An Examination of the Role Administration Play in the Retention

of Special Educators

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine and identify the administrative strategies that are being applied in two special education programs with intention of increasing teacher retention. The measurement tool was a survey. The study involved participants completing a 10 question Likert survey and evaluating the results. The survey results demonstrated both positive and negative tendencies in the surveyed strategies of administrative support. Further research with an in-depth survey with wider circulation might provide a sound basis for implementing more effective professional development.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Finding and retaining special educators has been challenge for administrators across the country for years. Although total turnover rates are typically lowest in the Northeast at 10.3% (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), Maryland reported all counties in the state were in a 'shortage' of educators (Maryland public school website 2016) and special education programs are ranked in the 'critical shortage' range. With almost one-third of special educators leaving the profession entirely after only three years in the field (Cancio, 2013), it is important to note the key variables that drive this turnover. The most frequently cited reason for teachers leaving the field, aside from testing and accountability pressures, was the kind of administrative support they receive on the job (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Special educators are serving students who require well-trained and highly qualified teachers to meet their intensive and specific needs. However, teacher shortages put these students at risk of falling further behind in achieving academic, behavior, and functional goals. Research indicates that teacher retention is strongly influenced by teachers' perceptions regarding the support they receive from their administrators (Prather-Jones, 2011). Although the definition of administrative support may be difficult to define (Prather Jones, 2011), this study aims to identify support strategies to improve a school's climate as well as teacher and student achievement.

As an associate director at a special education program for three years, the researcher found it was difficult to find and maintain quality special educators. Due to the rapid turnover,

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the researcher began to observe students' achievement was negatively affected within her school. Through discussion with colleagues, the researcher began to notice a trend that special educators who were returning to the same school year after year had stated that they had a positive and involved professional relationship with their administration. This researcher's study serves to expand on an administrator's role in effectively retaining special educators.

Problem Statement

This study is designed to provide insight into determining which strategies administrators can implement to increase retention of special educators from year to year.

Operational Definitions

The variables that were examined were special educators plan to return from one year to the next and the supportive strategies implemented by a school's administration. Operational definitions for terms used in this action research study are presented below.

- *Turnover* for the purposes of this study refers to educators leaving their positions.

- *Retention* for the purposes of this study refers to educators staying in their positions at schools and districts.

- *Administration* for the purposes of this study refers to a principal, vice principal, director or associate director of a school.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the integral role that administrators play in the staggering rate of turnover of teachers within special education programs. The first section provides a brief history of the teacher shortage in the United States. The second section examines the indirect and direct costs to all stakeholders involved. Finally, the literature review will discuss the specific strategies administrators can implement to improve the retention issue over time.

History of Teacher Turnover

According to research the demand for educators is not a new issue. Teacher shortages have been reported on for decades and records indicate the difficulty attracting and retaining teachers back to the 1930's for general education teachers and 1950 for special educators (U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017). More recently the national database estimated a "teacher shortage of approximately 64,000 teachers in the 2015-16 school year and an annual shortage of 112,000 teachers in 2017-18" (Sutcher et al., 2019).

The shortages, generally described as a school system who is unable to fill vacancies with qualified individuals, are pervasive across the country. Historically the reported shortages are significantly higher in areas of rural schools as well in schools who serve students with emotional or behavior disabilities. In local data, the 2016-2018 Maryland Staff Report found all counties in Maryland to have reported a teacher shortage. All special education sub-categories excluding hearing impaired and visually impaired, fall within the 'critical shortage' area. The metaphoric 'revolving door' has been an appropriate expression for a school's special education team. As research supports various findings that "the odds of a new special education teacher leaving the field are about two and one-half times that of other new teachers" (Smith & Ingersoll,

2004, p. #). A study reported national, state, and local studies have shown that young, inexperienced special education teachers are more likely to either leave the classroom or indicate an intention to leave than are their more experienced counterparts (Brownell et al., 2002).

According to Sutcher (2019) the scope of why educators leave the profession range from retirement, which accounts for one-third of the leavers, and the other two-thirds comprised of school staffing decisions, life changes and dissatisfactions with teaching. With alarmingly high attrition rates, the United States is hovering near 8% over the last decade, and much higher for new teachers and teachers in high-poverty schools and districts (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Although special education has made its way on the perennial shortage list year after year, creating serious staffing challenges (U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017). For school leaders and policymakers to respond effectively to these reports, it is important to understand what factors are driving these high rates of turnover.

Why Special Educators Leave

Based on evidence available, common issues teachers exiting the field report are inadequate wages and salaries, few career advancement opportunities, and lack of support from administration. To better understand the degree of compensation as a factor, a 2007 study compared similar special education programs with differing wages. The researchers concluded that "wages must reach a threshold (which varies depending on the local economic conditions) at which positions are attractive relative to other employment opportunities" (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Education needs to be competitive with other jobs. If not, the hiring personnel will find low level candidates, as supported through Ghere's (2007) research that demonstrated a "direct effect of raised wages increased the quality and number of applications" (p. 29). It may be the

case that administrators have little control over the teacher wages, salaries and benefits, but they can have an impact on the satisfaction and contentment a teacher has in their school climate.

