.48%). A wave analysis (Table 6) was completed to compare the Week 1 results to Week 2 results to determine if the responses were consistent during the duration of the data collection.

**Table 6***Wave Analysis Between Week 1 and Week 2 Results*

Survey question	Week 1 mean	Week 2 mean	Difference
1. I feel like I can make a lot of inputs to deciding how my job gets done.	4.67	4.88	.21
2. I really like the people I work with.	6.30	6.27	.03
3. I do not feel very competent when I am at work.	2.26	2.02	.24
4. People at work tell me I am good at what I do.	5.67	5.81	.14
5. I feel pressured at work.	5.19	5.33	.14
6. I get along with people at work.	6.26	6.33	.07
7. I pretty much keep to myself when I am at work.	3.77	3.53	.24
8. I am free to express my ideas and opinions on the job.	4.78	5.08	.30
9. I consider the people I work with to be my friends.	5.74	5.60	.14
10. I have been able to learn interesting new skills on my job.	5.30	5.46	.16
11. When I am at work, I have to do what I am told.	4.88	4.89	.01
12. Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from working.	4.78	5.21	.43
13. My feelings are taken into consideration at work.	4.44	4.81	.37
14. On my job I do not get much of a chance to show how capable I am.	3.85	3.17	.68

(continued)

Survey question	Week 1 mean	Week 2 mean	Difference
15. People at work care about me.	5.26	5.56	.30
16. There are not many people at work that I am close to.	3.74	3.29	.45
17. I feel like I can pretty much be myself at work.	5.22	5.25	.03
18. The people I work with do not seem to like me much.	1.78	1.73	.05
19. When I am working, I often do not feel very capable.	2.59	2.26	.33
20. There is not much opportunity for me to decide for myself how to go about my work.	3.26	2.83	.43
21. People at work are pretty friendly towards me.	6.04	6.25	.21

The wave analysis revealed no significant differences in the mean value for each question as reported in Qualtrics. When comparing Week 1 data to Week 2 data, it was noted that Question 14 revealed the largest difference (.64), but this is less than a 10% difference between Week 1 and Week 2. Although some of the questions require reverse scoring, I used the mean scores generated by Qualtrics for the analysis. The reverse scoring was utilized when analyzing the results.

### ***Interviews***

After the survey window ended, I sent out a thank you letter to all 97 eligible participants and recruited teachers who would be interested in taking part in an interview. Within 1 week, I got responses from 10 teachers who were willing to help. Using a random selection website, I selected six experienced teachers to be interviewed. The range of their classroom experience was from 8 years to 24 years. The participants

represented a diverse group whose students are from 5 to 21 years of age and who have mild to severe disabilities.

The interviews took place virtually over a 2-week period to accommodate the participants' schedules. The preliminary interview questions were designed to gather data about their preparation and what drew them to the profession. Ultimately, the information was used to answer the research questions about the motivating factors that have kept them in special education and suggestions they might have to increase job satisfaction and improve teacher retention. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed using Tactiq Chrome Extension. I watched the recorded interview and read through the transcripts several times to become more familiar with the teachers' lived experiences and listened for relevant codes and themes.

When the preliminary codes were identified, a second conversation was scheduled with each participant to review their data and ask for confirmation that I had represented their responses accurately with the identified themes.

## **Findings**

The quantitative (survey) data and qualitative (interview) data were analyzed separately and then combined to answer the research questions. In the analysis of the survey, each subscale was given a score by averaging the item responses. Descriptive statistics such as mean, mode, standard deviation, range, and frequency distribution are presented. Standard deviation is a measure of how dispersed the data are in relation to the mean. Low standard deviations (of less than 2) indicate a more reliable sample. All questions from my survey have a standard deviation of less than 2.

Quantitative data from the survey provided information about how the

respondents felt regarding their levels of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose in their workplace. Analyzing the scores provided insight into those factors that motivate them to remain in the profession (Research Question 1) or those areas that are less satisfactory and provide opportunities for improvement (Research Question 2). Qualitative data from the interviews used both inductive and deductive coding. A priori themes of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose were initially used. Inductive coding was used as new codes emerged from the interview transcripts.

### ***Survey***

The survey consisted of 21 questions that were answered using a 7-point Likert scale. During scoring, the questions are grouped according to three predetermined subscales: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2001; Ilardi et al., 1993; Kasser et al., 1992). I made the decision to modify these a priori themes based on my previous research and use the themes of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Pink, 2009).

**Autonomy.** The definition of autonomy is the right or condition of self-government (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c). In education, teacher autonomy fuels the belief that teachers are professional, competent individuals who possess valuable knowledge, skills, and the ability to design and implement quality instruction with their own means and discovery (Nunnery, 2021; Walker, 2016). In the Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work Scale, autonomy is represented in the questions that ask about a teacher's ability to have input into their work, to feel free from pressure, to express ideas and opinions, to make choices, to know that their feelings and opinions matter, to feel relaxed and be themselves, and to make their own decisions. Table 7 provides the statistical data from



the survey results.

**Table 7**

*Statistical Data From Questions About Autonomy*

Survey question	Mean	Mode	Standard deviation	Range
1. I feel like I can make a lot of inputs to deciding how my job gets done.	4.88	5	1.69	1-7
5. I feel pressure at work.	5.33	7	1.60	1-7
8. I am free to express my ideas and opinions on the job.	5.08	5	1.54	1-7
11. When I am at work, I have to do what I am told.	4.89	4	1.26	1-7
13. My feelings are taken into consideration at work.	4.81	5	1.33	2-7
17. I feel like I can pretty much be myself at work.	5.25	6	1.56	1-7
20. There is not much opportunity for me to decide for myself how to go about my work.	2.83	2	1.60	1-6

Questions 1, 8, 13, and 17 were worded in a positive format. These questions had similar means (4.88, 5.08, 4.81, 5.25) and modes of 5 or 6, indicating that respondents feel it is true that they have input to decide how their job gets done, are free to express their ideas and opinions, their feelings are taken into consideration, and they can be themselves at work.

Questions 5, 11, and 20 were worded in a negative format and were interpreted in a reverse manner. When analyzing Question 5, a higher mean score (5.33) and a mode of 7 indicate that the respondents do feel pressure at work. For Question 11, a mean score (4.89) and a mode of 4 indicate that respondents felt it is somewhat true that they have to

do as they are told when at work. For Question 20, a lower mean score (2.83) and a mode of 2 indicate that the respondents disagree with the statement that there is not much opportunity for them to decide for themselves how to go about their work. Table 8 provides frequency distribution data regarding the respondents' selections for each question.

