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Fall 10-18-2018

# Special Education Teacher Turnover & School Leadership

Patricia Moore

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education  
Doctorate of Education Program

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Special Education Teacher Turnover and School Leadership:  
A Qualitative Phenomenological Case Study

Patricia Moore  
Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in  
Educational Administration

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Concordia University–Portland  
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## **Abstract**

Turnover and retention among special education teachers (SETs) continues to be a problem for many school districts. Studies suggest that the leadership approach of school leaders is a key factor influencing SETs' decision to stay or leave their jobs. This qualitative phenomenological case study was designed to gain a better understanding of eight SETs' experiences with their school leadership. In-depth one-to-one interviews, focus group interviews, and participant journaling were employed to collect rich narratives of SETs' lived experiences. The data gathered from this study clearly showed that servant leadership, in which leaders are attuned to the emotional and professional needs of their followers, fostered strong leader-member exchange (LMX). Thus, selfless, relational, and holistic leadership behaviors affected SETs' workplace experiences and influenced their workplace longevity.

*Keywords:* leader-member exchange, leadership support, servant leadership, special education teachers

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Turnover among special education teachers (SET) in the United States continues to rise faster than that of their non-SET counterparts (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Tyler, 2012; Vittek, 2015). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) defines the role of SETs clearly in their report as described below.

A teacher that works with students who have a wide range of learning, mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. They adapt general education lessons and teach various subjects, such as reading, writing, and math, to students with mild and moderate disabilities. They also teach literacy and communication techniques, to students with severe disabilities. (para. 1)

The main question researchers now face is “no longer how do we recruit more teachers, but rather how can we best train and support our teachers” (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2011, p. 682). Unfortunately, school leaders often fill SET vacancies with unqualified teachers rather than finding ways to support and retain qualified SETs (Berry et al., 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Tyler, 2012). The complexity of SETs’ roles, a lack of school leadership support, arduous job responsibilities, and overall challenging workplace conditions (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014) often influence their decision to leave the field (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Green, 2011). Specifically, SETs commonly perceive there is a lack of school leadership support for their professional development (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Berry et al., 2011; Conley & You, 2017), managing stress, burnout, and feelings of incompetence (Boyd et al., 2011). Such issues create a dissatisfying SETs workplace experiences (Andrews & Brown, 2015).

Teachers generally become dissatisfied when their role expectations are not congruent with their experiences (Andrews & Brown, 2015). This leads many teachers to find other professional options. Since researchers have found that school leadership correlates with SET intent to stay in the field (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns; 2013; Grant, 2012; & Tsang & Liu, 2016), a closer exploration of what leadership approaches foster quality relationships and professional and support for SETs. Good leadership is necessary to reduce high turnover rates among SETs, which would ensure that every school retains highly qualified SETs.

### **Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework of the Problem**

**Background.** Teaching is commonly perceived as a fun job with summers off. However, many teachers are unsatisfied with their working conditions, particularly those who teach special education (Burkhauser, 2016; Cancio et al., 2013; Conley & You, 2017). When SETs feel overwhelmed and unsupported by school leaders, some push forward, but others simply give up.

Stress, “due to heavy workloads, reams of administrative tasks, and special demands of students with disabilities. drains teachers physically and emotionally” (Major, 2012, p. 2). Unfortunately, many SETs are not given the guidance and support to handle these workplace stressors (Berry et al., 2011; Lewis 2016; McCray et. al., 2011). Additionally, stress among SETs is heightened when they perceive a major discrepancy between what they expect their teaching roles and responsibilities to be and what they are (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Grant, 2017; Lavian, 2012; Major, 2012; Vittek, 2015). When first-year SETs encountered stressors such as heavy workload, lack of preparation time and collegial support, and too much paperwork, their job satisfaction plummeted (Boyd et al., 2011; Vittek, 2015). Often, teachers rely on their coworkers for professional and psychological support (Simone & Johnson, 2015).



Teachers need strong collaborative relationships with their school leaders to expand their knowledge and grow in their role (Al-Mahdy, Al-Harhi & Salah El-Din, 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Collaborative workplace cultures not only develop SETs, they foster a feeling of connectedness, which diminishes workplace stress. Further, they help them succeed in their very challenging educational settings (Boe, 2013).

Although school leaders often dismiss stress as a natural occurrence experienced by many people in the workplace, special education teachers face particular stressors. That is, they are working in understaffed schools, overloaded with responsibilities, and a student challenging population with emotional, learning, and behavioral disorders. Demands like these are more likely to lead to burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Høigaard, Giske, & Sundsli, 2012). Burnout occurs when situational stress and personal investment results in a progressive loss of energy and purpose as a result of working conditions (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Over time, burnout from managing students with emotional and behavior disorders (E/BD) makes SETs more likely to leave their jobs (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2018).

SETs as a whole are committed to their profession and genuinely dedicated to providing a quality education for students. Perversely, this makes burnout more likely when teachers feel that their efforts are being impeded in the workplace (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Without supportive leader-teacher relationships, leaders contribute to burnout, causing SETs to be less engaged in their work and eventually leave their positions (Major, 2012). While some studies focused on remediating the symptoms of stress and burnout (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010), overwhelmingly, research indicated that providing administrative and collegial support, especially for novice teachers, was paramount in promoting SETs job satisfaction levels and

preventing burnout from occurring (Lee et al., 2011).

When asked what would boost their job satisfaction, SETs suggest that schools create more time for collegial collaboration and mentorships to help them to manage IEP-related paperwork, develop behavior management skills, and deliver quality instruction (Boe, 2013; Lee et al., 2011; Tyler, 2012). Although several studies have suggested that both college teacher preparation programs and school districts assist new teachers and provide professional development that includes mentorship/peer support, most school leaders are not likely to provide special educators with mentors (Jackson, 2008; Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013; Lee et al., 2011). Peer mentors often faced scheduling conflicts and limited time in meeting with novice teachers. Also, mentors often lacked adequate mentoring training or clear expectations for what to do in a mentoring session (Barerra, Braley, Richard, & Slate, 2010). Unfortunately, “administrators sometimes do not understand the complexities of collaboration, and consequently, they are not sure how to nurture it, assess it, and determine the type of professional development needed to make it happen” (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002, p. 227).

**Context and history.** Studies show continuing difficulties in recruiting and retaining SETs across the United States. Forty-nine states are experiencing SET shortages (Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2018; NCPSSERS, 2018), and 82% of special education teachers report that the educational needs of students with disabilities are not being met because instruction is provided by unqualified teachers (Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2018; NCPSSERS, 2018). The shortage of special education teachers is 11% (Lignugaris-Kraft & West, n.d.). Approximately nine percent of SETs chose not to return to the profession after their first year (Grant, 2017), and 50% of special education teachers leave the field within five years (Alliance for Excellent Education, as cited in Thorp, 2013). Most data reflect the leading factors contributing to the

problem are excessive workload, stress from job demands, lack of administrative and collegial support, and lack of professional development (Lewis, 2017; NCPSSERS, 2018). SETs experience high levels of role dissonance and lack of commitment (Major, 2012). Special education teachers with low efficacy feel that they are ill-equipped to handle their student population, which creates negative attitudes and susceptibility to attrition and turnover (Lee et al., 2011). School leaders are often unaware of these negative experiences and feelings among their SETs. Although school leaders may find it challenging to address SET professional needs (Bettini, Cheyney, Wang, & Leko, 2015; Boyd et al., 2011), studies examining SET perceptions of administrative support for both veteran and novice SETs indicate that school can improve SET job satisfaction and retention (Burkhauser, 2016; Vittek, 2015).

**Theoretical framework.** Views of workplace leadership have evolved beyond the idea of top-down autocratic leadership. Instead, people-centered, relationship-building leadership has been promoted as a way to meet followers' needs (Dierendonck, 2011). Servant-like leadership emphasizes providing emotional support and professional growth for followers. In this study, SETs require both leadership approaches to be successful and more likely to remain in their jobs (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). Servant leadership builds trusting and cohesive relationships. When SETs feel that leaders prioritize their needs and well-being, they will be more dedicated and productive (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). Teachers that feel isolated and disconnected from their leaders are dissatisfied and unmotivated (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016).

Building teacher-leadership relationships gives SETs opportunities for ongoing communication, greater collaboration, and professional development due to the exchange of views, experiences, and knowledge between leaders and their followers (Rishabh rai & Prakash,

2012). This leader-follower exchange process contributes to a better understanding of the complex relationships between leaders and their followers (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Robert Greenleaf who originated the idea of servant leadership, postulates that leaders who show altruism, provide emotional healing, give wisdom, guide with persuasive mapping, and engage in organizational stewardship foster cohesive professional relationships (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

A lack of supportive leadership continues to affect retention for SETs resulting in high SET turnover and shortages. Stressful working conditions and ineffective school leadership accelerate turnover among SETs (Brunsting et al., 2014; Lavin, 2012). Stress, burnout, collegial isolation, and inadequate professional development also affect school districts' ability to retain qualified teachers (Grant, 2012; NCPSSERS, 2018).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth analysis of workplace experiences among SETs, particularly how school leadership practices influenced their retention. The rationale for this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the best leadership approaches to support SETs' professional and psychological needs. This study is valuable because school leaders across the country face challenges in filling vacant special education positions with highly qualified SETs. This study has been conducted to fill a gap in the research about the role school leaders can play in supporting SETs. Special education teachers can provide important perspectives for school districts that need to improve SET retention.

## **Research Questions**

This study will address the following questions:

1. How do teacher-school leadership relationships influence special education teachers' decision to stay or leave their workplaces?
2. How do special education teachers describe leadership that would best support them in their role?
3. What workplace factors do special education teachers perceive that school leaders should address in order to support them in their day-to-day responsibilities?

## **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of Study**

The rationale for this study is to provide a better understanding of which leadership approaches will facilitate SET retention. As SET turnover and shortages continue to worsen (Berry et al., 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012), the need for leadership strategies that foster collaborative relationships with teachers continues to grow (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Alexander, 2010; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Price, 2011). Unfortunately, few studies have explored the leadership approaches that would be most effective for guiding SETs in their specialized work (Jones et al., 2013; Price, 2011). Exploring the phenomenon of SET turnover is significant because of the shortage of qualified SETs for students with numerous emotional, physical, and cognitive disabilities (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Vittek, 2015). The results of this study may provide school leaders with data that describe the kind of supportive relationships SETs need to be successful in their role.

## **Definition of terms**

The following key terms are used throughout this study.

*Burnout* occurs when enduring situational stress and personal investment results in a progressive loss of energy and purpose because of poor working conditions (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

*Collegial support* is the dependability on peers in the workplace to provide social interaction for professional and psychological support they need (Simone & Johnson, 2015).

*Job satisfaction* is the emotional feedback that workers receive from particular aspects of their workplace and their commitment to the job as a whole (Conley & You, 2017).

*Lack of administrative support* occurs when the priorities of school leaders are not centered on the professional and psychological needs of teachers (Cancio et al., 2012)

*Leadership support* is the degree to which school leaders make teachers' roles and responsibilities easier and assist them in developing their pedagogical skills (Boyd et al., 2011).

*Mentoring* occurs when a senior person with professional and social experience establishes a relationship with a less experienced colleague to provide crucial knowledge, guidance and emotional support for an extended period (Barrera, Braley, & Slate, 2010).

*Novice teacher* is a teacher with less than 6 years of teaching experience (Mehrenburg, 2013).

*Professional development* is job-related support and training that extends teachers' knowledge and instructional skills to improve student learning outcomes (Bettini et al., 2017)

*Role ambiguity* develops when information regarding teacher's role, responsibilities, and rights are ineffectively communication to them and how they are to best put them into practice (Lavian, 2011).

*Servant leadership* is a style of leadership that encourages selfless leaders who focus on the well-being and overall needs of their followers by empowering and developing their talents (Dierendonck, 2011).

*SET attrition* refers to the phenomenon of special education teachers leaving the education profession (Vitteck, 2015).

*SET stress* occurs when special education teachers experience mental exhaustion and find it challenging to meet their professional responsibilities (Brunsting et al., 2014; Major, 2012).

*Special education teacher* is a teacher who “works with students who have a wide range of learning, mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. They adapt general education lessons and teach various subjects, such as reading, writing, and math, to students with mild and moderate disabilities. They also teach basic skills, such as literacy and communication techniques, to students with severe disabilities” (Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2015).

*Special education teacher retention* is the rate at which SETs retain the same job as the previous year (Vitteck, 2015).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* is a federal law that “ensures that all children with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017).

*Teacher turnover* is the transfer of teachers to other schools (Simone & Johnson, 2015).

## **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

The assumptions of this study are that rich data gathered about SETs' experiences with school leaders provided genuine accounts of their day to day experiences and will provide insight into leadership practices that foster collaborative leader-teacher relationships necessary to help SETs grow professionally, manage stressors, and feel fulfilled in their work environments. Thus, healthy workplace relationships foster open communication, knowledge building, and collaborative efforts.

Although this study was limited to one special education school and special education teachers, the participants' experiences in an extremely challenging school provided comprehensive rich and detailed accounts of their day-to-day responsibilities and interactions with their school leader.

As with all studies, this study has certain limitations. Its small sample size was drawn from a single school, which may affect the reliability and transferability of the findings. Further, the school's leader and previous SETs were not included in this study; therefore, the current school administrator and SETs that decided to leave the school would have provided more extensive and valuable data related to SET attrition. However, the data and findings will contribute to current and future research when exploring the type of leadership practices SETs perceive builds supportive leader-teacher relationships.

## **Summary**

Considering the very high level of turnover among SETs, it is imperative for leaders to understand the unique challenges of working in special education. In order to receive support for their emotional and professional needs, SETs need authentic leadership (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, & Jinks., 2007; Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). When leaders



develop supportive leader-teacher relationships, teachers tend to experience less stress and burnout, which can be worsened by a lack of professional development opportunities and inadequate collaborative support from school leaders and colleagues (Bettini et al., 2015; Brunsting et al., 2014; Zabel, Boomer, & King, 1984).

The remainder of this dissertation will be organized as follows: Chapter 2 is a literature review that will provide a comprehensive review and critique of studies pertaining to challenges that SETs face and their perceptions of how school leadership can affect their decision to stay in or leave their positions. Chapter 3 contains a description of the study's methodology, including a rationale for the research design, a description of the conceptual framework, and an explanation of how the study was conducted. The study was guided by three research questions. Chapter 4 provides a description of the data analysis in this study, including the instruments and questions used to gather data and a complete analysis of the data collected. Chapter 5 contains a summary of the entire study and a discussion of conclusions and implications.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction to Literature Review**

Even as the need for special education services rises, SETs are leaving their jobs at higher rates than their regular education counterparts (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Cancio et al., 2013; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Talley, 2016). As a result, school leaders must confront the task of addressing SET turnover and filling vacancies with qualified teachers (Berry et al., 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Tyler 2012; Vittek, 2015). The complex roles and responsibilities of special education teachers (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013) regularly lead to job dissatisfaction (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Green, 2011). Many SETs report a lack of institutional support, both from uncooperative administrators and a lack of professional development opportunities (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Conley & You, 2017). SETs also report high levels of stress, burnout, and feelings of role ambiguity and unpreparedness. Teacher role ambiguity develops from ineffective communication and information regarding a teacher's responsibilities, rights, and best practices (Lavian, 2011). These factors create a difficult working environment for SETs (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Jackson, 2008).

Several studies reflected the role of high-quality school leadership approach in addressing issues that affect teacher attrition and retention (Cancio et al., 2013; Grant, 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011; Tsang & Liu, 2016). These studies consistently found that providing good leadership and support to SETs is vital to encouraging them to remain in their jobs, especially for novice teachers (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Dierendonck, 2011; Kagler, 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Talley, 2016).

**Study topic.** The topic of study is the influence of school leadership on SET turnover. Examining SETs' perceptions of the leadership practices they encounter in their jobs would provide information about what kinds of leaders would best help SETs remain satisfied in their jobs. Servant-like leadership, which strives to meet the needs of followers, has been successful in supporting teachers dealing with school workplace challenges (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Dierendonck, 2011). The concept of servant leadership originated from theorist Robert K. Greenleaf. Servant leadership is “demonstrated by empowering and developing people; by expressing humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, and stewardship; and by providing direction” (Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1,228). The reciprocal relationships developed between followers and their servant leaders has a positive effect on leader-follower relationships (Taylor et al., 2007). When SETs have ineffective and unsupportive leaders, they either put forth the effort to succeed or give up (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). While many school leaders tend to dismiss stress as a natural occurrence experienced by most people in the workplace, the dynamics of working with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders often leads to SET burnout (Høigaard et al., 2012).

Over time, the daily job stressors SETs encounter, including managing students with emotional and behavior disorders (E/BD) can result in burnout and SET attrition (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Studies reveal that SET burnout occurs and is accentuated when enduring situational stress and personal investment results in a progressive loss of energy and purpose because of the conditions of their work (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). While SETs try to remain engaged and motivated under stressful workplace conditions, it has become more difficult because many school leaders do not adequately address these issues (Major, 2012).

Statistical software was used by researchers to compare SETs' current experiences and ideal perceptions of administrative support. Results show SETs perceive their experiences with school leaders are significantly lower than their ideal expectations, because many SETs feel they have minimal contact or support from their school leaders (Andrews & Brown, 2015). SETs are more inclined to burnout when school environments impede their efforts to accomplish their professional responsibilities (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). While some studies focused on remediating the symptoms of stress and burnout, such as behavior analysis-like therapy, rather than addressing workplace conditions (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010), interpersonal administrative support has been shown more effective in supporting SETs (Lee et al., 2011).

Research has shown that SETs can provide school leaders with essential data for ideal teaching, job satisfaction, and retention (Andrews & Brown, 2015). Without specific feedback from SETs regarding what they need from their school leaders, SETs' job design will make it likely they will continue to experience role dissonance, stress, and lack of commitment (Major, 2012). Optimal job design includes practices and structures that foster success for accomplishing work objectives (Conley & You, 2017; Major, 2015).

Novice SETs are most often not prepared for the role and demands of the job (Lee et al., 2011). First-year SETs introduction to stressors, such as extensive workload, lack of preparation time and collegial support, and required paperwork for special education students, lowers their job satisfaction levels (Vittekk, 2015, p. 2). In fact, job stressors, including lack of administrative support, is the impetus for many SETs not electing to return to their job (Grant, 2017). Ironically, School leaders perceive SETs' professional unpreparedness makes their job to support them more challenging. SETs with low efficacy feel they are ill-equipped to handle a special education population, which creates negative attitudes and the susceptibility to SETs' attrition

and burnout (Jackson 2008; Lee, et al., 2011). Special education teachers suggest that schools design mentorships and professional development to better equip them for managing IEP-related paperwork, specialized behavior management skills, and quality instruction. Research has not provided clear reasons why SETs are not provided with colleagues to mentor them (Jackson, 2008; Jones et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2011). The study's findings emphasize both college teacher preparation programs and school districts should assist new teachers and provide adequate professional development that includes peer mentorships to assist novice teachers with the demands of their role (Jackson, 2008; Jones et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2011). However, Dr. Marilyn Friend (as cited in Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002), a leading expert in special education collaboration, believes "administrators sometimes do not understand the complexities of collaboration, and consequently, they are not sure how to nurture it, assess it, and determine the type of professional development needed to make it happen" (p. 6) to foster SET growth and retention. School leaders must remain involved in collaborative approaches to ensure that novice teachers receive the pedagogical support they need from them and veteran teachers.