Special educators have a heavy workload which is no wonder why workload and work conditions account for one of the leading causes of their exit from the profession. Billingsley (2003) and Miller (1999) report when special education teachers feel overwhelmed and overly stressed by their jobs, they report a greater intent to leave the classroom. Special educators write Individualized Education Plans, document behaviors, communicate with team members, and undertake conventional teacher duties of lesson planning, grading, and classroom teaching. Administration may find it beneficial to give extra attention to the beginning teachers, as their caseload responsibilities, along with challenging emotional and behavioral problems may be a perilous combination.

There is significant evidence to support the correlation between a school's leadership and its teacher retention. Hughes and O'Reilly (2015) suggest a definition of administrative support as "the principal taking an active role in assisting, encouraging, and displaying approving attitudes towards teachers" (p. 130). Administrative support has an immense impact on whether educators return from one year to the next. To put it into perspective, the overall school teacher attrition rate was calculated to be 7.68% (NCES, 2013); therefore, of the 3.1 million teachers in 2011, 238,310 teachers did not teach the following year (Sutcher Et. Al., 2019). Special education teachers often indicate that lack of support is a significant contributor to their decisions to leave their schools (Billingsley, 2005). In a 1999 study, approximately two-thirds of teachers expressed a need for more support from their administrators (Kaff, 2004). This research studied 658 special education teachers and the reported contributing factors to special educators' decision to leave or stay in the field.

According to Billingsley (2005), principals played a major role in supporting new special educators in their schools, and the effects of their support can buffer the stress of the first teaching years. Historically, the beginning years for special educators are the most influential and should be of particular concern to district personnel. Research shows that 20–25 percent of all new teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching and 39 percent of all novice teachers leave the profession within five years (Clark, 2012).󠁛󠁏󠁂󠁊󠁝 Generally, the support special educators seek is through instrumental support, through training or providing materials and means to deliver instruction. Emotional supports through supervision, mentorship or including a teacher in executing consequences for students' misbehaviors. In order to provide students with a high quality of education, it is strongly suggested the administration invests in the support of novice teachers, who compose a large portion of the special educator supply (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

The Cost of Special Educator Turnover

When a special educator exits a program, the disruption causes a ripple effect throughout the entire program. Special education programs are unique in the sense that there are typically no substitute teachers or backups for teacher absenteeism. Therefore, when a special educator is absent, the entirety of the program makes a shift to fill in for that role. During this shift, there are indirect costs of transitioning new staff in and old out. Indirect cost at the school level could be loss of momentum of an overall improvement goal or individual student goal. Special educators are responsible for the development and progress tracking of a student's academic IEP goals. When the teacher abruptly leaves, the student's academic progress is at a standstill. The administration is then left to answer essential questions: What are the students' current abilities? Who will complete the IEP progress tracking? Who will develop the next IEP goals? Will the

student perform their best if they are assessed by a new and different teacher? Are there artifacts to support that the student is or is not making progress and lastly, who will inform the student and guardians of the change? The last question can bring forth more issues for the school community.

A distraught and emotionally immature student may become overwhelmed with the sudden change and begin display old misbehaviors. In this scenario, it is likely the administration has shifted a staff member to fill the vacant teacher role with another staff member into the classroom. However, Ghere (2007) provides a poignant point in that special education educators 'have an ability to have unspoken and spoken expectations in various classrooms," (p. 28 when there is a disruption in this, such as a teacher leaving, it could present a possible danger or withhold a student from their needs. Special educators require time to learn their students' antecedents to behavior and best consequences. Enforcing the need for consistency and reliability in a special education classroom team.

School districts feel the direct cost of the reported constant turnover from their special education programs. Districts lose a tremendous amount of money. Although it is difficult to calculate the exact cost, it is estimated that the fiscal cost of replacing an employee varies between 70% and 200% of the departing employee's salary (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Other data states replacement costs for teachers were estimated to range from around $4,400 in a small rural district to nearly $18,000 in a large urban district for every teacher who leaves—a national price tag of over $8 billion today (Sutcher Et. Al., 2019). These replacement costs include expenses for recruiting, interviewing and training each new teacher. The sum of money spent on hiring and training new staff may be better spent elsewhere to improve the special education program.