**Table 8**

*Frequency Distribution for Autonomy Questions*

Survey question	1 Not at all true	2	3	4 Somewhat true	5	6	7 Very true
1. I feel like I can make a lot of inputs to deciding how my job gets done.	2	3	5	8	12	7	11
5. I feel pressure at work.	1	2	2	12	5	10	16
8. I am free to express my ideas and opinions on the job.	2	2	2	8	13	12	9
11. When I am at work, I have to do what I am told.	1	0	3	16	11	11	5
13. My feelings are taken into consideration at work.	0	2	6	11	16	6	7
17. I feel like I can pretty much be myself at work.	1	2	4	8	7	14	12
20. There is not much opportunity for me to decide for myself how to go about my work.	10	15	11	3	3	6	0

The frequency distribution shows that the respondents' answers to the positively worded questions (1, 8, 13, 17) were mostly concentrated between the "somewhat true" and "very true" sides of the Likert scale. For Question 1, 42% of respondents answered 4

or 5, and 38% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement regarding making a lot of inputs on how their job is done. For Question 8, 44% of respondents answered 4 or 5, and an additional 44% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that they are free to express ideas and opinions at work. For Question 13, 56% of respondents answered 4 or 5, and 27% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that their feelings are taken into consideration at work. For Question 17, 31% of respondents answered 4 or 5, and 54% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that they can pretty much be themselves at work.

Questions 5, 11, and 20 were worded in a negative format. For Question 5, 35% of respondents answered 4 or 5, and 54% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that they do feel pressure at work. For Question 11, 56% of respondents answered 4 or 5, and 35% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that they have to do what they are told when at work. For Question 20, 75% of respondents answered 1, 2, or 3 (indicating disagreement) to the statement that there is not much opportunity to decide for themselves how to go about their work.

When analyzing Questions 5 and 11, I found it challenging to interpret the answers in relation to the reverse scoring concept. The questions were intended to represent a negative attribute but were not actually worded negatively. I made the decision to leave the respondents' answers intact and use a narrative to interpret them. If I had reversed the scoring, the intended response would have been misrepresented.

**Competence (or Mastery).** The definition of competence is the ability to do

something well (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-a). Deci and Ryan (2008) defined it as an individual's inherent desire to feel effective in their environment. This trait is also called mastery and is defined by Pink (2009) as the urge to get better at something that matters. In the survey, competence (or mastery) is represented by questions that ask about feelings of competence, being told that you are good at what you do, the chance to learn new skills on the job, having a sense of accomplishment, feeling capable, and being allowed to show that capability. Table 9 provides statistical data from the survey results.

**Table 9**

*Statistical Data From Questions About Mastery*

Survey question	Mean	Mode	Standard deviation	Range
3. I do not feel very competent at work.	2.02	1	1.45	1-7
4. People at work tell me I am good at what I do.	5.81	6	1.11	3-7
10. I have been able to learn interesting new skills on my job.	5.46	6	1.47	2-7
12. Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from working.	5.21	6	1.35	2-7
14. On my job I do not get much of a chance to show how capable I am.	3.17	1 and 2	1.86	1-7
19. When I am working, I often do not feel very capable.	2.26	1	1.55	1-6

Questions 4, 10, and 12 were worded positively. These questions revealed relatively high mean scores (5.81, 5.46, and 5.21), and all mode values were 6. This indicates that respondents are getting positive feedback from other colleagues, they are learning new skills at work, and they feel a sense of accomplishment on most days.

Questions 3, 14, and 19 were worded in a negative format and therefore interpreted in a reverse manner. The mean score for Question 3 was 2.02, and the mode was 1, indicating that the respondents disagree with the sentiment of not feeling competent at work. They are expressing that they do feel competent in their work environment. The mean score for Question 14 was 3.17, and the mode was 1 and 2. This indicates that the respondents disagree with the statement about not getting much of a chance to show their capabilities at work. They are expressing that they do get to demonstrate their capabilities. The mean score for Question 19 was 2.26, and the mode was 1. This indicates that the respondents disagree with the statement, “When I am at work, I often do not feel very capable,” and do feel capable when at work. From these answers, it is clear that the survey respondents do feel a sense of mastery when they are teaching, and they have people around them who are providing positive feedback that they are capable and doing a good job. Table 10 provides frequency distribution data regarding the respondents’ selections for each question.

**Table 10***Frequency Distribution for Questions About Mastery*

Survey question	1 Not at all true	2	3	4 Somewhat true	5	6	7 Very true
3. I do not feel very competent at work.	23	15	4	2	1	2	1
4. People at work tell me I am good at what I do.	0	0	1	8	5	19	15
10. I have been able to learn interesting new skills on my job.	0	3	3	5	9	14	14
12. Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from working.	1	0	4	9	12	13	9
14. On my job I do not get much of a chance to show how capable I am.	11	11	6	10	3	3	4
19. When I am working, I often do not feel very capable.	22	10	4	6	2	3	0

The frequency distribution shows that the respondents' answers to the positively worded questions (4, 10, and 12) were mostly concentrated at the "very true" side of the Likert scale. Question 4 had 71% of respondents answer 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement, "People at work tell me I am good at what I do." For Question 10, 58% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement about learning interesting new skills at work. For Question 12, 46% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement about feeling a sense of accomplishment at work on most days. For that question (12), there was also a significant number of responses of 5 (just above "somewhat true") that, when included, increases the agreement to the question to 71% of respondents.

The respondents' answers to the negatively worded questions (3, 14, 19) were concentrated at the "not at all true" side of the Likert scale. Question 3 had 79% of respondents answer 1 or 2 (indicating disagreement) to the statement about not feeling competent at work. For Question 14, 46% of respondents answered 1 or 2 (indicating disagreement) to the statement about not getting a chance to show how capable I am at my job. For Question 19, 67% of respondents answered 1 or 2 (indicating disagreement) to the statement about often not feeling capable at work.

**Relatedness (or Shared Purpose).** The definition of relatedness is the state of being related or connected. Deci and Ryan (2008) described it as the need to interact, be connected to, and have meaningful relationships with other people. Pink (2009) defined purpose as the desire to do things in service of something larger than ourselves, to do things that matter. In the survey, relatedness (or shared purpose) is represented by questions that ask about getting along, liking the people you work with and knowing they like you, feeling close and connected, being part of a group, and being friends with work colleagues and knowing that they care about you. Table 11 provides statistical data from the survey results.

**Table 11***Statistical Data From Questions About Shared Purpose*

Survey Question	Mean	Mode	Standard deviation	Range
2. I really like the people I work with.	6.27	7	.97	3-7
6. I get along with people at work.	6.33	7	.90	3-7
7. I pretty much keep to myself when I am at work.	3.53	4	1.57	1-7
9. I consider the people I work with to be my friends.	5.60	6	1.27	2-7
15. People at work care about me.	5.56	6	1.40	2-7
16. There are not many people at work that I am close to.	3.29	2	1.91	1-7
18. The people I work with do not seem to like me much.	1.73	1	1.04	1-6
21. People at work are pretty friendly towards me.	6.25	7	.88	3-7

Questions 2, 6, 9, 15, and 21 were worded positively. These questions revealed relatively high mean scores (6.27, 6.33, 5.60, 5.56, and 6.25), and all mode values were 6 or 7. This indicates that respondents like and get along with the people in their schools. They consider their colleagues to be friends and feel that they care about them. The mean and mode values for this subsection were the highest of the three components of the survey instrument.