**Context.** Not surprisingly, studies continue to show a sense of urgency to recruit and retain SETs in the United States. Special education teacher shortages are pervasive in most states (Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2018; NCPSSERS, 2018). Additionally, many SETs are deciding to leave their jobs or transfer jobs early in their careers (Boyd et al., 2011; Grant, 2017; Jones et al., 2013). Stress, burnout, and a lack of professional development, peer support, and quality school leadership have been major factors accelerating a trend (Cancio et al., 2013; Lewis, 2017; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014; NCPSSERS, 2018). Finding leadership approaches that holistically meet the needs of SETs can reduce SET turnover (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Burkhauser, 2016; Boyd, 2011; Cancio et al., 2013).

**Significance of the topic.** Due to the past three decades of substantial teacher turnover and attrition, especially SETs in U.S. public schools (Simone & Johnson, 2015), it is imperative that SET attrition is further explored to determine the extent of SETs' workplace dissatisfaction perceptions and how school leadership approaches can effectively address the problem. Research has shown that if the problem is not managed expeditiously more SETs will leave the field, which will affect the quality of school programs (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Students receiving special education services need instructional continuity and sustained student-teacher relationships. With the rise in the identification of students with disabilities, it is essential that schools are provided with the most qualified SETs to ensure that all students receive a quality education from a teacher with a certification in Teacher for Students with Disabilities (Berry et al., 2011; Bureau of Labor & Statistics, 2018; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Grant, 2017). For this reason, retention efforts for qualified SETs should identify specific conditions and leadership strategies effective for teacher workplace attitudes and beliefs, and decisions to stay or leave their jobs (Alexander, 2010; Carson, 2015; Boe, 2013; Vittek, 2015). Specifically, further research can provide more awareness in what types of leadership compared to others would be most beneficial for handling the challenges of a special education school environment. Special education teachers' feedback can expand crucial data for school leaders to develop strategies to promote an educational environment that reduces stress and burnout and provides adequate support and professional development to prepare and maintain highly skilled SETs.

**Problem statement.** Workplace dissatisfaction among SETs continues to have a great impact on their decision-making to leave or stay on their jobs, creating a nationwide teacher shortage. Compounding the problem is the lack of school leadership interventions to specifically target SET perceptions of workplace dissatisfaction. Data gathered from both regular education

teachers (RETs) and SETs reveals the more unsupportive a school organizational climate is perceived, the greater feelings of stress and burnout, which leads to attrition (Lavin, 2012). Low self-efficacy, minimal professional development, and work-related stress and burnout have shown to be key areas in need of more attention to combat workplace dissatisfaction and SET turnover.

**Organization.** The literature review will explore key workplace factors affecting SETs job satisfaction and attrition rates. Specifically, SETs level of stress, burnout, collegial support, and professional development will be presented. Special education teacher stress, related to their challenging role, is a major factor SETs perceive is not adequately addressed by school leaders. Compounding the problem is when SETs become more stressed when their role expectations and job-related experience is mismatched, stress is more prevalent (Brunsting et al, 2014; Zabel et al., 1984). In addition, SETs experienced high levels of burnout due to SETs' experience with mental and physical work-related exhaustion, and it is exacerbated by a lack of personal accomplishment (Brunsting et al., 2014; Helou, Nabhani, & Bahous, 2016). However, leadership support and peer collaboration were strategies SETs perceived would help them manage stress and burnout and be successful in their role (Brunsting et al., 2014; Helou et al., 2016). Special education teachers require professional development, which include peer-mentorship in teaching students with special needs (Barrera et al., 2010). Many SETs remain in their roles because of the connectivity, interactions, and relationships they develop with their peers (Boe, 2003).

A conceptual framework focused on servant-like leadership's influence on addressing the aforementioned to improve SETs' perceptions of their workplace conditions and, consequently, decreasing SETs decisions to leave their job or career in teaching will be presented.

People-centered management and leadership that priority is peoples' well-being and professional growth provides organizations and its employees the support they need to success (Taylor & Renner, 2003).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Studies consistently found a lack of effective school leadership is a significant factor that affect SETs' decisions to stay or seek employment in another school (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Burkhauser, 2016; Conley & You, 2017); conversely, researchers indicated leaders who are selfless and have a desire to serve others by meeting their followers' professional and emotional needs have followers that are more satisfied and likely to remain in their workplace (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Dierendonck, 2011). Thus, it is essential to further examine servant leadership, its relationships, and the impact it has on SETs' perceptions of their school leaders' practices.

Unlike most organizational leadership practices where the primary goal is the prosperity of the organization, a servant leader is sincerely focused on the concerns of their followers (Dierendonck, 2011). Servant school leaders are more inclined to address the needs of SETs because they are "concerned firstly to serve rather than firstly to lead; in other words, meeting the needs of their followers is a higher priority than achieving self-interest and material possession" (Al-Mahdy et al., 2002, p. 544). This leadership style is resolute in creating a shared vision, empowering teachers, collaborating with them, and assisting them in reaching their full talents and potential; consequently, SETs who feel supported by their leaders are more committed to stay in their jobs (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Cobb, 2015). A servant leader principal "ensures teachers' participation in decisions that affect their work lives, because servant leadership suggests collaboration between leader and follower" (Cerit, 2009, p. 603).



Servant school leaders’ altruism, wisdom, stewardship, emotional healing and persuasive mapping builds positive reciprocal relationship between school leaders and SETs whose role is complex. Followers experience higher Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), which is an exceptional and genuine relationship that leaders develop with their followers (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Leadership Membership Exchange flourishes when servant leaders ensure that their followers’ physical, psychological, and emotional well-being are being met (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Cerit, 2009; Dierendonck, 2011). Dierendonck (2011) found that servant leadership influence leader-follower relationships and the psychological environment within organization, which affects followers’ workplace satisfaction, performance, and longevity. Figure 1 depicts the impact of servant leadership and LMX has on job satisfaction (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011).

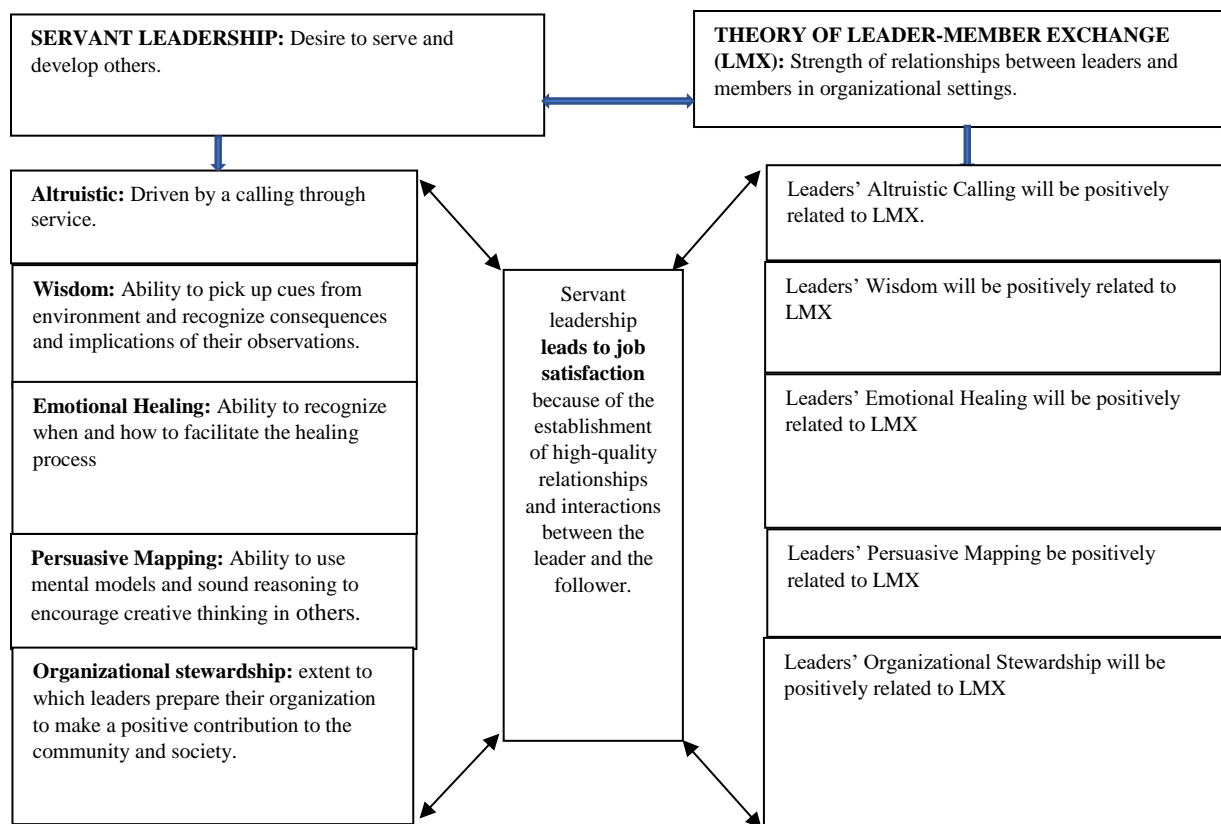


Figure 1. Servant leadership & LMX.

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in existing research, my own experience as a school administrator, and a philosophical servant-like leadership framework. School principals who practice servant leadership approaches are perceived significantly higher by their teachers in the five leadership areas on the Leadership Practices Inventory. Leadership Practices Inventory is an instrument designed for teachers to assess school leaders' effectiveness and provide school leaders with critical feedback on their leadership approach (Taylor et al., 2007). While the servant leadership premise is to serve, it is much more in-depth and effective compared to other leadership approaches. That is, servant leadership's altruism, wisdom, organizational stewardship, emotional healing, and persuasive mapping behaviors encompasses a "team approach, creating a learning environment in which personal growth and employee fulfillment are emphasized" (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 402). Ultimately servant leadership creates strong leader-follower relationships and higher workplace satisfaction (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Dierendonck, 2011; Taylor et al., 2007).

**Altruism.** One of the key findings of servant leadership is the care that is shown to followers making them successful in their jobs (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2007). This characteristic is crucial for SETs who feel stressed and burnout due to the dynamics of their role in educating special needs student population (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brunsting et al., 2014; Cancio et al., 2015; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Leaders whose supportive interactions with their followers are authentic and leadership approach is not self-serving (Dierendonck, 2011). Employees that perceive and experience their leaders' genuine concern for their emotional and professional well-being are more dedicated and productive on the job (AL-Mahdy et al. 2016).

**Wisdom.** Servant leaders are aware and understand their followers' needs. Furthermore, wise leaders facilitate knowledge formation through collaborative leadership with their followers

that result in a sense of mutual empowerment and caring relationships (Rishabh & Prakash, 2012). Special education environments that are collaborative and share knowledge foster cohesive relationships, which are essential for improving SETs' efficacy and retention (Boe, 2013). Special education teachers indicate that one of the most positive and rewarding aspects of their work is the establishment of cohesive relationships with their colleagues because they fostered feelings of inclusiveness and support, which influenced their career longevity (Boe, 2013).

**Emotional healing.** A servant leader's skill at recognizing when and how to facilitate the therapeutic process of their followers is just as significant as eventually providing the emotional healing required, which hinges on the servant leaders' wisdom of knowing the psychological needs of their followers (AL-Mahdy et al., 2016). Servant leaders who work towards maintaining their followers' job satisfaction are more concerned with their followers' emotional needs and, therefore, likely to treat them with the sensitivity they require (Dierendonck, 2011). A rater-report subscale has shown that an employees' emotional healing is a predictor for employees' workplace satisfaction (AL-Mahdy et al., 2016). Emotional healing is accomplished when servant principals consistently and effectively communicate and show appreciation for and attention to teachers' views and overall role (Roderick & Jung, 2012, p. 5) rather than utilizing typical autocratic leadership approaches without the required support.

**Persuasive mapping.** Servant leaders' willingness to give their teachers an acceptable level of autonomy that fosters creativity in their role as teachers (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011) increases job satisfaction and reduces attrition (Tyler, 2012). Persuasive mapping does not rely on autocratic leadership to motivate behaviors; instead, leaders use sound reasoning to encourage and support their followers to succeed in their jobs (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Empowering

teachers' nurtures self-efficacy and gives them a sense of ownership in the outcome of their actions, and builds creative energy and trusting relationships with their leaders (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Cerit, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007). Cerit (2009) asserted, "A principal who exhibits behaviors of servant leadership might contribute to increasing teachers' self-efficacy" (p. 603).

**Organizational stewardship.** Servant leaders desire to not only support and prepare teachers on the job, but desire to ensure their organization has the potential to make positive contributions to their communities and society (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016), which is conducive with SETs' desire to make a positive impact on their students' future (Bell, 2012; Boe, 2013). Like servant school leaders, teachers often have a yearning to move beyond their self-centeredness by showing a dedication of social responsibility to their students, community, and society at large (Brunsting et al., 2014; Cerit, 2009; Rishabh & Prakash, 2012). Specifically, ensuring that the well-being of teachers is a priority for school leaders. In doing so, teachers who feel supported, can effectively do their jobs, and are less likely to contribute to the SETs attrition, turnover, and shortage. Moreover, SETs will be equipped to provide students with a quality education.

These characteristics of servant leaders accelerate quality LMX relationships based on trust between SETs and their leaders. Such relationships influence followers' professional growth, performance, and workplace satisfaction (Dierendonck, 2011) and, ultimately, teacher job satisfaction and retention. When significant positive relationships are discovered, vital knowledge about their followers and themselves become more evident to them. Barbuto and Hayden (2011) posit, "This knowledge adds to an understanding of the complex dynamics operating between leaders and their followers and informs educators of what impact the leaders' style may have upon the critical establishment of an effective relationship" (p. 21).

## **Servant Leadership Versus Other Leadership Styles**

Although there is no leadership style that is suited for all organizations, leadership styles should be appropriate for organizations and employees. Thus, it is imperative that leaders understand that importance of effective leadership approaches, which will increase and maintain workplace satisfaction and retention (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015). Due to the dynamics of SETs' jobs, understanding a relational leadership approach facilitates the constant flow of information. This allows leaders to address the needs of their followers; moreover, it builds supportive and trusting relationships (Cancio et al., 2013; Cerit, 2009; Dierendonck, 2011; Rishabh & Prakash, 2012). Jones et al. (2013) found SETs often did not receive guidance to successfully manage and perform prescribed routines and tasks that are specific to SETs. Amanchukwu et al. (2015) found "Effective educational leadership and management of schools create structures and processes and establish relationships which enable teachers to engage fully in teaching" (pp. 8-9).

**Transformational leadership.** Although research shows servant leadership is an effective style that motivates and satisfies their followers, it has been criticized for being impractical, fostering passivity, and sometimes not focused on serving the right cause (Cerit, 2009). Servant leadership's focus is on being responsible for more than the organizational goals and adopts an altruistic and moral dimension. In transformational leadership, professional development and empowerment of followers is secondary to the accomplishment of organizational objectives (Cerit, 2009). However, transformational leaders are inclined to communicate the importance of organizational change that inspires and motivates people (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). While focusing on the organization is crucial, peoples' needs must first be met for an organization to be successful (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Dierendonck, 2011).

Servant-like principals are skilled at inspiring their teachers through “creating a shared vision and empowering them to achieve that vision by using their full talents and potential” (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016, p. 544). Collaboration efforts also result in the emotional and professional development of their followers.

**Distributive leadership.** Distributive leadership takes a different leadership approach: it emphasizes leadership in accordance to the demands of the market or organizational needs and their employees’ expertise (Cerit, 2009). The theoretical distinction between distributive and servant leadership is that servant leaders’ primary focus is on leading, although both leadership approaches do emphasize role-sharing and collaborative efforts. Collaboration is a means to “accomplish the complex goals of the school, a way to build community, while responding to the many pressures of the contemporary education system” (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002, p. 224). On the other hand, distributive leadership does not place high value on people, their personal growth, and displaying other components of servant leadership. Research reveals there is a positive and significant relationship between teacher job satisfaction and principals that embody servant leadership (Cerit, 2009).

**Autocratic leadership.** With various mandates associated with educating students with disabilities, autocratic leadership, might be required to ensure adherence to state and federal educational policies. However, leadership that consists of mostly directives and expectations of a follower’s obedience is extreme transactional leadership, which leave followers powerless. Moreover, dictatorial leadership leads to unhappy employees (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). For this reason, this style of leadership is not very effective for fostering SETs’ professional growth and workplace satisfaction.

In essence, understanding leadership approaches can offer school districts an opportunity to adapt and perfect educational leadership practices by aligning and applying leadership approaches that close the gap between leadership concepts and practice, which will give leaders an effective and practical foundation in theory and application (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Moreover, school leaders are encouraged to discover a leadership style that will be supportive to their educators; at the same time, the school achieves positive results.

### **Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

**SET Stress and servant leadership.** Research shows SETs' workplace stress greatly affects their well-being and leads to attrition when unaddressed (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brunsting et al., 2014; Cancio et al., 2015; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Servant leadership has been a vital construct in reducing stress because subordinates feel this style of leadership values their well-being (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011, Dierendonck, 2011). As a result, teachers are more dedicated to and productive in schools (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Equally noteworthy, school leaders capable of addressing SETs' stress have been shown to develop stronger relationships with their teachers (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Leader Member Exchange is fostered and accelerated by a servant leadership approach (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Researchers indicated, "servant leadership success arises from the establishment of high-quality relationships and interactions between the leader and the follower. Committed servant leaders pay attention to the welfare of their followers, which leads to higher satisfaction and work motivation" (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016, p. 548). A core servant leaders' characteristic is altruistic practices towards followers, which SETs valued most in their school leaders (Roderick & Jung, 2012).

**SET burnout and servant leadership.** Not surprisingly, school leaders do not meet SETs' needs to handle stress, which leads to burnout. Teacher burnout occurs when teachers experienced extended periods of stress, feelings of emotional exhaustion, and feeling non-productive in their role (Brunsting et al., 2014). Special education teacher interviews indicate that poor working conditions, including too much paperwork, unmanageable workloads, burnout, stress, inadequate peer and leadership support, and professional isolation led to SETs leaving their profession or jobs (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Andrews & Brown, 2015; Conley & You, 2017; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Grant, 2012; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013; NCPSSERS, 2018). SETs experience burnout due to working conditions, such as a lack of leadership support and/or strained relationships with their leaders (Brunsting et al., 2014; Grant, 2017; Helou et al., 2016). However, studies indicate, school leaders have control to alleviate SETs' stress (Roderick & Jung, 2012) when their aim is to serve, take interest in, and provide emotional support for their followers during times of managing stress and burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Grant, 2017; Helou et al., 2016; Lavian, 2012; Lipscomb, 2014). Principals who provide emotional support effectively communicates, expresses appreciation, and shows a genuine interest their teachers' viewpoints and efforts (Roderick and Jung, 2012). Significant and positive relationships with teachers (LMX) development through servant-leader principals contributes to teacher job satisfaction (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Price, 2011).

