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Combating Special Educator Attrition: Mentor Teachers' Perceptions of Job Satisfaction, Resiliency, and Retention[†]

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Abstract

Special educator attrition is a major problem in the United States (US) and in many countries worldwide. In the present study, we investigated the experiences of 5 highly successful special education teachers serving students with autism spectrum disorder in the central Florida area of the US with particular attention to factors associated with teacher retention. A phenomenological research design was employed to identify factors leading participants to persevere where others have not. A representative sample was included of multiple teachers in classrooms of varying grade levels and school districts across central Florida as part of a funded project by the Office of Special Education Services and the U.S. Department of Education. Findings include that teachers of students with ASD who are involved in extracurricular activities may show a lowered burnout rate.

Teaching students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) requires specific skills that range from teaching academic problems to teaching behavioural needs, and social skills (Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003). It is imperative to keep highly qualified, highly effective teachers of students with ASD in the classroom. However, many teachers of students with ASD leave the teaching profession. Jennett, Harris, and Mesibov (2003) highlighted the greater 'risk for burnout' (p. 584) in teachers who teach students with ASD, who must address idiosyncratic communication, social, and behavioural challenges.

Many nations have problems with teacher attrition. Dupriez, Delvaux, and Lothaire (2016) described a teacher shortage in French-speaking Belgium. Their teachers' concerns, like many nations, were poor working conditions and low pay (Dupriez et al., 2016). In Australia, Georgakis and Wilson (2011) followed a group of Australian physical and health education teachers who could not find employment, whereas in other areas of the Australian education system jobs were available. The researchers suggested a university program, which required students to major in their area of choice and a critical shortage area (Georgakis & Wilson, 2011). Dutch researchers van Geffen and Poell (2014) responded to teaching shortages in the Netherlands by citing teacher mobility as a possible solution.

Like many other nations, critical shortages of special educators are a national concern in the United States (US; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative

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Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2015). The data for autumn 2012 revealed 5% of special education teachers were not fully certified (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2015). For the 2016–2017 school year, 48 states reported shortages of special education teachers, with many states also reporting a specific need for more teachers prepared to serve students with ASD (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2016). The rising prevalence of young children diagnosed with ASD combined with the lack of teacher preparation programs specifically focused on evidence-based practices for working with students with ASD has resulted in an expanding supply–demand gap and the need for an immediate response from the field (McGee & Morrier, 2005; USDOE, 2016).

Existing special education teacher shortages are further compounded by attrition levels for special educators, which often exceed those of their general education colleagues (Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, 2004; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Wasburn, Wasburn-Moses, & Davis, 2012; Whitaker, 2000). Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2016) argued that reducing attrition by half could eliminate teacher shortages. A follow-up survey of teachers in the US suggested the attrition rate for special educators was about 12–13% compared to 7–8% for general educators (Keigher, 2010). Plash and Piotrowski (2006) explained that about 6% of special educators leave the field and about 7% go to general education positions. More recently, findings from the 2012–2013 Teacher Follow-Up Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed the percentage of public school special education teachers identified as stayers was lower than any other main assignment field, with the exception of early childhood/general elementary (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007), the cost of teacher turnover is substantial, ranging from $4,000 to $15,000 per teacher (dependent on area in the nation) for the costs of recruiting, hiring, and training a replacement teacher.

Special education teacher attrition, within the first few years on the job, is influenced by stressful and demanding job requirements such as needing to create individualised education programs and behaviour management systems for learners with different abilities (Dempsey, Arthur-Kelly, & Carty, 2009; Vittek, 2015). Further, special educators must teach in a variety of settings, collaborate with a variety of individuals, and increasingly are being evaluated by student standardised test scores (Rock et al., 2016). Teachers report isolation, lack of resources, inadequate support from administrators, lack of decision-making input, confusion of job-related tasks, and paperwork burdens (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Kaff, 2004; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Sutcher et al., 2016). Boyer and Lee (2001) provided an extensive list of the distinct challenges faced by beginning special education teachers, such as accountability, working with paraprofessionals, and designing strategies for unique student needs.