In the researcher's opinion, the impact teacher turnover has on the students may be the greatest area at cost. An effective special education teacher can dramatically alter students' educational outcomes. This is evident through consistent research findings of teachers of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders. Students with emotional and/or behavioral disturbances are said to be among the highest ranked areas of need (American Association for Employment in Education [AAEE] 2004, 2006, 2007; Prather-Jones, 2011). In tandem with the reporting that several descriptive studies link teacher turnover to negative school environments and poor student outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), an overwhelming feeling of concern for students achievement is raised. Further evidence suggests that the attrition rates for teachers working with students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities are the highest among all teacher groups (Prather-Jones, 2011). Therefore, in order to meet the special education student's achievement expectations, and close this gap, the administrators need to utilize proven strategies to find, develop and retain quality special educators.

Strategies for Improving Retention

Recent research findings suggest that the odds of a new special education teacher leaving the field are about two and one-half times that of other new teachers (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) demonstrating the importance for solutions. Administrative support has been cited as having a significant influence on a special educator's intent, particularly that of teachers of students with emotional/behavioral disturbances, to stay in the field for the long term or leave within the first few years of teaching (Cancio Et. Al., 2013). A 2009 survey revealed that one significant factor in determining whether teachers were likely to stay versus likely to leave was administrative support (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013). Kaff (2014) defines support of a special educator as consisting of an administrator scheduling shared planning time, more autonomy in decision

making, and the feeling of appreciation and trust for all the work completed. The acknowledgement of the demanding nature and the stress incurred is affecting special educators' decision to leave. However, the Texas Center for Educational Research reported in 2006 that supportive administrators have been found to offset the negative effects of a burdensome workload (Cancio et al., 2013).

Administrative support is evident to prospective teachers during recruitment and interviewing. As stated in Cancio's earlier study (2013), a majority of new special education teachers are young and inexperienced. Ghere (2007) further supports this in his statement that "young employees with limited work experience, who may not have fully understood their responsibilities prior to accepting the position" (p. 28) tend to leave the profession early on. Therein lies the critical conversation during recruitment and orientation. This presents an opportunity to educate the prospective staff member on their future position and create an initial opportunity for building a relationship with the prospective employee (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013). Further research states the quality of the interview is considered pivotal because it presents an opportunity for increasing an applicant's understanding of the program's philosophy, the students who are served, and the roles and responsibilities of the position (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). In turn, this allows the prospect to make an informed decision in whether or not to move forward with a potential job offer.

With 7.7% special educators leaving their positions due to lack of professional development (Leko & Smith, 2010) and training, policymakers determined it was time to make a shift. Both the 2018 Maryland Kirwan Commission (2018) and Ghere's (2007) research suggest a layering of district level involvement to introduce new employees to all aspects of the related school. The structure will give all team members "the vision, motivation, skills, and knowledge"

(p. 22) they will need (Kirwan 2018) to create positive school climates with high achieving special education students and teachers. The Kirwan Commission recently passed House Bill 1033, the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The bill is a "multi-year initiative to research and develop major funding and policy reforms to improve the quality of Maryland's public education system" (MABE, 2020, p. 1). The bill proposed the following: "establishing a career ladder system for educators comprised of levels through which teachers may progress and gain certain authority, status, and compensation as they gain certain expertise; requiring certain individuals to participate in the career ladder; authorizing certain individuals to participate in the career ladder; specifying certain qualifications and salary increases associated with levels of the career ladder" (Kirwan, 2018, p. 3). As of March 11, 2020, House Bill 1300 was passed to take effect on July 1, 2020 thus supporting Maryland educators in an upgraded professional development framework.

Further evidence of a vigorous enrolling process was documented through Ghere's (2007) and York-Barr's (2007) research where a school district adopted a more centralized approach to orientation which resulted in a relatively standardized process across the district and contributed to hiring more qualified paraprofessionals. The special education director stated, "Our interview process is better. Our background checks are better. I'm feeling comfortable with our pool of candidates now certainly in comparison to what we had before" (Ghere, 2007 p.26 #). Similarly, staff development has been identified as a variable that enhances paraprofessional retention and improves workforce quality, whereas a high rate of turnover adversely affects the development of a skilled paraprofessional workforce (Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

To continue to remedy special educator struggles, research suggests the support of guidance and supervision by administrators. Although induction programs vary greatly, most districts include a mentoring component (Billingsley Et. Al., 2009). The districts institute

induction programs to address new teachers' professional challenges (Billingsley Et. al., 2004) and provide strategies for handling job related stress (Algozzine Et. al , 2007). However, there has been debate and inconsistent data on delivery and evaluation of mentorship feedback. In fact, some literature report negative effects of evaluation within mentoring practices (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). Other studies point to the usefulness of credible teacher evaluation, as it provides useful feedback that supports ongoing teacher development (Tyler, Taylor, Kane, & Wooten, 2010). These opposing views may simply reflect an educator whose supervision feedback that might have been detrimental to their development (Higgins & Kram, 2001) thus stunting their professional growth. Regardless, the importance of mentorship is evident. Administrators need to promote special educators to openly debrief and trust one another, share experiences and provide a high quality of service to students and families. This trusting environment will foster happy and successful special educators.