**Collegial support and servant leadership.** In addition to a servant leadership's support to help SETs cope with stress and burnout, findings show most SETs perceive that an induction program and administrative and collegial support are central factors in their recruitment and retention (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). SETs perceive collegial support as a



prominent factor in workplace satisfaction, which has an effect on their decisions to stay or leave their workplace. SETs expressed positive workplace relationships with their colleagues is an aspect of their jobs they found extremely rewarding (Boe, 2013; Caputo & Langher, 2014; Jones et al., 2013; Kagler, 2011; Mehrenberg, 2013; Prather-Jones, 2011). Without school leadership support, SETs tend to feel isolated and burnt out (Caputo & Langher, 2014). In fact, peer support is perceived as superseding other support in secondary schools as a valuable component for SET workplace satisfaction (Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape, & Norwich, 2011); however, it is perceived as an area in need of administrative attention. Providing peer support to assist novice teachers' transition into a new job easier reduces their attrition and improves workplace satisfaction (Barrera et al., 2010). It has been shown that novice SETs perceive sparse collegial support as a factor affecting their workplace dissatisfaction attitudes, and SETs feel school leaders contribute to the problem. Studies also reveal that school leaders are unprepared and lack adequate training to effectively support the needs of SETs (Bettini et al., 2015; Boyd et al., 2011; Jackson, 2008; Roderick & Woo Jung, 2012; Schaaf, Williamson, & Novak, 2015). Administrative support refers to the extent to which school leaders help teachers be successful by providing ways to make teachers' role and responsibilities easier (Boyd et al., 2011).

**SET professional development and servant leadership.** In addition to inadequate collegial support for SETs, studies have found professional development for novice and veteran teachers is not sufficiently provided. Professional development is job-related support and training that extends teachers knowledge and instructional skills and improve student learning outcomes (Bettini et al., 2015; Bettini et al., 2017). The feedback from SETs' interviews found that induction programs, administrative support, and teacher mentors are key factors in retaining

them. Efforts of servant-leader school principals to develop teachers had a significant impact on teachers' overall job satisfaction (Cerit, 2009).

Studies reveal that to develop teachers and increase their job satisfaction, school leaders need to provide professional development and opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other. Servant leaders embody the knowledge and skills to assist and support their followers (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011, Dierendonck, 2011). Special education teachers may have rudimentary pedagogical practices and knowledge and basic student management skills; however, they do not have ample or specialized professional development in special education, tools to cope with stress, and self-efficacy and role certainty needed to effectively manage their jobs (Major, 2012). Thus, school administrators and the structure of school environments play a role in the gap between what educators expect and the reality of their jobs (Andrew & Brown, 2015; Boe, 2013; Brunsting et al., 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013).

Predictably, mentorships and induction school programs are perceived by SETs as inadequate, which affects their professional development and decisions to remain in their jobs (Alliance for Excellence Education, 2004; Barrera et al., 2010; Boe, 2013; Green, 2011; Kagler, 2011; Lewis, 2016). Novice and veteran SETs' interviews and survey responses indicate schools should create mentorships to better meet their needs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Barrera et al., Boe, 2013; Grant, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Mehrenberg, 2013). Brown and Schainker (2008) found common workplace factors, such as lack of collegial mentorship, professional development, leadership support, and stress were linked to teachers choosing to leave their schools. Another case study highlighted SET perceptions regarding their frustrations with the lack of mentoring and professional development because of their unpreparedness to serve students with disabilities (Jackson, 2012).

Fortunately, the literature has shown how various methods were helpful for examining SETs' perceptions related to school leadership's response to their professional and emotional needs. To generalize SET workplace experience findings, some studies compared the SETs' perceptions across interviews (cross-case analysis) and within interviews of participant's responses (constant comparison) (Helou et al., 2016; Prather-Jones, 2011). Additionally, the use of scales, such as Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Educators Survey (ES) is a useful approach for measuring and comparing SETs' workplace burnout and satisfaction levels to schools' attrition rates. Scales are effective for measuring prevention of the risk of burnout in novice SETs (Brunsting et al., 2014; Caputo & Langher, 2014; Helou et al., 2016).

It was evident that the qualitative tools, such as interviews and focus groups, used in many of the studies provided rich and descriptive data about teachers' lived experiences (Barrera et al.; 2010; Kagler, 2011). Using interview data made it easier for me to identify themes related to school leadership support and SET turnover. To ensure accuracy prior to analyzing data, interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and themes and sub-themes categorized for review of findings (Boyle et al., 2011; Lewis, 2016). For example, Helou et al. (2016) analyzed transcripts inductively and deductively followed by comparing the results for trustworthiness. Similar studies might provide further development of areas that could provide more insight on what factor influence first year SETs' decision to leave or stay in the profession or jobs (Grant, 2015).

Quantitative approaches such as surveys and numerical data were instrumental in understanding the relationship between teachers' perceptions of their working conditions and their intended and actual departures from schools (Brunsting et al., 2014; Ladd, 2011). Predominantly, web-based surveys were used to gather data about the impact of workplace

conditions on SET turnover and attrition. Likert or Likert-like instruments measured survey responses. Likert scales are commonly used to collect and measure participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs ranging from measure scores on a 4 to 5-point scale (Cancio et al, 2013; Conley & You, 2017). Likert responses provided a range of SETs' perception measurements from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Descriptive analysis was widely used to analyze and interpret data. For example, a hypothesis relating to leadership and teacher social capital used a task survey and a Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) program for analyzing and measuring means, standard deviations and inter-correlation between workplace satisfaction variables (Hoigaard et al., 2012). These studies provided a clearer insight of the relationship between teacher perceptions of leadership practices, social capital and teacher efficacy (Minckler, 2013). One study investigated new teachers' workplace behavior and sense of productivity regarding job satisfaction, level of leadership support, feeling burnt out, and employment decisions (Hoigaard et al., 2012). Statistical analysis indicates teacher efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction and job burnout and the intention to quit negatively related to job satisfaction (Hoigaard et al., 2012).

Qualitative case studies were conducted to develop a clearer understanding of what is needed to support new SETs. One study reports the principal took proactive steps to retaining her teachers; however, her findings showed the leadership approach she took to support her teachers was ineffective and made the turnover problem worse (Brown & Schainker, 2008). Although the research was conducted 10 years ago, it is relevant for comparing it with present studies. Specifically, the principal indicated she had a 35 % turnover rate with a higher portion among those teaching special education students (Brown & Schainker, 2008). The SET turnover rate of this case study's is 32 %, which indicates the problem is still prevalent.

The triangulated data used in the studies, such as semi-structured interviews, surveys, and open-ended questions, permitted SETs to respond in both restricted and nonrestricted questions. Triangulation is the usage of various methods to obtain data and enhance the knowledge of what is discovered in research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 64). For example, Kagler (2011) used semi-structured interviews, surveys, and open-ended questions to examine factors influencing recruitment and retention of SETs. Data triangulation is essential when analyzing different instruments and seeking common patterns and themes, and, consequently, developing categories. That is, consequently, they are compared for similarities and drawing conclusions about a phenomenon (Helou et al., 2016). Researchers analyzed data separately and compared them for likeness and/or conflicts. One mixed-method study was instrumental in examining the relationship between job stressors and SETs' job satisfaction using open and closed-end electronic surveys and focus-group sessions, which helped to clarify teachers' perceptions on the workplace factors facilitating their stress (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Survey items were often collaboratively developed by those related to the field of special education (Bell et al., 2011; Cancio, et al., 2015). Methods consisting of both open and closed-ended questionnaires, interviews, statistical data, and focus groups were used to triangulate data, which contributed to the studies' credibility (Barrera et al.; 2010; Kagler, 2011). The focus group approach was a good approach for member checking because it provided additional clarifications and key information about SETs' perceptions in the workplace (Barrera et al.; 2010; Kagler, 2011).

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

While most research will likely have its limitations and there is no "perfect" methodology, the literature review was found to be thorough in providing mostly clear and adequate methods for examining SETs' workplace challenges and the impact supportive

leadership has on SET career decisions. The selection of data gathering instruments, such as surveys, interviews, and review of previous data were purposefully employed (Harris, 2014); and a common set of research procedures, comprising of systematic and structured methods for data coding, analysis, and interpretation were used in the studies. For example, Thorp (2013) conducted SET interviews, coded the data, and analyzed themes to explore and determine their relationship to SET longevity. Educational census and statistical data offered ample data for quantitative and qualitative studies (Blackwell, 2016; Cobb, 2015; Helou et al, 2016).

Qualitative strengths included semi-structured audio-taped interviews (Boyle et al., 2011; Carson; 2015; Lewis, 2016) and focus groups to ensure that the data were detailed and accurate. Additionally, member checking was integral for accurate data interpretation. That is, participants were asked to review the study's interpretations and conclusions to enhance the accuracy, credibility and trustworthiness of the study (McMillan, 2012). A systematic data analysis approach for analyzing themes and subthemes provided a better understanding about SET attrition (Boyle et al., 2011; Lewis, 2016; Helou et al., 2016). Credibility was added to the findings by comparing SET and school leaders' responses across and within interviews (Prather-Jones, 2011). Although small sample size was a common weakness in the studies, which limited the ability to generalize findings, researchers were careful to relay gaps in their research and alerting readers not to overgeneralize findings based solely on their research. Instead, it was recommended to engage in reviewing and performing future research to provide a more in-depth comprehension of the topic of study (Harris, 2014).

Generally, the research designs used to examine the relationship between SET workplace dissatisfaction perceptions and its relationship to turnover, attrition and teacher shortage established key workplace conditions that affect SETs decision to stay or leave for another job or

leave their profession (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Cancio et al., 2013; Talley, 2016). The use of mostly on-line surveys was a quick and inexpensive avenue for gathering data. Descriptive coding and interpretative analysis were used to determine clear patterns and themes for interpretation. SPSS program was used for evaluating data and Pearson product correlation coefficient was often used to identify any statistically significant relationships between administrator leadership styles and other workplace factors and special education teacher retention rates (Alexander, 2010; Carson, 2015; Høigaard et al., 2012; James-LaMonica, 2015; Lee et al., 2011). Surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and state databases indicated extreme student behaviors, lack of effective mentors, support, or professional development, and ongoing stress and burnout were factors found to influence special education teacher attrition (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Andrews & Brown, 2015; Conley & You, 2017; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013).

Weaknesses in methodology were mostly due to the use of small or limited sample sizes for examining factors contributing to SET turnover. For example, Carson (2015) only used administrator participants from a rural southwestern area in the United States to examine to “what extent, if any, a relationship existed between the leadership styles of primary and secondary school administrators and the retention rate of special education teachers in Southwestern United States” (p. 3). Although the findings showed no statistically significant relationship exists between school leadership style and SETs’ retention rate, researchers noted the findings could not be generalized without a larger sample size. Andrew and Brown (2015) restricted their study to one school district with a small a sample size and limited it to female participants. Comparing more SETs’ experiences in multiple and larger school districts and more diverse populations would have provided greater insight into the experiences of SETs’

reasons to remain in the field and help determine the transferability of the current study results.

Boyd et al. (2011) did not identify factors related to the role school leaders play in how or why their leadership approach affects teachers, nor does it provide teachers' perceptions of what leaders could do to support them in their role, workplace satisfaction levels, and reasons for their workplace retention. For example, one survey item asked teachers to rate the extent of their school administrator's behavior toward supporting and encouraging them in the role. However, the question did not clarify what constitutes "supportive" and "encouraging." Teachers' interpretation of "supportive" and "encouraging" varied depending on their experiences and perception of the words used in the survey. Another study conducted by Helou et al. (2016), was weakened by a small number of teachers interviewed and questionnaire respondents lack of participant diversity: this mixed-methods study included mostly women in Lebanon. The aim of the study was to provide a greater insight into the phenomenon of teachers supporting other teachers to prevent burnout and increase their professional longevity.

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Research shows SET turnover, attrition, and shortages will continue to be a problem throughout North America if school leaders do not effectively address the problem (Berry et al., 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Tyler 2011; Vittek, 2015). The demanding and complex role of SETs and limited effective support they receive (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013) contributes to their negative perceptions of their jobs, and, ultimately, their decision to leave (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Bell, 2012; Berry et al., 2011; Green, 2011; Simone & Johnson, 2015). Further, school leadership, collegial support, and professional development are perceived as deficient by SETs in many schools (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Barrera et al., 2010; Boyle et



al., 2011; Cancio, et al, 2011; Conley & You, 2017; Vittek, 2015), which adds to stress, burnout, and role ambiguity (Brunsting et al., 2014; Emery, & Vandenberg, 2010; Grant, 2017).

Job-related stress leads to burnout among SETs, which affects their well-being. More importantly, it eventually leads to teachers no longer being committed to their schools (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Vittek, 2015). Teachers either transfer to other schools or leave the profession entirely (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brunsting et al., 2014; Cancio et al., 2015; Emery, B., 2010; Vittek, 2015). School leaders who sufficiently address SETs' stress develop stronger relationships with them (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Roderick & Jung, 2012); consequently, SET job satisfaction and retention are increased. Although job-related stress and burnout might be commonplace in many workplaces; overwhelmingly, research shows both can be addressed with selfless school leadership and collegial support (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011).

Collegial support is a key factor in SETs' perceptions of workplace satisfaction that affects their decisions to stay or leave their jobs. For example, Andrews and Brown (2015) used SPSS to compare SETs' current teaching experiences with teachers' model views of collegial support, and researchers found a significant difference in teachers' ideal perceptions of peer support scores to what they actually experienced. Without the support, SETs feel secluded and more susceptible to extreme levels of burnout (Caputo & Langher, 2014; Simone & Smith, 2015). Veteran peer support reduces novice SETs' turnover rate and increases their workplace satisfaction (Barrera et al., 2010). Positive collegial relationships are extremely rewarding to SETs (Boe, 2013; Caputo & Langher, 2014; Jones et al., 2013; Kagler, 2011; Mehrenberg, 2013; Prather-Jones, 2011); however, school leaders do not provide much support to facilitate time for peer support and other professional needs required for SETs to be successful.

Providing SETs with sufficient professional development and time to collaborate with their peers increases SETs' job satisfaction levels (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Brunsting et al., 2014; Boyle et al., 2011). Professional development and collegial support are paramount to beginner SETs because they often are not well-equipped to handle stress, divert burnout, and prevent feelings of low self-efficacy, and role uncertainty (Major, 2012). When teachers' experiences were contrary to their expectations, they separated from their schools (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Grant, 2017; Lavian, 2012; Major, 2012; Vittek, 2015). Thus, professional development, collegial support, mentorships and induction school programs are essential to meet SETs' professional needs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Barrera et al. 2010; Boe, 2013; Green, 2011; Kagler, 2011; Lewis, 2016). Nurturing school principals who aid in the development of their teachers, significantly and positively, affect teachers both intrinsically and extrinsically. Hence, teachers feel a sense of self-worth and accomplishment in the job (Cerit, 2009).

While common workplace factors such as stress, burnout, and a lack of collegial support, leadership support, and professional development influenced SETs longevity, studies show effective and affective leadership approaches are crucial for improving employee workplace attitudes and retention. Greenleaf (2016) believes servant leaders whose desire is to ensure that their followers' psychological and professional needs are met, leads to LMX and workplace satisfaction. Servant leaders pay close attention to the well-being of their subordinates, which promotes their motivation, productivity, and workplace satisfaction (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Cobb, 2015). SETs value school leaders' behaviors that are supportive, especially in the emotional domain (Roderick & Jung, 2012). One district-level school administrator emphasized

service should be the core of the district's identity. He posited, "Your purpose is to be selfless, your purpose is to serve" (Bettini et al., 2017, p. 119).

### **Critique of Previous Research**

As SET turnover, attrition, and shortages become more urgent in schools throughout North America, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies provided key insights into workplace factors contributing to the problem (Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Hogan, 2012; Kagler, 2011). Although, some studies did not indicate the precise methodological approach for a particular study (Barrera et al., 2010; Berry et al. 2011); they clearly described the methods used in the studies to explore and/or determine relationships between SET career decision-making and their relationship with school leaders. The purpose, problem, key terms and definitions were informative and contributed to the understanding of the research. Research questions and hypotheses were indicated in the abstracts and body of the articles. The collective body of research provided SETs' perception data focusing on key factors, such as level of leadership and collegial support, stress, burnout, and professional development, to substantiate what is contributing to the problem.

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches using interviews, surveys, observations, focus groups, and field and numerical data triangulation strengthen the research findings (Boe, 2013; Helou, et al., 2016; Kagler, 2011; Lewis, 2016). National teacher perception surveys and State statistical databases provided reliable studies that offered larger samples, participant responses, and consistent results (Blackwell & Young, 2016; Conley & You, 2017) to generalize their findings. Furthermore, the instruments used to gather various data provided a holistic approach to gaining a better understanding of the underlying factors for SETs' decision to stay or leave their jobs. Standard research coding for qualitative methods was

applied for seeking patterns and formulating themes to paint a clear picture of SETs' workplace experiences. A strength of qualitative methods was taped and transcribed interviews that ensured accuracy of participants' perceptions. Statistical Package for Social Sciences was beneficial for tabulating numerical data and for transforming qualitative data into numerical data (Blackwell & Young, 2016; Helou et al., 2016; Minckler, 2014). Matrices provided visuals of data as they related to research questions. Findings indicated the degree of leadership support is a major factor for SETs' decision to stay or leave their jobs (Andrews & Brown, 2015).

Although some studies had limitations due to small sample size that could not be generalized to other populations, findings could be transferrable. Larger studies showed statistically significant relationships between leadership styles and special education teacher retention rates (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Burkhauser, 2016). Burkhauser's (2016) longitudinal value-added study used 4 years of data from a North Carolina teacher survey on working conditions to examine and measure teachers' perceptions of their workplace conditions and relationship with their principal, which provided evidence that school principals have the capacity to aid in improving the working conditions and teachers' perceptions of their schools and has been linked to teachers' leaving decisions. However, most studies did not specifically measure the level of significance that specific leadership styles had on SETs workplace satisfaction, success in their role, leader-teacher relationships, and retaining them. Moreover, researchers did not explore why administrative support is essential to teachers and to what degree school leadership approaches influence teachers' career decisions (Boyd et al., 2011). These gaps in the research need further examination since researchers found teachers' perceptions of school administration has the greatest influence on teacher retention decisions (Boyd et al., 2011; Burkhauser, 2016); Cancio et al., 2013; Kagler, 2001). Thus, further research would be

necessary to provide administrators with a clearer understanding of what type of leadership relationship is required for retaining SETs. The studies did not go far enough to provide concrete data as to the leadership approaches that can contribute to reducing SET turnover.