Although a number of challenges experienced by special educators have been linked to attrition, researchers have discovered that teacher satisfaction, positive working conditions, collaborative school climates, administrative support, and job-related resources might improve teacher retention (Brownell, Billingsley, McLeskey, & Sindelar, 2012; Gray & Taie, 2015; Hirsch & Emerick, 2007; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; McLeskey et al., 2004; Tyler & Brunner, 2014). Additionally, quality induction programs with a mentorship component have been shown to improve job satisfaction and teacher retention rates (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; Dempsey et al., 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Vittek, 2015). Early career teachers view mentoring as invaluable (Dempsey et al., 2009; Dempsey & Christenson-Foggett, 2011). Data gathered from the Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study (2007–2012) indicated that 80% of new teachers who were assigned mentors remained through their first 5 years of teaching, whereas only 64% of new teachers without a mentor remained (Raue & Gray, 2015). Quality mentoring for beginning teachers has been shown to enhance job satisfaction, which has been positively correlated with retention (Fish & Stephens, 2010).

Mentorship is common practice in the teacher induction process (Israel, Kamman, McCray, & Sindelar, 2014). Unfortunately, mentors supporting beginning teachers of students with ASD may

not always have the specialised preparation required. In a study of how teachers are prepared to use strategies for students with ASD, Morrier, Hess, and Heflin (2011) noted the complexities of preparing teachers to work with students with ASD due to their individual learning needs and the variety of evidence-based practices available. Boyer and Lee (2001) examined the experiences of a new teacher working with students with ASD and indicated the importance of providing mentors with 'knowledge or experience in the needs of the students being taught by the new special educator' (p. 81).

Researchers have evaluated the challenges of retaining special education teachers, including teachers of students with ASD, and the problems associated with special educators leaving the classroom (Billingsley, 2002, 2004; McLeskey et al., 2004). One suggestion posed by Dempsey and Christenson-Foggett (2011) for the Australian school system is an online mentoring program using mentors from outside the school to support novice special education teachers. Teacher induction programs are another common solution (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kram, 1985; White & Mason, 2001); however, the problem of special education teacher attrition remains.

The purpose of this pilot study is to provide a unique insight into addressing the problem of attrition for special educators who teach students with ASD. The present study investigates the experiences of highly successful special education teachers serving students with ASD with particular attention to factors associated with teacher retention. Rather than the focus being on teachers who have left the classroom, this study focuses on those who have stayed and what has contributed to their success. A phenomenological research design was employed to illuminate what has made them persevere, where many others have not, and strives to answer the question, what are the lived experiences of a successful teacher of students with ASD? We explored the research question by answering the following subquestions:

1. What is success for a teacher of students with ASD?
2. What is the typical day or routine for a teacher of students with ASD?
3. Who does the teacher of students with ASD identify as a support system?
4. Why does the teacher of students with ASD choose to stay in the field?
5. How does the teacher of students With ASD define his or her role in the school's culture?

Method

Research Design

A phenomenological approach was chosen as the design to explore the questions previously mentioned. A phenomenology describes a common experience of participants (Creswell, 2007, 2014). Creswell (2007, 2014) noted phenomenological research is best suited to explore the common or shared experiences of several individuals. The typical method of data collection in a phenomenology is interviews, which involves informal, interactive, open-ended questioning (Moustakas, 1994). An important concept used in phenomenology is epoche (bracketing). Moustakas (1994, p. 34) described epoche as the practice of the researcher setting aside their preconceived notions and beliefs on the subject in order to remain neutral and unbiased when collecting and analysing data.

This is a pilot study to be used to inspire further investigation of the topic. There are five participants in this study, thus making the results unable to be generalised to a larger audience.

Setting and Participants

The University of Central Florida (UCF) is the second largest university in the US, with a population of over 60,000 students enrolled. Project ASD at UCF is funded through the US Office of

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participants	Years teaching	Grade level
P1	11	Elementary
P2	15	Elementary
P3	6	Middle school
P4	6	High school
P5	10	High school

Special Education Programs. This federal grant was designed to increase the number of highly qualified special education teachers with specialised knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based practices and comprehensive programming for students with ASD. Funded scholars earn master's degrees in Exceptional Student Education, which incorporate a graduate certificate in ASD, approved by Florida's Department of Education for State Endorsement in Autism. A featured component of Project ASD is the presence of a mentorship/demonstration classroom (MDC) program. MDCs serving students with ASD are specifically designed to integrate coursework and field experience to (a) offset professional isolation experienced by special educators (Obiakor, Rotatori, & Burkhardt, 2007) through collaboration with mentor teachers at project meetings each semester; (b) introduce, model, and encourage teaching best practices through the use of live seminars, asynchronous, and synchronous online presentations from and discussions with collaborating mentors and video streaming from MDC sites; (c) facilitate application of evidence-based practices in authentic settings by providing high-quality field and practicum experiences at MDC sites; and (d) increase understanding and awareness of the unique needs of students with ASD and their families through collaborative learning. MDC teachers are selected based on evaluations that include evidence of the use of research-based practices, principles of learning, and supportive classroom environments.