Questions 7, 16, and 18 were worded in a negative format and therefore interpreted in a reverse manner. The mean score for Question 7 was 3.53, and the mode was 4, indicating the notion of “I pretty much keep to myself when I am at work” slightly



less than somewhat true. The mean score for Question 16 was 3.29, and the mode was 2. This indicates disagreement with the sentiment that there are not many people at work that they are close to. The mean score for Question 18 was 1.73, and the mode was 1. This indicates that the respondents disagree with the statement, “The people I work with do not seem to like me much.” This supports the other positively worded statements.

Table 12 provides frequency distribution data regarding the respondents’ selections for each question.

**Table 12**

*Frequency Distribution for Questions About Shared Purpose*

Survey question	1 Not at all true	2	3	4 Somewhat true	5	6	7 Very true
2. I really like the people I work with.	0	0	1	2	6	13	26
6. I get along with people at work.	0	0	1	1	5	15	26
7. I pretty much keep to myself when I am at work.	7	5	9	15	5	5	1
9. I consider the people I work with to be my friends.	0	1	2	7	9	15	14
15. People at work care about me.	0	3	2	3	11	15	14
16. There are not many people at work that I am close to.	8	15	7	4	5	5	4
18. The people I work with do not seem to like me much.	25	17	2	3	0	1	0
21. People at work are pretty friendly towards me.	0	0	1	1	5	19	22

The frequency distribution shows that the respondents’ answers to the positively

worded questions (2, 6, 9, 15, 21) were mostly concentrated at the “very true” side of the Likert scale. Question 2 had 81% of respondents answer 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that they really like the people they work with. For Question 6, 85% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that they get along with people at work. For Question 9, 60% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that they consider people at work to be their friends. For Question 15, 60% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that people at work care about them. For Question 21, 85% of respondents answered 6 or 7 (indicating agreement) to the statement that people at work are pretty friendly toward them.

The respondents’ answers to the negatively worded questions (7, 16, 18) were concentrated mostly on the “not at all true” side of the Likert scale. Question 7 had 44% of respondents answer 1, 2, or 3 (indicating disagreement) to the statement, “I pretty much keep to myself at work.” For Question 16, 63% of respondents answered 1, 2, or 3 (indicating disagreement) to the statement that there are not many people that they are close to at work. For Question 18, 92% of respondents answered 1, 2, or 3 (indicating disagreement) to the statement that people at work do not seem to like me.

The shared purpose subscale of the survey indicates that these teachers feel a sense of friendship and caring with the people with whom they work. They have relationships with their colleagues. This theme was explored further in the survey portion of the study.

My overall conclusion regarding the survey was that while autonomy and mastery play a part in a teacher’s job satisfaction and motivation to stay on the job, it is the shared

purpose trait that is statistically the most potent contributor to their happiness and desire to stay in the classroom. I was looking forward to my discussions with the interview participants to see if they corroborated or disagreed with this finding.

### ***Interviews***

The interview questions were designed to provide in-depth responses and supporting data to answer the two research questions that were the focus of the study. All participants answered the same questions in the first interview. These questions allowed me to explore topics such as teacher preparation, why they decided to go into special education, and their job responsibilities and challenges. They were also asked if they have considered leaving and why they have stayed. Finally, they were asked what advice they would give preservice teachers and what recommendations they would offer to the administration. These recommendations are further explored in Chapter 5.

### **Research Question 1**

“What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession?” This question is central to my study. To answer Research Question 1, I relied on the answers to the following interview questions:

- Interview Question 1: Can you tell me about your own preparation to become a teacher? How and where you received your teaching credentials?
- Interview Question 2: What drew you to the field of special education? Did any personal experiences influence your decision?
- Interview Question 3: Can you describe the different roles and expectations for you as a special education teacher? How do you manage all these roles?
- Interview Question 4: How would you describe your work with other team

members at your school? With general education teachers? Administrators?

- Interview Question 6. Why have you stayed in special education?
- Interview Question 7. Have you ever considered leaving the profession? If so, why?
- Interview Question 8. Does your salary have an impact on your decision to stay? Please explain.

Table 13 outlines the demographic information of those interviewed. All six of the interview participants were educated in a traditional 4-year university teaching preparation program. Four of the six participants have been employed in special education from the beginning of their careers. One participant started in elementary education, and one was a mass communications major and then both switched over to special education. Four of the six interview participants have master's degrees in special education. Three of the participants have National Board certification. The fact that these teachers are lifelong learners speaks to the fact that they are still in education after 5 or more years (Sudhakar, 2018).

**Table 13**

*Demographic Information of Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years of service	Preparation
Ashley	F	Caucasian	17	Traditional
Betty	F	Caucasian	8	Traditional
Caren	F	Caucasian	24	Traditional
Del	M	African American	23	Traditional
Ellen	F	Caucasian	22	Traditional
Finley	F	Caucasian	20	Traditional

### *Why Special Education?*

Interestingly, only one of the participants knew that they wanted to teach special education as a child. Ellen recalled,

I was with special needs students from an early age. They were an integral part of my everyday school experience. They were my buddies. They were fun. They were so different and they loved me unconditionally, they were my people.

The other participants relayed experiences of working with special needs students at a basketball camp (Betty), having a job working with adults with traumatic brain injuries (Caren), or volunteering with a city police department in a program for kids who experienced homicide within their family (Caren). Del talked about doing community service in a high needs middle school:

I noticed that all of the kids looked like me, but none of the teachers did. Mostly African American males. How are they going to be able to understand and relate if they don't see anybody that looks like them? Anybody can talk about it, you can write a book about changes but the only change that you really make is to make the difference yourself. I changed my major.

Ashley told of her father who bit his tongue off when he was small. She said his speech issues were a source of teasing, and people thought he was stupid. She said no one looked out for him. She wanted to be the protector and she said, "Give me the students other people don't want."

Other participants have explained their career choice using statements such as being told they would have great job security (Finely), wanting to advocate for kids who have tough circumstances and poverty (Caren), being drawn to special education students

(Ellen), being empathetic (Caren), and being drawn to the outliers and the underdogs (Finley). Ellen expressed her commitment by saying, “I want to give them as much as they have given me.”

### **The Role as Advocate**

The respondents had no difficulty listing the many roles they perform within their day. During deductive analysis of their answers, it was apparent that the trait of shared purpose was the most prominent of the a priori themes. Using inductive analysis, within the trait of shared purpose, two additional subthemes emerged from their answers. The new themes were advocacy—caring for and supporting students and parents—and collegiality—forming relationships with colleagues. Table 14 provides the frequency with which respondents used keywords related to advocacy and collegiality.