## **Summary**

While the demand for qualified SETs in the United States has increased, school leaders struggle to retain them. (Berry et al., 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Tyler 2012; Vittek, 2015). Apart from the challenges of educating a demanding student population, ineffective school leadership and multidimensional responsibilities often make it extremely difficult for special education teachers to remain in their jobs (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013). Consistently, findings have shown poor leadership affects SETs' perceptions of their working conditions and attrition (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Green, 2011). In many schools, SETs perceive there is too little professional development or support from administration for them to be successful (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Conley & You, 2017). High levels of stress among SETs' lead to burnout; unpreparedness and unfulfilled job expectations often lead to a lack of self-efficacy (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Jackson, 2008). However, providing SETs with consistent and supportive servant-like leadership that promotes collaborative support, professional development, and emotional health will help SETs manage job-related stressors, reduce burnout, and consequently increase job retention (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Cancio et al., 2013; Dierendonck, 2011; Grant, 2012, Kagler, 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Prather-Jones, 2011; Talley, 2016; Tsang & Liu, 2016). Leaders whose main focus is serving their followers and ensuring their emotional and physical well-being have proven effective for building strong professional relationships and satisfied employees (Al-Mahdy et al., 2002; Dierendonck, 2011).

This literature review has uncovered a gap between SETs' workplace satisfaction and specific leadership approaches to address the problem. Dissatisfying workplace experiences, lack of leadership support to deal with workplace stressors, and distant relationships with school leaders have led to high turnover rates among SETs and nation-wide shortages in schools throughout the United States. As a result of findings from past studies, a qualitative phenomenological case study was used to examine, explore, and understand SETs' workplace experiences and what role school leadership play in SETs' decisions to stay or leave. Qualitative research is a comprehensive approach for the study of social phenomena. This approach uses multiple methods of inquiry and is naturalistic and interpretive in its study approach (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Hence, data was drawn from a small number of participants' experiences in their natural school setting. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews, participant journaling, and focus groups were data collected for understanding the SETs' experiences and motivation for their employment decisions. Phenomenology seeks clarification and a deeper understanding of perceptions and lived experiences that shed light into a problem. Phenomenological research entails the examination of participants' experiences and the relationship they have to the phenomenon (McMillan, 2012). In this case study, I used multiple instruments to collect data. This allow me gain a better understanding of SETs' workplace experiences the effect of school leadership practices on the employment decisions of a particular group of SETs in a particular special education school.

Multiple sources of data, including individual and focus group interviews, and participant journaling yielded in-depth and rich data for analysis and interpretation. Additionally, the different sources were triangulated for greater accuracy (Creswell & Plank-Clark, 2011). The data was systematically organized into patterns and themes, and then coded, analyzed,

interpreted, and shared with those instrumental in making the appropriate leadership changes to retain SETs, thus, ensuring that every student receives a quality education from skilled and certified SETs. The literature review has provided strong support for pursuing further studies to answer the following multifaceted research questions: How do teacher-school leadership relationships influence special education teachers' decision to stay or leave their workplaces? How do special education teachers describe leadership that would best support them in their role? What workplace factors do special education teachers perceive that school leaders should address in order to support them in their day-to-day responsibilities? These questions guided the research and assisted me in creating themes and categories during data analysis. Ultimately, themes assisted in drawing conclusions about the leadership styles that SETs believe would support them and help to build cohesive LMX.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction to Research Methodology**

Even though SETs continue to leave their jobs at a steady rate (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Cancio et al., 2013; Talley, 2016) and school leaders across the United States know that they must address SET turnover and attrition (Berry et al., 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Tyler 2012; Vittek, 2015), most school leaders have not addressed the issue driving SETs out of their workplace. That is, a lack of professional development, lack of collegial support, lack of administrative support, stress and burnout, and feelings of incompetence (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Høigaard et al., 2012; Major, 2012) have left teaching feeling dissatisfied in the workplace. As a result, many SETs are weighing the benefits of staying or leaving their current jobs (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Green, 2011; Lipscomb-Williams, 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013).

Although research indicates that school leaders share responsibility for cultivating successful SETs, previous research has demonstrated that SETs are dissatisfied with the relationship and support they receive from their school principals (Bettini et al., 2015; Burkhauser, 2017; Price, 2012). Principal-teacher relationships effects teachers' attitudes and commitment to their jobs (Bettini et al., 2015; Price, 2012). According to the theory of leader-member exchange (LMX), quality workplace relationships, especially between leaders and their followers, has a positive impact on employee job satisfaction. Committed leaders pay attention to the welfare and working conditions of their followers, which leads to followers' professional development, motivation, and job satisfaction (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). Schools which are experiencing high SET turnover should examine teachers' perceptions of their working environments to explore ways to improve the working environment (Burkhauser, 2017).



While SETs point to a lack of school leadership support a major factor affecting their workplace dissatisfaction (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Conley & You, 2017), the precise leadership approach(s) perceived as most effective by SETs for addressing their professional needs have not been thoroughly examined. For this reason, it was important the methodological approach was appropriate to further examine to what extent SETs perceived school leadership contributed to SET longevity. Methodology is an explanation of the research approach and process (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). This study used a qualitative phenomenological case study design to systematically collect various data in the participants' naturally occurring environment (McMillan, 2012) to assist in understanding why some SETs remain in their workplace and others choose to leave, and what impact school leadership practices had on SETs' decision-making. The school in which the study was conducted focused on and examined eight SETs' attitudes and perceptions of their school leader's support and to what extent it affected their workplace longevity.

### **Research Questions**

Three questions drove this research. The questions assisted in establishing the interview questions, which extended themes and concepts from emerging data. Specifically, the questions guided the direction in exploring how SETs perceived administrative support in their workplace and what impact it had on their commitment to stay on the job. The mostly non-directional questions were hinged on the study's literature review and conceptual framework, and they cultivated exploration and discovery of the essence of the problem (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

The study sought to answer and understand the following questions:

1. How do teacher-school leadership relationships influence special education teachers' decision to stay or leave their workplaces?

2. How do special education teachers describe leadership that would best support them in their role?
3. What workplace factors do special education teachers perceive that school leaders should address in order to support them in their day-to-day responsibilities?

This case study's questions were fitting for answering "how" questions and investigating occurrences in a current context (McMillan, 2012).

### **Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth analysis of SET workplace experiences, particularly how school leadership practices influenced their retention. The aim of the study was to gain a better understanding of the effect of leader-teacher relationships on employment longevity for SETs. I used a phenomenological design because I was interested in "interpreting what participants have said in order to explain why they said it" (Austin & Sutton, 2014, p. 137). I investigated how a school leadership approach was perceived by SETs and how those perceptions influenced their decision to remain in their jobs. Previous studies showed supportive relationships between principals and their teachers has an impact on teachers' attitudes and schools' overall climate (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2013; Price, 2012; Vittek, 2015). Further, research has shown that SETs perceived ineffective school leadership as a key factor contributing to their workplace dissatisfaction (Alexander, 2010; Andrews & Brown, 2015; Berry et al., 2007; Berry et al., 2011; Boe, 2013; Carson, 2015; Conley & You, 2017; Price, 2012; Vittek, 2015). I wanted to understand what kinds of leadership support, interactions with teachers, and other behaviors sustained SETs. Servant-like leadership does seem to be an effective leadership style that centers on serving, developing, and building relationships with their followers (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011).

**Qualitative phenomenological case study.** I used a qualitative phenomenological approach for this study. This design was suited for gaining a clear understanding of what type of leadership support and leader-teacher interactions helped SETs to stay in their jobs. It enabled me to gather extensive narratives of SETs' perceptions of themselves and their social contexts (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; McMillan, 2012; Sanders, 1982; Tsang & Liu, 2016). This helped me to clarify what kind of school leadership support SETs required to fulfill their job responsibilities. Qualitative research is an approach that explores and examines social phenomena conducted in the participants' natural setting without control or manipulation and draws on multiple methods of inquiry (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; McMillan, 2012).

Several methods of inquiry were utilized to explore and gain in-depth knowledge of the school leadership support and how it affected SET decision-making to stay committed to their workplace. The phenomenological aspect of this case study was designed to inquire and encourage participants to provide oral and written rich details about their lived experiences. Participants described their workplace experiences, which contributed to a better understanding of the participants' experiences and beliefs (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The value of phenomenological research is that it seeks explanations rather than measurements, obtains data directly from participants, and seek to understand human behaviors by developing questions in relation to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I conducted an in-depth analysis of distinctive group of teachers using a flexible form of exploration conducive for studying subjects in their natural environments (McMillan, 2012). That is, I investigated eight SETs' experiences with their school leader and relationship to their longevity on the job. Further, I sought to understand what leadership style was most appropriate for effective leader-teacher relationships that supports teachers in their role and retains them in the workplace. An empirical inquiry was

appropriate for this study because the objective was to thoroughly scrutinize SET turnover and attrition in a more authentic manner. Interview and journaling data were gathered directly from those related to a contemporary problem and based on real-life experiences.

One-to-one interviews, journaling, and focus group interviews were conducted involving SETs at a school for 5th through 12th grade special education students with learning, behavioral and physical disabilities. Multiple data sources are important for research, and these qualitative approaches add credibility to the study (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). The research approach gave voice to and extracted rich data from participants (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; McMillan, 2012; Sanders, 1982). I was provided with detailed accounts of experiences from those directly affected by the phenomenon. There were eight 45 to 60-minute one-to-one telephone interviews and two 60-minute focus group interviews. The school's library was reserved for the focus group interviews. Key documents, such as participant journals were offered to the participants to track detailed descriptions of their SET day-to-day workplace experiences in their teaching role and specific level of support they receive from their school administrator. The data helped to uncover themes and patterns that aided in understanding and developing theories about SETs' career decision-making process. Phenomenological studies explore participants' experiences to provide a better insight on the topic (McMillan, 2012; Sanders, 1982).

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

**Participant selection and sampling.** Selecting participants and sampling methods are crucial steps when conducting research to ensure that participants and sampling methods have the potential to provide answers to the research questions. The selection of participants was predicated on what they could contribute to the investigation and exploration of the study

(McMillan, 2012). Sampling procedures refers to the method, location, and recruitment methods (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). I used purposeful sampling to recruit participants.

Purposeful sampling is commonly used for case studies because it allows the researcher to collect qualitative data from individuals who can provide detailed and information-rich breadth of experiences related to the phenomenon (Adams & Lawrence, 2015; Adera & Bullock, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2015). The participant pool for this study was purposely selected from one special education school in the Northeastern region of the United States. Certified elementary, middle, and high school SETs, ranging from two years to 32 years of experience were recruited from this one site to share their thoughts and feelings about their professional relationships and level of support they received from their school leader. Additionally, SETs shared their perceptions of the type of support they required to be satisfied, successful in their jobs, and for retaining them. At this research site, 17 SETs were under the direct supervision of the school principal. The school's Information Technology designee sent an email to the teachers inviting them to participate in the study. The first 10 teachers consenting to participate in the study were used to gather data. The last two teachers to respond to the invitation were used as alternative participants if a participant(s) had chosen to no longer participate in the study. The participants under investigation had greater knowledge of the issue and potential to be insightful, concise, meaningful, and reflective.

The research site was located in a small state-approved 5<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade special education school. The school had been in existence for 25 years and was serving 84 students with physical, emotional, and cognitive disabilities. The school leadership consisted of a principal and an assistant principal. The principal had been the school's leader for nine years and primarily supervised 25 certified staff, which included 17 certified special education

teachers. The assistant principal had been in her role for nine years and supervised 50 instructional paraprofessionals, which job entailed assisting teachers and attending to students requiring a 1-1 for additional support. Instructional paraprofessionals primarily assisted teachers with instruction and student behavior management.

There were 12 homeroom classrooms consisting of a teacher, two instructional paraprofessionals, and 1-1s as dictated by students' Individual Educational Plans (IEP) for students with disabilities. Student IEPs consist of individualized prescribed curriculum, current academic performance levels, educational goals, instructional modifications and accommodations, and other related educational services (New Jersey Department of Education, [NJDOE], 2016). Each classroom contained three kidney-shaped learning centers (tables) for student seating rather than desks. Each learning center was led by a teacher or one of his/her two instructional paraprofessionals, and it supported four students and one teacher comfortably. The school's SET turnover rate for the 2016–2017 school year was 32 %, and there are currently four vacant SET positions. The longest SET years of service during the time of this study was 32 years, and shortest SET years of service was six months.

To acquire the participants, I sought and received permission from the school administrator to conduct the study in the school. After receiving IRB approval from Concordia University–Portland and an approved Informed Consent Letter (Appendix A), correspondence describing the study and inviting SETs to participate was drafted. The school's confidential information technology designee emailed an invitation to all the teachers (Appendix B). I received the responses; therefore, the designee was not aware of the employees that participated. The email explained the impetus for the SETs that participated in the study, duration, and ethical protocols. Twelve of the 17 SETs responded to the invitation. The first eight participants to

respond were selected and two alternatives. The participants' experience ranged from novice SETs to veteran SETs. Upon the participants' agreement to take part in the study, the Informed Consent Form was provided to the participants. The consent described the study's purpose, details of participant's rights and agreement.

An on-site participant orientation was arranged and communicated via an email from researcher. The orientation took place in the school's library, which was detached from the school. During orientation, the consent forms were reviewed with each participant as a whole group. The participants indicated that they felt more comfortable participating in telephone interviews rather than one-to-one interviews conducted on site. However, the participants did not have issues with participating in a focus group on the school's campus. All the participants agreed to participate in the study and signed their consent forms. Times and dates were arranged for conducting one-to-one and focus group interviews. At the conclusion of the orientation, the participants were given a journal to record their reflections over a six week period as was described in the consent form.

### **Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews, the most widely used instrument for qualitative research, were the primary instrument for collecting data. A semi-structured interview consists of a limited number of pre-planned and follow-up questions on a specific topic (McMillan, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I developed a 12-question interview protocol (Appendix C). Drawing on the literature review related to SET attrition and turnover, and leadership support, the questions were used to gain data about SETs' perceptions of workplace dissatisfaction factors, level of administrative support they received, and employment job-related decision-making. Additionally, two focus groups with four participants per group were created according to the

participants' availability. The group was asked five questions to assist in confirming or disaffirming themes that were developing from the interviews and journals. Participants requested I read the journals to gain insight into their daily experiences on the job. Further, two electronic journals were viewed throughout the process. Interviews took place between April 2018 and May 2018. Interview questions were developed based on common SETs' perceptions that were indicated in studies related to overall leadership support and leader-teacher relationships and how they influence SETs' longevity (Alexander, 2010; Andrews & Brown, 2015; Berry et al., 2007; Boe, 2013; Carson, 2015; Conley & You, 2017; Price, 2012; Tickle, Change, & Kim, 2011). The essence of the study was to identify and understand why SETs' beliefs and feelings about their leaders' approach affected their relationship and decision to stay or leave.

**In-depth qualitative interviews.** This qualitative case study was geared towards responses to how questions and more depth of data rather than breadth (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Hence, in-depth interviewing is a naturalistic approach where researchers interview those who have direct experience and knowledge with the problem of study. As a result of various data, I had the opportunity to examine experiences, behaviors, motives, and perceptions of SETs.

Interview questions one and two were intended to seek specific and detailed responses about how SETs perceived the level of support their school leaders provided to them in their day-to-day task and overall role as a teacher. Qualitative researchers do not look for *yes* or *no* responses; instead, they seek comprehensive answers related to lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Questions three and four asked SETs to respond to how their school leader affected their professional growth, and, ultimately, workplace experiences. An in-depth interview process allows participants to reflect, respond, and elaborate on their responses (Rubin



& Rubin, 2012). Questions five, six and seven solicited descriptive answers to gain vivid and multiple perceptions from participants, therefore, gaining information to “complete a whole picture” of the school’s culture and relationship with their school leaders (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 6). Questions eight and nine captured the phenomena of SET attrition and what impact school leadership played in the problem. I designed the questions to get a clearer understanding of how participants’ experiences affected their behaviors (McMillan, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Question ten allowed the participants the opportunity to provide additional responses they felt would contribute to the interest of study.

Prior to the data collection, each participant was invited by email to attend a brief orientation about the study in the school’s library. Participants unable to attend were provided with an alternative orientation time, date, and location. However, all the participants were able to attend the orientation, and they each completed a Participant Demographic Form to collect basic descriptive information about themselves (Appendix D). The purpose of the study was explained along with the participants’ role in the study. Additionally, how this information would contribute to current and future research relevant to school leadership support that meets SETs’ professional needs was clearly expounded upon. My role in this study was to explore how SETs’ perceptions could contribute to current and future research relevant to SETs and school leadership support. The participants were provided assurances of confidentiality and anonymity related to the study. Namely, during orientation I provided information that their identity and decision to participate would not be shared with school employees, including leadership. Additionally, they were reassured their school leader would not be provided with the findings of the study, and there would be no professional workplace risks afflicted upon them as a result of their participation in the study.

During orientation, I became more acquainted with the participants to help ease any anxieties or mistrust the participants might have had with participating in this study. The participants then officially introduced themselves to each other and shared their teaching backgrounds. Rapport with participants is heightened when a researcher puts forth great effort and time to listen and show interest in understanding others' views and belief, which shows a researcher's respect for others' varying views and eases potential anxieties about participating in a study (McMillan, 2012). To foster a good rapport and trust with the participants in this study, transparency about the study was effectively communicated.

### **Data Collection**

For this study, my role in collecting data was to obtain information from one-to-one interviews, focus group interviews, and journaling. Data collection was purposeful and guided by the study's leadership framework and core research questions to ensure "greater depth and understanding" (McMillan, 2012, p. 285) of the impetus for SET turnover.

**In depth one-to-one interviews.** Semi-structured, digitally-recorded, one-to-one telephone interviews entailing predetermined open-ended questions and probes were facilitated to generate detailed responses about SETs' experiences, perceptions, and relationships with their school leaders that affect their retention. Semi-structured interviews consisting of both defined and impromptu questions fostered more spontaneous and relaxed conversations between the researcher and participants (Austin & Sutton, 2014). At the request of the participants, telephone interviews were conducted after work hours. An interview guide approach, where the researcher selects the questions in advance but allows participants the freedom to expound on their responses or areas of concern, was used. Respondents were asked the same questions and in the same order to keep the focus on the research topic being examined. Follow-up probes were

necessary for each interview to confirm the questions were answered thoroughly. This interviewing practice was important because it provided comprehensive meanings to participants' responses. The interviews were manually transcribed and used for the data analysis process.

**Participant journaling.** Following each participant's one-to-one interview, each participant journaled for six weeks about day-to-day experiences and level of leadership support they received. Participants were informed of journaling during their orientation. Each participant was given a composition journal in which to take notes about the level and type of leadership support they received or other experiences they deemed worthy of sharing. Two participants chose to use their journals electronically, which I provided to them. All other participants completed their journals using composition pads structured with a calendar with large lines for dates and jotting down workplace experiences. I uploaded electronic journals and sent them to the participants' personal email identifying them by their assigned alphabetical letter to protect their identity.

Journal reflections provided further insight into why some SETs remain dedicated to their workplace and others were considering leaving. Additionally, journals were useful for further development of concepts and themes related to the phenomena. I periodically (bi-weekly) followed-up on the progress of the participant journaling by email. However, it was important that I did not dictate content of journals to make certain the information received was authentic. Each participant was asked to journal for at least 6 weeks following their telephone interview. Journaling took place between mid-April 2018 and the last week of May 2018. At the conclusion of the six weeks, I collected the journals for data analysis. Journals both confirmed and contradicted themes gathered from interviews.

