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The Impact of Working Conditions on Special Education Teacher Attrition

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SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ATTRITION

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An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented in
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This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of former Maine special education teachers (SETs) who left the field due to working conditions. The study was guided by three research questions: (a) what factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession, (b) how did the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession, and (c) what improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of SETs? A phenomenological research design was used to bring the participants' actual words to life. Four former Maine SETs were interviewed for the study, providing in-depth contextualized accounts of their lived experiences in the special education profession. The study's findings indicated that SETs left the field due to various working conditions, including excessive paperwork, educational technician supervision, parents, a lack of administrative support, and increased student mental health needs. These working conditions caused SETs to leave the field because they no longer felt they could do the job the way it needed to be done, and it negatively impacted their personal lives and health. Improvements to working conditions that could have supported the retention of the SETs included making the job more sustainable, adequate staffing, administrative support, a stronger MTSS framework, and additional training opportunities. Participants had differing views on the role of compensation in supporting retention. School

administrators and state policymakers can use the study's findings and recommendations to retain current and future SETs. The first-hand accounts found in this qualitative study offer valuable insights into the challenges related to the complex working conditions of special educators.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to teachers everywhere.

You are my heroes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The field of special education continues to face a critical challenge. The annual attrition rate for special education teachers (SETs) is approximately 16% (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), with approximately 40% of SETs leaving the field within their first five years (Kozleski et al., 2000). The job of SETs comes with a unique set of working conditions, which research has shown contributes to this persistent exodus (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This qualitative dissertation study explores how working conditions directly impacted SETs' decision to leave the profession and what supports could have kept them in the field.

This chapter begins by introducing the study's problem and purpose statements and three core research questions. Next, the study's significance is discussed, and definitions are provided for key terminology used throughout this dissertation. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the remaining chapters.

Statement of the Problem

Special education teachers (SETs) are integral to the education of students with disabilities. They support the most vulnerable students in their schools and are essential to implementing schoolwide prevention and intervention efforts (Hoover & Patton, 2006; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). In addition, they often fulfill the roles of interventionist, collaborator, and consultant within their school systems (Simonsen et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there has been a consistent shortage of special educators since passing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975. Currently, 43 states report a shortage of special educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). SET attrition, a particularly problematic issue as it magnifies the shortage, has been a concern that has challenged researchers for decades. This study defines attrition as a

SET leaving the field or moving to a general education position (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). While some attrition is appropriate, retirement or involuntary attrition accounts for only 18% and 14% of all turnover (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). According to a 2017 report, special educators who leave the field voluntarily account for the other 68% of the attrition rate (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond).

Recruitment and retention challenges in the Maine special education field closely mirror the national data trends. According to the Maine Department of Education, Teachers of Students with Disabilities (K-12) was designated a teacher shortage area for the 2023-2024 school year. In a recent statewide survey of 252 Maine principals, 70% indicated that it was a significant challenge to recruit and hire SETs, and 41.3% said it was a significant challenge to retain SETs (Fairman et al., 2019). Since approximately 19.49% of Maine students received special education services in 2022, representing a 3% increase since 2015, retention and attrition issues must be addressed (Maine Department of Education, 2023).

Several factors have been identified as contributing to SET attrition, including the absence of proper training and qualifications, personal reasons, school demographics, and working conditions (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Some of these factors are difficult to counteract, but others, such as adverse working conditions, are highly preventable (Bettini et al., 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Special education teachers have many complex responsibilities and struggle with work demands that are nearly impossible to fulfill (Bettini et al., 2016; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Research has consistently shown that working conditions are a powerful predictor of teachers' intentions to leave the field (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Working conditions are defined as "physical features…organizational structure, and the sociological, political, psychological and educational features of the work environment" (Ladd,

2009, p. 6). Several researchers have concluded that working conditions such as financial compensation (Miller et al., 1999), lack of support from administrators and colleagues (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten et al., 2001), poor school climate (Billingsley et al., 2004; Miller et al., 1999), caseload size (Billingsley, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018), and role conflict and ambiguity (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001; Morvant et al., 1995; Singh & Billingsley, 1996) contribute to SET attrition. Improving work conditions is necessary to improve students' educational experiences and support teacher retention. The recurring pattern of special educator hiring, losing, and then rehiring may have lasting adverse effects on teacher quality and student outcomes (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sorensen & Ladd, 2018).

Purpose Statement & Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of SETs who recently left the field due to working conditions. Using purposeful sampling techniques, four former Maine SETs who met the study's criteria were interviewed. This study utilized a three-series interview structure with each participant to better understand the phenomenon of special educators leaving the field due to working conditions. Because phenomenological research explores the shared meanings that individuals assign to a common experience, it was the appropriate method to help answer the core research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As a result of this study, school administrators and policymakers can better understand their role in creating sustainable working conditions that can support the retention of current and future special educators.

This phenomenological study addressed the following three research questions:

1. What factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession?

2. How did the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession?

3. What improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of SETs?

Significance of the Study

While there has been extensive research over the last several decades linking SET attrition and working conditions, many studies have researched intent to leave. However, only some have investigated SETs who have actually left the profession. The degree to which intent predicts actual attrition may vary over a school year. For example, intent to leave in the fall may not correlate with intent to leave come spring (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Understanding the teacher's perspective is necessary (McLeskey et al., 2004), so learning from those who have left the field is crucial.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, its participants are special educators who have actually left the field, contributing valuable insights to the existing research. Second, the study utilizes qualitative research methods to highlight the impact of working conditions on their decision to leave, offering contextualized accounts previously missing in the literature.

Definition of Key Terms

Definitions of key terminology used in this study are provided in this section:

Attrition: In this study, attrition refers to the turnover of SETs from year to year, including leaving the profession or transferring to a general education position (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Educational Technician: Paraprofessionals, teaching assistants, and teacher aides are alternate titles for educational technicians. They work under the supervision of a certified special education teacher to support students with an IEP (Maine Revised Statutes, 2024, § 13001-A)

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A legal document that outlines the educational plan for a child with a disability who is eligible for special education services under IDEA. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A federal law in the United States that ensures students with disabilities are provided with Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) tailored to their individual needs (2004).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS): The integration of "a number of multi-tiered systems into one coherent, strategically combined system meant to address multiple domains or content areas in education" (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016, p.5).

Retention: A term used to describe teachers who remain in the profession (Billingsley, 2004)

Special Education Director: Also known as a Special Education Administrator, these professionals oversee the implementation and evaluation of school-based special education programming.

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter provided a general overview and rationale for this research study. Chapter 2 reviews the current literature on SET attrition and retention, beginning with an overview of factors related to attrition and ending with research on, specifically, how working conditions impact special educators' decision to leave their jobs. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this phenomenological qualitative study. Chapter 4 presents the study's findings using

verbatim examples from participant interviews. Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses the findings within

the context of current research and provides recommendations for policy and practice.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The field of special education faces a persistent challenge in the form of high attrition rates, leading to continued staffing shortages (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). Retaining SETs is critical to ensuring that students with disabilities receive needed support and educational services. However, numerous factors contribute to the departure of these professionals from the field. SETs often experience unique and demanding working conditions, including high caseloads, extensive paperwork, insufficient resources, and a lack of administrative support (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). These factors can lead to job dissatisfaction, burnout, and, ultimately, attrition. Understanding how these working conditions affect teacher retention is essential for developing effective policies and practices to sustain a stable special education workforce.

This literature review is organized into several sections. The first provides an overview of the current state of the SET shortage. The second section introduces the conceptual frameworks commonly used in SET attrition research. The third section explores the current research literature, providing context to the SET shortage and turnover issues. The fourth section delves into how working conditions contribute to attrition, directly relating to this study's research questions. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of key findings.

<u>**Special Education Teacher Shortages**</u>

The role of special educators in meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities and in implementing and developing schoolwide prevention and intervention programming is essential to providing an appropriate education for all learners. However, a growing and widespread shortage of special educators threatens this quality of education

(Sutcher et al., 2016). There has been a consistent shortage of special educators for several decades. There is also a longstanding issue of SETs leaving the profession. SETs who leave the field voluntarily account for 68% of the attrition rate (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

As the population of special education students increases, the limited capacity to serve them is becoming more pronounced. For example, from the school year 2009–10 through 2021-22, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under IDEA increased from 6.5 million (13% of total public school enrollment) to 7.3 million (15% of total public school enrollment) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Nationally, securing and retaining special educators to work with these students has become increasingly difficult. In the 2020-21 academic year, 40 percent of public schools seeking to fill open special education teaching positions encountered challenges in filling those roles, marking a significant increase from the 17 percent reported in 2011-12 (Irwin et al., 2023).

The scope of a SET's responsibilities is immense and continually changing. Many report constraints related to paperwork and caseloads, insufficient administrative support, curriculum and technological resources, and inadequate professional development (Kozleski et al., 2000). These elements impact teachers' ability to provide high-quality services that support student achievement (Brunsting et al., 2014).

As a result of the teacher shortage, many school districts are forced to employ unqualified personnel, including long-term substitutes (Higher Education Consortium for Special Education, 2019). Specific populations of students are more disadvantaged by these shortages, including students in remote rural schools, high-poverty urban areas, and students with significant emotional and behavioral disorders (Albrecht et al., 2009; McLeskey et al., 2004).

Approximately 8% of SETs working with students who qualify for services under IDEA are not fully certified (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a). Students who require the most assistance lose critical learning opportunities as unqualified, new teachers struggle to figure out the job (Billingsley, 2004). In addition, teacher inexperience and turnover rates negatively impact student learning (Kini & Podolsky, 2016) and the organizational effectiveness of school systems (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

The challenge of retaining SETs disrupts the collaborative relationships established between school personnel and special educators. When a special education teacher leaves, those trusting, productive, and respectful relationships with general educators cease (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). New special educators must spend considerable time and energy reestablishing these relationships. This turnover also has a sizable impact on the sustainability of inclusive school reform, including schoolwide prevention and intervention efforts (Sindelar et al., 2006).

Conceptual Frameworks Used in Retention and Attrition Research

In the most recent analysis of the research literature, Billingsley and Bettini (2019) reviewed 30 studies from 2002 to 2017 that examined factors associated with SET attrition and retention, focusing on four major themes: (a) teacher preparation and qualifications, (b) school characteristics, (c) working conditions, and (d) teacher demographic and nonwork factors. This literature review built upon previous reviews (Billingsley, 1993, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1993) completed before national standards-based accountability requirements created a new set of teacher qualifications and responsibilities (No Child Left Behind, 2002).

Researchers frequently used two conceptual frameworks to better understand and interpret the factors associated with special educators' intent to stay in or leave the profession.

The first was Brownell and Smith's (1993) model based on Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological systems theory of four interrelated systems. Bronfenbrenner's model examines how an individual's development is affected by their surrounding environments. Brownell and Smith (1993) adapted this model to understand teacher attrition and retention. They included (a) the microsystem (teacher characteristics and classroom variables), (b) the mesosystem (includes the microsystem, plus variables of workplace integration such as support and collegiality and conflicts in teachers' perceptions of their job responsibilities), (c) the exosystem (school district characteristics and educational policies), and (d) the macrosystem (cultural ideologies and influences, along with current economic conditions). This framework contributes to shaping this study by acknowledging that many factors influence a SET's career choices. While some of these factors are under the teacher's control, many more are associated with their broader external environment.

Billingsley (1993) proposed a second conceptual model that focuses on three factors that guide special educators' career decisions: external factors, employment factors, and personal factors. External factors (societal, economic, and institutional) indirectly impact teachers' career decisions as they happen outside the school environment. Employment factors (professional qualifications, work conditions, rewards, commitment, and employability) directly or indirectly impact teachers' career decisions. For example, Billingsley (1993) hypothesized that teachers working in appealing environments experience work rewards, which leads to increased commitment, resulting in a decision to stay employed. Finally, personal factors (retirement, life circumstances, priorities), both past and present, are likely to directly or indirectly influence teachers' decisions to stay or leave. The relationship between these factors is complex, and the influence of these variables on teachers' decision-making evolves as life circumstances and

priorities change. This framework helped to inform this study by exploring how employment factors, such as working conditions, lead to a SET's decision to leave the field. Billingsley (1993) believed that three levels of working conditions, including district environment, school environment, and work assignment, impact a SET's sense of reward and commitment to their job. The working conditions that affect their daily lives are thought to hold the greatest significance for their ultimate career decisions.

Research on Factors that Contribute to Special Educator Attrition and Retention

Early research on special educator retention and attrition was often piecemeal and lacked a clear definition of attrition, which led to faulty research designs and assumptions (Billingsley, 1993). However, several studies conducted in the 1990s significantly shaped the field of special education retention and attrition research and acted as a springboard for future research efforts. One of the first large-scale attrition studies used survival analysis to describe the career paths of 6,642 special education teachers hired in Michigan and North Carolina between 1972 and 1983 (Singer, 1992). This longitudinal study was the first to chart the career paths of beginning special educators, following them for up to 13 years or until they stopped teaching. Singer found that beginning special education teachers taught an average of 7 years before leaving, and teachers with higher standardized test scores were at a greater risk of leaving the profession.

Billingsley (1993) strengthened future attrition studies by providing more concrete definitions of the varying types of teacher turnover. The *stayers* are those teachers who remain in the same position in the same school as the year prior. The teaching *transfers* are those who leave special education for another position within the same school or district. Lastly, the *exiters* are those individuals who leave the teaching profession entirely. For instance, Boe et al. (1997) conducted the first national study that used quantitative data to estimate the number of teachers

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for each turnover category. Their study provided information about how attrition rates differed among general and special educators. Using SASS and TFS data from 4,798 public school teachers, they found that special education teachers had a higher annual turnover rate when compared to general education teachers for both transfers among schools and exit attrition.

Another early significant attrition study conducted by Brownell et al. (1997) utilized phone interviews with 93 former Florida special education teachers to better understand the factors that lead to their attrition. They found that most special educators left the field due to poor working conditions but often stayed in education, usually moving to general education classrooms. Given the qualitative nature of their study, they were able to shed light on how various attrition factors interact, a feat that is not always captured well in quantitative research.

The following sections will examine the major themes from attrition research, including an in-depth look at the research on how working conditions impact SETs' decisions to leave the field.

Teacher Preparation and Qualifications

Given the persistent shortages in the special education teaching workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b), researchers must continue to examine the factors contributing to retention and attrition. For example, researchers have studied whether elements of special education teachers' preparation (i.e., initial preparation and mentoring) and qualifications (certification and experience) were related to their attrition and retention.

Given that traditional university preparation programs and alternative pathways with fewer requirements can lead to special education teacher certification, it is vital to research the effects of these varying levels of preparation. Connelly and Graham (2008) analyzed Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) data using quantitative measures

to determine whether elements of initial preparation predicted the odds that 168 early career special educators would stay in teaching. About 80% of special educators with more than ten weeks of student teaching stayed in education after one year, compared to 63% of those with fewer than ten weeks. They also found that other preparation components, such as coursework, did not significantly predict retention. Edgar and Pair (2005) conducted phone interviews with 149 graduates of their special education program. They found that 78% were still teaching in special education, yet those who graduated from the dual certification program (attaining both general and special education certificates) had a higher attrition rate of 28%, mainly transferring from special education to general education. In a similar study, Burnstein et al. (2009) surveyed graduates of Accelerate Collaborative Teacher, a year-long graduate credential program, and reported a 71% special educator retention rate after five years. Unfortunately, both the latter studies had low response rates with no comparison groups; thus, no significant conclusions about their results could be drawn.

Mentoring is the most common induction practice schools use to transition teachers into new positions (Billingsley et al., 2009). While research has shown that mentoring improves the retention of new general educators (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), little evidence supports that this relationship exists for special educators (Billingsley, 2004). For example, Connelly and Graham (2009) discovered that mentoring did not predict attrition among early-career special educators. Conversely, in a qualitative study, Gehrke and McCoy (2007) interviewed seven stayers and three movers in their first year of teaching, and none of the movers referred to mentor support. In contrast, stayers emphasized formal and informal mentoring as vital to them.