The Project ASD Observation Assessment for Teachers Providing Services to Students With ASD–Revised (OAASD-R; Pearl et al., 2018) is one of the tools used in the selection process. Only teachers deemed as exemplary during their observation by Project ASD staff, who are labelled highly effective by their district, have won various awards, and have created outstanding programs, are asked to be an MDC teacher.

The five participants in this study were graduates from Project ASD who, as previously mentioned, were selected as MDC teachers for the 2015–2016 school year. All five were special education teachers serving students with ASD in selected MDC sites in large urban or suburban school districts (see Table 1). They were fully certified in Exceptional Student Education with master's degrees in Exceptional Student Education, graduate certificates in ASD, and state endorsement in autism, and held teaching positions serving students with ASD in self-contained settings for the majority of the school day. The five participants were identified as expert teachers based on input from multiple sources (e.g., district and school evaluations, Project ASD OAASD-R; Pearl et al., 2018). In addition, four of the five participants had been voted teacher of the year in their schools and school districts.

Procedure

The University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board granted this study approval prior to its initiation. The first author recruited MDC teachers for this study via email. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Each participant was interviewed at the participant's school at a location and time of the participant's choosing. Interviews ranged in length from 25 to

35 minutes. P1 was interviewed during the school day and chose a private location in a small room at the school. P2 was interviewed after school and selected a corner of the classroom. P3 asked that the interview be held in the middle of the school day and chose to be interviewed in the administrative conference room in the front office. P4 preferred that the interview be conducted in a private office. P5 also elected for the interview to take place after school. The interview took place in P5's classroom. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Audio was recorded using an iPad and converted to an MP4a file. Files were sent to an outside agency for transcription. Audio and transcribed interviews were stored on a password-protected computer.

Instrument

Interview questions were written in a semistructured interview format. The semistructured interview allows the researcher to probe more deeply using open-ended questioning (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Questions were aligned to answer the overarching research question and subquestions (see Appendix).

Data Analysis

An adapted version of the Listening Guide developed by Gilligan (1993) was used in the analysis of the participant interviews. Gilligan recommended that the first read of data should be to extrapolate the plot. The second read should be to examine first-person voice, and the third read should be to examine themes or personal position. The first and third read remained the same as recommended by Gilligan (1993); however, the second step, extracting first-person statements, of the Listening Guide was not used because all data were in interview form. Themes were identified and manually coded using NVivo Version 11 for Windows (QSR International, 2015), a qualitative data management program.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasised the importance of trustworthiness. To ensure trustworthiness, qualitative data analysis procedures were used such as triangulation of data, member checking, and coding to identify the participant's voice (Fetterman, 2010). First, the researchers contacted all participants for member checking. All participants were asked to read the transcripts of their interviews to ensure that their thoughts, feelings, and opinions were conveyed appropriately. All participants read, made changes to their transcripts, and emailed their acceptance of the documents. Then interviews were coded and as themes emerged, the authors ensured three points of data, from three separate participants, were aligned with each theme.

NVivo Version 11 for Windows (QSR International, 2015) was used for coding. After manually coding using the software, a member of the research team coded two of the five interviews (40%) to ensure reliable coding. The intercoder agreement for each node ranged from 79.42% to 100%. The intercoders handled disagreements by discussing code assignments and viewing the codes through the lens of the other intercoder.

Results

To answer the overarching research question, 'What are the lived experiences of a successful teacher of students with ASD?', interviews were analysed using an adapted version of the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 1993). Table 2 provides the list of themes used in the analysis. The themes of accolades and support needed to be further broken into subthemes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Data Themes

Themes	Subtheme	Researcher-defined themes	Subquestions in which themes appear
Enthusiasm		Excitement about topic being discussed	1, 4, 5
Frustration		Demonstrated anger or feeling of being overwhelmed	2, 4
Accolades	a. Awards	Tangible award (e.g., teacher of the year)	1
	b. Honours	Nontangible honour (e.g., department chair, asked to conduct an in-service for staff)	1
	c. Rewards	Nontangible reward (e.g., student success, parent gratitude)	1, 4
Sadness		Sorrow (including body language, crying, and statements)	4
School involvement		Role the teacher plays in the school (e.g., extracurricular activities, committee involvement, teacher-created activities for students with disabilities)	5
Student functioning		Needs of students	2
Support	a. Non-example	Teacher discussed not being given assistance	3
	b. Positive support	Examples of being given assistance	3
Workload		Responsibilities of teacher	2, 4

Subquestion 1: What is Success for a Teacher of Students With ASD?