Within a mentorship relationship, special educators report a deeper and more explicit need for emotional support. The need for emotional support can be delivered 1:1 or through the school community as a whole. For example, an emotionally supportive school community "fosters a sense of camaraderie and care among all who are part of the school" (Billingsley, 2005, p. 4). Whereas the 1:1 support may be provided through private meetings, setting goals, and frequent check-ins with the teacher. A principal who treats their special educators and paraprofessionals as valued members of the school acknowledge the school's role in serving students with disabilities. An emotionally supportive principal is respectful, accessible, and treats special educators as professionals to foster open communication, consider teachers' ideas, show appreciation, and communicate confidence in the teacher (Gold, 1996; House, 1981). In an

emotionally supportive environment, special educators know that their presence matters and that their work is understood (Billingsley, 2005).

Special educators wear many hats in the classroom. They are required to complete behavior reports, individualized education plans, collaborate and communicate with team members, attend meetings, and provide meaningful instruction to their students. Add to that the one-third of special educators who report that they do not have necessary instructional materials (Billingsley et al., 2004). In order to lessen the burden on educators, especially the new or at-risk teachers, administrators are suggested to meet the indicated instrumental or workload, needs. Research suggests administrators 'create reasonable work assignments for special educators' through careful attention to both the teachers' current roles and the structural aspects for their work assignments (Billingsley, 2005). Otto (2005) and Billingsley's (2005) reasearch both specifically reported that teachers requested scheduled time to complete special education paperwork, scheduled time for collaboration and planning with general education teachers, providing meaningful in-service opportunities, lowering the size of caseloads and classes, and providing adequate technology and materials for special education students.. Billingsley and Cross (1992) reported that unsupportive environments that do not promote collaborating interactions and fail to provide special educators the support they need will reduce teacher efficacy and attrition.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The design used to conduct this research was a descriptive study. This study examined the relationship between administrator support and teacher turnover in the special education program in two special education schools. This study examined the impact of administrator's level of involvement and support on special educators' turnover in the 2018-2019 school year.

Participants

Eight special educators responded to the survey. Four teachers from a non-public special education program and four from a public school's special education program were surveyed. One of the teachers had been teaching for two years. One had been teaching for three years. Two had been teaching for ten years. One had been teaching for eleven years. One had been teaching for eighteen years. One had been teaching for thirty-one years and one had been teaching for thirty-seven years.

Instrument

The instrument used was a survey that was created by the researcher to examine teachers' expectations, satisfaction and experiences which can be found in the appendix. The survey was 10 questions. The questions included: years taught, communication with the administration, job responsibilities/work assignments, mentorship, opportunities for growth, and overall satisfaction with the 2018-2019 school year.

Procedure

The surveys were created through a survey generator in Google Documents and was sent electronically to the participating teachers at the two study schools. The participants were asked to anonymously complete the survey as soon as possible. The Google Document recorded and summarized the responses from the completed survey. All ten questions were completed for each participant.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact administrators might have on special educator turnover. This chapter presents the descriptive analysis reflecting special education teachers' perceptions about the causes of teacher retention. Data was collected from eight special education teachers from two different special education programs in Maryland. Four special educators were surveyed from two special education programs.

The survey consisted of nine Likert-type questions, scaled 1=strongly disagree (SD), 2=disagree (D), 3=neutral (N), 4=agree (A), and 5=strongly agree (SD).
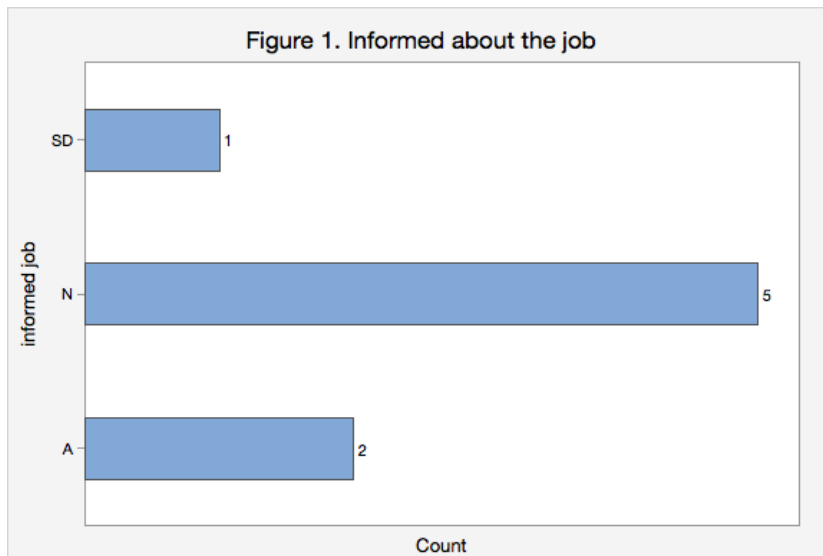
Figure 1