**Table 14**

*Keywords Used to Describe Advocacy and Collegiality*

Keywords used	Communicate	Support	Relationship used	Team or teamwork	Connect	Help
Ashley	5	8	7	10	11	5
Beth	5	8	-	3	-	-
Caren	1	3	-	-	-	1
Del	2	-	1	-	-	9
Ellen	-	5	3	-	1	4
Finley	3	2	4	1	-	-

Additional phrases used when describing advocacy for students, parents, or colleagues were having respect (Ellen) and having a sense of community (Betty).

### ***Advocacy***

Advocating for their students and fellow teachers was a prominent theme in the participants’ responses. Ashley mentioned being a counselor, a second mom, and making

students feel safe. She noted her room could be the nap room, the crying room, the discipline room, or where they could have a heart-to-heart talk about their attitude. She noted that being flexible and providing what her students need is important to her.

Del had similar responses and added role model and parent figure to his duties. He stated that each student needs something different. He said he had to “figure out what they need,” and he expressed how gratifying it is when you can fill that need for them.

Ellen described wanting to give them a better future and provide them with opportunities. Finley asserted that advocating for her students, helping others to understand them better, and helping parents is an important part of what she does.

Two respondents reported being an advocate for parents and students in school and the community and being a resource for parents as an important part of their job. Beth indicated that she makes sure she keeps parents in the loop so they can provide her with support for skills and behavioral needs.

### ***Collegiality***

The second facet of advocacy is working and having relationships with other teachers. Some of the respondents see themselves as “supporting cast members,” as Ashley did. She stated,

I put my class back together early so I can be helpful to the general education teachers. I work to build those relationships, not just superficial relationships within the school. I ask about their family to really get to know them.

The respondents expressed an understanding that working in education comes with having to work with others, and working in special education often involves paraprofessionals in your class. Four of the six teachers have other adults in their

classrooms. Three of the four teachers mentioned that their paraprofessionals are crucial (Beth) and that they are amazing and make their classrooms run smoothly (Ellen). Finley stated, “I would not be able to do what I am doing if they were not here.” Beth said, “I fully trust them, and I can just exchange a look with them, and they seamlessly take over.”

Ashley and Del said that they did not experience difficulties with other teachers in their schools as long as they developed good working relationships with them at the beginning. Several respondents mentioned mutual respect: Del stated, “Being flexible goes a long way in creating a team feeling.” Ashley suggested, “to be mindful of your tone especially when you’re tired.” Beth said that although she cannot attend all grade-level planning meetings, she checks in frequently with other teachers on her grade level or they exchange information by email. All interviewees mentioned communication as being the most critical component.

Three of the participants (Caren, Finley, and Beth) mentioned COVID and the unique challenges it posed for relationships between teachers and their families and among school personnel. Rebuilding personal connections to others and regaining some of the social skills that children did not practice during COVID make the idea of shared purpose even more critical. Caren mentioned trying to get back to normal.

### ***Support From Administrators***

Being supported by their administration was important to the respondents. This support was tied to feelings of appreciation and relationships. Beth and Ashley stated that they feel supported by their administration. Beth reported that her administration has been very supportive especially since her class has had many behavioral issues this year.



She said that even when she did not necessarily need administrative help, administrators would check in and offer to communicate with parents if necessary. It made her feel appreciated and supported, and “You always work harder for people that you know appreciate you.”

Del said that anytime he has asked for anything, he has never had an issue. He thinks administration is doing the best they can with what they have for resources. He noted that the school needed more staff, but “I do feel that I can talk with them if I have an issue.” He cited one recent instance where his administrator helped to smooth out a situation with a colleague who was not responding to emails. It was handled simply by just adding his CC: to the email.

Caren gave grace to the new administration at her school who are “just trying to find their way.” There is one vice principal assigned to special education, and Caren said he is very supportive and helpful.

Ellen talked about a previous principal who really showed care for the special education students and would come in every morning to shake her students’ hands. He knew their names, and he knew their parents’ names. “He believed that our kids were stakeholders in the school. Just as much as the international baccalaureate AP student was. He was so completely present.”

### **Staying Versus Leaving**

These questions are significant when addressing my research questions. What is it about this job that makes teachers want to stay in the profession? Have you ever considered leaving and why? Many respondents expressed that they found it hard to pinpoint the reason they love teaching so much, but as they talked, it became more clear.

### *Staying*

The experienced special education teachers' love of teaching was tied to two themes that emerged from these questions: relationships with students and student growth.

**Relationships.** All the respondents mentioned the relationship with students as a reason for staying in education. Amy said that she could not explain it; she just loves it. She likes the interaction with the students and the funny things they tell you. Beth described it as so rewarding. Carol and Ellen said that they just love the kids and the relationships they have nurtured with them. Finley said that she stays for the kids to help them have a better quality of life. Del describes it as his passion. He added that it is a career, not a job. He expects to have days when he is learning and becoming better.

Ashely said she gets excited to see what the new year will bring in terms of new students and new colleagues; more people to have relationships with. Finley expressed that some days her reasons for staying are practical: for health insurance, so her kids can be in this district, or because it is a good schedule. Luckily, those days are the minority. Most of the time, it is for her students.

**Student Growth.** Ashley commented that she needs to be in a role where she can see progress. She also mentioned having a shared ownership for these students to see that they have what they need to make progress.

Beth said that on some days when you think you have nothing left to give, you look back at the data and see all the progress. You can “lose perspective in the hustle and bustle and overlook the small things.” She noted that it is rewarding when you see how far they have come.

Ellen reported how much she loves watching the students grow. She reported that she loves teaching them and getting to the point where you know “they can have a future” rather than being resigned to attending an adult day center for the rest of their lives. She feels so grateful for businesses that have opened their doors wanting to employ her students, “because 21 shouldn’t be the best part of their life. The good stuff should not stop coming at 21.”

### ***Leaving***

When asked about leaving the profession, all the respondents said no, even if in a roundabout way. The responses aligned with similar themes of advocacy and relationships with students.

**Advocacy.** Ashley said she has not considered leaving education but would eventually like to have an administrative role to support teachers who have higher maintenance students. Finley said no, but she has considered adding certifications to have more options. Ellen stated that she has considered leaving the classroom and taking on a role that would advocate for teachers.

I see that the people around me who do this for our kids are passionate, they don’t get a lot of money, they’re not doing it because it’s easy or glamorous. I feel like the greatest need is my tribe of teachers. I feel like teachers are drowning and no one is saving them. The thing that makes me consider leaving the classroom is to help teachers and in turn help students in a different way.

Caren indicated that she was leaving the classroom to take a new position teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. She made it clear that she is not leaving education altogether, just a different kind of advocacy, “because I really love the

kids.”