A special education teacher's qualifications, such as certification and experience, play a role in attrition and retention. Analyzing SASS data, Conley and You (2017) discovered that

certified secondary special educators were less likely to intend to leave than their uncertified counterparts, which aligns with previous research (Billingsley, 2004). Past research has also suggested that attrition rates are higher for less experienced teachers and drop off until retirement age (Billingsley, 2004; Guarino et al., 2006). Boe et al. (2008) analyzed SASS and TFS data that looked at three types of attrition: leaving, moving, and transferring. They found significant differences in attrition rates between special and general educators throughout their careers. Exit attrition (leaving) was the highest early in the careers of both teacher groups and then declined. However, special education teacher exit attrition did not decline as much as their general education counterparts. Also, 19.7% of special educators moved in their first three years of teaching compared to only 13.1% of general educators, representing a significant difference.

School Characteristics

Staffing high-poverty urban and rural schools has long been a challenge. High-poverty schools often employ fewer certified special education teachers, and they rely more heavily on those who are emergency certified (Fall & Billingsley, 2011). While rural and urban schools vary geographically, both serve ethnically diverse students, students living in poverty, and struggling learners. Despite these facts, only some studies have examined how attrition relates to school demographics. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) analyzed SASS and TFS data and found that special education attrition rates varied significantly based on the percentage of students of color in a school. For example, a nearly 20% attrition rate occurred in schools serving > 55% students of color, compared to an 11% attrition rate in schools serving < 10% students of color. Another study by Prater et al. (2007) surveyed 98% of district special education administrators in Utah and found that rural special education personnel left or moved at a lower rate than urban personnel (7.8% and 13.6%, respectively). Many studies have

examined school demographics of general educator attrition rates (race/ethnicity, urban/rural, and poverty), so future research should focus on how special education attrition relates to school demographics.

Teacher Demographics and Non-work Factors

Teacher demographics such as race and ethnicity have scarcely been examined in relation to attrition. Despite 47% of students with disabilities being people of color, in 2011-2012, only 18% of special educators were people of color (Billingsley et al., 2017). The special education workforce is substantially more White than its population of students. Existing research suggests that race-based barriers to college admission have contributed to low enrollments of people of color in teacher preparation programs (Scott, 2018). In addition, research with general educators suggests that working conditions are problematic for teachers of color, leading to higher attrition rates (Achinstein et al., 2010). However, a similar study has yet to be conducted with special educators.

Some non-work reasons special education teachers leave the profession are not preventable through intervention, such as health, child care, and family moves. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found that 'other personal life reasons' (i.e., pregnancy/child care, health, and caring for family) were reported by 42% of special educators as very important to their decisions to leave teaching. Conversely, some teachers leave for other careers. Boe et al. (2008) reported that 14.5% of special education teachers and 9.3% of general education teachers left the profession. However, whether their new careers were within or outside of education is unclear.

<u>The Role of Working Conditions in Special Education Attrition</u>

Many factors influence special educator attrition: some are difficult to avoid (i.e., personal factors), but others are more preventable, including work conditions. While no single concrete definition exists, working conditions can be broadly defined as "physical features…organizational structure, and the sociological, political, psychological and educational features of the work environment" (Ladd, 2009, p. 6). SETs have many complex responsibilities and struggle with work demands that are nearly impossible to fulfill (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Research has consistently shown that working conditions are a powerful predictor of teachers' intentions to leave the field (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). For example, Kaff (2004) found that 48% of SETs who planned to leave reported that too many demands interfered with their ability to serve students effectively.

Caseload size and complexity

The overall number of students taught and the complexity of IEP caseloads are related to teachers' intent to stay or leave their positions (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Studies have found that special educators who teach students with emotional and behavioral disorders are more likely to leave their positions. For example, Gilmour and Wehby (2020) discovered that working primarily with students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) significantly raises the likelihood of turnover. Additionally, SETs who teach students with EBDs are at greater risk of burnout, which can lead to a higher rate of attrition (Bettini et al., 2019; Park & Shin, 2020). In a recent focus group study (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), SETs identified that both the size and complexity of their caseloads caused "significant stress in day-to-day routines" (p. 286). Previous research has shown that caseload is correlated with SET attrition rates, and the intensity of students' needs can impact how SETs perceive their effectiveness (Russ et al., 2001).

Paperwork

Paperwork is a critical component of a SET's job, yet previous research suggests that these non-teaching responsibilities interfere with student instruction and may contribute to attrition (Billingsley, 2004). Paperwork is one of the non-instructional aspects most frequently mentioned by special educators (Berry, 2012). Nearly 24% of the 99 special educators surveyed who left an urban school district over three years indicated that paperwork was an important factor in their decision to leave (Billingsley, 2007). Several studies have also provided special educators' perspectives on paperwork. It has been found that paperwork is overwhelming, can contribute to a demanding workload, and can interfere with instructional time (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Kaff, 2004). In one qualitative study of novice SETs, many described paperwork as "redundant, lengthy, and overwhelming" (Mehrenberg, 2013, p. 83). In an additional study, a significant portion of new SETs surveyed (76.1%, n = 872) expressed that routine tasks and paperwork moderately to substantially interfere with their teaching duties (Billingsley et al., 2004).

Role conflict and ambiguity

Previous research found that role conflict and ambiguity contribute to SET attrition (Brunsting et al., 2014; Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001). Role conflict happens when SETs are expected to perform tasks that are conflicting or impossible to complete within a reasonable timeframe, and role ambiguity results from their unclear job descriptions (Brunsting et al., 2014).

In a study by Cross and Billingsley (1994), role conflict and ambiguity were significant predictors of overall job satisfaction. Special educators reported significantly higher role conflict and ambiguity levels than their general education teacher counterparts. In another study, a survey

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of Connecticut special educators (n=443) found that role conflict and ambiguity were significantly related to burnout (Crane & Iwanicki, 1986). The issues of role conflict and role ambiguity signal a need to update and reevaluate the job design of special educators (Major, 2012).

Support

Several social contexts, including school culture and support, have been previously found to predict teachers' intent to stay or leave (Billingsley, 2004). For SETs, a school culture of collective responsibility has been linked to an intention to stay, whereas it has shown little effect on general education teachers (Jones et al., 2013). Special educators must interact with and collaborate with many stakeholders to meet student needs. So, it is not surprising that their overall support ratings from others were associated with intent to stay (Berry, 2012; Kaff, 2004).

Studies examining global ratings of school administrator support discovered that SETs were more likely to intend to stay when they rated administrator support highly (Albrecht et al., 2009; Conley & You, 2017). In a study of general and special educators, principal support was shown to impact job satisfaction and overall job commitment (Littrell et al., 1994). Participants in this study cited emotional support by a principal as the most important type of support. In addition, some studies examined specific aspects of administrative support, such as appreciation, trust, and growth opportunities, and found that these were rated significantly higher for those teachers who planned to stay longer in their positions (Cancio et al., 2018; Prather-Jones, 2011). These findings on administrative support can be beneficial as they can be easily incorporated into daily interactions with special educators.

Not only is administrative support necessary for SET retention, but collegial support and collaboration are essential contributors to teachers' intent to stay or leave (Billingsley, 2004;

DeMik, 2008; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Lopez-Estrada & Koyama, 2010). For example, strong relationships with colleagues have increased the likelihood that SETs will remain in their jobs (Jones et al., 2013). Daily access to educational technician support has been reported to increase the likelihood of SETs staying in their positions (Albrecht et al., 2009). Given these findings, it is reasonable to believe that a school district's ability to attract and retain education technicians may impact SET attrition.

A significant part of a SET's job is communicating and collaborating with parents and caregivers. This literature review uncovered no recent research on how parental support impacts attrition; however, it has been reported that parents can place unrealistic demands upon SETs (Kaff, 2004).

Pay

In the media, pay and compensation have widely been touted as reasons for teachers exiting the profession. As teacher pay is determined at the district level, teachers working in neighboring districts can bring home vastly different salaries (Dee & Wyckoff, 2013). Recently, differential pay for teaching in high-needs schools or shortage areas has effectively reduced attrition (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). For example, Clotfelter et al. (2008) reported that in North Carolina, $1800 salary bonuses for SETs working in high-poverty schools reduced attrition by 17%. Similarly, Feng and Sass (2017) found that a loan forgiveness program in Florida that paid up to $10,000 in student loan debt for novice special educators reduced attrition by more than 12%. The findings of both studies are supported by separate analyses of SASS data, in which special educators identified salary and benefits as a key critical reason for leaving (Berry et al., 2011; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Boe et al., 2008). Financial

incentives may be a cost-effective way to curb the high attrition costs (Milanowski & Odden, 2007).

Summary of the Literature

Special educators face a particularly challenging role, with demands that can be overwhelming and detrimental to their intent to stay in the profession. Research consistently underscores the role of working conditions in determining educators' intentions to leave, citing factors such as excessive workload, paperwork, caseloads, and compensation contributing to attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; DeMik, 2008; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Kaff, 2004). School culture, support, and collaboration are significant working conditions influencing SET attrition (Billingsley, 2004). Current research findings emphasize the importance of addressing working conditions to retain and support SETs effectively and mitigate attrition costs. Despite these longstanding research efforts, there remains a clear research-to-practice gap, given that SET attrition rates continue to be a glaring issue.

Within the above studies, two areas of significance should be addressed in future research: the use of qualitative methods and moving beyond 'intent-to-stay' research. Qualitative research has the potential to provide detailed support and a better understanding of previous findings. It can give us greater insight into the lives of special educators and the critical transition points that lead to attrition. Most researchers use quantitative methods to analyze survey data (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Rather than utilizing large-scale survey data, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions can contribute to a complete picture of the career decisions of special educators. For example, limited studies investigate how special education teachers decide to leave; we know that the decision is not made in a single moment but over time (Clandinin et al., 2015). It is crucial to explore the conditions in which teachers leave, and qualitative research

methods can supply these contextualized accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, it is essential to explore further why SETs choose to leave and how to prevent their decision to exit the profession. Many studies have researched intent to leave, but few have investigated special education teachers who have left the profession. The degree to which intent predicts actual attrition may vary over a school year (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In other words, a SET's expressed intention to quit their job may not always align with their real-life decision to leave. For example, SETs surveyed during the fall may have no intention of leaving, but if surveyed again in the spring, they could have a different answer.

Teacher attrition compromises the caliber of instruction and the quality of the education students receive (Boe et al., 1997; Nelson, 2001). This study is significant for several reasons. First, the participants are special educators who left the field, adding valuable information to the research base. Secondly, this study employed qualitative research methods to help acknowledge the role of working conditions in their exit from the field, providing contextualized accounts previously lacking in the literature. Findings are intended to provide detailed descriptions and insights for teachers, school administrators, and policymakers in special education.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological research study explored the lived experiences of SETs who left the profession, specifically focusing on how working conditions contributed to their decision to leave. A phenomenological design allowed me to focus on former SETs who experienced the shared phenomenon of leaving the field due to working conditions. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession?

2. How did the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession?

3. What improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of SETs?

In this chapter, I present the design and rationale of the phenomenological research methods, including a discussion of my role as the researcher. I review the participant recruitment procedures and data collection methods. In addition, I explain my data analysis process and conclude the chapter with a discussion of methodological limitations and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences of SETs who left the field due to working conditions. There is a significant need for qualitative research on SET retention and attrition, as historically, this research has been conducted using large-scale national survey data and questionnaires (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Qualitative research can examine a problem more closely by understanding and comprehending the complex components of a phenomenon. Encouraging teachers to share their

stories gives them a voice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unfortunately, in Billingsley and Bettini's most recent literature review (2019), only eight studies analyzed (out of thirty) used qualitative methods, and most reiterated what is already known about factors contributing to retention and attrition. The studies provided little to no new information that advanced the field.

Qualitative research can elaborate and contextualize the factors that contribute to SET attrition, and this study aims to do that by speaking directly to SETs who have recently left the field due to working conditions. Phenomenological research is specific to the experience being studied; thus, the results of this study cannot be generalized (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Vagle, 2018). Instead of aiming for generalizability, phenomenological research emphasizes transferability, meaning detailed descriptions of the study context and participants are provided so that readers can determine the extent to which the findings might apply to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition, given the continued issue of SET attrition, it was essential to explore why teachers choose to leave and how to prevent their decision to exit the profession. Most studies have researched intent to leave (Berry, 2012; DeMik, 2008; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Kaff, 2004), but few have investigated special education teachers who have actually left the profession (Brownell et al., 1997). Understanding the teacher's perspective is necessary (McLeskey et al., 2004), so learning from those who have left the field is crucial. This study addressed a gap in the literature by interviewing SETs who had recently exited the profession.

Qualitative research examines a problem through understanding and comprehending a phenomenon's intricate components and relationships. Phenomenological research describes the common meaning individuals who experience the same phenomenon share (Creswell & Poth,

2018). This study sought SETs who had experienced the shared phenomenon of leaving the field of special education due primarily to working conditions.

Creswell & Poth (2018) identified seven central features of phenomenological studies, which I have summarized below:

1. Highlighting a specific phenomenon for exploration, expressed as a single idea or concept,

2. An exploration of this phenomenon with a group of 3 to 15 individuals who have all experienced the central phenomenon,

3. A philosophical discussion around the basic ideas involved in conducting phenomenological research,

4. The researcher may have their own personal experiences with the phenomenon, so bracketing methods are used to identify any potential biases,

5. Interviewing individuals who have experienced the shared phenomenon is the primary method of data collection,

6. Data analysis seeks to summarize "what" the individuals have experienced and "how" they have experienced it,

7. Culminating the study by describing the "essence" of the experience for individuals, including the aforementioned "what" and "how."

Phenomenology involves viewing experiences through various lenses or perspectives to help understand the essence of a phenomenon. Two common approaches to phenomenology are hermeneutic (van Manen, 1990) and transcendental (Moustakas, 1994). This study used a transcendental approach, which focuses on bracketing out preconceptions and using participants' words to generate an essence of their lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). This approach fits the

purpose of the study as bracketing was crucial as I have had firsthand experience with the phenomenon. Additionally, preserving the participants' words and using verbatim quotes best encapsulates their lived experiences as former SETs.

A phenomenological research design was best suited for this study as I was interested in understanding the phenomenon of SET attrition more deeply and hoped to gain new perspectives using lived experiences that can impact future policies and procedures (Moustakas, 1994). A case study design was initially considered for this study but ultimately was deemed inappropriate as case studies are limited to a specific individual or group and utilize multiple pieces of data beyond interviews (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The research questions were also not focused on comparing subgroups of SETs who have left the field (i.e., general education transfers vs. leaving the teaching profession), which would have been more suited for a collective case study design.

Phenomenology allows the researcher to focus intensely on individuals' lived experiences, and the primary data collection method is in-depth interviews. In addition, as a former SET who recently left the profession, phenomenology explicitly encourages the researcher to discuss their personal experiences with the phenomenon. This level of researcher reflexivity made a phenomenological research design ideal for this dissertation study.

Role of the Researcher

Phenomenology was not only the most suitable method for this study, but it also encouraged an exploration of a phenomenon that held personal significance for the researcher. Having previously worked as a SET, I have experienced attrition firsthand. My departure from a middle school special education role in January 2020 marked the end of nearly a decade of teaching in middle and high school special education classrooms. The decision to leave the K-12

teaching profession entirely was challenging. By December 2019, I had reached a breaking point due to numerous challenging working conditions and submitted my formal resignation letter. I felt the burden of juggling multiple responsibilities in my SET position, often struggling to excel in any specific area due to the sheer number of tasks I had to manage. My Olympian efforts to wear the many "hats" of a special educator also became detrimental to my mental health. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how I used bracketing procedures to explicitly attempt to put aside my experiences and biases.