Respondents' Tallies on "Informed about the Job"

Figure 2

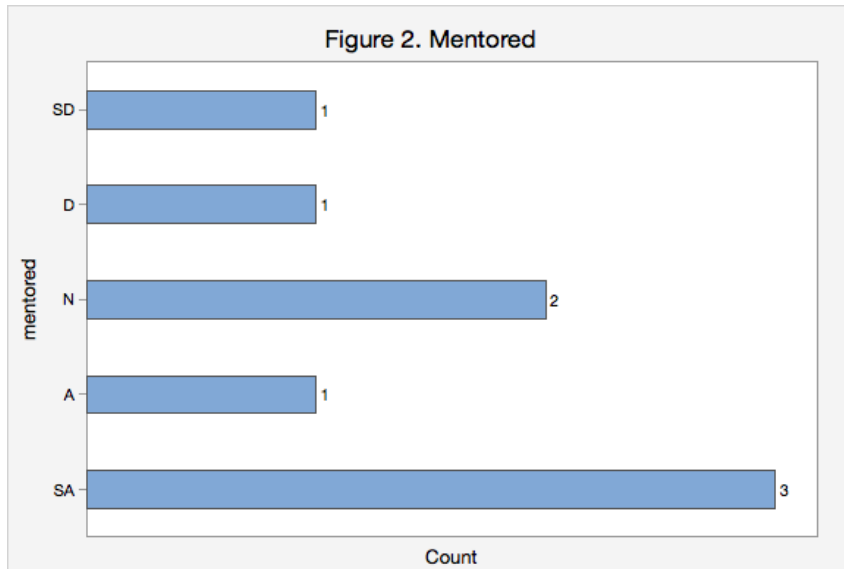*Respondents' Tallies on "Mentored by Veteran Teachers"*

Figure 2. Mentored

```
mentored
  SD |████████ 1
   D |████████ 1
   N |███████████████ 2
   A |████████ 1
  SA |███████████████████████ 3
      Count
```

Figure 3

Respondents' Tallies on "Open Communication"

Figure 3. Open communication

```
open communication
   D |███████ 1
   N |███████ 1
   A |███████████████████████████ 4
  SA |██████████████ 2
      Count
```
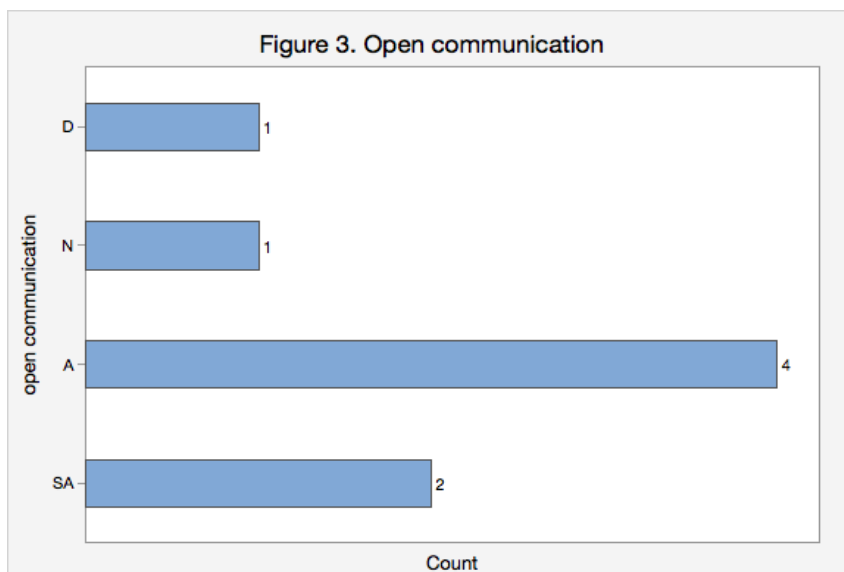
Figure 4

Respondents' Tallies on "Prompt Communication"

Figure 4. Prompt communication
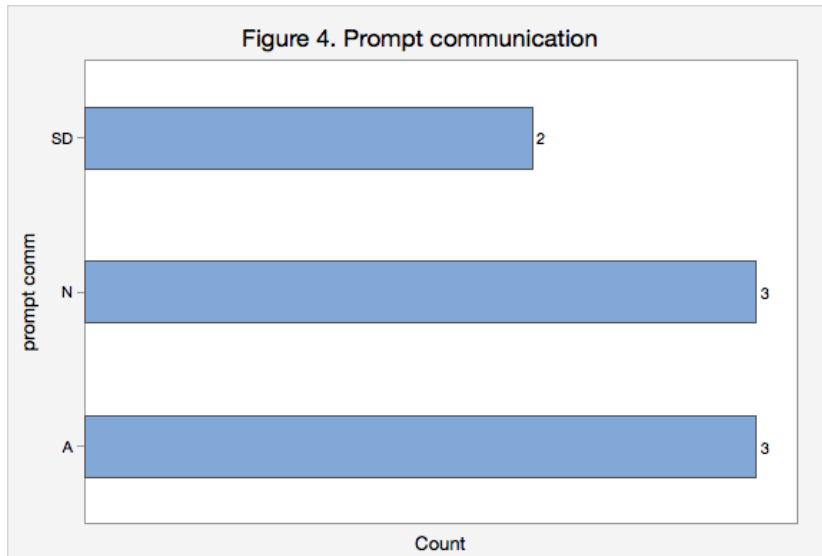
Figure 5

Respondents' Tallies on "Feedback"