**Focus group interviews.** As themes began to develop from individual interviews and during participant journaling, two 35-minute, digitally-recorded, focus groups interviews were conducted. A focus group is an unstructured interview allowing the participants to communicate spontaneously after a question is asked of them. Focus groups generally consist of seven to 12 people that are selected because they share common characteristics relative to their lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Participants from one-on-one interviews volunteered to participate in two focus groups. To protect the privacy of the participants, each was assigned an alphabetical letter to identify them. The two groups consisted of four SETs responding to five questions (Appendix E) with probes focused on developing themes from the one-to-one interviews and participant journal responses. The questions were geared to the school's leadership and climate. The interviews fostered extensive discussion among the participants, which provided valuable data for confirming or disaffirming themes and member checking because it clarified and substantiated research responses and conclusions.

Five focus group questions provided me with additional descriptive narratives to cross-reference and clarify themes for further examination of the SET turnover phenomena. The first question inquired about how the school's leadership affected the school's culture. This question was intended to explore the magnitude of the affect the principal had on the school; in turn, affecting their longevity. The second question sought to provide insight into the mindset of how SETs perceived the turnover problem. By obtaining this data, I was able to examine to how school leadership affected on SET well-being and ability to perform their duties; if so, was the problem further contributing SETs decision to leave. Questions three and four examined information that teachers felt was most positive and most negative aspects of their role in the school. By gaining this information, I was able to "examine layers of meaning, gradually

unpeeling the onion to get to the heart of the matter” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 103). Question five sought to get direct answers to what would, ultimately, affect SETs’ decision to separate from their employer. Here, I was looking to cross-reference themes with direct answers to further examine the influence of how leadership style affects SET longevity. Hence, sometimes themes can be lost in the details (Rubin & Rubin, 2018).

### **Identification of Attributes**

**Special education teacher challenges.** Key aspects of the study were centered around SETs’ role in educating the most challenging student population (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Conley & You, 2017) with various learning disabilities and behavior problems. Special education teachers are a special breed; it takes perseverance and dedication to endure the professional challenges of educating students with special needs (Høigaard et al., 2012; Major, 2012). Special education teachers’ IEP responsibilities, such as excessive paperwork, lack of time to complete it, and other stressors, create stress and burnout (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Høigaard et al., 2012; Vittek, 2015), which has been the impetus for them quitting their jobs (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Adera & Bullock, 2010).

Effective leadership that builds supportive relationships have been highlighted as an important factor in many of the studies. Hence, the research instruments facilitated the identification of and rationale for a particular leadership approach and characteristics that satisfied teachers. For example, servant leadership, an altruistic leadership style with a desire to serve others has proven to be a central factor for building leader-follower relationships (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership builds emotional and professional support to the extent that principals provide the professional development SETs require and empower SETs to make their jobs more manageable (Boyd et al., 2011; Dierendonck, 2011).

**Servant leadership and LMX.** Servant leadership promotes LMX because servant leaders are selfless and supportive. They develop their SETs who often work under the expectations of meeting high standards for educating students requiring special education services. Servant leaders have the leadership qualities to address SETs' stress and burnout, unpleasant interpersonal interactions, and inadequate opportunity for professional interactions and growth; therefore, creating positive professional and interpersonal leader-teacher relationship. Although workplace superiors have been labeled leaders, research shows many do not embody sufficient skills required for building relationships and supporting their followers. Teachers indicate many principals lack key leadership skills to support the work they are expected to do. Fortunately, servant leadership has revealed a new standard of leadership that is developed and sustained due to cohesive follower-leadership professional relationships and service to others (Dierendonck, 2011; Taylor et al., 2007). The participants' perceptions and relationships with their leaders has shed light upon the extent to which leaders influenced their employment decisions.

**Altruistic Leadership.** Servant leaders' demonstration of compassion is an essential leadership characteristic that followers perceive highly contributes to their success in the workplace (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2007). Altruistic leaders are instrumental in assisting educators who commonly experience high levels of stress due to the nature of their job managing and educating a special needs student population (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Brunsting et al., 2014; Cancio et al., 2015; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). This type of authentic and supportive interactions with their followers (Dierendonck, 2011) benefits both the organization and employee. Followers that believe and experience their leaders' selflessness and genuine

concern for their emotional and professional well-being improves their LMX, and are more committed, motivated, and productive on the job (AL-Mahdy et al. 2016).

**Wise leadership.** Servant leaders are attuned to and understand their followers' needs. They are wise in facilitating knowledge creation through collaborative and cohesive leadership-follower relationships that result mutual empowerment (Cerit, 2009; Rishabh & Prakash, 2012). School environments that are collaborative and share knowledge develop into productive and cohesive LMX, therefore, improving SETs' efficacy and organizational sustainability (Boe, 2013; Dierendonck, 2011).

**Emotive leadership.** Servant leaders' adeptness at knowing and distinguishing when and how to provide therapeutic support to their followers is as significant as altruism and wise leadership. Leaders that are more aware of their followers' emotional needs are more likely to support them with sensitivity (Dierendonck, 2011). Research has shown that employee emotional healing increases LMX and workplace satisfaction (AL-Mahdy et al., 2016).

**Persuasive Leadership.** Servant leaders' readiness to give their followers an acceptable level of professional autonomy that includes creative thinking (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011) increases LMX, enhances job satisfaction, and reduces attrition (Tyler, 2012). Persuasive mapping relies on wise reasoning to motivate and inspire followers to be productive in their jobs (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Employee empowerment fosters self-efficacy, a sense of productivity, creative energy. and LMX (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011; Cerit, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007).

**Stewardship Leadership.** Servant leaders, like many of their followers, have a desire to set aside their self-centered agendas by showing a dedication to community and society at large (Brunsting et al., 2014; Dierendonck, 2011; Cerit, 2009; Rishabh & Prakash, 2012). For

example, SETs' dedication to provide their students with a quality education ensures that their students have a good chance of a productive future (Bell, 2012; Boe, 2013). Servant school leaders make their followers' professional development a priority, which builds LMX. Organizational stewardship includes giving followers the knowledge and support they need to be productive within and outside the workplace.

Servant leadership nurtures LMX that epitomizes positive relational dynamics between servant-leader and follower (Dierendonck, 2011). Leader Member Exchange relationships are established and accelerated by ongoing shared knowledge, mutual trust, respect, and obligation (Rishabh & Prakash, 2012). As a result, lasting LMX influence followers' professional development, productivity, and workplace satisfaction (Dierendonck, 2011).

**Job Satisfaction.** The way in which leadership address SETs' levels of job satisfaction and how it influences their decisions to stay in or leave their jobs was affirmed or disaffirmed by comparing and analyzing data. Although other issues such as stress, burnout, and lack of collegial support and professional development contributed to lower job satisfaction among SETs, specific leadership and methods to address these challenges needed further exploration. This qualitative study filled the research gap (Andrew & Brown, 2015; Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Brunsting et al., 2014; Mehrenberg, 2013) in determining how school leaders could meet SETs' role expectations to be satisfied and successful in their jobs, in turn, the likelihood of retaining them (Andrews & Brown, 2015).

**Special education teacher turnover and retention.** In addition to the type of leadership support effects SET job satisfaction and SETs' behavior to leave their jobs when they are dissatisfied with their workplace. This study explored and revealed school leadership practices and their impact on SETs' workplace longevity. SETs' rich data provided the researcher with a



greater understanding and the knowledge of what SETs' need to be successful, satisfied, and committed to staying in their jobs.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

To ensure data provided this researcher a clearer understanding of SETs' relationship with their school leaders and what influence it had on their career decisions, transcribed interviews and journal data were systematically examined and coded for emerging themes. The data analysis was crucial to the discovery of themes, patterns, viewpoints, explanations, and understandings of SETs' perceptions. An inductive and emergent data analysis process was used and included gathering data, close reading data, coding data, creating themes and categories, reducing redundant categories/themes, and constructing meaning and drawing conclusions grounded on the participants' perceptions and behaviors. Recorded interviews were important to this phenomenological case studies because I was provided with descriptive participant responses that allowed me to continually review them for further clarity, accuracy, and understanding during analysis process. Journals also provided clarity on the phenomena by examining and cross-referencing data.

**First cycle coding.** The first cycle of data coding took place after the after each one-to-one interview. Coding is “the process by which raw data are gradually converted into usable data through the identification of themes, concepts, or ideas that have some connection with each other” (Austin & Sutton, 2014, p. 439). Transcripts were reread and coded based on participants' phrases, expressions, and descriptions of behaviors. I highlighted noteworthy excerpts that responded to the concept of each research questions for exploration. Specifically, descriptive coding, the use of short phrases/words, were assigned to highlighted excerpts in the margins (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). Short phrases

summarizing data became themes (Rubi & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña,, 2013). As themes became more evident, categories were developed. Short narratives of each transcript were written on index cards. Following the coding of individual interview transcriptions, participant journals were coded using the same coding process. Key excerpts were highlighted, assigned a phrase encapsulating an idea, and written in the margins adjacent to significant selections of each journal. Brief narratives of each journal were written on index cards. Lastly, transcriptions from focus group interviews were coded based on common responses that answered research questions. An overview of themes and categories were listed in a matrix (Figure 3) so I could get a clearer picture of SETs workplace experiences. However, I was cognizant that categories were subject to change after further scrutiny and cross-referencing of participants' beliefs, ideas, and behaviors in the second cycle of coding.

**Second cycle coding.** The second cycle of coding consisted of re-examining response patterns and combining themes and developing concepts derived from the first cycle's descriptive coding. Further, to ensure validity of the themes, I made sure they were supported by the data. Interview and journal response patterns made coding more efficient and aided in the establishment of themes. Condensed themes were reorganized into categories (groupings) as common patterns of thought and relationships among the data become more transparent. The graphic display was refined to reflect current themes and categories. As I began to construct a broader meaning of the data and development of a theory behind the phenomena (Saldaña,, 2013), conclusions were made in relationship to participants collectively answering the research questions.

## **Limitations of the Research Design**

The most important limitation to this study was the small sample size and single case design. Specifically, this sample size might not be adequate for data saturation and concluding emerging themes related the phenomenon of study as they relate to answering the research questions. Hence, it cannot be fully determined whether the factors and actions linked to SETs' perceptions of school's leadership would have the same outcome in similar school settings. Further, the small sample could have skewed the data if participants dropped out and limited alternative participants were no longer available or interested in participating in the study. Another limitation was the independence of school in the study: both independent special education schools and public special education schools should be included in future studies to get a better picture of SET attrition. Additionally, SETs' perceptions might be different in public school settings due to "protections" such as tenure and teacher unions. Specifically, school leadership might be more proactive in attending to the needs of SETs.

Other study limitations include bias due to my professional school leadership background. Specifically, my leadership background as a school administrator provided me with background knowledge of teacher-leader interactions and SETs day-to-day challenges and responsibilities. Although, my primary leadership role was managing, supporting, and supervising instructional paraprofessionals. Any predetermined thoughts about the phenomenon of this study was bracketed in order to gain a better insight of high SET turnover in the school. This study was also limited by not including workplace perceptions of SETs that resigned from the school and the school leader's perspective of SET turnover and leader-SET relationships.

## **Research Validation**

The triangulation of rich narrative data from this study indicated clear themes of what SETs require from school leaders to be successful and remain in their jobs. Thus, the findings could be transferable to similar special education school settings. The cross-referencing of different data sources substantiated consistent themes and patterns. Peer debriefing was used by asking a colleague who was not involved in the research to review the study for its credibility and ascertain whether the results appear congruent with the data. I also consulted with a colleague to evaluate the interview questions for potentially misleading questions or other issues for the objective interview. That is, peer-debriefing helped to improve the instrument design (interview questions) and improve and clarify data analysis. Negative case analysis, actively reviewing, and incorporating data that contradicts themes and patterns with the majority of the data enhanced the study's validity (McMillan, 2012). Further, seeking findings that were not congruent with initial themes reflected the reality of the phenomena and justified the study's conclusion. Lastly, member checking substantiated themes. I randomly selected participant B and D to review and respond to themes that emerged from the data (Figures 2 and Figure 3) at the conclusion of data analysis. The thick descriptions incorporated in the study made it more likely that school leaders could transfer the results to their settings.

## **Expected Findings**

Based on previous studies regarding SETs' perception of the workplace and their relationship with their school leaders, I expected to find a servant-like leadership approach was essential for providing SETs with productive LMX relationships needed to retain them. Moreover, I anticipated closing the research gap in determining how supportive and relational leadership approach could improve SETs' desire to remain in their jobs. I expected the findings

would show that school leaders who took interest in the professional and emotional needs of SETs fostered cohesive working relationships with their followers. Consequently, their followers would be satisfied on the job and less likely to leave. Conversely, SETs with unsupportive and emotionally detached school leadership would likely seek alternative employment options (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016).

### **Ethical Issues**

Potential ethical issues were considered prior to the study; therefore, it was important to indicate potential concerns and address them prior to conducting this study. For example, safeguarding confidentiality for participants, ensuring interview times and locations are safe and convenient for the participants, and being cognizant of not reporting unique characteristics that could identify participants' responses or stories that might be harmful to them (Austin & Sutton, 2014). It was also important that the school leader and educational institution anonymity was concealed.

Furthermore, transparency was crucial to this study; therefore, it was vital to specify my role and potential biases. Namely, I am an experienced special education school leader that supervised both instructional paraprofessionals and certified school staff. However, to ensure my background in special education school leadership did not influence the participants in any form, I informed the participants that I would rely on their feedback to gain a clearer understanding of school leadership and its influence on SET. Additionally, I reiterated to the participants any data collected and analyzed would not affect their role as teachers or be shared with other school leaders in the school or organization. I was able to develop a trusting and respectful relationship with the participants that was void of intimidation or fear. Rossman and Rallis (2012) stress the importance of researcher being sensitive to power dynamic and politics

of the topic and setting for the research to be trustworthy. In this circumstance, my ability to build relationships was positive to the study because trust was established early. Consequently, the participants' responses yielded candid and descriptive lived experiences in the workplace.

**Role of researcher and biases.** To maintain the integrity of the study, I managed, oversaw, and ensured all social interactions of the study was done with integrity. Further, my role was to conduct, write, and report the findings of this research with integrity and accuracy (Appendix F). I conducted all interviews and transcriptions, facilitated participant journals, employed a systematic data analysis process, and drew conclusions from the data. I built a rapport with the participants; however, I did not become part of the group being investigated. Understanding the dynamics of SETs' professional challenges, I *bracketed* preconceived beliefs about the school leadership practices and drew conclusions about the study as reflected in the outcome of data analysis. To preserve the integrity of the study, all participant acknowledgements were documented, confidential, ethical, and data collection was scheduled outside of work hours.

## **Summary**

The objective of this qualitative phenomenological case study was to examine SETs' experiences with school leadership and how those experiences affected SET retention. Specifically, eight SETs' perceptions of their role and responsibilities and how school leadership support influenced their career decisions added insight into what leadership attributes are required to support SETs in their role and increase workplace longevity. The case was guided by the research questions and bounded by the uniqueness of SETs role, responsibilities, and school leadership support challenges they encountered when seeking to be successful in a shared purpose of providing a quality education to their students. Special education teachers'

professional experiences were analyzed using the study's framework. The findings suggested transferability to similar school settings. Conducting an ethical and structured study and developing a trusting rapport with the participants so they feel comfortable describing their experiences, was a priority prior during this study. In Chapter 4, I present procedures for preparing data for analysis, examining data, analyzing data, representing data, and interpreting results (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

### Introduction

This qualitative phenomenological case study was designed to obtain a better understanding of SETs' workplace experiences and how school leadership support may have influenced their decision to stay in their jobs or leave. A qualitative phenomenological case study is valuable for its focus on detailed narratives from participants that helped me to better understand the phenomenon of SET teacher retention, rather than simply relying on numerical data (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative research explores social phenomena using various methods of inquiry without restraints or data manipulation (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; McMillan, 2012). A comprehensive examination of SETs' perceptions of their workplace experiences provided a clearer insight into SETs' employment decision-making.

Although I was aware of problems with SET attrition at the school, any preconceived perceptions of the issue were bracketed; instead, I looked for contradicting themes and patterns during analysis. Hence, I allowed the data to dictate the findings. My role as researcher consisted of administering eight one-to-one in-depth interviews and two four-person focus groups, providing journals to participants and collecting their completed journals, analyzing the data, and drawing conclusions from the data. The following three research questions guided the study:

1. How do teacher-school leadership relationships influence special education teachers' decision to stay or leave their workplaces?
2. How do special education teachers describe leadership that would best support them in their role?
3. What workplace factors do special education teachers perceive that school leaders



should address in order to support them in their day-to-day responsibilities?

This chapter includes a description of the data analysis process and the steps used in this study for coding transcripts and journals in order to identify themes and patterns. The chapter will also describe how the data analysis was chosen to answer the research questions and how the research questions were used to summarize the data.

### **Description of the Sample**

Using purposeful sampling methods, eight participants from a special education school were recruited for this study. A study invitation letter generated 12 “yes” responses out of 17 potential teachers to participate in the study. The first 10 to respond were selected; eight were used as actual participants and two were alternates in the event a participant was unwilling or unable to complete the study. A brief orientation was conducted describing the study’s purpose, rationale, and contents of the Informed Consent Form. All participants completed the Participant Demographic Form. Each participant was a certified special education teacher with teaching experience ranging from 2-32 years. To protect the identity of the participants, alphabetical letters were used in place of names Table 1 shows an overview of participants’ demographics and Table 2 shows participants’ professional backgrounds.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Participant	College Degree	Ethnicity	Age Range
Part. A	B.A.	White	37-69
Part. B	M.S.	White	37-69
Part. C	M.A.	Black	37-69
Part. D	M.S.	White	37-69
Part. E	B.A.	White	37-69
Part. F	B.A.	White	37-69
Part. G	B.A.	Black	37-69
Part. H	B.A.	White	37-69

Table 2

*Participant Professional Characteristics*

Participant	Special education teaching experience	Number of schools employed as a special education teacher	Tenure teaching at current school	Shortest tenure in special education teaching position
Part. A	8	3	6 months	6 months
Part. B	2	2	2 years	N/A
Part. C	35	2	32 years	6 months
Part. D	21	1	21 years	N/A
Part. E	12	2	1 years	1 month
Part. F	10	4	2 years	6 months
Part. G	28	3	2 years	1 year
Part. H	20	2	5 years	3 months

**Participant A.** Participant A was a certified Teacher of Students with Disabilities with eight years of experience and taught in three schools. Participant A had been serving as a History

teacher in the school for six months. Participant A's shortest stay in a teaching position was six months, due to personal reasons.

**Participant B.** Participant B held a Certificate of Eligibility with Advanced Standing for Students with Disabilities and taught in one school; the study's site. Participant B was an Instructional Paraprofessional for several years before transitioning into a teaching position. Participant B had been serving as a novice middle school teacher in the school for two years.

**Participant C.** Participant C was a certified Teacher of the Handicapped with 32 years of experience and taught in two schools. Participant C had been serving as a secondary English teacher in the school for 32 years. Participant C's shortest stay in a teaching position was six months due to relocating to another state.