My lived experiences inspired me to advocate for reform in the special education teaching profession and, thus, led me to my dissertation topic. Given the lack of qualitative research on special education attrition, developing a study highlighting former SETs' voices was critical. As the research study's principal investigator, I recruited participants, conducted all interviews, and ensured the accuracy of the interview transcriptions. I coded and analyzed the data using a version of phenomenological data analysis. I then reported the findings of each research question categorized by theme, using verbatim excerpts from participant interviews.

Participants

The population for this study was former SETs who recently left the field. To be considered for the study, potential participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) voluntarily left the field of special education in the last five years due to working conditions, (b) transferred to a general education teaching position or left the field of education (not for retirement reasons) and (c) last taught special education in the State of Maine. Teachers who left their special education classroom to pursue an administrative role were not eligible for this study.

Participant Recruitment Procedures

This phenomenological study sought a minimum of three former SETs. Sample size in qualitative research generally suggests studying a small group of individuals because the researcher collects extensive data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to obtain potential participants. Purposeful sampling requires the researcher to select participants for the study that will directly inform an understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Previous research has indicated that about two-thirds of SETs who leave the field do so voluntarily (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). The research questions were best explored by applying purposeful sampling procedures to obtain former SETs who fit into this statistic.

I used purposeful sampling methods to recruit four study participants by sending a recruitment email (Appendix A) and recruitment announcement (Appendix B) to the State of Maine Special Education Directors. I obtained their email addresses by contacting the Maine Department of Education for an updated directory, as the directory listed on their website was from the 2021-2022 school year (Appendix C). In the email to the Directors, I introduced my research study and briefly described the criteria for participation. I requested they forward the recruitment announcement to anyone they knew who may fit the criteria. The announcement contained a link to a Qualtrics form (Appendix D) for former SETs to fill out to determine whether they met the criteria to be potentially interviewed for the research study.

The first four Qualtrics respondents who met the participation criteria were contacted via email to schedule their first interview (Appendix E) and were provided a copy of the study's Informed Consent form (Appendix F). Each of the four respondents agreed to be interviewed for

the study. Participant demographics and narrative profiles of each former SET are detailed in Chapter 4.

<div align="center">**<u>Research Methods</u>**</div>

The Three-Interview Series

This study utilized a three-interview series approach with each of the four participants to obtain a rich understanding of the lived experiences of special educators who left the field due to working conditions. A phenomenological approach to interviewing aims to explore the essence of the lived experiences of interviewees. Thus, it is not recommended to conduct a single interview; instead, conducting multiple interviews with each participant is a more favorable approach (Seidman, 2013).

In the three-interview approach, each interview serves a purpose by itself and within the series (Seidman, 2013). The first interview focused on each participant's teaching history. The second interview concentrated on their lived experiences regarding the working conditions of their former special education position(s). The final interview focused on reflecting on their special education career, specifically discussing supports they deemed essential to improve working conditions and increase SET retention. Each interview helped to provide the foundation for the next.

<u>Semi-Structured Interview Protocols</u>. Interviewing records experiences, self-understanding, and versions of the participant's world as the researcher strives to interpret the phenomena at a deeper level of analysis beyond ordinary depictions (Josselson, 2013). Fylan (2005) defines semi-structured interviews as conversations where the researcher has a general sense of what subjects will be explored. However, the dialogue can differ and may vary significantly among

interviewees. Semi-structured interviews provide an avenue to discuss sensitive topics to gain a genuine understanding of the research questions (Fylan, 2005).

I developed three semi-structured interview protocols related to the research questions (Appendix G). I also employed follow-up questioning to seek elaboration as needed (Seidman, 2013). During the interviews, I used a researcher's journal to memo my thoughts, note participants' nonverbal cues or unusual insights, and document the follow-up questions used.

Data Collection. In the data collection phase, individual interviews were carried out during February and March 2024 through the Zoom platform at a mutually agreed-upon time between each participant and me. Before commencing each interview, the consent process was reviewed with the participant. Each interview lasted 30-110 minutes. The three interviews for each participant were spaced out three to seven days from one another. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom. I reviewed all transcripts to ensure accuracy and to remove any identifiable information. My handwritten researcher notes were converted to electronic notes, and hard copies of the notes were destroyed within 48 hours of each interview.

Data Analysis

In phenomenological research, the essence of the lived experiences shared by participants is identified through rigorously structured analysis methods. I utilized a version of Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis method for this study. In this section, I detail my data analysis process.

Reviewed Transcripts

I began the data analysis process by listening to each interview's audio recordings to ensure the transcribed data's accuracy and completeness. I corrected any errors and removed any identifiable information from the transcripts. By listening to each interview and reviewing the

transcriptions, I began to identify emerging themes from the data. This was a time-intensive task as there were 12 interviews conducted for this study, totaling nearly 12 hours of audio.

Bracketing

As a researcher investigating special education teacher attrition, I acknowledged my departure from the special education field due to challenging working conditions. Despite my personal experiences, I actively engaged in bracketing, a process where I attempted to set aside my feelings and biases to maintain objectivity in my study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recognizing that my own experience was just one perspective among many, I ensured that my research remained focused on the diverse range of experiences of other special educators.

In the bracketing process, as a researcher, I regularly documented my thoughts, feelings, and reflections throughout the research journey. This reflective practice allowed me to consciously set aside my perspectives and commit to more objectively exploring the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I wanted to make sure I explicitly bracketed certain parts of my personal experiences as a special educator, such as feeling the burden of juggling the multiple roles of a SET and the impact that my last SET position had on my mental health.

For example, below is an excerpt from my researcher's journal. I wrote it after a particularly emotional interview with one of the study participants, who revealed the significant mental health impact that their SET job had on them.

> It was really difficult to hear what was said in the first interview. I was almost in tears at one point. It's important to feel compassion for their reflection. I related to their experiences so much. I think that frequently reminding myself to focus on their experiences and what they are sharing with me will help me set aside, as much as possible, my own experiences and biases.

By intentionally reflecting on my experiences throughout the research process, I actively worked to suspend my judgments. I bracketed so as not to assume anything about the research data. Phenomenological research methods seek to set aside biases, but it is impossible to eliminate them (Peoples, 2021).

First-Cycle Coding

I began by coding the first interviews of all participants before moving on to the second and third interviews. This allowed me to focus on identifying emerging themes for the research question, as each of the three interviews addressed a separate research question. During my initial coding round, I read through each interview transcript once and highlighted significant statements (meaningful quotes) related to the research questions. I coded these significant statements using in-vivo codes to capture the essence of the raw data (Saldana, 2021). In-vivo codes contribute to a deeper analysis as they preserve the participants' own words. It was important for me to utilize in-vivo coding as it supported my bracketing processes. I was focused on the participants' words so as not to have my own experiences influence the essence of the participants' transcriptions.

As I read each transcript, I employed a thought-by-thought unit analysis method, segmenting each participant's responses into distinct thoughts and then coding each thought segment. This approach was preferred over line-by-line analysis, as I wanted to keep a contextualized account of the participants' words intact. Assigning a code to each line of data would not have been an appropriate data analysis method for this study. The initial in-vivo codes helped to provide an understanding of how participants experienced the phenomenon.

Second-Cycle Coding

After the first round of coding, I went back through the data and used descriptive codes to

group the initial in-vivo codes into emerging themes. Table 3.1 shows how I grouped in vivo

codes into descriptive codes that identified the study's emerging themes. This process removed

repetition and grouped similar aspects of the participants' experiences.

Table 3.1 Coding categories and emerging themes

	In vivo codes	**Descriptive codes (Emerging Themes & Sub-themes)**
Research Question 1	IEP expectations, legal requirements, regulations, meeting the timelines, no prep time, work at home, more and more things, paperwork needs to be perfect, a lot of work, little benefit, meaningless	Paperwork *The volume of paperwork* *Paperwork is often meaningless* *Lack of time during contracted hours to complete paperwork*
	Interpersonal conflicts, pushback from Ed Techs, not trained, low pay, can't give the guidance they need, being held responsible, absence of staff, understaffed, supervision, calling out, more work than the kids	Educational Technicians *Navigating how to supervise and manage other adults* *Dealing with chronic absenteeism and turnover* *Training educational technicians*
	Demands of parents, immediacy, families became more challenging, not valued for expertise, dictating, potential litigation, please parents, keep parents happy	Parents *Pressure to appease parents* *Increased threat of litigation*
	Incredible oversight, new agendas, insulting, they don't have a solution, desensitized, helplessness, nit-picking, not strong, their missions diverged from each other, tug of war, management styles	Administrative Support *Not listening to and addressing SETs' concerns* *Overly critical administration* *Having "two bosses"*
	Mental health, a shift in society, intensity of cases, complexity of student needs, Safety Care, behavior issues, pure chaos in the building	Increase in student mental health needs

Table 3.1 Continued.

Research Question 2	Failure, really difficult, pulling from different directions, could be doing better, impossible to do better, best practices, demands, crying, felt so guilty, systematic issues, overwhelming, ineffective, huge caseload, volume of work, not sustainable, not a good teacher	The belief they couldn't do the job the way it needed to be done *Feelings of failure* *Unreasonable expectations of what a SET should do*
	Life-saving move, medical issues, anxiety, blood pressure, family was angry with me, weighed on me, exhausted, too much to bear	Impact on personal life and health
Research Question 3	Streamline, reorganize, restructure, make it relevant, IEP coordinator, better balance, two roles, additional training and support, caseloads too high, more resources	Make the job more sustainable *Separate teaching and case management role* *Address the caseload numbers and student intensity* *Have more support for the supervision of Educational Technicians*
	Hiring more teachers, not employing enough people, fair wages, trained	Adequate staffing
	Stipend, competitive pay, fair wages	Compensation
	Listen to teachers, an understanding of special education, emotional support, administrators who value special education	Administrative Support
	RTI, early intervention, no one to do interventions	Stronger MTSS framework
	Better training, PD opportunities	Worthwhile training opportunities

I reread the significant statements and in vivo codes for each descriptive code and determined additional patterns that resulted in sub-themes. By identifying sub-themes, I provided a richer, more accurate description of the overall research question themes. Table 3.2 provides an

example of how I analyzed significant statements, first using in vivo codes and then grouping

them into themes and sub-themes using descriptive codes.

Table 3.2 An example of coded significant statements

Significant Statements with in vivo codes underlined	Descriptive Codes (Emerging Themes & Sub-themes)
"A big difference over my career is the <u>immediacy</u> of [communication]." "There's just so much, I feel, expectation to just sort of push kids through and <u>keep parents happy</u>." "I think the partnership with families became much <u>more challenging</u>."	Parents ↓ *Pressure to appease parents*

To summarize the findings of each research question, I wrote textural and structural

descriptions of the data using verbatim examples from the interview data to describe the

emerging themes (Moustakas, 1994). A textural description captures "what" the study

participants experienced with the phenomenon. A structural description seeks to describe "how"

the experience happened.

The "Essence" of the Phenomenon

In my final data analysis stage, I developed a composite description that incorporated

textural and structural descriptions to describe the phenomenon of SETs leaving the field due to

working conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By weaving together participants' voices with my

interpretive insights, I sought to convey the essence of the phenomenon in a way that honored

the complexity and nuance of their experiences while also shedding light on broader systemic

issues within the field of special education. I conclude Chapter 4 with a comprehensive summary

of the common significance that study participants attached to their experiences of leaving the

special education profession.

Validation & Trustworthiness Strategies

Several validation strategies were employed to ensure the study was rigorous and credible, including researcher reflexivity, member checking, and negative case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers should position themselves in qualitative research by telling the reader their background and how it informs their interpretation of the information in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vagle, 2018). I utilized a researcher's journal to help bracket my own experiences from what was being studied and eliminate potential biases. In addition, I included information on my personal experiences with the phenomenon earlier in this chapter.

Member checking was used to solicit study participants' views of the credibility of the study findings and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I shared a copy of interview transcripts with individual participants to ensure their accuracy. They were given up to one week to reply with corrections or redactions. Three participants responded, with one requesting a few minor redactions of possibly identifiable information. Additionally, at the end of the data analysis stage, I shared a chart of the emerging themes with each participant; participants provided no further corrective feedback.

Negative case analysis, a validation measure used to search for and discuss data elements that contradict any emerging patterns and themes, was used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through qualitative coding and data categorization, I identified any negative cases better to understand their significance within the greater research questions.

This study's trustworthiness was maintained through a detailed audit trail and purposeful sampling. I kept a detailed record of participant recruitment and interview scheduling. In contrast to a random sampling strategy, this study employed purposeful sampling. To be considered for the study, potential participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) voluntarily left the field of

special education in the last five years due to working conditions, (b) transferred to a general education teaching position or left the field of education (not for retirement reasons) and (c) last taught special education in the State of Maine. By instituting strict criteria for participants, the study's research questions could be answered with greater validity.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were taken during this study. Upon IRB approval, study participants were recruited through purposeful sampling techniques, and informed consent forms were distributed to all participants. Each interview was audio recorded, and the participants were encouraged to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout all stages of data collection and analysis. All data was stored on a password-protected computer. I selected a pseudonym for each participant. This pseudonym was used to identify all data collected from each participant. Participants' real names were never used in data collection, analysis, or future publications arising from the research.

The interviews were audio recorded on Zoom and saved directly to my computer for transcription purposes. Audio recordings and transcripts were removed from Zoom within 72 hours after the interview. I reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and removed any identifiable data, such as the names of specific school districts or colleagues. Handwritten researcher notes were converted to electronic notes, and hard copies were destroyed within 48 hours of the interview.

Summary

This chapter described the research methodology used to examine the lived experiences of SETs who left the field due to working conditions. A rationale for the research design was

discussed, along with a description of the data collection and analysis procedures. Validation and

trustworthiness strategies, along with ethical considerations were presented. In the next chapter, I

discuss the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to understand the lived experiences of special education teachers who left the field and to discover how working conditions contributed to their decision to leave. A phenomenological design allowed me to focus on former special education teachers who experienced the shared phenomenon of leaving the field due to working conditions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession?

2. How did the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession?

3. What improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of SETs?

This chapter begins with a narrative description of the four participants. Next, the major findings of each research question are presented and organized using themes that emerged from participants' interview responses. The chapter concludes with a description of the "essence" of the lived experience of special educators who left the field due to working conditions, and lastly, a general summary of the chapter.

Participants

The four participants in this study were former Maine special education teachers who had left the field within the last five years due to working conditions. Upon receiving IRB approval from the University of Maine, I emailed all State of Maine Special Education Directors, asking them to share the study recruitment information with anyone they knew who might meet the criteria. Four eligible participants completed the recruitment questionnaire and were contacted

to schedule their first interview. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Table 4.1 below describes the participant demographics, which are followed by individual narrative participant profiles.

Table 4.1 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Special Education Teaching Experience	Last Special Education Teaching Role	Current Role
David	Male	26	High School Life Skills	General Education - High School ELA Interventionist
Emma	Female	14	High School Social-Emotional Behavior Classroom	General Education - High School Alternative Education
Lucy	Female	4	K-8 Resource Room	General Education - Middle School ELA Interventionist
Natalie	Female	28	High School IEP Coordinator	Left K-12 public education

David

David spent 26 years as a special education teacher, working at middle and high school levels. Education was not his first choice of career, though. After graduating from high school, he worked in business for a year and then went to college to pursue a medical degree. When he realized that being a doctor wasn't what he wanted to do, he got a "day job" as a substitute teacher and tutor and later fell into an educational technician position. At that point, he joked, "Can't be that hard to be a teacher. What do I have to do to get to that point?" He began taking night classes to fulfill the state's teaching certification requirements and started working at his

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first special education teaching job. Throughout his special education career, he taught in resource rooms and behavior and life skills classrooms, in addition to co-teaching alongside general education teachers. His decision to leave special education was truly a "life-saving" move, as the job demands became too overwhelming. Reflecting on his career in education, he said, "It wasn't something I ever saw myself doing and, now I look back, and I can't imagine there was anything that I should have been doing other than this."