Figure 5. Feedback
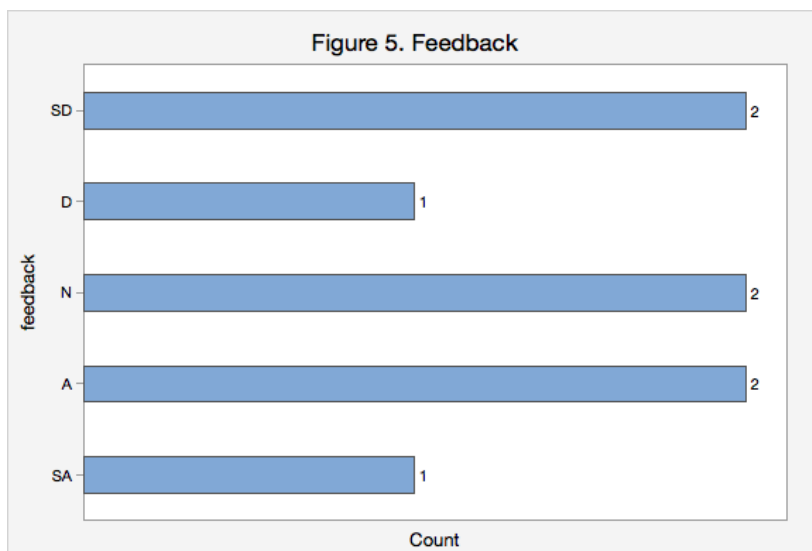
Figure 6

Respondents' Tallies on "Can Express Concerns"

Figure 6. Can express concerns
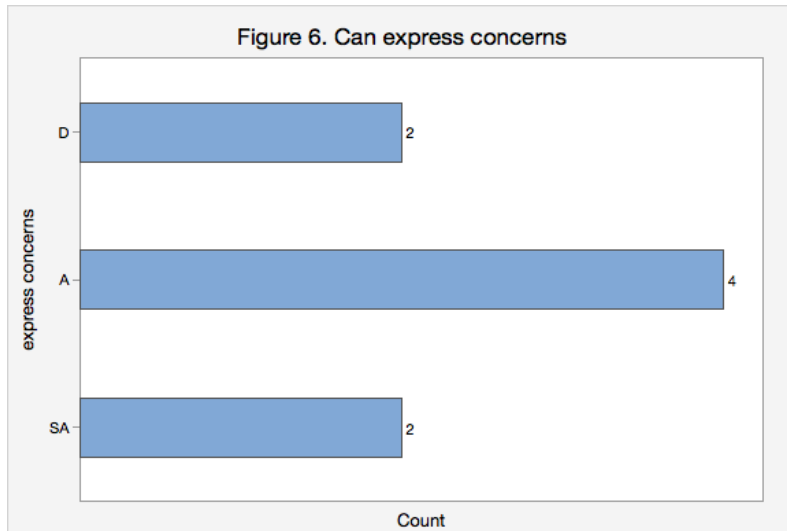
Figure 7

Respondents' Tallies on "Reasonable Workload"

Figure 7. Reasonable work load
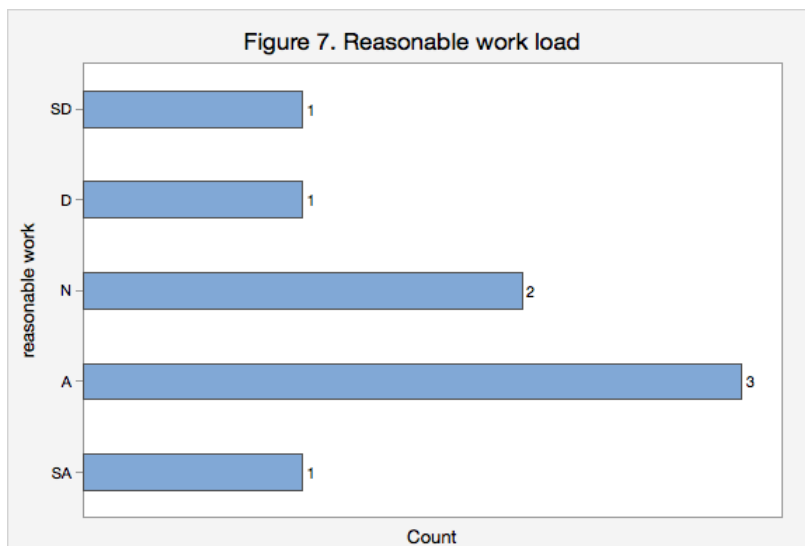
Figure 8

Respondents' Tallies on "Given more Responsibility"