Two themes emerged from the responses to this subquestion, accolades, with the subthemes of awards, honours and rewards, and enthusiasm. All of the teachers involved in this study felt success was directly tied to their students' successes or accomplishments. The participants discussed awards and honours they had received during their career, but none of the teachers discussed them at length or with the vigour they did when they told personal stories of students' successes. P1 stated, 'When you toilet train a child, teach them how to feed themselves, teach them how to communicate, teach them how to read, hello? … I take a lot of pride in that …'. Likewise, P2 communicated that the reward she obtained was the students' accomplishments: 'The rewards that I get are from my students … if they're just speaking for the first time or if it's something simple like going to the bathroom'.

The theme most heavily populated during analysis was accolades. Within the theme of accolades, tangible honours and awards were only discussed briefly, such as when P5 discussed winning grants or P1 discussed winning teacher of the year. However, the teachers emphasised that their reward was their students' learning. As the participants discussed the rewards of student success, the theme of enthusiasm also emerged.

Subquestion 2: What is the Typical Day or Routine for a Teacher of Students With ASD?

The three themes emerging from responses to subquestion 2 included frustration, workload, and student functioning. When participants were asked about their jobs, they talked about classroom routine. Describing the high school class routine, P4 stated:

I was responsible for the instruction of all content areas … because I had all grade levels in my classroom, … plus also being responsible for teaching those social, emotional skills that some-times students with autism struggle. … [and my] para-professional and making sure that she knew what my expectations were …

Teachers discussed the stressors in their job such as a lack of planning time, an abundance of paperwork, teacher evaluation procedures, meetings, and student behaviours, overwhelmingly revealing the themes of workload and frustration. P2 discussed the time given for planning:

I would feel my role is not only teaching the curriculum, but a lot of times making the curricu-lum. And I think that's where the administration is not as aware, nor is the gen-ed. aware of how much time and effort that it takes.

P5 reviewed the additional time spent on IEPs:

I still stay after school. I still take work home with me. I still do work on the weekends.

P4 discussed the time spent on meetings and paperwork

That's my biggest thing is people just continually expect you to do more and more, but don't realize how much time it takes … And at what point do you say, hey, I need a life too!

Given the workload and student behavioural problems in the classroom, P4 found it increasingly more difficult to separate her work and home life:

It becomes very hard to emotionally detach … I had a kid who was just having frequent meltdowns. It was very hard for me to go home and let it go because some of these kids become like family because you have them for four years or more.

P4's revelation of finding it difficult to separate work and home uniquely populated not only the themes of workload and frustration but also sadness. Although other participants' body language clearly fit the theme of frustration by raising their voices and sitting upright, P4 slouched and quietly and tearfully answered the question without making eye contact.

In addition to themes of workload and frustration, student functioning was discussed. All of the teachers interviewed had students with varying academic and behavioural abilities. P2 noted:

I teach children in kindergarten, first grade with autism. I currently have eleven students, ten students are self-contained.

Subquestion 3: Who Does the Teacher of Students With ASD Identify as a Support System?

When the teachers identified their support systems, four of the five discussed family and friends briefly, but interviewees spent a great deal of time talking about their 'at work family'. All five participants discussed the importance of other teachers, support staff, paraprofessionals, and administrators, and each participant felt these were the people that 'get it' or 'live it'. P3 discussed the importance of having support from their co-workers: 'just having that family, that, you know, that support'.

Themes that emerged when analysing the teachers' discussion of co-worker's roles in their lives was the support theme. Support was divided into the subthemes of positive and negative support. When discussing support, often teachers discussed positive experiences in past tense, and then

elaborated on the current state of their school as not being supportive or not being as supportive as before. This was most prevalent when the teachers discussed administration.