Emma

Emma worked as a special education teacher for 14 years in self-contained behavior classrooms at the middle and high school levels. She didn't pursue an education degree in college. It wasn't until she started substitute teaching that she decided special education was the career for her. She took classes to become conditionally certified and added, "I think I probably have more life experience than your average special ed teacher," as she had special needs children at home. Emma described herself as a "really tough, but fair" special education teacher. She believed that "you cannot expect kids to give you much academically or emotionally if they don't think you care about them…and so, you have to really invest yourself in that." Emma made the difficult decision to leave special education due to a "confluence of factors" that made her feel like she was "truly getting burnt out." She became emotional when giving her departing words in the final interview, "I'm sorry. I still really miss it. I really miss it."

Lucy

Lucy spent four years as a K-8 special education teacher. Before becoming a teacher, she ran a daycare for several years. She felt called to special education after working with some children with Autism at her daycare, along with the challenges she witnessed in school for her child with ADHD. Lucy said, "…special education just kind of fascinated me, like I wanted to

know more about it, especially watching my son." She went on to receive her Master's in Special Education and moved to Maine, landing her first special education teaching job as a K-4 Resource Room teacher. During her first year in the position, she had 12 students and supervised one educational technician. She described it as "certainly manageable" and added, "I actually had planning time that year. I had lunch." As time went on, her job requirements drastically changed. In her final year in the position, she was responsible for 47 students in grades K-8 and supervised nine educational technicians. Lucy resigned from her SET job mid-year and moved into a literacy interventionist general education position at a different school. She hopes to return to special education one day: "Hopefully, I'll go back, just not under those conditions."

Natalie

Natalie worked in special education for 28 years, most of that time being at the high school level. She went to college to be a social studies teacher, but after getting a job as an educational technician at a special purpose private school, she "fell in love with these really tough kids." Natalie took classes to be conditionally certified and eventually got her Master's in Special Education. During her career, she worked in the resource room setting and as an IEP Coordinator. As both the volume of work and the mental health needs of students continued to increase, she found that the job was no longer sustainable, saying, "kind of all of the factors came together at once, and it was time to go." Reflecting on her career in special education, she fondly said, "I sort of fell onto this path, and I wouldn't change it for the world because I love the variability, trying to figure out how kids' brains work and what they need."

Findings

The following presentation of findings is organized by research question, with associated themes described in detail using the voices of participants. Table 4.2 below displays the study's emerging themes and sub-themes.

Table 4.2 Emerging themes by research question

Research Question	Themes/Sub-themes
#1: What factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession?	**Paperwork** *The volume of paperwork* *Paperwork is often meaningless.* *Lack of time during contracted hours to complete paperwork* **Educational Technician Supervision** *Navigating how to supervise and manage other adults* *Dealing with chronic absenteeism and turnover* *Training educational technicians* **Parents** *Pressure to appease parents* *Increased threat of litigation* **Administrative Support** *Not listening to and addressing SETs' concerns* *Overly critical administration* *Having "two bosses"* **Increase in student mental health needs**
#2: How did the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession?	**Belief that they couldn't do the job the way it needed to be done** *Feelings of failure* *Unreasonable expectations of what a SET should do* **Impact on personal life and health**
#3: What improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of SETs?	**Make the job more sustainable** *Separate teaching and case management roles* *Address the caseload numbers and student intensity* *Have more support for the supervision of Educational Technicians* **Adequate staffing** **Compensation** **Administrative support** **Stronger MTSS framework** **Worthwhile training opportunities**

Research Question 1

What factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession?

Each participant was asked to detail the specific factors that influenced their decision to leave the special education field. From the interview process, the following themes emerged (a) paperwork, (b) educational technician supervision, (c) parents, (d) administrative support, and (e) an increase in student mental health needs. Findings for each theme and subsequent sub-themes are included in the following section.

Paperwork. During interviews with each participant, it was apparent that the paperwork burden weighed heavily on their decision to leave their special education teaching jobs.

The volume of paperwork. The sheer amount of paperwork that needs to be completed as part of a SET's job duties makes the position difficult to manage. David talked at length about the evolution of special education paperwork. Reflecting on the beginning of his career, he said:

The paperwork was not as onerous as it became over the years. I mean, we would have IEPs that were four pages long at the Junior High School. There were five at the High School because there was a transition page…you'd have that five-part or four-part carbon copy paper…and you'd have to press down really hard so it would go through…you'd have an hour-long meeting, you'd pass around a piece of paper, everybody would have a page to do on the IEP and you would do it during the meeting and there was no written notice.

He also stated that as time went on, "the expectations of the IEP morphed a bit and they became longer, as you know, legal requirements inserted themselves into the process…you have to do more I dotting and t crossing." For David, being a life skills teacher also meant writing IEPs with, "many more goals and objectives."

In Emma's last special education position, she was required to complete various paperwork, including writing IEPs, behavior plans, incident reports, and progress monitoring student goals. She stated that "it was not uncommon for me to spend two to three hours once everybody left the building…to do the legal paperwork."

Lucy experienced similar time commitments when it came to the required paperwork. In her last year in the position, she had over 40 students on her caseload and was responsible for writing IEPs, written notices, advanced written notices, and progress reports. She recalled a conversation with the administration where she expressed her struggles with completing the necessary paperwork:

I was like, "I'm floundering. There's so much paperwork and I'm working till 10:00 at night. I'm getting up at 4:00 in the morning…I don't spend time with my family because I'm writing all of these written notices and advanced written notices."

Natalie's role, as an IEP coordinator, was to take on some of the paperwork that would have been traditionally done by the classroom SET. Some of what she was responsible for included sending out all advanced written notices for IEP meetings, writing classroom observations, reviewing IEP goals with case managers, and conducting academic testing for student IEP re-evaluations. She remarked that she "doesn't understand how a district can function without a person like me in the building…that takes a lot off the special educators back."

The volume of paperwork required for SETs is overwhelming. From writing IEPs to behavior plans and progress reports, David, Emma, Lucy, and Natalie were burdened by extensive documentation requirements. This paperwork consumed significant time outside of

their regular working hours and detracted from time spent with students and families, contributing to their exit from the profession.

Paperwork is often meaningless. All participants recognized that paperwork was an inevitable part of the job, and two questioned its real purpose. David stated:

I guess it's not the paperwork itself…I mean everyone has paperwork in a professional job. I think that in special ed when you have been doing it for a while it just feels like…some of it is so inane, so paperwork for the sake of paperwork.

Emma shared similar views on the meaningfulness of paperwork, specifically, she believes the purpose behind the IEP has changed in recent years:

In general, the field has changed more about responding to, like, potential litigation and just trying to keep up instead of really providing the interventions that the IEP becomes almost a meaningless legal document…the amount of paperwork that we are asked to do is incredible and I wouldn't have a problem with it if I saw a direct benefit to students and I find very little direct benefit to students.

She added that "we put [the IEP] together, what we think looks great, and it's not really what we're able to provide…and I think that certainly has changed from my earlier years."

These responses reveal that participants believed that spending time completing paperwork is deflating when there is no perceived value to it. Given that their special education jobs were multifaceted, completing meaningless paperwork further detracted from their goal of supporting students through high-quality teaching and intervention.

Lack of time during contracted hours to complete paperwork. Even though paperwork was a requirement of the job, study participants remarked that they often had no time during the school day to work on it.

When asked when he found time to work on his paperwork, David mentioned what was written in the teacher's contract: "Contractually, we have to have a duty-free period…you couldn't possibly do that in life skills." He mentioned that some of his Ed Techs would encourage him to leave the classroom to find a quiet place to do paperwork: "You need to go, we've got this."

As a self-contained behavior teacher, Emma joked that her lunch was at 2:30 and her prep period at 3:00. She said, "I don't know any self-contained teacher, whether you're behavior or functional life skills, who really gets your prep." She also echoed what was in her contract, "You know, it's put in your schedule but you really can't leave [your classroom] if your Ed Techs are out and there are no subs." With no time to complete paperwork during the day, Emma dedicated several hours after every school day to this task.

Lucy recognized that there wasn't a quick solution to the paperwork problem, but she also noted, "But there's no time…I mean, I didn't even get a lunch break. I ate with students…I had no planning time."

While Natalie's job as an IEP Coordinator was a more nontraditional special education job, she remarked that in one of her first SET jobs, the school provided "two prep periods…one prep period because they had to prep instruction just like everybody else and then they received another period because they had to do case management, which is all of that paperwork." She also added that, "prep time is sorely lacking in this country."

The participants' responses make clear the discrepancy between contractual obligations and reality. Most of the former SETs didn't have time during the day to complete their required paperwork, underscoring the imbalance inherent to their workload. They stayed busy managing

all other aspects of their jobs during the day, leaving paperwork to be completed outside their working hours.

Educational Technician Supervision. Aside from the teaching and case management responsibilities, SETs are oftentimes responsible for more people than just the students on their caseload. Managing other adults in their classrooms was a nuanced element that added to an already complex job.

Navigating how to supervise & manage other adults**.** When talking about past experiences with their educational technicians, most participants struggled to define their role as a supervisory one. David said:

It's hard because you're not the boss of them, yet you're responsible for what they do. So you know, they're your colleagues, yet…when they mess up…you know, that kind of reflects back on you, on maybe your lack of oversight or your lack of management. Whether it is stated or whether it is even true, it's how you would feel as a special ed teacher.

David also spoke about the interpersonal conflicts among Ed Techs that he often faced and that he felt ill-equipped to deal with those issues:

I don't think in my training I really ever had a people management class, so you kind of learn on the fly and maybe there were some techniques that I was lacking in, but I found working with adults more difficult than working with the children.

He added that it was a daily part of his job to navigate all of the interpersonal conflicts and that during his first year in the life skills position, "there were techs who hated each other that were in the same room…the staff were more work than the kids in that instance."

Emma experienced similar ambiguity in her role as supervisor:

You know, you're not being compensated or trained how to supervise people, but you're being held responsible when they're not doing their job right…you should be responsible for supervising and training the people under you, but you're not really in a supervisory capacity, you know, by the teacher contract and you're not given training about how you should supervise these people. They sort of just assume that you're going to have this natural talent for supervising…and you can't hold them accountable, right?

Lucy's biggest concern when it came to how to navigate supervising her educational technicians was that there was simply no time for it:

On a daily basis I could have been anywhere in the building in a Safety Care situation, or de-escalation situation with a student…during that time, you know from 8:00 to 3:00, I'm not available to any of my ed techs, because I'm all over the building. So a very deflated group of people, because I can't even give the guidance that they needed.

In Natalie's position as IEP coordinator, she was the direct supervisor for all the school's educational technicians. She stated, "It was tricky, right, because I was not an administrator, but I was given the supervisory responsibilities." Those responsibilities included writing their yearly evaluations, providing their new employee orientation, creating their schedules, and, if there were problems, meeting with them at the lower level to address those issues.

Supervision's impact on the participants' everyday work was paramount—notably, the unclear expectations associated with educational technician supervision. There appeared to be a fine line between colleague and supervisor that most study participants found difficult to navigate. David's response might best summarize the challenges related to this role: "I found working with adults more difficult than working with the children."

Dealing with chronic absenteeism and turnover. A recurring theme during our interviews was the impact of the constant turnover and absenteeism of educational technicians. In his last life skills position, David supervised four educational technicians and would rotate weekly which students they worked with. He said:

> I would try to set [the schedule] up a week ahead, so that staff kind of knew what was in store, so they would know which day to call out…which was something that you had to deal with almost on a daily basis, you know, staff absenteeism.

Emma added that:

> It could start as early as something like 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning with a text from an Ed Tech, "I'm going to be out today," and it was so common for that to happen, it was like a daily part of my existence…so then the planning in my mind on the way to work about what are these other commitments that I need to make today and how am I going to juggle around the, you know, the absence of staff.

> Emma also experienced a lot of turnover in her classroom, "I can't say that I ever ended up with the same team of Ed Techs in a year." That constant turnover made it "difficult to develop a classroom culture." In the later years of her teaching career, her school district no longer allowed SETs to help with the hiring process so, "you just got Ed Techs assigned to you" whether they were a good fit for your program or not.

> Lucy echoed similar challenges with managing the schedule for her educational technicians and having to make adjustments first thing in the morning:

> Lots of times it was scheduled changes for the day because somebody was out sick…that's a pretty typical day with, you know, when you have nine Ed techs to

supervise, there's gonna be at least one or two of them out. So that was rescheduling

schedules, that was my favorite game.

While Lucy also saw her fair share of turnover over the years, she did express pleasure in getting

to "hand pick [her educational technicians] over the years."

Navigating the challenges of frequent staff absenteeism and turnover took a toll on the

former SETs. It put added pressure on them to find coverage and revise schedules while also

doing their best to uphold the services required by their students' IEPs. The participants would

have preferred consistency and reliability from their staff from year to year.

Training Educational Technicians. Many of the study participants expressed the need for

educational technicians to be trained. However, the SETs often lacked the time and resources to

do it themselves, or staff were unwilling to conform to their directions.

David strived to ensure that his students were getting the specially designed instruction

written in their IEPs, but when he had to hand over the direct instruction reins to his educational

technicians, it didn't always go as planned, "you send them off with the ed techs and hope that

the ed techs carry through with what you want to happen." He said it became increasingly

difficult when:

> Parents would say, "Well, how come this didn't happen?" And you'd say, "Well yeah, I
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> wanted that to happen," but…that was tough. I think that was the point where I started
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> thinking this may not be a tenable job for the long term and this is after 25 years of
>
> teaching.

David further elaborated that in his last position as a life skills teacher, some of his educational

technicians "wanted to do things their own way" rather than follow his directives. This created

more work for him, and he stated, "In a lot of instances, you know, I didn't say it, but I would act like, 'well, you know, fine, I'll just do it myself because I know it will get done.'"

As a high school behavior teacher, Emma had to plan for a variety of grade levels and courses to help her students earn their credits. She talked about the complexities of having her educational technicians support academic instruction:

> I could be teaching as many as 13 different sections…right, I'm not actually teaching all of those, you physically can't. So sometimes, there also was the supervision and trying to explain like, "Okay, here is this reading assignment and this student needs to work on comprehension and here's how you're going to do that," and "Here are different interventions, this approach is not going to work for this other student." It's just, there's no magic pill, and I realized, in terms of supervision, trying to figure out how much any one ed tech could take on because they all have different skills…it's like having more students.

In the final year of her SET position, Lucy was no longer the person delivering academic instruction to her students. She discussed the extra work involved for her and her educational technicians:

> Now you're up to nine ed techs, also part of that reason because you're not teaching, so now you're also trying to put these people who aren't really trained into an academic position…trying to hope for the best…because you don't even have time to train them and do it the right way.

She also expressed frustration because of her literacy background: "I should have been the one working with them [the students]." She went on to say about her educational technicians, "I'm not saying that they couldn't do it; I just don't think they were trained for it."

The participants' responses highlight the need for educational technicians trained to support academic instruction. The former SETs felt conflicted when leaving their staff in charge of direct instruction as they often lacked the expertise or training. Because the study participants entered the special education field to teach and work directly with students, delegating teaching tasks left them feeling disconnected from their original intentions.

Parents. The involvement and demands of parents became an overwhelming contributing factor to some study participants' decision to leave the profession.

Pressure to appease parents. Participants noted that they felt increased pressure to succumb to parents' demands, even if they didn't believe it was in the student's best interests.

When asked about the most challenging parts of his last special education position, David said, "trying to reconcile the demands of parents with the constraints of the resources." He added that it became difficult to "try to make everybody happy and still provide the appropriate programming for the child."

David's time and frequency on parent communication significantly increased in his last life skills position. He stated, "Because those kids are very involved, rightfully, their parents are very involved, and some try to micromanage things…some parents would need a little more assurances and updates and communication than others." David added that "a big difference over my career is the immediacy of [communication]," pointing to parent emails and texts.