The other two participants mentioned the challenges but expressed that the love of the job and the children outweighs the difficulties. Betsy said that she might think about leaving but it is a fleeting thought: “My heart is here and even though I’ve been pushed to the end this year, I want to be a teacher and I want to do this job.” She expressed that she loves the kids and the people with whom she works: “It’s tough but I love what I do and I’m not going anywhere.”

Del admitted that sometimes he felt overwhelmed, stressed, or not valued: “Then I looked at things from a faith perspective—I had to better understand my purpose and I know why I’m here.” He used a harvest metaphor to explain his thinking. He believed that with some kids, teachers may sow the seed; with another child, they have to water the seed; and with this third child, they get to see the harvest. He revealed that he wanted to do all three with every child and that was causing him so much stress. He reflected that it helps him to understand his place and what he was supposed to do: “To be here for the children.”

### ***Salary***

When asked if salary influenced their decision to stay in education, three participants felt very fortunate that salary did not play a part in their decision to stay. They are all married and have two incomes.

For the other three respondents, they said that it does have an impact on their decision to stay. Beth stated that salary has an effect “but not in a good way.” She disclosed that if she ever decided to leave, salary would be a big reason. She stated that there are things in her life that she cannot afford to do because of her salary. She is single

and would like to buy a house, but she said she cannot afford it on her own. She laments about having to work all summer just to get by. She mentioned seeing other people working from home in their pajamas, making double or triple her salary. She added that she loves what she does, and so the financial part is hard: “Coming to work with such good friends and amazing kids outweighs making lots of money going to a job I hate.”

Caren is also single and said that she has added National Board certification and master’s +30 to maximize her income. Getting another advanced degree is too expensive because she felt she would be paying it back forever. She says that pay is on her mind but not enough to force her to leave education.

Del agreed that salary has an effect. He said that in his previous district, there was a program where everyone was paid an incentive with the idea that it would continue each year that test scores hit a certain level (pay for performance):

People were quitting their second jobs and focusing on creative ways to help students. We saw a lot of growth but in the end, we were a few points short of the goal. When the incentives went away, the second jobs returned, and the scores declined. He confirmed that he is not leaving because of pay, but he sees the impact.

For these three teachers, their pay factors into their life choices but does not tip the scales enough to make them leave the profession. Their love of the job and the children is more important.

### **Advice for Preservice or New Teachers**

When asked what advice these experienced special education teachers would give to preservice or new teachers, the codes fell into all three of the a priori themes. The most

prevalent of the original themes proved to be shared purpose, and the new emerging themes of advocacy and collegiality were strongly represented.

### ***Within the Theme of Autonomy***

The experienced teachers described advocacy for yourself:

- Don't copy anyone else, find who you are. When you pressure yourself to be like someone else, you are losing who you are (Ashley).
- Balancing what you believe is best for kids vs. what others want (Caren).
- Learn how to use your voice (Finley).
- Know your non-negotiables—the things you're willing to do and the things you're not willing to do. Be firm in that and don't overextend yourself (Ellen).

### ***Within the Theme of Mastery***

The experienced teachers described advocacy for yourself and your students through being prepared:

- Understand your responsibilities, the legal piece, the accountability (Ellen).
- Know your options within the field of special education (Caren).
- Get into a classroom as much as you can, get experience, read and write IEPs if you have the opportunity (Finley).
- Learn how to manage people in your classroom, assume nothing, they don't have your understanding of things (Beth).
- Be flexible (Ashley).
- Find out if they view this as a job or a career, if it is a career for them, then they will be more open to being taught and have an investment in becoming better at their craft (Del).

### *Within the Theme of Shared Purpose*

The experienced teachers described relationships and collegiality:

- Connect with your teachers, connect with your families. This is especially important when you have to have those hard conversations, you have laid the groundwork for trust (Ashley).
- Really care about kids, be patient, meet them where they are (Caren).
- Learn to work with other adults, other teachers. Teaching assistants can make or break you—learn how to work as a team, support each other. Don't ask your assistants to do anything that you wouldn't do. You have to be firm but caring (Ellen).
- Over-communicate with everyone (Ashley).
- Learn how to deal with parents and coworkers with patience and kindness even when you're exhausted. Understand where others are coming from (Finely).
- Take care of yourself (Ellen).
- Give yourself grace. You will not be perfect all the time (Ellen).

There was one sentiment that all the respondents agreed upon. The comments emphasize the central idea of shared purpose and collegiality. The respondents urged teachers to find colleagues who will be their friends as well as their support network: a team of people who will make them laugh (even when everyone else is expecting too much). They felt it was important to find others to depend on or vent to; someone who understands how exhausting the day was, so they can rehash it and be done with it, so they do not take it home.

## **Research Question 2**

“What strategies do special education teachers suggest that school districts could implement to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention?” The last question I asked my interviewees was about recommendations. Their answers hinged on the theme of shared purpose, specifically building relationships and collegiality.

### ***Relationships***

The experienced special education teachers expressed that they would welcome more meaningful communication from the special education administrators: specific praise or recognition when appropriate and answering emails in a timely fashion. Respondents would like district office administrators to be more visible and present and meet special education teachers face to face. They feel that special education administrators should support the decisions made by the special education teams. When administrators come into our rooms once a year or not at all, it is difficult to view them as part of our team.

At the building level, the participants recommend that administrators need to embrace special needs children as being equal to all other stakeholders in the school. Administrators need to acknowledge how isolated special education teachers feel and make sure that they and their students are included. They need to check on us and support us in this very difficult job we do. They need to be mindful that we rarely get a duty-free lunch break. Special educators can tell when people are genuine and care about their kids. Fran said “We have gotten better at supporting each other as special educators, but it is so appreciated when we feel we have the support of our administration.”



### *Collegiality*

The experienced special educators further recommended that the building administrators could be mindful of times that training is not applicable to the special educators and let them work on the mountains of paperwork they have. For the district special education administrators, respondents stated that many of their meetings seem like busywork and forced sharing. Instead, maybe they could have some organic networking time where teachers share strategies, lessons, or activities.

The end-of-the-year paperwork could be streamlined. Respondents said that there are so many forms to be filled out with information that the district office should already have. It would also help teachers when new instructional materials are to be used, that adequate training is provided, especially if a teacher starts after the beginning of the year.

Del recommended that at each school, one principal should be special education certified, or better yet, they might have taught special education, actually been in the trenches; then the special education staff would have a “go-to” administrator. That person would be better at seeing issues from both the administration side and the special education side. Unless they have been there, “they will never understand the passion we have for these kids.”

The responses outlined in Table 15 are indicative of the comments made throughout the interview process. The respondents felt a sense of autonomy and mastery but realized that the theme of shared purpose, advocating for their students and collegiality with other school employees, was the driving force behind why they have sustained long careers in education.