All five of the teachers described the need for a strong administrator who was positive about including students with disabilities. All five participants said they had had or currently had such a person in their lives who helped shape them as professionals. For the three who had strong administrators at the beginning of their careers, and no longer have them, there was a distinct sadness in words, body language, and vocal tone when they described their former principals. P2 stated:

> He was very proud of our program … He would always talk about it to the staff, as well as to outside people … We felt like our jobs were important.

Another example of a strong administrative influence was given by P3 who said:

> The ESE [Exceptional Student Education] department here is very strong. The ESE specialist, she's amazing, and she always has my back … She supports me. She, if there's something that I need, she tries to get grants … [P3 goes on to say], I drive 50 minutes every day to get here.

The teacher who had the influence of a strong administrator believed their administrator created a culture of acceptance. All of the participants stated it was because of their administrator that their school is so willing and open to programs, in which their students are integrated into extracurricular activities. 'I think really just building a culture', said P4.

Subquestion 4: Why Does the Teacher of Students With ASD Choose to Stay in the Field?

Teachers were overwhelmingly in agreement: they stay in the field for the students. The reward was their students' success. Throughout the interviews, teachers discussed the problems in their jobs such as paperwork burdens, long hours, teacher evaluations not suited to their roles, and administrators not well educated in working with students with ASD. Teachers discussed feelings of isolation, injuries inflicted upon them by students, and meetings with outsiders who do not understand the school system 'coming in and telling them what to do'. But even with all of the potential reasons for these teachers to leave the field, they stay. Evidence of their dedication to the students is marked throughout the interviews. Stories were shared where they compared their students to a family member with a disability, and because of the family member's experiences, they felt the need to right a wrong or to make it better for others. For example, P5 stated, 'I really wanted to be more than just a parent/teacher of kids with autism', and P4 stated:

> I have a sister with Down syndrome, so for me, just living with an individual with a disability for 29 years has kind of trained me to have that caring heart and just be understanding and compassionate toward students.

Themes that emerged in discussing teacher participants' choice to stay in the field were enthusiasm for their students, frustration in discussing their workload, and sadness. More than any other part in the interview, this line of questioning evoked raw emotion. Four out of the five teachers discussed that they had thought about leaving the profession. When asking career-related questions, our research team did not expect to see the teachers become emotional and cry during the interview, but three out of the five interviews did result in the participant crying. Participants discussed their reason for entering the field of special education, and all of the teachers had a personal link in their lives as to their career choice. When researchers asked, 'Why have you chosen to remain in the field of special education?' and 'Have you ever thought about leaving the classroom? If so, what brought you to that point? What made you stay?', all but one participant said she had thought about leaving the field. Three of the participants cried during this part of the

Table 3. Activities

Participant	School level	Activities supporting students with disabilities	Extracurricular activities

P1	Elementary	Department chair
		Provides faculty professional development
		  for supporting students with disabilities
			President of the hospitality
			  club
			President of the cheer team

P2	Elementary	After school tutoring Social skills club	None

P3	Middle	Best Buddies
		  Unified Sports
		  Special Olympics
		  School store
			Cheerleading coach
			Track and field coach

P4	High	ASD awareness initiatives Special Olympics Department chair Provides faculty professional development for supporting students with disabilities Conducts professional development	Head swim coach
P5	High	Schoolwide recycling program Coffee and doughnuts delivery service On-campus farm Student involvement in theatre/drama program productions Cheerleading coach for students with disabilities	None

interview, and all but one participant displayed visibly different body language such as slouching, lack of eye contact, and talking in a softer tone. A powerful quote by P2 sums up so many of the answers to this question:

> But ultimately it's the kids, and just seeing, knowing that there are going to be bad days. You're going to have to cry, and then the next day should be a little bit better … But just seeing the smile of the kids, and just seeing their growth and progress.

Subquestion 5: How Does the Teacher of Students With ASD Define His or Her Role in the School's Culture?

The theme of school involvement was the primary focus of responses to this research question. The teachers discussed activities outside the classroom focused on students with disabilities, as well as schoolwide activities involving all students. Each of the participants listed their involvement in a number of school activities, both for students with disabilities as well as traditional extracurricular activities for all students (see Table 3). All five participants discussed their classroom being an open door for general education teachers in need of behavioural or academic guidance with students in their classes. The teachers also noted they were in charge of special education professional development for the faculty in their schools.