Emma also sensed a shift occurring in the landscape of education, which focused more and more on meeting parents' expectations:

There's just so much, I feel, expectation to just sort of push kids through and keep parents happy. So, parents who are advocating for more, their kids will get more. Doesn't mean their kid needs more, it means that administrations don't want to rock the boat with these

parents. So what that means is you, as a teacher, have to make these weird choices you don't like to make.

During one of her interviews, Lucy shared an example of her administrator putting her in a precarious situation with a parent:

I just felt like I just didn't feel a lot of support from her. We ran into some big situations where, with a parent, the parent has every right to, like, suggest things…she bowed down to this parent so much that he actually wrote the goals on my IEP that has my name signed on it. Goals that I would never write because they one, weren't attainable, and two, don't follow the logic, the order of learning how to read and encode.

She then added:

We want to please parents, but we also want to be honest with parents about their student's outcomes, and I felt like she just didn't want to argue with this parent, so she was going to do anything to get him off of her back. But then, it was on my back.

Natalie stated, "When I started in special ed, I loved helping parents…by the end, I did not like that part of my job anymore." She expressed similar frustrations with the changing dynamics of parent relationships:

Over the years, I think the partnership with families became much more challenging. I've had parents say to me, "You know, I pay your salary. You have to do what I say." Or parents coming in and dictating, "No, you will do this, this, and this" and you're kind of like, well, wait a minute, I'm the one with the degree…and so it really began to feel like I wasn't being valued for the expertise that I had. I think schools themselves are so overburdened that it's easier to just be like, yeah, we'll do whatever the parent wants versus sort of trying to hold a line.

The former SETs faced overwhelming pressure from parents, compelled to meet demands despite conflicting with students' best interests. These pressures contributed to their decision to leave the profession.

Increased threat of litigation. A few study participants cited that the emphasis on having perfect paperwork was due to the fear of litigation.

David expressed frustration with having less time to focus on lesson planning because "you're working on this paperwork to make sure that you know that it, when it ends up in court, that it's perfect and we're able to prevail because of the paperwork."

Emma echoed similar thoughts, adding:

If you have a parent of a special ed student who has influence or money, or there's any concern that this parent is going to get litigious, that student gets superior services over maybe a student with higher needs, who nobody is worried that the parent is going to do or say anything.

She stated, "That also contributes to burnout because you're spending a lot of effort on perhaps a student who needs a lot less support."

These shared experiences help to illustrate the influence that parents can have on special education services. Participants discussed the increased pressure placed upon SETs to write the IEP, a legally binding document, at a high level. Internal conflict arose when the former SETs were made to write IEPs that did not align with the level of services their students required.

Administrative Support. One theme to emerge from the interview process was an overall lack of administrative support. Each participant shared that unsupportive or overbearing administrators played a key role in their decision to leave the field of special education.

Not listening to and addressing SETs' concerns. Three of the study participants discussed at length their struggles with getting administrators to address their concerns regarding their working conditions. Emma began feeling so overwhelmed with the demands of her job that she requested a meeting with her special education director:

I wrote the special ed director an email saying that I was, you know, having a difficult time and explained how much I was working and said that my department chair suggested that I meet with her…I don't really remember all of the details of that conversation. I was really just trying to explain everything that I was trying to do and the needs of the students, and why it was taking me so much time every day. And she mostly just kept asking questions like, "What are you trying to do?" I started to feel defensive, there wasn't an offer…an acknowledgment, or an awareness, of like, "How long have you doing this?" or "How is this different than what you've experienced before?"

Emma went on to share more details about that meeting with her special education director:

She said to me, "You know when I was a special ed teacher, I would work late at night because I thought my students deserved everything I had to give them." I was just so shocked like she didn't really know my reputation. I also think my students deserve the best. I'm having a hard time giving that to them right now.

After this encounter with her special education director, Emma said, "I probably spent about three weeks trying not to cry on my way to work every day, which is a very unusual feature for me."

Lucy recalled her frustrating conversations with administrators, "There is no solution to the problem. As much as you can bring it to admin or the special education director or the

assistant director, they don't have a solution. And, so you're just expected to keep going." She added that:

> As the time went on, like, there's this desensitization…all of these upper people know all these struggles are going on. They don't know what to do about it, and then they just start closing the doors like they're not receptive to anything…you sound like you're a complainer, but you're struggling to get through the day.

Lucy repeatedly referenced the "hopelessness" that she felt from her administrators, "I just feel like, if the hopelessness is above you, too, the like, 'we can't do anything' and 'we can't fix it,' it just pervades everything."

When Natalie was asked to reflect on her decision to leave her job, she recalled conversations she had with administration regarding the sheer volume of work and the increase in the number of people she had to collaborate with on a daily basis as an IEP Coordinator:

> Each year I would say to my powers that be, "This is getting more and more. I can't do it all anymore." And I would be very honest, and they'd be like, "Yeah, we get it, we get it," and then nothing would come [of it]. One of the things I kept saying in my last two or three years to all my superiors is…you have increased all of these positions that I interact with so much and you haven't increased me.

She emphasized that a key contributor to her decision to leave was "the no increase in support for me, despite my many, many, many, many verbalizations that I needed more support."

The participants shared experiences of feeling ignored and unsupported, leading to overwhelming stress and a sense of hopelessness. Despite repeatedly voicing their need for more support, they found their concerns unaddressed, ultimately driving some to leave their positions.

Overly critical administration. Several study participants cited administrators' critical oversight and micromanagement as contributing to their decision to leave the field. David shared his thoughts on the micromanagement of his last special education director:

It was nice that [Written Notices] were taken off our plates. Of course, there were also expectations for the preciseness of the IEP were raised as a kind of tit-for-tat kind of thing….all of us would have to go through several editing sessions of our IEPs, where they would be returned to us from the director. She would look at every IEP, read every word, every period, every punctuation, and every space, every font deviation was picked up on and sent back for correction…we didn't have the trust that we were writing our IEPs correctly…it was very demoralizing for all of the staff.

Emma discussed similar experiences when it came to the special education directors' hyperfocus on paperwork: "Because I worked under four different ones I can think of, and they came in with a new agenda every time, and it's almost always paperwork, and nobody was ever doing their paperwork good enough." She went on to add:

Some directors were so particular, like, "There are two periods at the end of that sentence, go back and change your paperwork." And I just thought in the context of the job I'm trying to do, I really overlooked two periods? You're going to make me go do that because you want me to learn my lesson about not having two periods in the IEP because it is a legal document.

Lucy spent excessive time on paperwork for her growing caseload, and after the State audited her school district's special education paperwork, "it became a real nit-picking year. I mean nit-picking, like, it was bad." Lucy went on to say this about talking to her special education director after the audit:

I guess it was also like trying to explain to her how we just, like, we need help because we're so overloaded and we don't have enough people. And now we're working all these hours, and then, like her thing was, well, maybe when teacher's contracts come around you can ask them for a stipend, but you still need to get the work in.

Several participants mentioned administrators' micromanagement as a reason for leaving. David found IEP editing demoralizing, with every detail scrutinized. Emma and Lucy experienced similar issues with directors overly focused on paperwork, leading to frustration and stress. These accounts show how micromanagement and lack of support can push SETs to leave their jobs.

Having "two bosses". It is common in special education that SETs must answer to two different administrators: special education directors and building principals. Each of the study participants discussed the intricacies of working with multiple administrators. David described the building principals and special education directors that he'd worked with in this way:

They weren't at odds with each other, but certainly some of their missions diverged from each other…it feels like you have two bosses and sometimes…some of the direction that they wanted to go in differed a bit at times. Sometimes it almost felt like a bit of a tug of war.

Commenting on his current general education teaching job, David says, "It's nice to not have to answer to two bosses."

Emma shared a similar experience:

I have found by and large, the principal and the special ed director, and I'm talking across the board with different principals and different special ed directors, very rarely do they

get along. I don't know why, I didn't research this, but they really put their special ed

personnel in the crossfire. And it's really hard to sort of feel loyal.

Lucy discussed the lack of special education knowledge that her building principals had

and how that impacted her interactions with the special education director:

I would go to the director because she was the supervisor of special ed, she knows all the

laws and regulations, she knows the rules…if it was something that had to be dealt with

within the school that the director wouldn't have knowledge of, then yes, it was the

building admin that I would see. Often, I'm sure the director hated it, but because of that

lack of knowledge, we did often have to get a hold of her about something or question

her.

Having to collaborate with multiple administrators caused some issues for these former

SETs. They shared common challenges with directing their attention to many different

stakeholders.

<u>Increase in student mental health needs</u>. The increased mental health and behavioral needs of

students were one factor that contributed to three of the study participants leaving their special

education positions. As a behavior classroom SET at the high school level, Emma was no

stranger to various behavioral needs. When she was first hired, Emma was the only behavior

teacher at her school, but during the interview, she stated:

There are now three behavior classrooms at that public high school. That just boggles my

mind, because usually you're just taking that, you know, relatively small group of

students with really extreme needs, and that group is growing. So, I have a lot of

questions about why and are we really doing things that we're supposed to be doing.

When she was asked to talk about the "tipping point" or series of events that led to her decision to leave special education, one thing she noted was, "I can look back now and say, I think I was really and truly getting burned out, because the behaviors of the kids were getting to be more and more."

When Lucy was originally hired as a resource room teacher, she didn't expect that a few short years later she would be largely dealing with significant behaviors in the classroom:

> It was just a constant movement as compared to the first year I was there where I could be in the room with the Ed Tech teaching and actually sitting with students. It was this year, the typical day was on the run with behavior students and Safety Care calls and just "Can you come help me with this?"

She went on to add:

> So when I'm hired, the position is an academic resource teacher, that's not what I was doing in the end. In the end, I was more a behavior teacher. I'm decent with behaviors, but I'm also not a behavior teacher so in those situations I felt very lacking of more knowledge of how I could help.

Lucy elaborated on how the significant change in her job duties was a factor in her decision to resign from the position:

> That would impact my decision to leave because I could no longer do what I had done. My master's degree, in which was academic....the literacy portion of it is my big thing and I felt like it just started to feel like the stuff I was really good in I couldn't even do anymore.

> Natalie also discussed the challenges of increased student mental health needs:

It was my second to last year, I had to crawl under a locked bathroom door to get to a

student who was trying to harm themselves with a plastic knife. I'm, you know, crawling

on the bathroom floor and thinking, "I can't keep doing this." Everybody was doing

everything they could to address the student's mental health needs. It's not like anything

was going unaddressed. It's just that it's really hard and something shifted in society, and

that's way bigger than public schools can fix. But everybody still thinks public schools

can fix it.

When reflecting on the changing landscape of special education, she said:

The mental health needs became the biggest issue. You know, I was no longer talking

about how to teach reading or how to get kids to engage in the math program they need,

or I was no longer talking about instruction, which is my passion. I was talking about

"How do we get this kid out of bed to come to school?"...The type of work I was doing I

was not trained to do. I was not a special ed social worker. Could I do it? Yeah, I could it,

but I didn't love it…I want to talk about academics and that just became a smaller and

smaller part of what special educators need to do, you know?

Some of the participants shared that the escalating demands of managing student mental

health and behavior are contributing to challenging working conditions, pointing to a broader

systemic issue that needs addressing.

Summary of Research Question 1. Based on the study participants' personal experiences, the

findings of Research Question 1 revealed that many factors contributed to SETs leaving the

profession. Spending time completing excessive amounts of paperwork was deflating to

participants, as it detracted from their primary goal of supporting students through quality

teaching and intervention. There was a discrepancy between contractual obligations and reality,

with most of the former SETs unable to complete required paperwork during the day, leading to an imbalance in their workload and often pushing paperwork to after-hours. Educational technician supervision was an element that participants found overwhelming. The need for educational technicians trained to support academic instruction was also highlighted, as the former SETs felt conflicted leaving untrained staff in charge of direct instruction, causing a disconnection from their original teaching intentions. Additionally, parental influence added pressure on participants to write IEPs that may not align with students' actual needs, causing internal conflict. Unsupportive administrators and having to collaborate with multiple administrators posed challenges. The escalating demands of managing student mental health and behavior further contributed to the challenging working conditions of the former SETs.

Research Question 2

How did the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession?

As revealed in the findings of research question one, many working conditions contributed to participants leaving the field of special education, including excessive paperwork, educational technician supervision, and unsupportive administration. The second research question sought to uncover how these working conditions impacted their ultimate decision to leave their special education positions. The two major themes that emerged from Research Question 2 were (a) the belief that they couldn't do the job the way it needed to be done and (b) the impact on their personal life and health.

<u>Belief that they couldn't do the job the way it needed to be done</u>. Participants experienced internal conflict and guilt about not being able to meet the expectations of their SET positions, even when they realized it was truly an impossible task.

Feelings of failure. Most study participants talked about profound feelings of failure during their time as special education teachers. When David was asked how his former students might describe him, he used words such as "caring" and "kind" but hesitated when he started to say "responsible.":

So there were times where I did not meet my timelines. Not that I was alone in that failure, but it's not a good feeling. It's not good because you feel like you're not doing your job or something must be wrong. And even though, I mean logically, I've got colleagues who are further behind than I am, but still. It's just, that aspect of it, I mean, I felt like I was not a good teacher.

He went on to say about the culmination of working conditions, including trying to meet legal paperwork deadlines:

I internalized that failure a little more than I should. Towards the end, it became too much to bear. Feeling like I wasn't doing the job that I was supposed to be doing or not doing good enough in all aspects of the job and thinking that each one was just as important as the other.

Emma experienced feelings of failure due, in part, to the "shaming response" she felt from her special education director:

I had very tearful mornings driving in going, like, this job is so hard and I have somebody who believes I'm incompetent at what I do and that I don't care about my students, for whatever reason, that is what this person thinks of me or wants me to think they think of me. That was really very hard.

When Lucy decided to resign from her position, she said, "I left and I feel guilty. I feel bad." She added, "It's like you can't complete the job the way it's supposed to be done. That's a

huge thing. And I just felt like I was so ineffective." When asked if she had any regrets about her decision to leave special education for her current literacy interventionist job, she stated:

> I regret, like, I specifically went to school for special education and so, I like being in MTSS. I like that I'm still part of the process, but sometimes I feel like, did I fail to be a good special education teacher?

The profound feelings of failure that the study participants experienced impacted their decision to leave the profession. David's missed deadlines and internalized guilt reflect the immense pressure on special educators today. Emma's sense of incompetence, worsened by her director's negative feedback, highlights the emotional toll. Lucy's guilt and sense of ineffectiveness upon resigning illustrate the lasting impact of these unattainable expectations. These shared experiences suggest that working conditions within the special education system may be setting up SETs for significant emotional distress.

Unreasonable expectations of what a SET should do. Rooted in their belief that they could not do the job the way it needed to be done was the realization that the job expectations of a SET were highly unreasonable. When describing the most challenging aspects of his special education position, David said:

> Trying to reconcile the demands of the parents with the constraints of the resources and the pushback from ed techs and trying to make everyone happy…trying to reconcile all of those divergent agendas, because that, as a special ed teacher, that's kind of your job to make that all work together somehow and that's really difficult sometimes.

During her interviews, Emma emphasized the unrealistic expectations placed upon special education teachers. When asked which working conditions had the most significant

impact on her decision to leave she said, "I think the biggest factor really is the unreasonable expectations of what a special educator should be able to provide." She added that:

> People employed in special education really want to do good work for the kids, they really are committed to that idea…it continues to be apparent to me that it's very hard for those dedicated people to do the good things they want to do for kids because what is asked of you to do every day is beyond sort of humanly possible, right, to sustain the level of everything you're supposed to do.

As a parting thought during her second interview, Emma stated:

> If you want to do quality work then you gotta just start accepting that you have to do something where the results are, you know, not indicative of what you're capable of; they're indicative of the resources that you have available to you.