Figure 8. Given more responsibility

Respondents' Tallies on "Given more Responsibility" — bar chart: D = 1, N = 1, A = 3, SA = 3 (y-axis: responsibility; x-axis: Count)
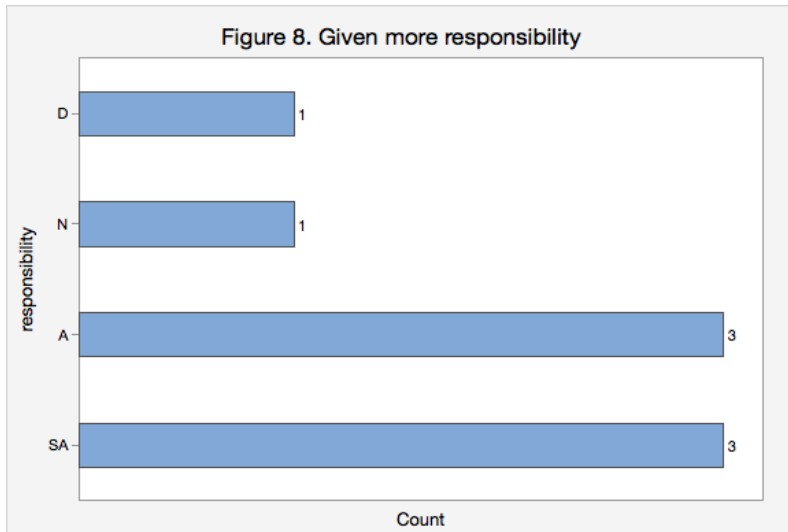
Figure 9

Respondents' Tallies on "Feel as a Valued Member of the Faculty"

Figure 9. Feel a valued member of the faculty

Respondents' Tallies on "Feel as a Valued Member of the Faculty" — bar chart: SD = 1, A = 2, SA = 5 (y-axis: valued member; x-axis: Count)
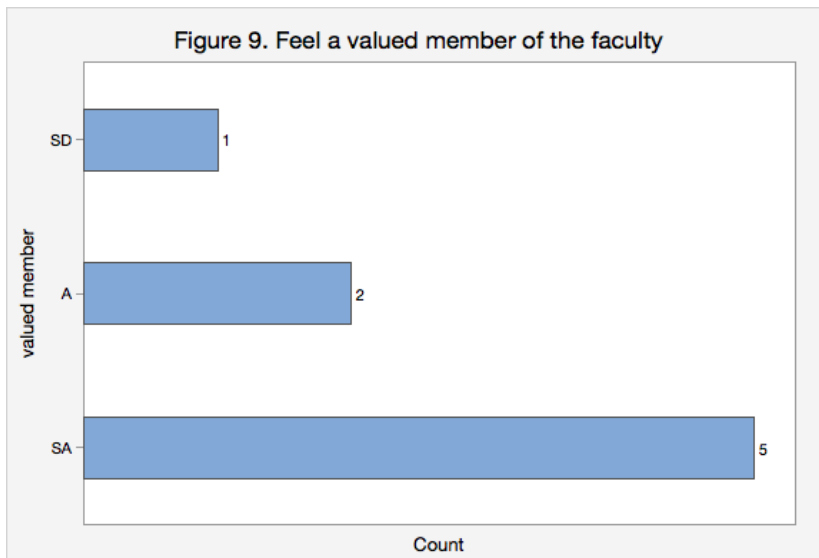
Figure 10

Respondents' Tallies on "Number of Years Taught"

Figure 10. Number of years taught
Half taught 10 yrs or less; half taught 11 to 37 years
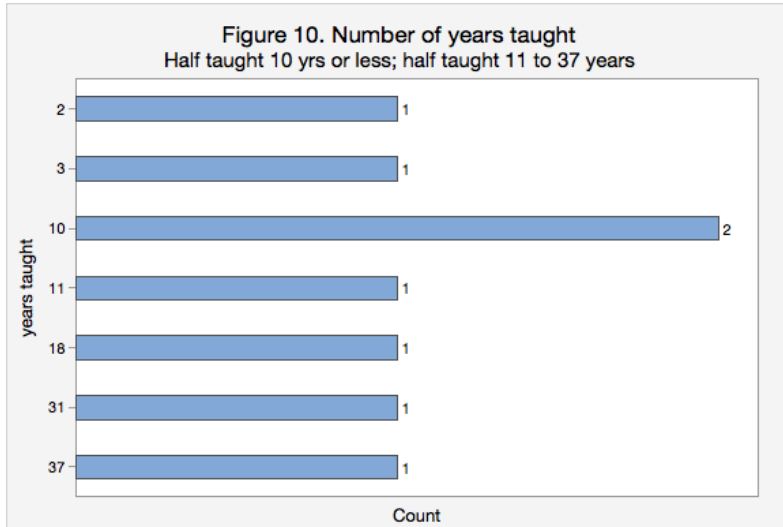
Figure 11