**Participant D.** Participant D was a certified Teacher of the Handicapped with 21 years of experience and taught in one school; the study site. Participant D had been serving as a middle school Language Arts teacher for 11 years. Participant D's shortest stay in a teaching position was 10 years due taking a leave of absence to raise her young children.

**Participant E.** Participant E was a certified Teacher of Students with Disabilities with 12 years of experience and taught in two schools. Participant E had been serving as a secondary History teacher in the school for one year. Participant E's shortest stay in a teaching position was one month due to undesirable working conditions.

**Participant F.** Participant F was a certified Teacher of the Handicapped with ten years of experience and taught in four schools. Participant F had been serving as a secondary teacher

for students with severe developmental disabilities in the school for two years. Participant F's shortest stay in a teaching position was six months due to undesirable working conditions.

**Participant G.** Participant G was a certified Teacher of the Handicapped with 28 years of experience and taught in three schools. Participant G had been serving as a secondary Science for two years. Participant G's shortest stay in a teaching position was one year due to non-renewal of contract.

**Participant H.** Participant H was a certified Teacher of the Handicapped with 20 years of experience and taught in two schools. Participant H had been serving as a secondary Math teacher for five years. Participant H's shortest stay in a teaching position was three years due to non-renewal of contract.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

Instruments used for gathering and analyzing data for this case study consisted of eight one-to-one interviews, six-week participant journaling beginning after each one-to-one interview, and two focus groups of four participants each. The instruments were suited for this qualitative phenomenological case study because it allowed for gathering extensive narratives of participants' daily experiences (McMillan, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In-depth qualitative interviews provided rich information from those knowledgeable of the problem of study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). When qualitative researchers are looking for richness, they "need to know what something feels like or how it works from the inside. When they are looking at something unusual or unique, naturalistic research tools are more appropriate" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3). The data were systematically analyzed to reduce redundancy and eliminate irrelevant information. Cross-referencing was used to develop answers to "how" research questions. Case study questions are often focused on "how" questions because they provide more depth (Rubin &

Rubin, 2012). Through this approach, the problem was thoroughly examined based on the participants' voices and descriptive details behind the motives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) of their staying or leaving their workplace.

**Data collection.** Data was collected in three stages. First, eight in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted; second, participants completed journal entries over a six-week period about their work experiences, and third, two focus group interviews were conducted during the fourth week of the journaling. During the journaling process, I was able to review both those done electronically in Word Doc and handwritten. Participants were eager to share their experiences.

Participants requested one-on-one interviews by telephone rather than a set location; therefore, I honored their request. Within a week, digitally-recorded one-to-one interviews were conducted and ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. Prior to the interview, each participant was informed that they did not have to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. Further, they could cease participating in the interview process at any time. There were ten pre-determined open-ended questions and brief probes when further details and clarity were necessary to understand and ensure each question was answered thoroughly. The questions were geared toward SETs' workplace experiences, perceptions of support SETs received from their school leader, and perceptions of leader-teacher relationships to examine whether these factors influenced SET retention decisions.

After each participant completed their one-to-one interview, they began 6-week journaling. Participants wrote each workday about their day-to-day experiences and how it impacted their ability to perform their jobs and longevity in the workplace. Further, the participants described their perceptions of their relationship and support they received from their

leader. At the conclusion of the six weeks, which consisted of a time span from April 16, 2018 to June 6, 2018. The journals were collected, read, and coded using the same process as the interviews. I notified the participants of a journal retrieval date at the conclusion of their 6-week journaling. At the conclusion of the six weeks, handwritten journals were gathered, and electronic journals were downloaded and printed out. Themes and categories were cross-referenced with coding, themes, and categories that emerged from the interviews.

Following the transcriptions of the one-to-one interviews and after the fourth week of participant journaling, two focus group interviews were conducted. The sample was drawn from the eight participants. Groups were decided based on participant availability. The first focus group was held in the school's library prior to the start of their workday and the second focus group was held at the conclusion of their work day. Each focus group interview lasted for approximately 30-35 minutes. Five questions were developed to help clarify developing themes from the one-to-one interviews and participant journaling. Since I was able to review electronic journal narratives throughout the process. Additionally, during the six weeks, journal narratives were reviewed at the request of the participants, and it became clear that emerging themes were congruent with transcribed one-to-one interviews. The focus group interviews stimulated a discussion among the participants that helped clarify emerging themes (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman) related to teachers' perceptions of leadership support and how it might influence their workplace satisfaction and longevity.

**Data analysis.** A systematic approach was used to analyze textual data: codes, themes patterns, and categories were created. The first cycle of coding consisted of descriptive coding, which is fitting for employing exploratory and investigative qualitative studies and data forms, such as interview transcripts and journals. Descriptive coding is used to summarize qualitative

data into a phrase or word (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). The first step of data analysis entailed listening to and transcribing the one-to one audio-taped interviews followed by relisting and rereading them to ensure they were transcribed accurately. Relevant excerpts (narratives) were coded and highlighted in the transcribed margins. The codes were then analyzed for developing themes. Developing themes were considered consistent and repeated participant experiences, beliefs, and perceptions during data analysis. At the conclusion of this process, each journal was examined for developing themes. Electronic journals were monitored through email and composition books were examined biweekly after school hours in the school's library. The school's library is detached from the school. However, many of the participants requested that I reviewed their journals throughout the process. After each journal was completed and collected, the same coding process for interviews was applied. That is, each journal entry was read, analyzed, and common phrases were used to develop themes. I, again, listen to the recordings of focus group interviews and reread transcriptions to ensure their accuracy. The same process was used to code and develop themes. As themes began to develop due to the frequency of similar perceptions among the participants, excerpts were examined by constant comparison. I continually searched for both supporting and contrary evidence of each category.

The second cycle of coding consisted of further analysis and interpretation by looking over the excerpts and finding reoccurring themes and reoccurring patterns of thoughts. Constant comparison was used across and within data to uncover consistencies or contradictions of categories. By focusing on the research questions, I organized the data by the responses to the questions which allowed me to identify data uniformities and differences. After examining the reoccurring themes (ideas, concepts, behaviors, interactions, incidents, terminology or phrases), they were organized into categories that brought further meaning to the text. Categories and sub-

categories were included or excluded based on constant analysis and relevance to the research questions. A matrix (Figure 3) with the questions and categories were reexamined for frequency of responses and clarity of prominent themes from interviews and journal entries.

### **Summary of the Findings**

One-to-one interviews, focus group interviews, and daily journals provided a greater understanding of how school leadership affected the career decisions of eight SETs. Data collection was followed by a data analysis process consisting of organizing data, creating codes, categories, and patterns, and interpreting the data. These steps allowed me to draw conclusions for this study.

The data revealed five prominent themes that reoccurred throughout the data analysis process: communicative leadership, democratic leadership, altruistic leadership, cohesive leader-teacher relationship, which led to a satisfying work environment. Thus, participants indicated they were best supported by school leadership that communicated well, served and led democratically, cared for the professional and emotional well-being of others, and built cohesive leader-teacher relationships that fostered a positive workplace environment. In turn, SETs would be satisfied, successful, and remain in their workplace. Connections were made from participants' meaningful narratives, descriptive coding, and constant comparison across and within data. Data that provided answers to the research questions and member checking were instrumental substantiating the findings (McMillan, 2012).

Data showed SETs placed value on leaders that demonstrated ample and effective lines of communication with their teachers. In doing so, SETs would feel their leader was sociable and valued their thoughts and expertise. Further, participants would feel appreciated by their leader



taking the time out of his or her busy schedule to connect with them, share knowledge, and hear their concerns and ideas. Thus, leader-teacher engagement was a key thread in this study.

In addition to effective communication, themes reflected that participants preferred a democratic leadership approach that supported them in various aspects of their teaching responsibilities. Special education teachers desired leadership that was collaborative in providing instructional guidance and classroom and time management, especially for novice and new teachers (employees). Novice SETs were those who never taught prior to employment at the school and new SETs were those who have taught for at least 1 year prior to employment at the school. They felt they would have benefited from early and team support from peers and school leaders to alleviate stress and frustration that new teachers often encountered.

Further, participants suggested to make their day-to-day tasks less challenging and more productive, they should be provided with professional development and instructional guidance geared towards their individual needs. Special education teachers stressed allowing them to seek additional trainings that were focused on their particular weaknesses. Additionally, SETs wanted school leadership that promoted autonomy and creativity to build their self-efficacy. Special education teachers stressed school leaders should allow them to use their expertise and participate in instructional decisions, which would boost their moral and performance level.

An affiliative leader-teacher relationship was an aspect of the workplace SETs believed would motivate them and foster a cohesive workplace. Participants believed such leadership characteristics that focused on the emotional well-being of people builds unified working relationships. Additionally, those relationships fostered two-way and on-going communication that improved workplace morale, motivation, and SET retention. Participants' narratives specified school leadership that is altruistic, welcoming, and interactive was necessary for their

success. Special education teachers want to work in an environment where their school leader enjoys interacting and serving them.

Participants felt school leadership style shapes school culture; consequently, SETs desire a leader that positively affected their school's culture. For example, Participant B described an ideal school leader as sociable, approachable, communicative, shows respect for a SETs role, and provides support to help teachers thrive. Additionally, Participant D described an ideal school leader as sensitive, caring, supportive and more flexible to providing him/her with what they need to be a successful SET. Participants specified, leaders have the power to make necessary improvements to support and retain SETs. That is, participants suggested school leaders effectively interact with SETs, promote collaborative peer and leadership efforts, and provide sufficient emotional and professional support, which builds LMX and positively impacted the workplace culture. Participants communicated how these types of leadership practices would increase SETs' morale, motivation, and increase teacher retention.

The importance of the findings will provide school leaders with a better understanding of the dynamics of how LMX affects SETs' success and impact their employment decisions. Quality leadership begins with unified relationships perceived by both parties. A leader's desire to serve others and work collectively towards a shared organizational vision builds cohesive LMX that create satisfying and thriving followers. Additionally, great leaders develop a mindset that focuses on their followers' emotional and professional needs, and they ensure that followers participate in decision-making processes that affects them. Figure 2 depicts prominent themes that emerged regarding SETs' desired school leadership impacting their workplace longevity.

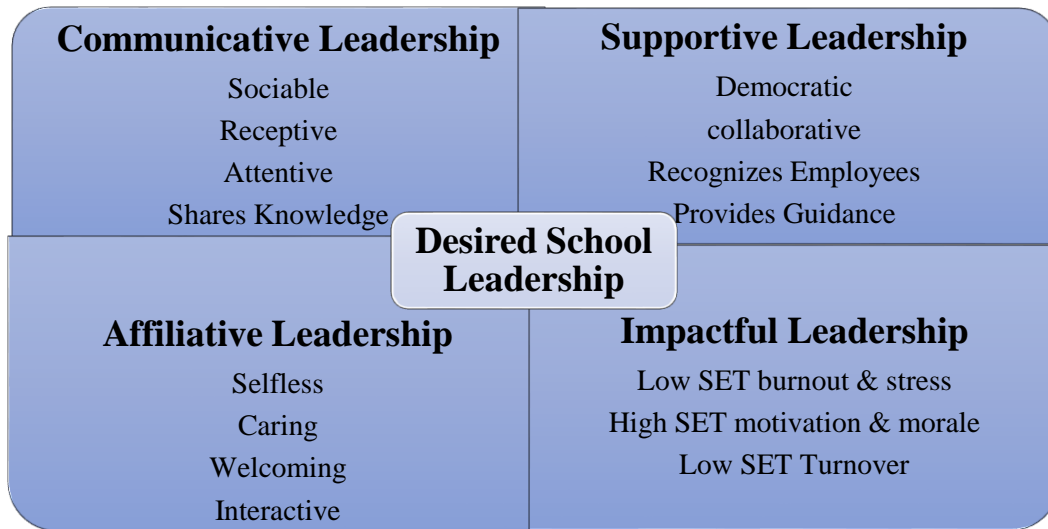


Figure 2. SET desired leadership.

**Presentation of the Data and Results**

Based on the terminology, phrases, and themes that emerged from the data analysis, reoccurring responses (themes) were organized into prominent categories that summarized and brought meaning to the data (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Prominent themes included affiliative, democratic, and holistic leadership and how they affected the school school’s culture. Themes that emerged from the one-to-one and focus group interviews and journal entries generated data that provided a deeper understanding of the research and answering the research questions.

**Research question 1: How do teacher-school leadership relationships influence special education teachers’ decision to stay or leave their workplaces?**

The first question read: How do teacher-school leadership relationships influence special education teachers’ decision to stay or leave their workplace? The way in which SETs perceived the quality of their relationships with their school leader influenced their overall workplace satisfaction and longevity on the job. Participants wanted a leader that had a desire to build

strong LMX and attended to their professional and emotional well-being. Participant F stated, “You want to have that rapport with your leader.” Although they understood that leaders have varying personalities and ways of relating to people, they believed leaders should be purposeful about developing leadership skills that are best suited for building relationships with people. Participant C stated, “I need a leader that is sensitive to what I go through as a SET.” Participant A indicated, “I don’t think my relationship is that good with my leader. I don’t think my leader is approachable.” I probed in asking the participant to explain what was meant by “approachable,” and participant A replied, “I don’t know, I just don’t think I can speak to my leader.” Participants were seeking a leader they could connect with on a deeper level rather than a boss-subordinate relationship. Participant F responded, “Friendly administrators make you feel good. It makes me feel at ease to have that comfortable relationship.” Participants wanted to feel connected to their school leader.

Participants indicated how they wanted to feel valued in the workplace. Participant B explained, “I would like to be more than a number, I guess you could say. I would like somebody that is sociable with me and that can talk to people and make somebody feel that their job is important, and you know, kind of help you thrive as a teacher.” Participant F stated,

I don’t really have a relationship with my administrator. I don’t know anything more than what my leader’s name is and my leader doesn’t know anything more than what my name is. It is like I am the administrator and you are the teacher and that is how it is.

Leader-teacher relationships were strengthened when SETs felt valued, recognized, or appreciated for their efforts. Participants discussed strengthening these feelings would increase SET motivation and workplace morale. Participant D suggested, “If you show a little bit appreciation, people would do more for you.” Participant A reflected, “The school leader

communicated appreciation for everything that I did in the school, which I liked.” Participant B felt school leaders should implement an Employee Recognition Program, which would motivate SETs and boost morale. Participants believed if school leaders recognized SETs for their efforts and successes, aside from during their performance evaluations, SETs would feel better about their job competency and more connected with their leaders. Further, they would feel more valued and appreciated. Participant D stated, “I want to be appreciated when I go above and beyond. If I were to consider leaving, it would be partly due to feeling unappreciated.”

Positive and ample leader-teacher communication and interaction would give SETs a sense of connectedness with their leader. Participant C stated, “I need a leader that is a good listener when I go him or her for guidance.” Participant H responded, “I think that is what we talked about all along is the fact that there is a lack of communication. I think the whole overall concept with communication with supervisors would make me stay or leave.” Participants would like more communication from their school leaders to build LMX and motivate them on the job. Participant E reflected, “I feel like just a little more interaction between leaders and teachers would be helpful. I always felt that positive reinforcement goes a long way.”

Participants asserted how they preferred more purposeful and light-hearted interactions with their leader. Participant H explained,

Our leader just seems to be distant and not overly concerned as a supervisor relating to teachers. It’s not the kind of rapport that I had from leaders in the past. I am not saying that to be negative. I am just saying if we would want to improve on that, we want more communication between teachers and supervisors.

Participants want to work with serving school leaders to help them grow professionally and build cohesive relationships. Participants believed stronger LMX facilitated collaborative

efforts, which would influence SETs' decision to stay in their workplace. Participant C articulated how top-down leadership was not very suitable for SETs who benefitted from collective efforts. They felt that autocratic leadership does not focus on the emotional and professional needs of their followers. Participants pointed out how SETs have little time to support each other and work collaboratively with their leader. Participant D stated,

We don't get to collaborate professionally, such as coming up with good lessons for students. I would like to collaborate like a whole unit so that everything is connected.

But we are able to support each other when there are difficult situations. There is comradery in the building because everyone knows how difficult each person's job is.

Participants described a desire for more positive engagement with their school leaders. They wanted to learn and bond individually and as a team with their school leader. Participant F indicated, "It really helps a lot working together." Participants would like their school leaders to find time collaborate with them, as well as their peers to grow professionally and build tight professional relationships. Participant E stated, "Teachers are too busy on their own to help me out."

Participants, especially, felt school leaders should collaborate with new SETs to provide them with extra support and develop positive LMX they require early in their role as SETs. They thought early and on-going collaboration with novice and new employees would establish great LMX relationships. Further, participants suggested school leaders provide new SETs with peer support, so schools can create a culture of positive professional relationships. Participant B stated, "I would like to feel like a team. I don't feel that I am part of a team." Participants wanted to build a unified working environment.

**Research question 2: How do special education teachers describe leadership that would best support them in their role?**

The second question read: Participants preferred a leadership approach that was democratic and geared toward collaborative efforts and serving others. Participant C believed leadership has to be focused on teachers rather than a leader's professional desires. Participant D stated, "I would like a democratic leader who respects the employees' opinions, professionalism, and expertise, someone that will lead and guide, not someone who is authoritative." Special education teachers appreciated a task-oriented leader, but felt collaborative decision-making and efforts were more what they needed as SETs. Participant C suggested school leaders need to be flexible in changing teaching practices that are not effective; instead, collaboratively "seek solutions to try to better it or change it."

Participants contended more engaging and collaborative leadership would provide SETs with the support and guidance they need. Additionally, SET felt new and novice SETs would benefit from peer mentor support. Participant D stated, "If leaders would show more support, people would stay." Participant F suggested school leaders provide more opportunities for peer mentoring, which would better aid in novice and new SETs fulfill their role as a SETs and work as a team. Participant B stated, "I really wasn't given any information when I started my teaching job. I was just thrown in the situation type deal. I was never given anything per se to make me successful." Participant E had a suggestion for novice teachers beginning a teaching job, stating,

When you are first in a position, I would set it up with a veteran teacher and determine what expectations would be for that first year. Just have them go to that person for more support or help. I pretty much had to figure out things on my own.

Participant F reflected, “I felt like there should be more specific training for new teachers on ways in which we could better fulfill our jobs.” Participant F concurred, “Having more special educational trainings would have been more helpful.” Participants specified their peers sought to assist new teachers but were not always successful due to their heavy workload. However, SETs did have some success in supporting one another. Participant D described an experience with new SETs: “When new staff come to me or I will go to them and help them navigate their way through the beginning of their stay. I will support newer staff and help them understand the routines and their role.” It was extremely crucial to SETs that school leaders demonstrate collaborative and team leadership to support their needs.

SETs, also, preferred a school leadership that demonstrated concern for their faculty. SETs asserted, they believe leaders should be caring and attuned to the needs of their followers. Participant C explained,

I need a leader that will listen and be concerned about how I feel about what I am doing.  
I need a strong leader. Somebody concerned. I need a leader that is sensitive to what I go through as a special education teacher.