Of particular note were findings that all five participants were involved in schoolwide activities outside of their classrooms, many of which were not specifically related to special education (see Table 3). P4 is the head swim coach of a large suburban high school and believed that being the swim coach has opened the doors for students with disabilities to join the team. P4 stated, 'I'm the head swim coach. We had a young lady with Down syndrome on the swim team, and a young man with cerebral palsy'. She went on to talk about how the general education students on the swim

team accepted the students with disabilities: 'I guess, just having that inclusionary component and having, building, not just a program, but a school that, accepts all students for who they are … I think really just building a culture'.

Some of the teachers created programs to ensure the involvement of students with disabilities in the school. For example, when P3 discussed their student-run school store, she excitedly stated:

> Students go on a delivery … they have their [order] ticket … have to know what floor to go to (to deliver) … On Friday they get they get their paycheck, so it's meaningful to them.

Originally, the store was to teach employability skills, but it has morphed into P3's students becoming more visible on campus. Likewise, P5 stated:

> We do recycling and sell coffee and doughnuts to our staff. We also run an on-campus farm, through some collaboration with our agriculture teacher. We raise money every week that provides for the animal's food, and it also helped purchase the animals.

Like P3, P5 intended this program to teach employability skills, and as a result of P5's program, P5's students are included in a number of activities on campus because of their work: 'So we are very active around the campus. We also participate in dance program and Theater Magnet' (see Table 3).

Discussion

Special educator attrition is a major problem contributing to the ongoing special education teacher shortages reported by 48 US states for the 2016–2017 school year (USDOE, 2016). Many special educators are challenged to meet the unique needs of their students given paperwork burdens, demands of accountability, inadequacy of resources, and lack of support from administrators (Boyer & Lee, 2001; Gersten et al., 2001; Kaff, 2004; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). The attrition rate for special education teachers has been consistently higher in comparison to that of their general education counterparts (Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, 2004; McLeskey et al., 2004; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006; Wasburn et al., 2012; Whitaker, 2000). Tyler and Brunner (2014) identified a number of factors associated with teacher satisfaction including workplace conditions, administrative support, professional development, teacher mentorship/induction, teacher preparation, and workplace decision-making. Although this study focused solely on teachers of students with ASD, the challenges they shared were similar to those of most special educators in the literature.

Arguably, the participants in this study are better prepared in comparison to most special educators in similar teaching positions. They also received mentorship through their master's programs. Although their success and retention in the field may be attributed in part to a high level of preparedness for the challenges of their teaching positions, similar issues affecting special educator job satisfaction and identified in the literature as contributing to attrition emerged in their interviews.

One of the themes emerging from the interviews was the critical role of administrative and school support in special educator retention. Administrators who support induction programs, early career mentorship, and cross-school collaboration are able to produce a schoolwide culture of acceptance and support for teachers and students with disabilities that can potentially lessen special educator burnout and reduce teacher attrition (Brownell et al., 2012; Hirsch & Emerick, 2007; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; McLeskey et al., 2004; Tyler & Brunner, 2014). All five participants discussed an administrator who supported their teaching. They defined administrative support as emphasising the importance of their roles in the school or financial backing for the program. Tyler and Brunner (2014) provided guidance to school administrators stressing the need to understand the 'importance of decision-making's role in special educators' perceptions of job

satisfaction' (p. 299). The teachers in the current study identified school administrators who had not only taken a lead but also empowered them in 'building a culture' that was inclusive.

Isolation has been identified as one of the factors impacting special education teacher attrition (Gersten et al., 2001; Kaff, 2004; Plash & Piotrowski, 2006). The study participants, like many special educators, taught in self-contained classrooms, a service delivery model that can limit contact with other students or professionals. However, a schoolwide collaborative environment facilitated the development of a work family as a support system. Teachers identified the need for school-based support systems and the value of discussing problems of the day with colleagues who understood the job. These colleagues were not always other teachers of students with ASD but also included other special educators, classroom assistants or paraprofessionals, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech pathologists, staffing specialists, or the administrator of the special education department.

One of major themes emerging from this study was the high level of involvement of these teachers in activities outside of their classrooms. They were all involved in their schools through coaching, clubs, committees, or activities for their students, and they expressed high levels of satisfaction with those activities. In particular, the teachers who were interviewed highlighted the positive impact of their involvement in school activities in creating more inclusive opportunities for the students with disabilities in their classes. These findings suggest administrators should encourage and support special educators' participation in schoolwide extracurricular activities to ameliorate the isolation of special educators and create a collaborative school culture. Given the potential benefits, participation outside the classroom should be considered as an important component of induction programs for beginning special educators.