> When asked to summarize the daily expectations of her last special education teaching job, Lucy stated:

> So my day-to-day expectations were to supervise all nine ed techs and keep up with all nine behavior students. I had to make sure that my paperwork was done in a timely manner and collaborate with teachers that needed to talk….any fires that came up, any IEP meetings that were scheduled. I had to report out on Written Notices, Advanced Written Notices, setting up meetings. We didn't have a secretary…getting the referrals in and then handling all the paperwork from that point that the director handed over to me. It was a lot. All teachers have a lot they have to do, you know, you have to worry about planning. That was the other thing, planning for my students.

After listing her daily responsibilities, Lucy said, "It was so overwhelming you couldn't even keep track of it. I couldn't even, writing things down, even setting alarms, it was just a lot to keep track of." She added that as the expectations of the job became too much:

> Not being able to perform to the best that I could was a big deal to me. I'm kind of a perfectionist. I want to make sure that every kid is getting exactly what they need…it's a big hit to not be able to provide that.

> The participants shared that despite their tremendous efforts, they ultimately recognized that what they were expected to do each day was nearly impossible. This weighed heavily on their minds, mainly because, at the forefront of it all, they always wanted to do right by their students. The unrealistic expectations and competing work demands resulted in working conditions that were no longer sustainable for the participants, impacting their decision to leave the field.

Impact on personal life and health. The culmination of various working conditions significantly impacted each former special educator's personal life and health. David openly shared that he had to take a nearly two-month leave of absence during his last special education position due to an "existential crisis" that left him hospitalized:

> It had gotten to the point where I think I placed a little too much importance on paperwork and was not getting it done because of all the other things I had to do. I just started getting behind and it just spiraled and I had an existential crisis, hospitalized…it was precipitated, certainly, by the stressors of the job.

He added that his hospitalization, "was the catalyst that helped me realize that that was an unsustainable job." Although he returned to his classroom after the extended absence, the following year, when his current position, general education literacy interventionist, opened at

his school, he remarked, "They gave me the chance to get into this position, which was, and not to exaggerate, it's really not an exaggeration, that it was life-saving for me."

Emma described special educators' teaching versus nonteaching responsibilities as "hugely overwhelming; they're like a separate job in themselves." Due to the nature of the job, Emma said, "So much of your mind is always on work in a very unhealthy way."

Lucy's special education job began causing her significant health issues, "My blood pressure was up, like, medical things were happening…I was starting to have really bad anxiety attacks." She added, "Lots of health issues had started to creep up, and then family issues, too. My family was not happy with me, they know how much I love special education, but they were like, this is all-consuming." When describing the amount of work that she was doing while at home, Lucy said:

> I would be getting up at 4:00, even on Saturdays and Sundays, and working until like 10:00 in the morning, then I could take a break. I had to meet those [paperwork] deadlines, and I was doing it. I would go back on my computer while my husband and I watch TV at night together. So here I am, not even really paying attention, I'm doing more work and so that's what it became.

While contemplating her decision to resign from her position, Lucy added:

> I just needed to have a work-life balance…like, my family would understand a little bit of paperwork at home…But, I have a [daughter], she's turning 14 next week, but like she's put up with so many years of me picking paperwork over her, and I just don't think, that's not the way I wanna go, and the kids at school are important, but she's important, too.

Natalie also reflected on how draining the special education profession is:

I don't think I could have stayed. I know I wouldn't, because I was burnt out. It was

affecting my home life. I could come home and all I could do was sit on the couch. I was

exhausted mentally. I was exhausted emotionally. I couldn't cook dinner. I couldn't even

think about doing a chore. And I was leaving the house at 6:30 am…my day started at

7:00 am. I was leaving at 4:30 or 5:00 at night because I was on leadership teams and in

all the meetings. It was like, no, this just is not sustainable.

These findings illustrate the significant impact that the former SETs' working conditions

had on their personal lives and health. Their jobs became all-consuming, with demands that

extended far beyond school hours, affecting their overall well-being.

<u>Summary of Research Question 2.</u> The experiences of these former SETs revealed that despite

their best efforts, they found the daily expectations of their jobs nearly impossible to meet. Their

desire to do right by their students made this realization particularly difficult. The unsustainable

working conditions, driven by unrealistic expectations and competing demands, led to their

decision to leave the field. These conditions also significantly impacted their personal lives and

health.

Research Question 3

What improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of SETs?

Participants were asked to discuss improvements to their SET working conditions that

would have led them to decide to stay in special education. The themes that arose from the

interviews were (a) making the job of SET more sustainable, (b) providing adequate staffing, (c)

compensation, (d) administrative support, (e) having a stronger MTSS framework, and (f)

providing worthwhile training opportunities.

Make the job more sustainable. Participants cited various working conditions, such as paperwork, unsupportive administration, and educational technician supervision, as contributing to the overwhelming responsibilities of being a special education teacher. The job design of special educators is filled with fragmented responsibilities, including teaching, case management, and supervision duties. When asked about the improvements that could have been made to their previous positions, they discussed various ways that the job could be made more sustainable.

Separate teaching and case management roles. Some participants stated that the job of a SET should be two separate jobs: teacher and case manager. David said, "It always seems like there's this constant battle between doing your paperwork or servicing students, and there's just not enough time or energy to do both." His ideas on addressing the paperwork burden were, "If there were just some way to streamline it and make it relevant or maybe even make that somebody's specific job to come in and do that."

Emma talked about the two distinct roles that SETs are expected to assume and stated, "...those two roles, I think, could be separated with some thoughtfulness." She added:

> We really need to look at all of the different roles that we're asking a special ed teacher typically to provide, and I think the number one that comes to mind is, be a teacher and be a case manager and I'm not sure that you should be doing both, because it really is two jobs. And when I say I'm not sure it's because sometimes, being a case manager really allowed me to get to know kids, right? I'm really looking into their cumulative file, but I could do that as a teacher, too, and not be responsible for all of those legal deadlines, right? Like, I used to say, everybody has gone home, I eat my lunch, and then I do all the legal paperwork first. What if somebody else was doing that? That could have made a

huge difference, although it would be hard for me to sort of let go, to be honest, once you're trained that way, but I do think they're very distinct roles.

In her last role as an IEP Coordinator, Natalie took on much of the paperwork responsibility in order to support the other SETs in her building. She said:

I don't understand how a district can function without a person like me in the building. That takes a lot off the special educator's back so that they can teach and do their thing with the kids because that's what they are there for.

But, she added that the IEP Coordinator role also needed to be looked at because "that's a big job, too."

These findings indicate that had their roles been redesigned, the participants would have been more likely to stay in the special education field. The participants suggest that schools consider delineating between teaching and case manager roles in an effort to support more sustainable working conditions.

Address caseload numbers and student intensity. A few participants discussed the need for change around SET caseload numbers. Emma only spent one year in her special education job, during which her caseload was not maxed out. She said, "I think in terms of case management, the legal numbers in Maine are way too high for resource room case managers and probably too high in self-contained classrooms."

Lucy echoed, "...a State maximum of 35 is too much. I think that we need to look at those policies in the State and say after a certain point, you can't care for that many children." She added, "I would say, after 20, you're starting to get to the point where you're way overloaded."

Natalie suggested that administrators "don't just look at the numbers" but instead consider the "intensity level" of students when making decisions about SET caseload numbers.

The former SETs said that there is a need to reassess SET caseload policies, as current limits are too high and unmanageable. Participants argued that caseloads exceeding certain thresholds compromise the education they can provide special education students. They also shared that special education administrators consider the number and intensity of students' needs when making caseload decisions.

<u>Have more support for the supervision of Educational Technicians</u>. Supervising adults who worked in their classrooms was an area of the job that caused additional work and stress for the former SETs. David said that when he had one or two educational technicians working in his classroom, "...we meshed and we were able to work so well together as a team. When you get more people, there's more of those interpersonal dynamics." He suggested that schools could provide, "...training around how to have employees because it's different than managing the kids."

Emma added, "...if you're going to put somebody in that [supervisor] role, you really need to provide them some additional training and support around that."

The participants reflected on the support they needed to stay in the special education field. More guidance around educational technician supervision was essential to them, as they felt it could have made the job more sustainable.

Adequate staffing. Several participants discussed the challenges of not having an adequate number of special education staff, including both SETs and educational technicians. Emma put it simply when she said, "We are not employing enough people across the board to provide the services that we say we're going to provide in those IEPs in a realistic fashion." She also discussed the importance of SETs being able to have input in the educational technician hiring process, which is something one of her department chairs did early on for her in Emma's career:

She was able to bring teachers together and provided sort of an overview and said, "I

think these ed techs would work great for you, what do you think?" What she really

allowed us to do was build a team which I think is so important. And so you, as a teacher,

got some input into who is going to be on your team, knowing the types of students you

had and knowing the types of skills that person brought and that makes such a difference.

Like I said, in my last several years of my job I never had the same group of ed techs. I

would be lucky if I had one return.

Lucy stressed the importance of "definitely having trained ed techs." In addition, she

shared that the struggle to retain quality educational technicians often had to do with their pay.

She said, "I definitely think paying a fair wage to ed techs, like, we are losing those ed techs

because we don't pay. I mean, McDonalds pays them more than what we pay them."

Part of being adequately staffed is advertising for open positions as soon as possible.

Lucy was made to manage both her caseload and the caseload of a vacant special education

position that was never filled. She remarked, "I think timing of advertising, you can't wait if

somebody leaves a position, like advertising as soon as possible is, I think, key because you're

going to compete for all those special education teachers." She added, "...some of the things that

I think would have, could have swayed me [to stay] was definitely to have a behavior teacher and

another middle-level teacher."

According to the participants, school districts may have prevented them from leaving

their jobs had they been better equipped to retain and attract quality educational technicians and

fill their vacant SET positions.

Compensation. Having, at minimum, a stipend for the paperwork related to case management

duties was something suggested by most participants. David suggested, "You keep track of what

you put in for hours outside of school on your paperwork, and you get paid for it...So I think certainly a paid stipend would be a major thing." He also added, "I mean, we have stipends for curriculum work, we have stipends for coaching or for any extracurricular kind of stuff. It's extracurricular; in a lot of cases, that's what paperwork is."

Emma had a different opinion when it came to offering SETs a stipend:

I'm going to tell you one of the things that I don't think will work, that people are talking a lot about, and that is to pay special education teachers more money or to give them a stipend. Earlier in my career I thought, yes, of course. I do not believe that at all now, because I think what we should be doing is saying, yes, you're a teacher like everybody else and you should have a normal workload. So, I don't think this idea of trying to pay people more, because you're validating that they've got this crazy workload, is a good idea.

However, when she later discussed ways to address educational technician supervision, Emma said, "I do think you should get a stipend if you are [supervising] two or more people."

Lucy stated, "…possibly adding a stipend or some other way to recognize that special education teachers are doing more." She also shared similar thoughts as Emma:

But, that time, that paperwork, having some kind of pay that can match that. That's not the end all be all because again, I told you, even if I got paid more, I don't want to be up until 10:00 at night.

Although Natalie never felt underpaid in her last position, she did say, "There's got to be some sort of way to quantify the time that we all put in outside of our working days. We're not paid for our hours outside." Another suggestion she had:

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...build in more prep time, which means more teachers, which means less of a teaching

load for the teachers that are there…so in a way, you are spending more money. You're

not raising salaries, but you're kind of raising salaries because you're giving less work

and hiring more teachers.

These responses suggest that while some participants supported stipends for the extensive

paperwork and supervisory duties, others, like Emma, believed reducing the workload would be

a better solution. All participants emphasized the need for recognition and compensation for

SETs' additional responsibilities, whether through stipends, reduced workloads, or more prep

time.

<u>Administrative Support</u>. Participants stressed the importance of having administrators who

both supported them and had a general understanding of just how difficult the job of SET could

be.

Lucy said, "Having that admin support is a big deal and there were lots of times where I

felt just, kind of, unsupported." She recalled incidents where she was left alone to handle student

safety issues:

...our own admin in the building stopped answering our Safety Care calls. I would be like,

"I need help down the hallway with this student" and they wouldn't show up…it was like

the non-reaction from admin, because I think they feel so hopeless, but still. We work for

this school, we work for you.

She specifically noted the need for building administrators to have some special education

knowledge:

Our admin knew nothing about special education, the very, very basics. It is very hard to

go to a meeting where the director is not going to be there, because she doesn't need to be

there, and then having admin that don't know how to keep a meeting going and so then

not only are you in charge of making sure that you're keeping good notes, because you

have to write the written notice, but also facilitating and keeping it going.

She also discussed how special education directors could be more supportive in onboarding their

staff:

The director and assistant director making an effort to train people not willy-nilly and

how they feel at the time, but in a clear, concise way and "this is how we're going to do it

here" with no confusion. With them on the same page, too.

Natalie shared how building administrators can help to retain their SETs, "I guess I

would encourage them to really listen to their teachers. I've seen a lot of principals who don't

have a great understanding of special education and what it really is." She also noted the need for

administrative support with disgruntled parents, recollecting an administrator telling her, "...but

they're the customer, and we have to please them." She added:

We got the message that we had to please everybody, the parents, the kids, and we've got

to go back to our missions and what we're really there for, and the fact that we are the

experts and we can make calls.

Participants emphasized the critical role of supportive administrators who understand the

challenges of the SET role. It was also important to them that building administrators, such as

school principals, have a better understanding of special education. They would have considered

staying in their SET positions if given that level of support and understanding.

<u>Stronger MTSS Framework</u>. To address the growing number of special education students,

some of the participants discussed the need to strengthen multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)

in their schools. Emma explained how she would like to see the caseload burden addressed:

I would say that we need to put a lot more resources as early on as possible because it

seems as if we're growing in special ed…the thing is that over time, you should need less

special ed intervention for most students. Some students are always going to need a very

high level of support, given their needs…but, I think sometimes problems get passed

along because you don't have enough people to do what is needed to be done early on.

She added, "I think that all RTI needs to be strengthened."

Lucy expressed frustration with the lack of general education-tiered interventions in her

last position because she felt it led to an over-identification of special education students. She

said:

I'm on the MTSS team. We have nobody to do interventions. Kids are getting pushed to

special ed, because they're not getting the proper Tier 2 and 3 interventions to even see if

this is a different issue than a disability.

Participants shared that having a more robust MTSS framework could reduce the number

of students requiring special education services, which would have aided in keeping them in the

profession.

Worthwhile Training Opportunities. One theme that emerged when discussing ways to

increase retention efforts was the need for meaningful training and professional development

opportunities for special educators. David said,

Another area where a change might help to retain special educators is to ensure that they

do not always spend professional development time sequestered at the central office with

all of the other special educators in the district. This had often been the case in the past,

and I would miss out on building-level trainings, as well as opportunities to spend time

with my colleagues, as we instead reviewed yet another way to develop and write

"present levels of performance."

Emma shared similar thoughts, "I think that the in-district professional development needs to be less about how to write an IEP." She added,"...if you've been doing it for a long time and you don't know how to write, those things can be tackled individually rather than with everyone." Another suggestion Emma had:

> I think one thing that's lacking is really helping people find, knowing your staff well enough to know what type of other PD they could do…I think it would be really helpful within the special ed department, either district-wide or you're building. Somebody is really saying, "You're really struggling with this" or "You want to know more about this? I saw this conference and really want to send you."

Lucy discussed that opportunities for her own professional development were limited as a special educator. She shared an example of a reading program that she started using with students:

> That's a training that I could have used but never had the time to ask for it because I didn't know about it. And not once was it mentioned when I had a student with comprehension issues that "Hey, there's this program out there and maybe you would want training?"

The participants wanted more diversity in their professional development offerings. They were frustrated by repetitive training on IEP paperwork and wanted opportunities to learn more about different academic programming that could directly benefit their teaching practice.

Summary of Research Question 3. The findings of Research Question 3 indicated that redesigning SET roles to separate teaching and case management could improve retention in the

special education field. Participants suggested reassessing caseload policies, emphasizing the need to consider the number and intensity of students' needs. They highlighted the impact of SET and support staff shortages, suggesting better retention and recruitment of educational technicians could have prevented their departure. Recognition and compensation for additional responsibilities, either through stipends or reduced workloads, were also emphasized. The importance of supportive administrators and diverse professional development opportunities were key factors that could have influenced the participants' decisions to stay in the field.