**Table 15***Alignment of Responses to Themes*

	Autonomy	Mastery	Shared purpose
Sample participant responses regarding perceptions	I was able to find my niche within special education (Ashley)	I feel confident in my abilities and decisions at work (Ashley)	<b>Advocacy</b> I was able to develop a new program that met the needs of my students (Ellen)
	I was able to make suggestions that were later incorporated into our program (Ellen)	I work best when I'm prepared and organized, I get my testing done early (Del)	Relationships with students are a top priority (all) Celebrate the small things (Beth)
	I was able to develop guidelines for students who entered my class (Del)	Seeing student progress and providing them with what they need (Beth)	<b>Collegiality</b> I have great trust in my assistants and value their support (Beth)
	I am able to enact change when necessary (Del)	The opportunity to learn on the job especially about other cultures (Finn)	Find your people, those people who can support you. (Ellen and Beth) Appreciates those who reach out to her and her students (Finn)
Sample responses regarding opportunities for improvement	District administrators need to respect the decisions made at the special education team level (Ashley, Ellen)	Administrators might help to carve out more time for us to do paperwork (all)	Worried about the future of education, teachers need more support (Ellen)
		Networking opportunities so teachers can learn from each other (Ellen, Del)	Teachers need to meet and have relationships with district office administration and building administration (all)
			Make sure that special educators are not an afterthought (Finn, Ellen, Caren)

When commenting on those points that reflected a sense of autonomy, the respondents said that they have made choices in their career fields and enacted some changes to the way their classrooms operate. They would like to see administrators validate their decisions at times.

The comments regarding mastery reflect a confidence in their abilities to run an effective classroom and give their students what they need. They would like to have more time to do paperwork and network with other teachers.

The most salient points from the data reflected the trait of shared purpose. The experienced special education teachers' responses illustrated a desire to have more meaningful relationships with colleagues and administrators throughout the district. Their comments indicated a sense of caring for assistants with whom they currently work and those who reach out to support them within their schools. They work tirelessly to build strong relationships with their students, and they want to advocate for other teachers. These teachers who have stayed in the field of special education have empathetic hearts and are working to build relationships.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to utilize a survey instrument and interviews to determine the factors that motivate special educators to remain in the special education profession. This chapter described the participants and their responses during the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study. The interviews uncovered codes and themes that aligned with each of the three traits of the conceptual framework: autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose. The study was driven by two research questions that addressed the motivating factors special educators experienced and the

recommendations that could be offered to increase job satisfaction and teacher retention.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the study, the data collection and analysis process, conclusions based on these findings, and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The United States is facing a serious shortage of workers. In April 2021, job openings rose to an unprecedented 9.3 million (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022a). Similarly, the current trend in education indicates an alarming decrease in the number of teachers entering the profession as well as a sharp increase in attrition. It is imperative that administrators and school systems work to increase the interest in the teaching profession, but equally important is the task of increasing job satisfaction and motivating teachers to remain in the profession.

### Study Overview

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study was to better understand the factors that motivate special education teachers to remain in the profession. Through a survey and interviews, my goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the components of a special education teacher's job that they report as motivating enough to keep them in this intense and specialized segment of education. A conceptual framework for the study was designed based on previous research from Maslow (1943), Herzberg (1968), Deci and Ryan (2008), and Pink (2009).

The study began with a job satisfaction survey completed by 48 experienced special education teachers from a public school district in South Carolina. Following the survey, six virtual interviews were conducted. Survey data were analyzed, and interviews were transcribed. Deductive coding was used to sort the data into the a priori themes of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose. Inductive coding was used to identify newly emerging themes of collegiality and advocacy within the original theme of shared purpose. The following research questions were addressed during data collection and

analysis:

1. What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession?
2. What strategies do special education teachers suggest, that school districts could implement, to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention?

This chapter provides a summary of the data collection process, data analysis, summary of findings, and their implications. Limitations of the study are outlined, followed by recommendations for future study and final conclusions.

### **Data Collected**

Phase 1 of the data collection process involved a survey sent to all special education teachers from one South Carolina school district who met the criteria of having 5 or more years of experience. The parameters of the study were outlined, and informed consent was signed by all participants prior to the survey. The window to participate in the survey was 2 weeks. A wave analysis was done to compare the Week 1 results to the Week 2 results. No significant differences were found. There were 48 participants who took the survey. From this group, 10 teachers volunteered to participate in the interviews, and six were chosen randomly.

Phase 2 of the data collection process involved virtual interviews that were conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and date. The interviews were conducted individually and took approximately 1 hour each. I recorded and transcribed each virtual interview. After the interviews were finished, I conducted a follow-up correspondence with each participant to review and validate their responses using member checking.

## **Data Analysis**

The survey data were analyzed and reported statistically as mean, mode, standard deviation, range, and frequency distribution. Then comparative analysis was utilized to determine which traits had the most impact on job satisfaction. The data from the interviews were transcribed and coded to identify common themes within the responses. The a priori themes of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose were utilized during deductive coding. Two emerging themes surfaced during the inductive coding process within the original theme of shared purpose: advocacy and collegiality. The respondents' answers were used to provide support for these themes. When the themes were identified, a colleague helped to verify my interpretations to provide inter-rater reliability.

## **Summary of Findings**

The conceptual framework for this study merged theories from several prominent motivational theorists including Maslow (1943), Herzberg (1968), Deci and Ryan (2008), and Pink (2009). When summarized, I found that their theories presented common traits of autonomy, mastery, and shared purpose that melded together to become my conceptual framework.

Based on the experienced special educators' responses from the survey portion of the study, shared purpose emerged as the strongest indicator of their job satisfaction. Autonomy and mastery, while important, did not have the same impact on teachers' feelings of motivation. The concept of shared purpose was further explored during the interview portion of the study and was found to have two subthemes: advocacy and collegiality. The respondents explained that relationships with their students, advocating for their students, and the collegial relationships they have with other teachers are the

reasons they remain in the profession. This finding aligns with previous research which states that positive relationships and school climate are strong predictors of teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Thomas, 2017). The findings also expand upon previous research in that the most influential theme of shared purpose was found to include components of collegiality and advocacy.

### ***Research Question 1***

Specific findings related to the first research question, “What factors motivate experienced special education teachers to remain in the special education profession,” are as follows.

**Finding 1.** Experienced special educators stated that collegial relationships with other teachers and school administrators, where they feel supported and valued, motivate them to remain in the profession.

Both the quantitative and qualitative responses supported this finding. Although the responses provided favorable scores for autonomy and mastery, it was the sense of shared purpose, demonstrated through collegial relationships, that was one of the most motivating factors. Respondents spoke of caring about their colleagues and considering their colleagues to be friends.

**Finding 2.** Experienced special educators indicated that having nurturing relationships with their students, including advocating for them and seeing their growth, motivates them to remain in the profession.