Frequencies of Responses About Teacher Retention (N=8)

Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1. Informed about the job	1	**5**	2
2. Mentored	2	2	**4**
3. Open, honest communication	1	1	**6**
4. Prompt communication	2	**3**	3
5. Feedback	**3**	2	3
6. Can express concerns to administrators	2	0	**6**
7. Reasonable workload	2	2	**4**
8. Receive more responsibility	1	1	**6**
9. Feel valued member of faculty	1	0	**7**

A summary of survey responses from the eight special education teachers indicated positive

tendencies in the following categories: mentoring; open, honest communication; the ability to

express concerns to administrators; reasonable work load; assignment of more responsibility; and

the feeling of being a valued member of the faculty. Neutral or negative tendencies were noted in

the following: feeling informed about the job, prompt communication, and feedback.

A discussion of results will follow in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The researcher's hypotheses were that there would be a relationship between administrative supports and special educator retention. The original hypothesis was supported, although the sample size was too small to establish a quantitative relationship.

Implications of the Results

Overall, more than half of the special educators felt they were valued members of their school community. An educator's feeling of belonging and acceptance are large influencers for feeling valued within their school. The special educators also reported they were given the opportunity to take on more responsibility within their school, which might contribute to their feelings of value. Providing mentorship for beginning special educators seemed to be another important factor in feeling supported. Four of the educators who received mentoring in their early years as an educator continued to teach the following year. The educators also reported positive tendencies in their workload and their opportunity to provide honest concerns to their administrators.

Overall, the survey reported the teachers had negative tendencies when responding to feeling informed of their job responsibilities upon its start and receiving prompt feedback and consistent feedback.

Theoretical Consequences

Based on the findings, school systems should be certain they are placing emphasis on ensuring administrators have the necessary tools to support their special educators. School administrators must be proactive in supporting their special educators. Administrators should provide mentoring, consistent feedback, open communication, reasonable workloads, and

materials (Prather-Jones, 2011). Special educators who are provided positive working conditions have proven to return to the teaching field. When teachers return year after year, they can continue to build upon their expertise. When administrators maintain focus on the educators' support, teachers are then able to grow and develop into expert teachers. The special educators can then maintain their focus on developing successful students, rather than attempting to foster a relationship with their administrator.

Threats to Validity

There were threats to validity in this study. The special educators might have had an overall positive and happy experience at their schools, therefore responding with mostly positive responses. However, due to Covid-19 restrictions and school closures, the number of respondents might have been lower than anticipated due to the educators' computers being at the school. Additionally, the special educators who did respond may have been under a lot of stress due to Covid-19 and may not have taken their time when providing their responses. Based on the data, six of the eight teachers have been teaching for ten or more years; therefore, their memory of the job description when they started may be indistinct. With ten or more years of experience, it might be that more experienced teachers were given more responsibilities because they are confident and secure in their general teaching duties. The same experienced teachers might have felt confident in expressing concerns because of an established relationship with their administrators.

Comparison with Previous Research

This study was a small sample of special educators from two different programs. The results of this research are much smaller than many other surveys. However, the results are similar in their findings to Otto and Arnold's 2005 study of experienced special education

teachers' perceptions on administrative support. Otto and Arnold's research found that 40% of the respondents reported that they 'Agreed' that they had administrator support. Sixty nine percent (69%) of experienced special education teachers described they were satisfied with the level of their administrative support. In contrast, 8% reported they 'Disagreed' and 4% 'Strongly Disagreed' with the statement, "I have support from administration."

Implications for Future Research

A review of the data collected indicates that it would be beneficial to conduct further research. Future research might include a larger number of survey participates, increase in length, and include more in-depth questions to examine teacher preparedness, administrative preparedness, and induction programs. Future research might focus on finding more survey participants who fall within specific years of experience, to easily compare those with under five years' experience, more than five and more than ten. Given the complexities of special education roles and responsibilities, it is important that the educators and administrators preparation programs are examined. As a result, more in-depth results will assist schools in developing a stronger special education program. Finally, further research on those teachers who did leave the field or transferred to a different special education program would provide further insight.

Conclusion

As a result of this research, administrators are provided with suggested supports to reduce teacher turnover. The supports provided may help create a better school community where all stakeholders can grow and be successful. Given the historical shortage and high turnover rate for special educators, one may believe greater administrative preparation would behoove special education programs to be equipped with the necessary tools to attract, retain, and grow special educators.

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