The Essence of the Experience

Phenomenological research seeks to understand and describe the essence of a shared phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study sought to explore the phenomenon of SETs leaving the field due to working conditions through the analysis of in-depth interviews with four former SETs. Using themes that emerged from this research data, the following paragraph captures the essence of their lived experiences with the shared phenomenon.

The essence of the experience of SET attrition due to working conditions reflects special educators' struggle to serve their students' needs in the face of overwhelming challenges inherent to the profession. SETs grapple with a substantial volume of paperwork, not all of it meaningful, and are given inadequate time to complete it within contracted hours. Collaborating with various stakeholders is an immense undertaking in their position. SETs navigate the complexities of educational technician supervision amid chronic absenteeism and turnover, with little support for their efforts. They face pressure to appease parents and to address the growing mental health needs of students. All of this is exacerbated by inadequate administrative support, leaving SETs' concerns unheard and unaddressed. Despite their steadfast commitment to the profession, SETs

feel a strong sense of failure and frustration, with unsustainable working conditions impacting

their personal lives and health, ultimately leading them to leave the field.

<u>Summary</u>

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to understand the

lived experiences of special education teachers who left the field and to discover how working

conditions contributed to their decision to leave. In this chapter, I provided findings based on

data analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the participants. The chapter began with an

overview of the purposeful sampling methods used to secure the study participants and narrative

descriptions of each of the four participants. I then presented the findings of each research

question as themes and subthemes that emerged through the participants' voices as they

described their lived experiences as special education teachers. I concluded the chapter with a

synthesis of the research question's themes to describe the "essence of the experience."

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

<u>Overview</u>

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of former SETs who left the field due to working conditions. In Chapter 4, the study's results were presented using themes that emerged from each of the three research questions. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings within the context of the current literature and implications for future policy and practice. I conclude by discussing the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

<u>Summary of Findings</u>

This study was guided by three research questions intended to explore the lived experiences of special educators who left the profession due to working conditions. Through a series of three semi-structured interviews, each participant shared their authentic experiences as a former SET. This allowed me to gain a deep understanding of how working conditions impacted their decision to leave the field.

The first research question asked what factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession. Findings from the interview data showed that participants experienced many factors contributing to their decision to leave the field. These factors included paperwork, supervision of educational technicians, parents, lack of administrative support, and increased student mental health needs.

The second research question asked how the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession. Participants indicated that a combination of working conditions resulted in them not feeling that they could do their jobs to a level they knew was most appropriate and beneficial to students. In addition, the compounding of working conditions impacted their personal life and health, contributing to their decision to leave the field.

The third research question focused on which improvements to working conditions could have supported their retention in their special education positions. Participants reported that making the job more sustainable, having adequate staffing, more administrative support, a stronger MTSS framework, and increased training opportunities could have led them to stay in the special education field. Participants had varying views on the impact that compensation has on retention.

<u>Interpretation of Findings within the Context of Current Research Literature</u>

This study's findings related to working conditions that impact SET attrition and retention were consistent with those in the literature review. Research indicates that factors such as financial compensation (Miller et al., 1999), lack of support from administrators and colleagues (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten et al., 2001), poor school climate (Billingsley et al., 2004; Miller et al., 1999), caseload size (Billingsley, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018), and role conflict and ambiguity (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001; Morvant et al., 1995; Singh & Billingsley, 1996) contribute to special education teacher (SET) attrition. This study's findings help provide a rich, contextualized account of working conditions that contributed to attrition and improvements to these working conditions necessary to retain SETs. Qualitative findings are not meant to be generalizable, but rather, the study's readers determine the extent to which the findings might apply to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following section discusses how the current literature connects to the themes that emerged from each research question.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What factors contributed to SETs leaving the profession? Based on the research data collected, the following themes emerged: (a) paperwork, (b) educational

technician supervision, (c) parents, (d) administrative support, and (e) an increase in student mental health needs.

Paperwork. The current literature suggests that paperwork is a crucial aspect of a SET's role, but these non-teaching responsibilities can detract from student instruction and may contribute to teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004). Various studies highlight special educators' views on paperwork, revealing that it is often overwhelming, contributes to a heavy workload, and interferes with teaching time (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Kaff, 2004).

During data analysis, study participants cited paperwork contributing to their decision to leave their SET positions. Participants noted the volume of paperwork and lack of time to complete it during contracted hours. Lucy shared that she ate lunch with her students daily and didn't have a prep period, while David and Emma emphasized that "self-contained teachers don't really get their prep." Participants shared that they felt the required paperwork was often not meaningful, or as David put it, "paperwork for the sake of paperwork." By collecting qualitative interview data, participants could expound upon the literature and provide additional context to the paperwork burden.

Administrative Support. Research has consistently shown that administrative support is a strong factor in teacher retention, as supportive administrators increase teachers' likelihood of staying in the profession (Littrell et al., 1994). Developing positive working relationships between SETs and their administrators is critical for retention (Billingsley, 1995). Administrators who communicate effectively and provide regular feedback are perceived as supportive and help alleviate the stress associated with the increased workload of SETs (Bettini et al., 2017).

During interviews, study participants expressed frustration that the lack of administrative support often made their SET jobs more challenging. They reported that administrators ignored

their requests for help or were desensitized, given their own "hopelessness" regarding the special education system. Administrators were more critical of non-teaching tasks like paperwork, leaving some of the former SETs feeling "demoralized" or made to "learn their lesson" when they didn't complete their paperwork up to the standards. Participants also discussed the challenges posed by the competing demands of building administrators and district special education directors, sometimes not knowing who to be "loyal" to.

Supervision of Educational Technicians. Studies have shown that a SET's intent to stay in their position is related to overall support ratings from other professionals, such as educational technicians (Berry, 2012; Kaff, 2004). However, little has been studied regarding how educational technician support is related to SET attrition.

Participants in this study shared that their experiences with educational technician supervision were complex, exacerbated by their lack of formal training in this aspect of the job. Emma described her experiences with supervision as "[administrators] sort of just assume that you're going to have this natural talent for it." In addition, participants shared that frequent absenteeism, which they encountered on a "daily basis," and turnover of educational technicians contributed to adverse working conditions.

Parents. SETs must frequently collaborate with various stakeholders, including parents. Current SET retention and attrition research has shown that while parents can be strong advocates for their children, they can also place unrealistic demands on SETs (Kaff, 2004). Despite this fact, little research has been done regarding parental support's impact on SET attrition.

The former SETs interviewed for this study elaborated on their relationships with parents, sharing that they felt pressure to keep them happy. David's work as a life skills teacher meant "frequent" and "immediate" communication to update parents on student progress. For some,

their administrators also pressured them to give in to parents rather than face the threat of litigation or hostility. Emma shared that administrators sometimes forced SETs to "make these weird choices" when parents pushed for more services for their children, even when they were not warranted. Natalie added that the changing dynamics of parent relationships made her feel "I wasn't being valued for the expertise I had." These findings provide further evidence of how parents can pressure SETs by placing unreasonable demands on them. Future research must examine the specific aspects of parental support necessary to increase the likelihood of retaining SETs.

Increased Student Mental Health Needs. Studies have shown that SETs who teach students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) are at greater risk of burnout and higher levels of attrition (Bettini et al., 2019; Park & Shin, 2020). Student discipline problems have also been reported as a reason for SETs leaving their jobs (Billingsley, 2007).

Participants shared that students' increased behavioral needs in recent years contributed to their decision to leave the field. The growing number of behavior needs addressed through special education services left Emma wondering: "Are we really doing things that we're supposed to be doing?" Participants noted not only an increase in students with an EBD but also a general rise in behavioral challenges and student mental health needs, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Natalie described this recent increase as "a shift in society" and "way bigger than public schools can fix."

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: How did the working conditions of SETs impact their decision to leave the profession? The themes that emerged from this research question were (a) the belief

that they couldn't do the job the way it needed to be done and (b) the impact on their personal life and health.

Belief that they couldn't do the job the way it needed to be done. Participants were asked how their working conditions significantly impacted their decision to leave their SET jobs. The competing demands of the position caused the former SETs to feel that they could no longer do their jobs to the expected level. Many study participants described immense feelings of failure as they reflected on their decision to leave the profession. David said he "internalized that failure a little more than I should," which caused him to think, "I wasn't a good teacher." Lucy felt guilty resigning from her position, leaving her asking: "Did I fail to be a good special education teacher?"

The experiences of these former SETs reveal that, despite their significant efforts, they ultimately acknowledged the near impossibility of their daily responsibilities. Lucy described her day-to-day tasks as "overwhelming," while Emma added, "What is asked of you to do every day is beyond sort of humanly possible." This weighed heavily on them, as their foremost priority was always the well-being of their students.

This study's findings are consistent with the research literature on role conflict, which arises when SETs are expected to perform contradictory or impossible tasks within a reasonable timeframe (Brunsting et al., 2014). Crane and Iwanicki (1986) found that role conflict contributed significantly to SET burnout.

Impact on personal life and health. Working conditions impacted the former SETs, which extended beyond the walls of their classrooms and schools. Participants detailed how their jobs affected their personal lives and health. They all recounted having to stay after contracted hours to complete required paperwork or spending significant time on the weekends completing these

work tasks, taking time away from their families. Lucy recounted how her family became frustrated with the amount of schoolwork that she was doing at home and told her that her SET job was "all-consuming." Emma worked several hours directly after school to keep up with her paperwork and planning, while Natalie would get home after work and feel "mentally and emotionally exhausted." A few participants also shared that the working conditions of their jobs led to many health issues. Lucy developed high blood pressure and was having anxiety attacks. David was hospitalized following what he referred to as his "existential crisis," resulting in an absence from work that lasted nearly two months. Current research suggests that SET burnout is related to poor health and decreased well-being (Brunsting et al., 2014).

Research Question 3

Research Question 3: What improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of SETs? The following themes emerged: (a) making the job of SET more sustainable, (b) providing adequate staffing, (c) administrative support, (d) having a strong MTSS framework, (e) providing worthwhile training opportunities, and (f) compensation.

<u>Make the job more sustainable</u>. When asked what supports would have prevented them from leaving the special education field, participants emphasized that, overall, the job expectations of a SET needed to be made more realistic in order to make the position more sustainable. Having to fulfill the roles of teacher, supervisor, and case manager was above and beyond the capacity of a single special educator. Participants proposed that the roles of teacher and case manager be divided into two distinct positions. They also recommended addressing caseload numbers and the intensity of student needs rather than relying strictly on the State's IEP case management limits for guidance. Regarding educational technician supervision, participants felt they needed more support, advice, and resources from administrators to define their supervisor role better.

Adequate staffing. Study participants discussed the challenges of insufficient special education staff, including SETs and educational technicians. Without adequate staffing, they were often stretched thin, unable to keep up with all the job's demands. They shared that hiring enough SETs to support the IEP caseload was paramount. Also, they expressed interest in being part of the educational technician hiring process to better ensure a "good fit" given their classroom's dynamics. Given that 43 states currently report a shortage of special educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b), addressing the staffing needs of schools is essential.

Administrative support. Current research indicates that administrative support is strongly associated with intent to stay in the special education teaching profession (Littrell et al., 1994). Participants agreed that if they had received better support from their administration, they would have been more likely to stay in their jobs. Lucy and Natalie expressed the need for building administration to have a stronger understanding of special education, an area currently lacking. Participants also felt it was important for administrators to really listen to their SETs and work to address their concerns, whether it be about an unhappy parent or unsafe student behavior. Future research should explore what specific administrative supports are needed to retain SETs.

Stronger MTSS framework. A solid MTSS framework can help schools promote early intervention and decrease the number of unnecessary special education referrals (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Consistent with the research literature, a few participants shared that if their schools had had a stronger MTSS framework, their caseloads might have been smaller. Addressing the caseload burden by providing a higher level of general education intervention to address the overidentification of special education students was important to some participants. For example, Lucy was frustrated that her growing caseload may have been due to her school's lack of an MTSS framework: "Kids are being pushed to special ed because they are not getting

the proper Tier 2 and 3 interventions." Schools can reduce the number of students needing special education services by systematically addressing prevention and intervention efforts with appropriate resources.

Training Opportunities. Participants shared that, in general, their professional development was limited to training on state-mandated IEP paperwork. They felt that a support necessary to increase the likelihood of retention is providing SETs with worthwhile training opportunities that focus more on academic and behavioral intervention and less on paperwork. A study by Cancio et al. (2018) reported that the administration's support for professional growth was rated significantly higher for special educators working with students with an EBD who indicated their intent to stay in their positions. Other qualitative studies have also shown that SETs value PD opportunities (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

Compensation. This study's participants had mixed views regarding financial compensation supporting SET retention. Emma and Lucy emphasized that even if they were to get paid more, it would not overcome the fact that they spent countless hours outside of contracted hours completing their work. David shared that, at minimum, schools should give SETs a stipend to help account for time spent outside working hours to complete paperwork. Natalie also agreed that having a way to quantify the hours that SETs work outside their contracted hours was important when it comes to being fairly compensated. Current research has indicated that salary bonuses (Clotfelter et al., 2008), differential pay (Mason-Williams et al., 2020), and loan forgiveness programs (Feng & Sass, 2017) have curbed attrition rates among special educators. Since local school districts set special educators' salaries, they should consider improving overall compensation.

<u>**Recommendations for Policy & Practice**</u>

Improving the working conditions for special educators is vital for supporting retention efforts. The following recommendations for policy and practice are based on this study's findings and interpretations derived from one-on-one interviews with former special educators.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

1. Reevaluate the caseload limits for Maine SETs. According to Chapter 101, Maine Unified Special Education Regulations (MUSER), full-time SETs are permitted to case manage up to 35 students.

2. Streamline and condense the amount of legally required IEP paperwork.

3. Develop a state-wide database to track SET attrition among individual school districts. There is currently no way to track the number of SETs who leave their positions or whether they move to general education, another SET position, or leave the field entirely. This quantitative data, coupled with surveying local school districts, could help to identify patterns and work towards a more stable SET workforce.

Recommendations for District and School Administration

1. Seek feedback from current SET staff to identify specific working conditions that they find challenging and address these areas.

2. Reimagine the SET role and consider separating teaching and case management duties. This would allow the SET to focus more on instruction and student support while delegating paperwork and administrative tasks to someone else.

3. Consider student intensity when assigning caseloads to SETs. Regardless of the state-mandated caseload limits, recognize that SETs may need more resources and support to take on a full caseload.

4. Advocate for local teacher contracts that articulate the unique working conditions of SETs more clearly. Include a compensation package that is representative of their work.

5. As administrators, listen, with empathy and understanding, to the challenges that face your SETs and work to address their concerns.

6. Provide SETs time for quality professional development that addresses personal interests and areas for growth.

7. If your SETs supervise educational technicians, provide additional guidance about their supervision role and allow them to participate in the hiring process.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study has produced findings that support further research on the topic of SET attrition. Future researchers can use this study's themes to understand further how working conditions impact SETs' decisions to leave their positions.

Further qualitative research would be beneficial as conducting one-on-one interviews and focus groups can offer deep insights into their decision-making processes. The limited sample size in this study was a constraint; hence, including more participants in future research would be recommended. Additionally, selecting participants with diverse years of experience and who have taught in different program types (i.e., resource, behavior, life skills) could offer valuable comparisons. This approach could provide further insights into how working conditions affect attrition rates across various demographic groups.

Future research on the role of administrative burden in special education could provide valuable context for how working conditions, such as paperwork, impact SETs' career decisions. Administrative burden is a well-documented concern in the teaching profession, given that

special educators spend their time doing both teaching and administrative duties (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016).

<u>Limitations</u>

As with any research investigation, this study had several limitations. One limitation was the small sample size. Qualitative research often employs a small number of participants, making it difficult to generalize the data. However, this study reached the recommended 3 to 10-participant threshold (Dukes, 1984), as four former SETs were interviewed.