There are similarities between the challenges experienced by the teachers in the present study and the reported experiences of other special education teachers in the field. It is important to note that even though these teachers expressed sadness, stress, or anger related to their jobs, they have continued to persevere. Andrews and Brown (2015) found discrepancies between teachers' ideal perceptions and their current experiences. Special education teachers rated their current experiences with colleague support, administrative support, classroom management, student success, instructional resources, workload, and parental contact significantly lower than their ideal perceptions. The teachers in the present study expressed similar concerns. Given the resource limitations and the multiple challenges faced by special educators, ideal perceptions may be unrealistic. Administrators hoping to retain highly effective teachers should seek to understand the ways and extent to which special educators' current experiences fall short of their ideal perceptions. The passion and commitment to students, families of students, and schools were clearly evident in the responses of these five special educators. At the heart of the issue of special educator attrition is the need to recognise the deep commitment and emotional investment of the successful special education teacher seen in participant responses when asked why they chose to remain in the field. As was the case with these five teachers, special education teachers are often drawn to the profession as a result of personal experiences with individuals with disabilities. Their enthusiasm and involvement are driven by the desire to improve the lives of their students: 'ultimately it's the kids'. And yet, despite this inner drive, the fact that four of the five exemplary special educators interviewed admitted having, at one time, considered leaving the field is sobering. Their responses emphasise how essential it is that the passion of special education teachers be recognised and encouraged, and they are given the support and resources needed to realise the successful outcomes they envision for their students.

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations, the first of which is the small sample size, consisting of only five teachers. Although more than one district was represented, the sample was confined to three adjacent school districts, which is a relatively small geographical area, and certainly not

representative of other special education programs worldwide. Representation included teachers in classrooms of varying grade levels. All teachers were teaching in self-contained classroom settings and no inclusive settings were investigated. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample might lead to more generalisable results.

Conclusions

There is an ongoing need for researchers to study high attrition rates among special educators, specifically teachers of students with ASD, and continue to propose solutions to this problem. Mentorship or induction programs may be one solution to the problem. With the need for more teachers of students with ASD on the rise, more specific research on the benefits of mentorship and induction programs for teachers of students with ASD might assist in curtailing the high attrition rate of these teachers. Districts and administrators must address the problems facing special educators to help alleviate special educator attrition. Although there is much to be learned from research focused on special educator attrition, there is also a need for further research investigating factors associated with the resiliency and retention of highly successful special educators who, despite persistent and ongoing challenges, remain in the classroom. The teachers in this study joined the field of education for emotional reasons and have continued their commitment to serve students with ASD. It is important to maintain such teachers in our classroom.

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APPENDIX

Research question: What are the influences expert teachers serving students with ASD identify as contributing to their success?

Introduction: Hello. My name is _____. I'm a researcher at the University of Central Florida's Project ASD helping with a study of expert teachers serving students with ASD. I think this conversation will take about 20–30 minutes. Is this still a convenient time for you to talk with me?

There are no right or wrong, desirable, or undesirable answers. Please feel free to express your opinions, whether they are positive or negative. I just want you to openly share with me what you really think and feel. I am a graduate assistant of Project ASD, but this will remain confidential. You may also choose not to respond to any or all of the questions without an explanation. You may also decline to participate in this interview without any consequences.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to identify causes of successes for teachers serving students with ASD. My questions will focus on your employment, job satisfaction, and successes.

Recording: I would like to video record the discussion so that I do not miss anything you have to say. Would that be all right? TURN ON RECORDER . . . Now that the recorder is on, do I have your permission to record our conversation? Do you have any questions before I begin?

The following questions are geared toward a review of your employment:

1. Please describe your current position.
2. Please describe your role in the school.
3. Can you give me an example of school involvement for your classroom?
4. Describe resources (e.g., community, school) that have contributed to your success as a teacher.
5. As a beginning teacher, what were the crucial supports that contributed to your success?
6. How have people supported you as a special education teacher?
7. Why have you chosen to remain in the field of special education?
8. Have you ever thought about leaving the classroom? If so, what brought you to that point? What made you stay?
9. What are you most proud of in the ASD program you have built?

Member checking: Review the main points to summarise your interview with the participant to ensure you have the correct understanding for their answers.