Participants thought leaders are often too focused on deadlines and personal goals rather than what SETs experience and the support they need to manage their daily responsibilities. Participant C stated, “I want a caring leader.” Participant D wanted a leader that not only showed concern for their well-being but showed their vulnerabilities as a leader. Participant G stated, “Leaders should have the quality of being compassionate towards their employees. By having that quality, you demonstrate to your employee, you have a role to play here. And, yes indeed I do care about your well-being.” Participants perceived caring leaders as aware and attended to their employees’ vulnerabilities and emotional needs. Participant G did not want



leaders to look at employees as simply teachers who produce output. Participant G indicated, “I am not a robot that wants to be looked at as a subordinate, because I am going to look at you first as being a person with certain emotional feelings.” Participants craved for leaders that had both a professional and “soft” disposition. Participant H stated, “I feel the professionalism is there, but that is not all it takes to be successful leader in this kind of profession. You need an ability to relate.”

Teachers, also, desired visible and communicative leadership throughout the day. The level of leadership engagement and communication was a concern of SETs. They asserted that without added opportunities for SETs to engage with school leaders, they feel isolated and uncertain about their job performance. They need consistent engagement, advice, and input. Participant A stated,

I think one of the most supportive leadership qualities is a visible principal, a visible leader, someone that you see walking in the hallways talking to students, especially in this population. Someone that you know you could go up and speak with.

It is important to SET that their leader is more visible and provide immediate feedback throughout the day, such as visits to their classrooms and more engagement. Throughout participant journals, they indicated leadership visibility is an imperative support tactic that helps them with their daily responsibilities. It was clear from the interview and journal narratives that SETs believed that seeing and communicating with their school leader throughout the day would promote a sense of care and interest in their day-to-day routine. Participant G realized that school leaders are busy but believed more interactions would be an integral part of motivating staff. Participant G acknowledged that their school leader interacted well with SETs about their role and responsibilities during staff meetings, but stated, “As far as one-to-one interaction

between my leader and I. It is very, very, scarce.” Further, visible leaders would show that school leaders were accessible and approachable. Participants believed, the more they engaged with their leader, the more comfortable they would feel initiating conversations with them.

Flexible leadership was another key theme SETs desired. Participants believed that leaders should be flexible and open to their ideas and creativity. Special education teachers indicated allowing them professional autonomy was crucial to the dynamics of working with a special need population. Participant C stated, “I need a leader that will listen and consider how I feel about what I am doing. I need a leader that is flexible.” Special education teachers want school leaders to respect teacher creativity and expertise and promote thinking outside the box. They want their professional expertise and skills acknowledged and valued by their leader. Specifically, SETs would like school leaders to be more accommodating in giving them some latitude in best practices for instruction content and delivery. Participant D stated, “I think teachers should be permitted to use their creativities to help promote the strengths of students.”

**Research question 3: What workplace factors do special education teachers perceive school leaders should address to support them in their day-to-day responsibilities?**

The third question read: What workplace factors do special education teachers perceive school leaders should address to support them in their day-to-day responsibilities? Participants articulated that a holistic leadership approach should support them in their day-to-day responsibilities. Overall, participants indicated they required on-going and proactive pedagogical guidance, professional development, collaborative leadership, effective leader-teacher communication, leadership visibility and leadership engagement, constructive employee feedback, employee recognition, teacher autonomy, and leadership that promotes a satisfying environment to retain SETs.

Participants suggested SETs be provided with additional leadership support to assist SETs with daily pedagogical challenges. Participant F indicated, there should be more instructional guidance for peak job performance. Journal and interview data showed SETs required additional guidance from their leader because of the challenges of their job. Journals reflected that school leaders needed to understand the magnitude of their responsibilities and provide guidance in student management, instructional support, and time and task management. Participant D indicated during the one-to-one interview process, “I think supportive leadership should be understanding, involved, and proactive.” Proactive leadership included guidance throughout the day in time, task, and classroom management. Participant A struggled with day-to-day classroom management, and indicated: “I am beginning to burnout, and I am thinking about leaving.”

Unfortunately, SETs perceived that school leaders do not have the answers to help them in every aspect of their job; therefore, they need more support and professional development to help them succeed in their teaching role. Participant G believed that teachers would benefit from “more training of what to do when it came to know what to expect from special education students in the classroom.” Participant F indicated, “More behavioral modules would be good.” Further, participants would like to participate in external professional development opportunities based on their individual needs. Participant C stated, “Leaders should be more open to what we need to be successful teachers.” Participants were provided with some professional development throughout the school year, but desired specific areas of concern based on their individual needs. Most SETs wanted additional trainings in IEP report writing, but others desired professional development geared to their specific needs in each academic subject area. Participants

experienced some educational trainings or workshops that were beneficial to them and others that were not. Participant H stated,

I could have used some help on different ways to get across [subject areas] to these kids that have different learning needs. In addition, to the curriculum, I need professional development on being a little more creative or something more effective for the kids.

Participant H believed leaders should engage in professional development about collaborative leadership. Thus, school leaders would likely adopt leadership flexibility; in turn, they would create a climate of individual creativity.

Although Participant F stated, a school leader's role is to "guide teachers in finding answers to questions," other participants were ambiguous as to what level of leadership support and what role their school leader should play in their overall success. Participants perceived school leaders might not understand the extensiveness of a SETs' role; especially the difficulty of managing students with disabilities, providing instruction, and time management challenges. Participant B stated, "I am not certain if school leaders know about the function (magnitude) of a special education teacher role is." Participants sensed school leaders might put forth the effort to assist them, but struggle to address all of their work-related challenges.

Workplace collaboration was another theme that emerged regarding day-to-day leadership support. Participants indicated SETs wanted to collaborate more with peers and school leadership throughout the workday to improve school practices, relationships, and build morale. Participant A articulated,

I think a staff meeting with special education teachers only, meeting together, collaborating together, brainstorming, and bouncing [ideas] off of each other with school

leader on updated research on special education. Maybe could come up with some really good ideas together.

Participant B and C indicated, many of the challenges they faced, they were fortunate to rely on their peers for added support.

Participants felt more opportunities to communicate interact with peer and school leaders throughout the day would likely reduce SETs' frustration and stress when managing their pedagogical responsibilities. Participant E stated, "We need more interactions with our school leader by coming in the classroom talking to us. That would benefit teachers." Participants revealed that if leaders were more visible in the school and engaged more with SETs and students, they would have a better understanding of what was necessary for students and teachers to be successful. Particularly, SETs suggested school leaders provide guidance and support in completing extensive IEP paperwork and lesson plans. Particularly, participants would like quality professional development and more guidance in writing IEPs. Further, SETs would like professional development in the best instructional strategies for students with learning disabilities. Participant B asserted, "We're not really given any kind of knowledge for things that affect us every day with our kids as far as information regarding IEPs how to write them: how to write them well."

Since IEP preparation and attending IEP meetings were ongoing activities, completing other time-sensitive tasks day-to-day tasks were challenging for SETs. Participants indicated, they needed leadership guidance in managing their responsibilities under limited prep periods often offered to SETs. Specifically, SETs stressed preparing student lesson plans, making copies, completing IEPs and student behavior documentation, and attending student-related meetings were, virtually, impossible unless they took work home. Participant B stated, "These

are all the things that I don't have enough time given to me through my regular working day without sufficient prep periods." Participant D and F expressed SETs be given additional prep periods and support for managing their workload, so they are not inclined to take paperwork home to fulfil their work responsibilities.

In addition to support and guidance with time management, special education teachers want performance feedback and follow-up on school issues throughout the day. Participant H asserted, "We just go to each other and try to take care of any concerns that we had with teaching, or the kids, or curriculum." Participants felt ongoing and constructive professional feedback would give them the perception that their school leader has an open-door policy and feedback was reciprocal. Participant G elaborated, feedback "is a two-way street. The teacher needs to be approachable, too. I think that communication on both ends should be a comfortable level that is good." Participant E stated, "I don't want to feel like I am taking up someone's time when I go to see them." Special education teachers want constructive performance feedback related to curriculum matters, instruction delivery, and student management, so they can improve their professional skills and feel valued as a part of a team. Participant, E stated, "I want more feedback about how we as teachers are doing. More interactions." Participant G acknowledged, "My first year, I received feedback early on." However, Participant G stated,

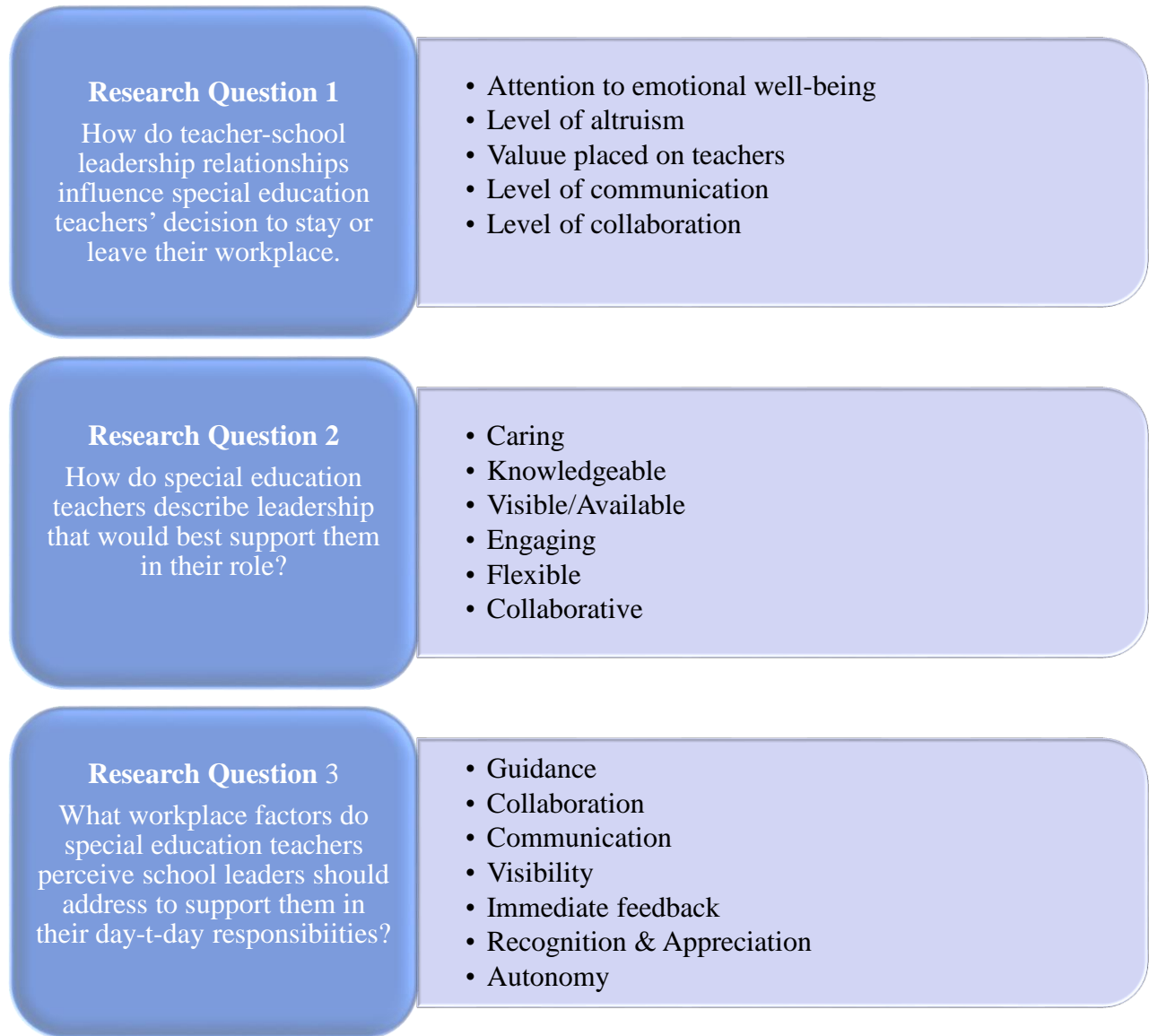
I need more information regarding what I need to improve upon. There could be more of a verbal evaluation process. Maybe I am doing my job or not doing my job. It gives me an attitude of being stranded on a fence sort of speak of not knowing which way I am going. Am I going in the right direction or the wrong direction?

SETs felt continuous constructive performance feedback built self-efficacy and reduced SET role ambiguity. Additionally, SETs thought effective leadership feedback should include recognizing

SETs' accomplishments which would boost SET performance motivation and morale.

Participant E stated, "Reinforcement is uplifting. You know, working with the students that we work with (laughter), any kind of reinforcement would be uplifting and improve my role as a teacher." Participants noted in their journals, gratitude and appreciation for their leader providing a Staff Appreciation Luncheon, approval for student projects, and brief classroom visits. Participant G stated, "My supervisor checked in early in the day and had a very decent conversation about what the students were engaged in."

Promoting autonomy was another prominent theme that SETs communicated they would like to make their daily responsibilities easier and more fulfilling. Participant E stated, "Democratic leadership would allow teachers to teach the way they are supposed to teach and that would be helpful for the students." Participant C corresponded, "I agree wholeheartedly with that. Teachers should be given that opportunity or I don't think we do our best." Participant E specified, leaders have to be open to suggestions and visit in the classroom to see what is and isn't working. If instructional practices are not effective, SETs felt they should be given autonomy to demonstrate their knowledge, expertise, and creativity to employ better practices. Participant H would have liked it if their school leader to observe and evaluate instructional practices for their effectiveness and work more collaboratively with them to ensure the best methods are being employed. Participant H proposed that school leaders, "Maybe add something a more creative and more helpful as far as the needs of the kids and be more effective." Overall, SETs would like leadership feedback that showed interest in their performance by letting them know how well they are performing, what is expected of them, how much they are appreciated for their efforts. Figure 3 shows common and frequent SET responses that respond to the questions.



*Figure 3.* Data themes that respond to research questions.

As with participant interviews, participant journal entries substantiated themes and categories that affected their perceptions of their leadership support and influenced their workplace longevity. Table 3 shows the frequency of themes entered in the six-week day-to-day journal entries completed by the participants.



Table 3

*Participant Journals: Themes that Emerged*

Part.	Desire More Flexibility	Desire More Interaction	Desire More Support & Guidance	Desire More Recognition & Appreciation	Desire More Communication	Desire More Affiliative Leadership
Part. A		X	X			X
Part. B		X	X		X	
Part. C	X		X		X	X
Part. D			X		X	X
Part. E	X	X	X	X	X	X
Part. F	X	X		X		X
Part. G		X		X		
Part. H	X		X		X	

**Impact of school environment.** Participants perceived school leadership influences SET longevity. Participant H indicated, if the culture is not good, “teachers will go somewhere else.” Participants felt school leaders dictate the school’s culture, which affects everyone working in the school. Participant A stated, “The teacher turnover in my school is high. Participant G elaborated, I have seen over 50% turnover here. I am not sure what the cause of that could be. A lot of teachers come in, where do I go, what do I do, and the next thing you know, well, I can’t do this anymore. The percentage was based on the participant’s perception, not factual data. Participant B stated, “I have seen a lot of turnover. If something comes up, I can say that I am honestly looking”. Participants suggested school leaders take measures to address working

conditions, such as promoting SET autonomy, support for novice teachers, and building supportive LMX to retain SETs. Special education teacher autonomy was a major factor SETs would like school leaders to consider. It was important that SETs had some control over their effect on their working environment. Freedom to make some instructional decisions and inclusion in school programming decisions was important to SETs. Further, SET autonomy and participation in school decision-making influenced teacher retention. Providing novice teachers with extra support they require to be successful and satisfied on the job is another factor SETs would like to see addressed by school leaders. First-year SETs encountered many challenges, such as managing excessive paperwork, student behaviors, time-management, and delivering quality instruction to students with many learning disabilities and learning styles. Participant A stated,

I really don't feel like the State of New Jersey schools provide SETs with the support they need. I feel that special education teachers need to be refreshed on the State standards, goals, objectives, IEP writing, professional development, behavior modification techniques, and managing stress.

Participant B suggested that leaders have continuous dialogue with new teachers to create a cohesive school environment. Further, they would like school leaders should prepare them with adequate materials, and provide them with mentors. Participant F specified, leaders provide new SETs with trainings by veteran SETs to prevent them from feeling frustrated in not being able to fulfil their job responsibilities, and reduce the likelihood of quitting their job. Participant F stated, "I think I was very fortunate to be trained by people who knew the ropes and gave me insight on how to do certain things.

These workplace factors have led to SETs' workplace dissatisfaction because their professional needs were not being addressed. SETs' indicated their experiences were not aligned with their job expectations due to the lack of leadership support. Consequently, new SETs are more likely to seek employment in another school. Novice SETs want school leaders to develop supportive relationships with them early on in their employment so that they will feel confident enough to share with their leaders any performance doubts and support they need to be great teachers. Participant B indicated, "I want someone I feel I can go talk to anytime if I had a problem." Developing strong LMX was a key factor for influencing SETs' employment decisions. Participant B stated, "I think number one is someone that is sociable, can talk to people and make them feel like their job is important, and help them thrive as a teacher.

Participants, also, relayed school environments can foster burnout and stress, which affects morale and leaves SETs feeling unmotivated to go above and beyond their role and responsibilities, or simply doing their jobs. Participant B stated, "Burnout is a big thing, too. Gets to a point where you almost just give up. You're like, I got to get out of here. I got to go somewhere where I am not so stressed. I think burnout is another biggy." Participant B appreciated the school's leader for providing SETs an additional Winter Break to escape from the mental stressors and physical challenges of their job, which was an incentive to retain them. Special education teachers want school leaders to recognize SET job stressors and address them, accordingly. Further, Participant B contended, stress created a lack of motivation and workplace dissatisfaction that was compounded when there is a "lack of praise or acknowledgement for the little extra things that we do." Participant D described conditions that can promote stress,

It's a lot when we don't have teachers for our Specials, which then we need to fill in during our prep period. A lack of staffing rolls into lack of being prepared, lack of consistency, lack of everything. It is a snowball because that effects everything.

Participants felt SET turnover also affected SET employment decisions and morale.

Participant H revealed, SETs want the SET turnover problem addressed by school leaders; if not, they will continue to leave their schools for another. Participant F and H both stated, "I am looking for something." Participant D stated, "The turnover is getting worse. If supportive (colleagues) school staff left, I would leave, too." Participant C and E both shook their heads in agreement. Participant C laughed, uneasily, and stated, "The teacher turnover is real." However, Participant G stated, "There is nothing that I have seen thus far that would deter me from leaving here. I am sure I will be here for a while." Participants felt servant-like leadership would increase SETs' workplace satisfaction and morale. Participant G indicated, "If leaders showed more compassion, it would be good for teacher morale."

## **Summary**

Participant one-to-one interviews, journaling, and focus group interviews revealed common themes among SETs about school leadership and SET retention. Transcriptions of interviews that revealed participants' beliefs, attitudes, and values were examined along with journal entries describing day-to-day workplace experiences. The majority of the participants were consistent in their responses. The participants provided narratives of their relationships with school leaders, the type and level of support they received from their school leaders provided them, and the influence that leaders had on their employment decisions. Most participants described effective and ongoing leadership communication, overall servant

leadership support, affiliative leader-teacher relationships, and a culture with high employee morale, praise, recognition, and teacher longevity.