Qualitative research was advantageous because it focused on data related to thoughts and feelings. However, a limitation was that this data could not be quantified, unlike quantitative analysis, which involves measurable data (Merriam, 2009). Despite this, qualitative data was preferred for its ability to describe participants' lived experiences. Qualitative research does not intend to generalize information but to explain the specific (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The rich interview data collected in this study contributed significantly to the research, particularly in learning how working conditions impacted former SETs' decisions to leave the field.

Another limitation is that only former Maine SETs were considered for this study. Limiting the demographics to one state may not produce representative findings. However, the insights gained could still be relevant and informative for understanding the broader experiences of SETs in other regions, as SET shortages due to attrition are a nationwide issue.

In addition, given the timeline of this dissertation study, the participant pool was limited to those who could quickly respond to the initial recruitment survey. I had to rely on special education directors to forward the recruitment materials, so the total population of potential participants was likely not reached.

Conclusion

Special educator attrition is a significant issue that has been a concern that has challenged researchers for decades. This study sought to understand better how the working conditions of former SETs impacted their decision to leave the profession, addressing a gap in the current literature. Using phenomenological qualitative methods to explore three core research questions, four former Maine SETs who recently left the field due to working conditions were interviewed for this study. The study found that SETs left the profession due to factors such as excessive paperwork, supervision of educational technicians, difficult parents, lack of administrative support, and increased student mental health needs. Working conditions, including these factors, made it difficult for SETs to perform their jobs effectively, negatively impacting their personal lives and health. Participants suggested that adequate staffing, more administrative support, a stronger MTSS framework, increased training, and making the job more sustainable could have improved retention, with mixed views on the role of compensation. Because the working conditions of special educators are highly influenced by the school districts in which they work, school administrators and policymakers should consider these findings and the recommendations for practice included in this final chapter. This study adds to the literature on SET attrition and retention and provides additional context to the issue. The future of the SET workforce depends on our ability to promote working conditions that make the job more sustainable.

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Hello,

I am Danielle Pelletier, a doctoral candidate at the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. I am seeking assistance recruiting participants for my dissertation research study. The faculty sponsor for this study is Dr. Jim Artesani, Associate Dean of Graduate Education, Research, and Outreach and Associate Professor of Special Education with the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of former special education teachers who have left the field due to working conditions.

I am seeking former Maine special education teachers to participate in a series of three one-on-one interviews. To participate in this study, participants must meet the following criteria:

- last taught special education in the State of Maine
- left the special education teaching field voluntarily within the last five years due primarily to working conditions
- after leaving their special education position, they either moved to a general education position *or* left the field of K-12 education entirely

Please share the attached recruitment announcement and informed consent form with anyone you know who might fit these criteria.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any additional questions, please contact me at danielle.n.young@maine.edu.

Sincerely,
Danielle Pelletier, M.Ed.

Appendix B- Recruitment Announcement

Hello,

I am Danielle Pelletier, a doctoral candidate at the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. You are invited to participate in a research study. The faculty sponsor for this study is Dr. Jim Artesani, Associate Dean of Graduate Education, Research, and Outreach and Associate Professor of Special Education with the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development.

This study explores the lived experiences of former special education teachers (SETs) who have left the field due to working conditions. The study will address three questions: (a) what factors contributed to special education teachers leaving the profession? (b) how did the working conditions of special education teachers impact their decision to leave the profession? And (c) what improvements to working conditions could have supported the retention of special education teachers?

To participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

- Last taught special education in the State of Maine
- Left the special education teaching field voluntarily within the last five years, due primarily to working conditions
- After leaving your special education position, you either moved to a general education position *or* left the field of K-12 education entirely

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a series of three one-on-one interviews that may last 45-60 minutes each. All interviews will be held via Zoom at a time of your choosing, with approximately one week between each interview. All interviews will be audio recorded. All data collected will be kept confidential and participation is voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the following form: **INSERT LINK TO RECRUITMENT FORM.** Only some of those who volunteer to be interviewed will be interviewed. If selected, I will contact you to discuss the research study and your participation further.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have further questions, please contact me via email at danielle.n.young@maine.edu

Sincerely,

Danielle Pelletier, M.Ed.

Appendix C – Email to Maine Department of Education Requesting an Updated Email List of Special Education Directors

Hello,

My name is Danielle Pelletier, a doctoral candidate at the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. I am working on my dissertation research study which explores the lived experiences of former special education teachers who have left the field due to working conditions. The faculty sponsor for this study is Dr. Jim Artesani, Associate Dean of Graduate Education, Research, and Outreach and Associate Professor of Special Education with the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development.

I am reaching out today to request an updated email list of current Maine Special Education Directors. The directory listed on your website is dated a few years ago. I would like to email these Directors to share recruitment information about my research study.

Thank you for your help with this request!

Best,
Danielle Pelletier, M.Ed.

{*Insert Informed Consent Form on first page of recruitment form*}

Questions to include:
- First and Last Name
- Email Address
- Gender
- How many years of special education teaching experience do you have?
- What grade level(s) did you teach?
- What special education program types did you teach in? (For example, self-contained, resource room, life skills, behavior)
- In what month and year did you leave your last special education teaching position?
- In what school was your last special education teaching position? (Include school name and location)
- Did you leave your last special education teaching position for retirement reasons? Y/N
- Did you leave your last special education teaching position primarily due to the working conditions? Y/N
- After leaving your previous position, did you continue to work in the K-12 education field? Y/N
- If you answered YES, what was your next position?

{After submitting answers to the above questions, the sign-up form proceeds to the third page.}

"Thank you for agreeing to be considered for an interview as part of this research study. You may change your mind at any time if you are selected to be interviewed. Not all those who volunteer to be interviewed will be interviewed. Danielle Pelletier will contact you if you are selected to schedule your first interview. If you have any further questions, please contact Danielle Pelletier at danielle.n.young@maine.edu.

Screenshot of the Qualtrics recruitment form

Thank you for your interest in being interviewed for this research study. Please answer the following questions to help determine your eligibility for this study.

First and Last Name

Email Address

Gender

How many years of special education teaching experience do you have?

What grade level(s) did you teach?

What special education program types did you teach in? (For example, self-contained, resource room, life skills, behavior)

[ ]

In what month and year did you leave your last special education teacher position?

[ ]

In what school was your last special education teaching position? (include school name and location)

[ ]

Did you leave your last special education teaching position for retirement reasons?

○ Yes
○ No

Did you leave your last special education teaching position primarily due to the working conditions?

○ Yes
○ No

After leaving your previous position, did you continue to work in the K-12 education field?

○ Yes

○ No

If you answered YES to the previous question, what was your next position?

[ ]

← →

Maine's Public Universities

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE SYSTEM

Thank you for agreeing to be considered for an interview as part of this research study. You may change your mind at any time if you are selected to be interviewed. Not all those who volunteer to be interviewed will be interviewed. Danielle Pelletier will contact you if you are selected to schedule your first interview. If you have any further questions, please contact Danielle Pelletier at danielle.n.young@maine.edu.

Appendix E – Follow-up email to confirm participation and schedule first interview

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on the lived experiences of special education teachers who have recently left the field due to working conditions. If you still want to participate in three interviews, please reply at your earliest convenience. A full description of the study and your participation are outlined in the attached "Informed Consent" form.

Interviews will take place on Zoom and be scheduled for a time convenient for you, with interviews being spaced approximately one week from one another. Each interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed by me. The interviews will focus on your special education teaching history, the impact that working conditions had on your decision to leave the profession, and suggested supports to increase the retention of current special education teachers.

Your privacy and data confidentiality will be ensured at all times, and participation is voluntary. You will be given a pseudonym that will be used to identify all data collected. Your real name will never be used in data collection, analysis, or publications arising from the research.

If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at danielle.n.young@maine.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,
Danielle Pelletier, M.Ed.

Appendix F– Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Danielle Pelletier, a University of Maine Doctoral Candidate in Prevention & Intervention Studies. The faculty sponsor for this study is Dr. Jim Artesani, Associate Dean of Graduate Education, Research, and Outreach and Associate Professor of Special Education with the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development. The purpose of the research is to understand the lived experiences of Maine special education teachers who recently left the field due to working conditions. Potential study participants will be chosen based on the following qualifications: (a) voluntarily left the field of special education in the last five years due to working conditions, (b) transferred to a general education teaching position or left the field of education (not for retirement reasons) and (c) last taught special education in the State of Maine.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a series of three interviews. The interviews will take place on Zoom and will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. The interviews will be audio recorded via Zoom and you must agree to the audio recordings in order to participate. The interviews will take place at a time of your choosing, with approximately one week between each interview. You will be asked questions regarding your experiences as a former special educator and how working conditions impacted your decision to leave the field. Sample questions may include:
- What motivated you to become a special education teacher?
- What were your day-to-day responsibilities in your last special education teaching position?
- What improvements to your working conditions could have been made that would have led you to stay in your position?

Risks: Except for your time and inconvenience, there are minimal risks to you from participating in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to individuals for participating in this study. However, this study's findings can help inform special education policymakers and school administrators about improvements to working conditions that could lead to improved retention of special education teachers.

Confidentiality: Your privacy and data confidentiality will be ensured at all times. The recruitment form data will be removed from Qualtrics by March 2024 and will be permanently destroyed by April 2024. You will be given a pseudonym which will be used to identify data collected during Zoom interviews. Your real name will never be used in data collection, analysis, or publications arising from the research. Additionally, all collected data will be kept on a

password-protected computer. The interviews will take place on Zoom and will be recorded and saved directly to Danielle Pelletier's computer for transcription purposes. Audio recordings and transcripts will be removed from Zoom within 72 hours after the interview takes place. The transcriptions will be checked for accuracy by Danielle Pelletier. Research data will consist of Zoom recordings, transcriptions of those files, and handwritten researcher notes. Original audio recordings will be destroyed by December 2024. Handwritten researcher notes will be converted to electronic notes, and hard copies of the notes will be destroyed, within 48 hours of the interview. Interview transcripts and electronic researcher notes will be saved indefinitely.

If any participants mention the name of their school or specific colleagues, that information will be deleted from the transcript of the interview. No one other than Danielle Pelletier will have access to the transcripts before they are removed of any identifying information (i.e. name of school, colleagues). When reporting results, Danielle Pelletier will summarize across the interviews and report patterns of findings across participants. Participant quotes used when reporting the findings will not include any potentially identifying information.

Voluntary: Participation is voluntary. If you choose to participate in this study, you may stop anytime. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about this study, please contact Danielle Pelletier (danielle.n.young@maine.edu). You may also contact Dr. Jim Artesani, the faculty advisor for this study, at arthur.artesani@maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207-581-2657 (or e-mail umric@maine.edu).

Appendix G – Interview Protocols
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol #1
Teaching History

Pre-Interview Introduction Script:
Hello, my name is Danielle Pelletier. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Maine. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers who have recently left the field. Today I hope to learn more about your teaching history and hear about how you entered the field. You may choose to skip any questions that you do not want to answer, or you may choose to end the interview at any time. Your participation is voluntary, and confidentiality is maintained at all times. The interview will be audio recorded. You will be identified by a pseudonym, and this will be used to identify data collected from each participant. Do you consent to be interviewed for this study? Do you have any other questions before we begin?

Background/Demographic Questions:

1. How many years of experience did you have as a special education teacher (SET)?
2. What grade level(s) did you teach?
3. What type of program(s) did you teach in (i.e., resource, self-contained, life skills, etc.)?
4. When did you leave your last special education teaching position?

Questions:
1. Describe your educational background.
    a. Potential follow-up question: What motivated you to get into the field of special education? How did you obtain your special education teaching certification?
2. Tell me about your experiences in the special education profession.
3. How would you describe yourself as a special education teacher?
    a. Potential follow-up question: How would your former students describe you?
4. Tell me about the best parts of being a special education teacher.
    a. Potential follow-up question: Do you have any favorite memories from your SET career?
5. Tell me about the most challenging parts of being a special education teacher. a. Potential follow-up question: Do any specific memories come to mind that left an impact on you?
6. After leaving the field, did you pursue a career outside of education or move to the general education setting? Tell me about this decision.
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your teaching history?

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol #2
Impact of Working Conditions on SET Job

Pre-Interview Introduction Script:
The last time we met, we discussed your teaching history. Today, I hope to learn about your perspective regarding how working conditions impacted your decision to leave the field. You can skip any questions that you do not want to answer and you may choose to end the interview at any time. The interview will be audio recorded. Do you consent to be interviewed for this study? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions:

1. What would you say were the day-to-day expectations in your last special education teaching position? Tell me more about these expectations.
    a. Potential follow-up questions: Did you have a clear understanding of the responsibilities of your job? Why or why not? Describe a typical day in your last SET job.
2. How would you describe your relationships with your colleagues (i.e., general education teachers, SETs, paraprofessionals, and related service providers)?
    a. Potential follow-up questions: What types of support did they provide you? Tell me about your supervision of paraprofessionals and how that impacted your daily job duties.
3. How would you describe your relationship with your former school administrator(s) (i.e., principal, special education director)?
    a. Potential follow-up questions: Were there specific ways in which they supported you in your position? If so, please tell me more about those types of supports.
 4. How much time did you spend directly teaching students in a typical day?
    a. Potential follow-up question: Could you tell me more about what that looked like?
5. What non-teaching responsibilities were typical in your SET position? How did these responsibilities have an impact on your position as a whole?
6. Tell me about how you managed your caseload and timelines to ensure legal compliance.
    a. Potential follow-up questions: How many students on average would you say were on your caseload? What strategies did you have to help manage your time and workload?
7. Thinking back to your decision to leave the profession, was there a "tipping point" for you? If so, please describe it.
    a. Potential follow-up question: Were there a series of events that led to your decision to leave? Please tell me how you informed the administration of your decision to leave. Did you have any regrets about your decision?

8. Which working conditions had the most significant impact on your decision to leave? Tell me more about these.
9. Tell me about the period between when you notified the administration of your decision to leave until your final day as a SET.
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me today about your decision to leave the profession in regard to your working conditions?

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol #3
Reflection on Future Retention Supports

Pre-Interview Introduction Script:
The last time we met, we discussed the different working conditions that impacted your decision to leave your special education job. Today, I would like to talk about the support and improvements to working conditions that could be made to help retain special education teachers. You can skip any questions that you do not want to answer and you may choose to end the interview at any time. The interview will be audio recorded. Do you consent to be interviewed for this study? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions:

1. Thinking back to your time as a special education teacher, which supports or resources did you feel were the most helpful?
2. In our last interview, you talked about _____ being the working conditions that impacted your decision to leave. What improvements to these working conditions could have been made that helped you to remain in the field?
    a. Potential follow-up questions: Can you elaborate on _____?
3. In the first interviews, you talked about _____. Would you be able to tell me a bit more about _____? (*To be used as a general probing question if I need additional clarification or information about previously discussed questions*)
4. What advice do you have for schools, administrators, and policymakers looking to retain and attract special education teachers based on your experiences and insights?
    a. Potential follow-up questions: What working condition changes should school administrators consider? What more significant improvements to the special education profession would make it more likely to attract and retain teachers?
5. What advice or insights would you offer current special educators facing challenging working conditions and considering leaving the profession?
6. This is our final interview. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a special educator?

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Danielle Pelletier was born and raised in Alton, Maine, and graduated from Old Town High School in 2005. She earned her Bachelor's in Elementary Education from the University of Maine in 2009. Upon graduation, she went to work at a K-12 public day treatment program for students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders. It was there that she developed a passion for special education. She returned to the University of Maine to earn her Master's in Special Education in 2012 and later a CAS in Special Education in 2015.

Danielle has been employed as a special educator in middle and high school settings for a decade. Additionally, she has spent several years as an adjunct instructor at the University of Maine, working with current and future educators. Danielle is a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy in Education in Prevention and Intervention Studies from the University of Maine in August 2024.