Relationships with students were one of the most influential factors found in this study. The survey respondents talked at length about seeing their students’ growth and wanting to advocate for them and provide them with a good education and a better life.



During the interviews, experienced special education teachers were very clear that it was the relationships with colleagues, the relationships with students, and the opportunities to advocate for others that kept them in education.

### ***Research Question 2***

Specific findings related to the second research question, “What strategies do special education teachers suggest, that school districts could implement, to increase job satisfaction and subsequently lead to greater teacher retention,” are as follows.

**Finding 1.** Experienced special education teachers indicated that providing inclusive or cooperative opportunities to improve relationships and promote better understanding between special education teachers/students and general education teachers/students would increase job satisfaction.

Respondents stated that opportunities for both special education teachers and general education teachers to have a dialogue and better understand the similarities and differences in their jobs would promote a stronger feeling of collegiality. Furthermore, collaborative opportunities to have general education students and special education students interact would promote an inclusive mindset. Both scenarios would help everyone see each other as people and increase the opportunities to form relationships.

**Finding 2.** Experienced special education teachers indicated that personal interactions between teachers and administrators, especially those at the district office level, would improve relationships and promote the concept of shared purpose. Four of the six interview participants expressed that they would welcome the opportunity to meet and have more frequent interactions with these administrators.

These powerful findings demonstrate that through relationships and true shared

purpose, educators can experience more job satisfaction which in turn would impact teacher retention. If time is devoted to nurturing these vertical relationships, other components like autonomy (decision-making, having input into the way things are done, and sharing of perspectives) can improve as well. If administrators take more of an active role in coming to the classrooms and meeting special education teachers, it may alleviate the feelings of pressure and isolation that special educators often feel. When feelings of autonomy and mastery are waning, it is shared purpose and relationships that help teachers to maintain their motivation.

### **Implications**

This study provided valuable information for two of our most prominent stakeholder groups: teachers and administrators. The insights shared in the survey and interviews can inform our practice as we attempt to increase job satisfaction and teacher retention through improved relationships in schools. Maslow (1943), in his hierarchy of needs, placed love and belonging directly following basic physiological needs. Neuroscience suggests that we are neurologically wired to connect with others; humans are hardwired for relationships (Rochkind, 2016).

### ***Teachers***

The strongest piece of advice study participants offered to teachers to improve job satisfaction and motivation was to “find your people.” During rich discussions with interview participants, they emphasized the need for special educators to build trusting, supportive relationships. These school relationships are all built on the bedrock of shared purpose and good communication.

Relationships with colleagues are critical. The respondents urged special

educators to develop a core group of teachers who understand situations from their perspective and with whom they can share ideas and concerns. This group could be a grade level or a trusted group of like-minded colleagues who will provide an empathetic ear when they need to talk. Several studies found that teachers feel greater job satisfaction when they are supported by colleagues and administrators (Robinson et al., 2019). The study participants also encourage special education teachers to be visible within the school and cultivate positive relationships. Being open and promoting inclusion with other teachers will nurture relationships between the special education teacher and their students. Other teachers may not be aware of how to include special education students, and giving them grace will build relationships. While understanding that special education is one piece of the bigger picture in the success of a school, the respondents felt that advocating for yourself and your special education students in a respectful way is important. Making your needs known to other teachers or administrators is advocacy.

Another way to build collegial relationships is by being part of a PLC. PLCs cultivate interpersonal communication and feedback which promote feelings of proficiency and can increase intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A PLC's primary purpose is to improve student achievement, but it also promotes collegial relationships, dialogue, a sense of shared purpose, and a practice of reflection (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). When a teacher is supported by this group, it provides them with a way to meet their need for acceptance. This in turn allows them to focus on other needs such as honing their skills and achieving mastery as an educator (Woolfolk et al., 2009). Collins (2005) proposed, "Success breeds support and commitment, which breeds even greater success,

which breeds more support and commitment” (p. 24). Being willing to share ideas with colleagues is a key component of communication in a professional setting. This communication promotes a sense of shared purpose and a collective sense of belonging, which results in happier and more motivated employees (Tomassi, 2021).

Support and relationship can also come in the form of a mentor. Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship that can alleviate isolation for a new teacher. A mentor can introduce them to other colleagues, show them around the building, and answer questions about procedures. Those teachers who were provided with a trained mentor were much more likely to remain in education (Raue & Gray, 2015).

Another relationship that can increase feelings of partnership is the relationship with your students and parents. Study participants suggested that teachers communicate with students and parents often and connect in a personal way to celebrate small victories and progress. This relationship allows teachers to be a part of something greater than themselves (Pink, 2009).

Finally, two-way communication and respect are vital to your relationship with your administration. Let them know of your desire to be involved in the school community and follow through by taking part in activities and committees. Administrators will appreciate it if teachers communicate with them if a potential issue with parents or students might be brewing, if there is something the teacher needs, or if they have an idea about an inclusive opportunity. Two other suggestions from the study participants are to respect your principal’s time and give them grace since they have so many people who need their attention.

### *Administrators*

If the main goal within the field of education is to attract people to become teachers and retain those teachers, we must meet their needs. The findings of this study identified the need for relationships and shared purpose as being critical for job satisfaction. Previous studies have shown that when an employee's needs are met, job satisfaction and motivation increase (McLeod, 2020).

Administrators at the building or district level can take away valuable information from the results of this study. When asked how the experienced teachers viewed their administration, the most frequent comments mentioned relationships. Conley and You (2017) found that the factor that had the greatest impact on special educators staying or leaving the profession was support from district- and school-level administrators. The findings from this study indicate a need for stronger relationships between teachers and school administrators or district administrators. Teachers need to have a collegial relationship with administrators in order to feel a sense of connection. Cenkseven-Onder and Sari (2009) stated that when an administrator is a good leader, teachers have a greater sense of job satisfaction and will continue in the teaching field. Study participants stated that relationships could be strengthened if administrators were more visible within the schools and were available to meet and talk with their colleagues and students. Several of the interview participants commented that they had never met administrators from the district office or met the special education administration. Nurturing these relationships and encouraging a sense of community would be beneficial to the well-being of the teachers and promote a feeling of shared purpose.

Special educators are more susceptible to feelings of isolation and lack of support,

which can contribute to high levels of burnout and stress and result in greater attrition rates. They rely greatly on cooperative and collaborative relationships with many other professionals to serve their students and need strong relationships with school leaders to support their work (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

A great deal of research has been done on how principals can best support special education teachers; some study evidence suggests that showing appreciation and recognition, fostering creativity and autonomy, creating a cohesive culture, and showing concern for the psychological well-being of special education teachers have a large impact on their feelings of collegiality. Principal preparation must include instruction on how to effectively support special education teachers to enhance the likelihood that these teachers will be retained (Burkhauser, 2017; Moore, 2018).

A second suggestion would be for administrators to make sure they have programs in place to onboard their new teachers such as mentoring and PLCs. These programs provide a great deal of support as new teachers develop relationships throughout the school. Advocating for a longer mentoring time, when necessary, could also be helpful for those teachers who require more time and support. As an administrator, allocating time for and prioritizing the use of PLCs promote collaboration and collegial working relationships, the sharing of ideas, the use of collective inquiry using data for improvement of instructional methods, and reflection on teaching practices (Serviss, 2021). Administrators have the opportunity to allocate time to grow these relationships, and as leaders in the district, they can be role models.

### **Limitations**

The objective of this study was to gather meaningful data from a survey and

interviews in order to determine the factors that have kept special education teachers from my school district in the profession for 5 or more years.

One limitation of the study was the utilization of only teachers from one school district. I realize that this could restrict the responses since these teachers are all operating within the guidelines of one employer, but the dynamics in each school allow for some variety.

A second limitation was that all the survey findings were generated from mostly female, Caucasian participants. A study with more diverse demographics might produce different results. In South Carolina, 81% of the teaching force is female, and 19% is male. In my survey, 83% of the participants were female, and 17% were male. In South Carolina, 79% of the teaching force is Caucasian, and 15% is African American. In my survey, 83% of the participants were Caucasian, and 17% were African American. Although the number of participants was not large, it is representative of the state as a whole.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Based on the survey and interview data, I would suggest that a future research opportunity might be a study using similar methodology that incorporates more than one district or a district that has a more diverse demographic. This would allow for a comparison of data to determine if factors such as district size, demographics, or state guidelines impact results.

Another possible study could look at those teachers who have alternate forms of preparation or lateral entry coming into the field of special education to determine if their preparation impacts their longevity. This might shed light on the need to incorporate

more stringent college preparation or increased internship/student teaching opportunities as they prepare for a career in special education.

A third suggestion for future research is a study that investigates teacher retention and its relationship to mentoring. A study might look at those teachers who have stayed in education and determine if mentors had an impact on their feelings of efficacy and job satisfaction. Variables such as how long they were paired with a mentor and the quality of the relationships with their mentor could be studied.

A final recommendation for future research might focus on the impact administration has on retention. This could include collecting data on the leadership skills that teachers report as being motivating and supportive, that have created a positive atmosphere in their school, and that have built relationships with teachers, students, and communities.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to examine the factors that have motivated experienced special educators to remain in the field of special education for more than 5 years. Through the use of a survey and virtual interviews, special educators were able to communicate their lived experiences and perceptions. This research indicated that special educators are motivated by relationships and a sense of shared purpose.

It is my hope that this research will provide insight to all stakeholder groups about the factors that impact a teacher's feelings of job satisfaction and collegiality. It is my hope that teachers and administrators will recognize their responsibility to promote relationships in their school communities in order to provide a sense of shared purpose



and collegiality to new teachers. Current teachers and administrators need to recognize the opportunities we have each day to nurture and advocate for one another in an effort to increase teacher retention. The future of our profession depends upon it.

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**Appendix A**

**Basic Need Satisfaction at Work Scale**

## Basic Need Satisfaction at Work

### When I Am At Work

The following questions concern your feelings about your job during the last year. (If you have been on this job for less than a year, this concerns the entire time you have been at this job.) Please indicate how true each of the following statement is for you given your experiences on this job. Remember that your boss will never know how you responded to the questions. Please use the following scale in responding to the items.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all true			somewhat true			very true

1. I feel like I can make a lot of inputs to deciding how my job gets done.
2. I really like the people I work with.
3. I do not feel very competent when I am at work.
4. People at work tell me I am good at what I do.
5. I feel pressured at work.
6. I get along with people at work.
7. I pretty much keep to myself when I am at work.
8. I am free to express my ideas and opinions on the job.
9. I consider the people I work with to be my friends.
10. I have been able to learn interesting new skills on my job.
11. When I am at work, I have to do what I am told.
12. Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from working.
13. My feelings are taken into consideration at work.
14. On my job I do not get much of a chance to show how capable I am.
15. People at work care about me.

16. There are not many people at work that I am close to.
17. I feel like I can pretty much be myself at work.
18. The people I work with do not seem to like me much.
19. When I am working, I often do not feel very capable.
20. There is not much opportunity for me to decide for myself how to go about  
my work.
21. People at work are pretty friendly towards me.

**Appendix B**

**Follow-Up Letter to Say Thank You and Recruit for Interviews**

Date

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Jill Douds and I am a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University's College of Education. There is currently a serious shortage of special education teachers that affects our state as well as the nation. Thank you so much for participating in my research survey about job satisfaction. You are providing valuable information for me and our district. I am interested in hearing the stories of your journey and identifying the reasons that educators, like yourself, have remained in the field of special education for 5 or more years. I am hopeful that together, we can define the factors that have motivated you so that we might capitalize on those things and improve teacher retention. I would also like to hear about the challenges you have faced and suggestions you might have for our district to improve our ability to support one another.

I would be so appreciative if you would be willing to participate in an interview (less than 1 hour of your time) so that I can hear about your lived experiences in the classroom. Please respond to this email so that we can set up a virtual interview at a time that is most convenient to you.

Sincerely,

Jill Douds

**Appendix C**  
**Initial Interview Protocol**



**Introduction:**

Hello, my name is Jill Douds. I am a Doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and answer some questions. This should take less than one hour. I am interested in hearing about your experiences and therefore, there are no right or wrong answers. I am also a special educator so please feel comfortable to express your perceptions. All information is confidential and your honest opinions will be most helpful. You will be assigned a pseudonym so no identifying information will be traced to you. You may decline to answer any question and you can withdraw from the process at any time.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to identify the motivational factors that have kept you in a special education classroom for all of these years. I am interested to hear why you have stayed when many others have left the profession.

**Recording:**

I would like to video record our discussion so that I don't miss anything. Is that alright with you?

**Turn on the recording:** Now that I have the recording on, do I have your permission to record our conversation? Do you have any questions before I begin?

**Questions:**

Review demographic information about participant.

1. Tell me about your preparation to be a teacher. Where did you go to school? Did you have a traditional teacher preparation program or an alternative preparation?
2. What drew you to the field of special education? Did any personal experiences influence your career decision?
3. Can you describe the different roles and expectations for you as a special education teacher? How do you manage all these roles?
4. How would you describe your work with other team members at your school? With general education teachers? With administrators?
5. What are your greatest challenges in special education? What helped you overcome them?
6. Why have you stayed in special education?
7. Have you ever considered leaving the profession? If so, why?
8. Does your salary have an impact on your decision to stay? Please explain.

9. What advice would you have for pre-service teachers entering the field of special education?

10. What recommendations would you offer to administrators to help retain teachers or make a special educator's job more manageable?