The first prominent theme that emerged from the data was the level and quality of leadership communication. Participants perceived that better communication between leaders and SETs would increase their knowledge and reduce SETs' feelings of unpreparedness and non-productivity. Special education teachers would like their school leaders to be accessible to engage with them throughout the workday because they often need on-the-spot school leadership guidance and collaborative decision-making related to classroom management, instructional practices, and time management. Further, beyond staff meetings, SETs desired on-going opportunities to discuss other school-related issues and engage with their school leader to build leader-teacher relationships.

The second theme that emerged was the desire for more overall leadership support for providing professional development. Special education teachers required proactive leadership in trainings on IEP-related responsibilities and pedagogical strategies that best meet the needs of students with disabilities. Further, while SETs relied heavily on their peers for extra support, they would like their school leaders to engage in team trainings that explained the importance of and demonstrates how school leaders and teachers working more collaboratively would be beneficial for both staff and students. Additionally, SETs believed novice teachers and new employees would benefit from additional leadership support that included providing peer mentors. Placing SETs in a new position with little direction or guidance was stressful for them. Further, as they grew into their jobs, they felt uncertain of their role and competency.

The third theme that emerged was the quality of leader-teacher relationships. Participants indicated that SETs have a strong need for a leader-teacher bond. Teachers sought a leader that

embodied an inviting demeanor; one that showed interest in their psychological, professional, and emotional well-being. Special education teachers would like their school leaders to have a passion for working collaboratively and serving others. They believed school leaders that have a genuine interest in promoting the emotional well-being and professional growth in others were more likely to develop strong LMX. Leader-teacher relationships were a vital aspect for improving workplace satisfaction.

The fourth theme that emerged was the influence of leadership styles on the workplace environment. Participants perceived leadership characteristics, such as being altruistic, supportive, selfless, democratic, and engaging positively affected a school's culture. SETs also perceived collaborative leaders that have a drive for serving others would improve SETs' morale, motivation, and retention. Moreover, participants thought autocratic leadership approaches created a workplace environment that was dissatisfying. Thus, SETs were not motivated to fulfill their duties and responsibilities under restrictive leadership styles. Conversely, democratic leadership practices fostered SET satisfaction, supportive positive leader-teacher relationships, and the likelihood of them remaining in the workplace. Participants believed leadership style can influence SETs' decisions to stay or leave the workplace. Participants felt more leadership support and addressing teacher turnover would reduce SETs burnout and stress, which they perceived impeded their success. That is, due to the school's shortage of SETs, some teachers continuously lost their prep periods because they had to fill in for SET vacancies. As a result of SET turnover, SETs had to provide students with additional lessons to fill in instructional gaps. Hence, SET turnover lowered their morale and placed undo stress and burnout on some teachers who felt frustrated and unmotivated. As a result of workplace stressors and lack of support, SETs contemplated leaving or left for better employment opportunities. Although SETs strongly

indicated their stress would be reduced if school leaders recognized their going the extra mile manage the challenges in the workplace.

Chapter 5 contains a discussion of this study and interpretations of the results. It also contains information about the study's limitations, implications of the study, and recommendations for further research. The chapter ends with a conclusion summarizing the study's results and significance.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter contains a discussion of the research findings. I will draw on themes that emerged from the study to discuss and summarize the findings. This chapter also includes information about the study's limitations, implications, and recommendations for further research.

My primary role as the researcher was to manage the study with integrity and ensure the participants were treated safely and with respect. I work in the education field and have over a decade of experience in school administration. My interest in SET attrition led me to design a study that would shed light on the type of leadership support SETs need to be satisfied and successful in their job. I conducted a qualitative case study to better understand the problem and to gather rich and detailed data from those directly affected by the problem. Integrating a phenomenological aspect into this study allowed me to be able to explore the experiences, feelings, and beliefs of SETs in their school environment. Analyzing these perceptions and experiences enhanced my comprehension of the phenomenon of SET turnover.

Turnover among special education teachers continues to increase in the United States, even as school leaders continue to struggle to support and retain them (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Tyler, 2012; Vittek, 2015). This qualitative phenomenological case provided rich and detailed accounts of special education teachers' experiences as they decided to stay or leave their jobs. Historically, school leaders have resorted to hiring unqualified teachers rather than addressing the root of the problem (Berry et al., 2011; Deutsch-Smith, 2012; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011;



Tyler, 2012; Vittek, 2015). However, school leaders are now seeking ways to fully support and retain SETs (Bettini et al. 2017; Brunsting et al., 2011).

This study was significant because it examined the relationship between school leadership and SET retention. The study found that top-down leadership approaches negatively affected the level of support teachers received. In most workplaces, top-down leadership has been found to be ineffective, leading to unmotivated and unhappy employees (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011).

Triangulated methods of inquiry were guided by the following research questions, which were used to explore and examine the phenomena of SET attrition.

1. How do teacher-school leadership relationships influence special education teachers' decision to stay or leave their workplaces?
2. How do special education teachers describe leadership that would best support them in their role?
3. What workplace factors do special education teachers perceive that school leaders should address in order to support them in their day-to-day responsibilities?

Eight educators were recruited from one special education school in the United States. Participants were eager to share their workplace experiences and perceptions of their work as special educators, with special attention to the relationships and support that school leaders can provide to help them thrive and remain in their job. One-to-one interviews, 6-week participant journaling, and focus group interviews were used to collect data. Individual interviews generated detailed responses to 10 questions. Participant responses included narratives of workplace experiences. Journaling provided a clearer picture of SETs' day-to-day experiences, even though some participants' journals were more thorough than others. The two focus groups

clarified how school leadership influenced workplace longevity. The research questions were answered using systematic data analysis. Specifically, transcribed narratives were analyzed by using descriptive coding and creating themes and categories. Four prominent themes emerged from the data: desire for democratic leadership, effective leader-teacher communication, adequate and consistent leadership support, cohesive and caring leader-teacher relationship. SETs also asserted that school leadership affects a school faculty's morale, motivation, and retention.

### **Summary of the Results**

Leading democratically, communicating effectively, fostering collaborative efforts, and attending to the emotional needs of SETs were broad themes that emerged from this case study. Special education teachers indicated such leadership behaviors would positively affect the school's culture.

**Leading democratically.** Overwhelmingly SETs desired a more democratic school leadership approach that prioritized serving and supporting them in doing their jobs more effectively. SETs felt that an autocratic leadership style weakened leader-member exchange (LMX) and contributed to an unsatisfactory working environment that was not conducive to teacher retention. Special education teachers perceived top-down leadership was ineffective for two-way communication between leaders and teachers. Servant leadership is a balanced approach to leadership because it is comprised of democratic and primal leadership approaches. Servant leadership would help them grow professionally and establish productive relationship with their leader. A key characteristic of servant leadership is the desire for leaders to seek and provide SETs with what they need professionally and emotionally to be successful. Additionally, SETs indicated the strength of servant leadership positively reflects whether

workplace environment had high or low SET motivation and morale. Studies showed that cohesive LMX relationship positively influence followers' job attitude, motivation, and performance (Al- Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). Special education teachers felt school leaders that develop strong working relationships inspired and motivated them to achieve individual and collective organizational goals. A relational leader “drives the moods and actions of an organization” (Goleman, Bovatzis, & McKee, 2001, p. 44).

**Communicating and collaborating effectively.** Educational leadership that engaged in on-going communication with their employees was a key factor that SETs associated with effective leadership. When SETs believed they did not have ample opportunities to express themselves to their leader about instructional and school practices, they felt helpless in their roles. Consequently, SETs developed role ambiguity because they found it difficult and frustrating to communicate with their leader and seek knowledge and guidance to aid them in fulfilling their pedagogical responsibilities. Eventually, positive LMX becomes less likely and SET workplace dissatisfaction occurs. Servant leaders have a welcoming demeanor and are accessible to their followers, which made it easier for effective two-way communication. Effective communication allows for an exchange of insights, experiences, and knowledge between leaders and employees. A lack of collaborative dialogue between school leaders and SETs makes it difficult for SETs seek guidance from their leader or be motivated to put forth their best efforts. Given SETs' emphasis on leader-teacher sharing knowledge and working collaboratively, it would be advantageous for school leaders to give attention to developing relationships that foster on-going communication and collaboration which would improve SET workplace satisfaction. A collaborative workplace is essential for SET workplace satisfaction. Special education teachers desired a serving leader who is wise in understanding the importance

of facilitating knowledge formation through collaboration, which results in SET extended knowledge and positive LMX relationships. Wise leaders are cognizant that individual and team support are necessary for job empowerment and building relationships. Job empowerment is essential for SET self-efficacy and retention (Boe, 2013). A leader's team approach mindset must be proactive in providing opportunities for collaborative decision-making and efforts to inspire and ensure their followers remain motivated on the job.

**Developing employees.** Providing adequate professional development was a theme SETs felt school leaders should provide to increase their knowledge and skill base. Consequently, SET performance confidence would rise and stress levels would be reduced. Special education teachers specified school leaders should be aware that novice teachers need comprehensive trainings on IEP and related paperwork, time-management, student management, and effective instructional practices to reduce SET stress, burnout, and attrition. Novice teachers were more vulnerable to stress and performance uncertainty; therefore, they required more professional development and leader and peer guidance. When novice SETs did not receive enough guidance and training, they resorted to scrambling for pedagogical support, which was frustrating for them. Research found that providing good leadership and support, especially for novice teachers, is paramount to retaining them (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Dierendonck, 2011; Kagler, 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Talley, 2016). Burnout was prevalent when SETs worked diligently, but their performance outcomes were perceived too challenging to achieve (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Thus, without leadership support to meet the demands of their job, their stress and burnout levels increased. A heavy workload and compensating for unfilled SET positions led to SET frustrations and burnout. It is school leaders' desire to serve and altruistic calling of a servant leader that is always working to help

teachers grow professionally and attend to their emotional health (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016).

Providing novice teachers with peer mentors would certainly give them the early support and professional development they need to be effective in their role as a special needs teacher.

**Showing altruism.** Affiliative leadership create organizational climates that cultivate the sharing of information, building trust, encouraging innovation and creativity, and professional growth (Goleman et al., 2001). Servant leaders' altruism was also important for providing SETs with performance recognition. When SETs felt appreciated and recognized by their leaders, they felt good about their job performance and relationship with their leader. A lack of cohesive leader-teacher relationships affected SETs' well-being. Followers that felt their leaders cared about them, LMX were much stronger (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Special education teachers need to feel valued and emotionally and professionally attached to their leader. It was SETs' perceptions of a caring leadership that bought out strong emotions in SETs. Special education teachers felt positive reinforcement from school leaders went a long way in building LMX and motivating them. Participants indicated, they want a school leader that had a happy spirit and was motivated by serving and looking out for the well-being of others. Emotive leadership was a factor that SETs indicated not only affected their attitudes and behaviors, but the entire school culture. Special education teachers strongly stressed that school leadership style impacted the school's overall environment, which eventually influenced their desire to stay or leave the workplace. Specifically, studies reflected that supportive and caring LMX influenced teachers' decisions to stay in their workplace (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013; Grant, 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011; Tsang & Liu, 2016).

Unfortunately, SETs perceived school leaders were unaware of many of the aforementioned themes that precipitated SETs' decision to separate from their employers.

Servant leaders have the ability to recognize the tone of their work environments and skills to address the needs of their followers (Barbuto and Hayden (2011)). Simply, because their focus on serving and developing others.

This case study indicated the aforementioned broad themes of what SETs require from school leaders to be satisfied and remain in their teaching role. Conducting this study allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of SETs workplace experiences and what impact school leadership approaches had on their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Based on themes that emerged from participants' rich descriptive data, SETs indicated to be successful and satisfied in their workplace, they require relational, affiliative, flexible, engaging, collaborative, and communicative leadership styles that are geared toward attending to SET emotional health, professional creativity, collaborative efforts, and leader-teacher interactions.

**Relational leadership.** A school leadership approach that built high-quality leader-follower relationships was a core theme in this study. Although SETs want efficient and task-oriented school leadership, a theme that was clearly indicated was SETs' displeasure with any type of top-down leadership because it did not provide for their emotional or professional needs. In fact, autocratic leadership is slowly moving towards a more balanced style of leadership. School leaders are adopting a democratic and relational leadership approach, such as servant leadership (Taylor et al., 2007). Leadership style is a strong predictor of how strong LMX will be; therefore, it is crucial to identify proper leadership approaches required for supporting SETs and, ultimately, building better leader-teacher relationships. School leaders can start this process by demonstrating approachable and welcoming behaviors. Special education teachers are faced with unique challenges in their role; as a result, the type of relationships they developed with their school leader was a key factor for SET workplace satisfaction and longevity. Research has

shown school administrators are in the best position for affecting how teachers feel about their jobs and influencing the school's working conditions (Burkhauser, 2016). For example, servant leaders are attuned to their followers' emotional health. Special education teachers wanted their leaders to be knowledgeable about SETs' profession and experiences and SETs' needs to be successful in providing students with a quality education. Participants shared their frustration with the of lack of school leaders' unawareness of the ins and outs of their jobs and experiences. Servant school leaders are wise and attuned to the needs of their followers; they have a strong sense of awareness. Moreover, they fully understand the consequences of not attending to their followers' needs (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Servant leadership lends itself to an environment where insight and mindfulness of followers' needs fosters strong relationships, which is central for workplace satisfaction.

**Caring leadership.** Ensuring that SETs emotional well-being is healthy was a key theme related to the importance LMX relationships. A review of recent leadership theories indicated, leaders must know their followers' dispositions and look out for their emotional health (Amanchukwu et al., 2015, p. 9). Participants indicated how important it was for SETs to develop a strong rapport with their school leaders because they wanted to feel supported and unified in what workplace. Without emotional leader-teacher connections, SETs are likely to "experience job-related stress, which eventually makes them question the worthwhileness of teaching, their career choice, and satisfaction, eventually affecting their intent to leave" (Conley & You, 2017, p. 535). Principals that embody servant leadership characteristics, such as, showing altruism, providing support, and making teachers a priority would be the type of leadership to buffer workplace stressors and develop strong emotional connections (Burkhauser, 2016). Participants reflected, leadership that showed caring behavior and a compassion for

making the needs of others their highest priority was a central factor for quality LMX, which influenced their decision to remain in the workplace. Servant leaders nurturing disposition and willingness to understand their followers' job stressors are driven by ensuring their followers grow emotionally and professionally. Most leaders are too focused on self-fulfilling and organizational goals; therefore, they forget goals cannot be accomplished with a workplace that is replete with low morale and unmotivated followers.

**Flexible leadership.** Accommodating leadership that embraced autonomy was a theme SETs voiced would make them feel more competent and respected as teacher. Special education teacher felt school leaders should be high in persuasive mapping: the use of knowledge, sound reasoning, and flexibility to encourage creativity. Servant leaders have the capability to use persuasive mapping, rather than pushing edicts that diminishes cohesive and respectable relationships (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Communicating a need for autonomy with school leaders was a struggle for SETs because school leaders seemed inclined to follow strict school and leadership practices. Authority-based leaders who seek to validate unilateral thinking rather than encourage lateral thinking in others is ineffective for employee productivity (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Participants concurred with this assessment of school leaders, indicating their feelings of dissatisfaction was due to top-down leadership, which hindered their success. Unfortunately, studies pointed out that school leaders did not have adequate leadership skills or training in special education leadership; therefore, they are often unprepared to successfully support SETs (Bettini et al., 2015; Boyd et al., 2011; Jackson, 2008; Roderick & Woo Jung, 2012; Schaaf et al, 2015). However, SETs felt that if school leaders effectively communicated with them and gave them some instructional flexibility, they would realize the value of SET innovation and creativity. For example, it improved instructional delivery and student



management strategies.

**Visible and engaging leadership.** Another prominent theme was SETs' need for visible and engaging leadership throughout their workday. School leaders found it challenging to move away from day-to-day management concerns and focus on the larger purpose of their organizations (Taylor et al., 2007). Participants revealed, when they needed immediate guidance it was not readily available to them throughout the day. Special education teachers wanted supportive dialogue from their leader to assist them with problems or concerns they encountered, and when that didn't happen, they felt stressed. They perceived interactive and visible leadership indicated leaders were interested in the school's workplace culture and supporting teachers as much as possible. Studies indicate leaders should engage with their followers throughout the day; they should share knowledge and effective and supportive dialogue (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Special education teacher craved respectful dialogue with school leaders that was open to their perspectives and provided them with knowledge and support to be and successful in their jobs. Sharing knowledge not only develops cohesive leader-teacher relationships, the exchange of knowledge leads to collective wisdom for achieving individual and common organizational goals. In this study, teachers and school leaders' collective goal was providing a quality education for students that developed their character and gave them life skills to be productive members of society. Special education teachers required a servant leader that cooperative mindset and caring nature compels them to engage and motivate their followers individually and as a unified team.

**Collaborative leadership.** Providing SETs collaborative opportunities with school leaders and peers was a theme SETs perceived would create productive work teams and quality relationships. Collaboration is reflective of servant leaders because they enjoy and promote the

principal of shared leadership and decision-making. Collective interactions towards organizational goal, which is an organizational stewardship quality of servant leaders (AL-Mahdy, 2016), was important to teachers. Teachers articulated how much they enjoy working together and being involved in joint decision-making to achieve a common goal. Equally important, SETs realized the value collaborative leader-teacher relationships has on their employment decisions. Servant leadership's focus on shared leadership enhanced SET commitment, motivation, and LMX. Shared leadership continue to prove an extremely effective leadership approach for accelerating SET morale and performance levels.

**Appreciative leadership.** Leadership that is appreciative and recognizes their followers are themes that also increased motivation and morale throughout the day. Special education teachers craved admiration and praise from their school leader, which they indicated made tackling their daily responsibilities easier. Special education indicated, they would be less frustrated and stressed knowing their leader understood the challenges of their job and appreciated them for their efforts. That is, SETs want a leader that encouraged the heart, namely, a leader that recognizes their contributions to the school. Additionally, SETs need school leadership that is willing to give them constructive job performance feedback and work collaboratively with them to grow professionally, which would build engaging and productive LMX. Thus, SETs indicated they would feel like valued members of a team if their leader interacted with them more caringly and with an open mind to their ideas. Recognition and feedback are central for the psychological health of SETs. A trait of servant leaders is their ability to encourage the heart, which entails recognizing followers' contributions to the school (Taylor et al., 2017). Leaders are making a mistake in not finding the time to recognizing their teachers' contributions to the school because praise and acknowledging job performance gives

teachers a sense of belonging and that motivates them to higher performance involvement.

Without performance feedback, SETs will continue to feel their efforts are not noticed and they are not making a difference in their schools. Consequently, LMX is weakened and they are more inclined to go where they are appreciated and can make a positive impact.

### **Discussion of the Results**

It was evident from the data analysis of this qualitative case study that professional relationship SETs develop with their school leader influences their decision to stay or leave the workplace. Appreciative, flexible, collaborative, serving, and affiliative leadership were essential serving leadership behaviors SETs require to support them in their role, build essential working relationships, and retain them in the workplace.

**Showing appreciation and recognition.** Not surprisingly, SETs repeatedly asserted the need for their school leader show appreciation and recognizing them for their contribution to the school. More than financial incentives or time paid off, SETs wanted to know and be recognized for their job performance and dedication for going above and beyond. Those leaders that are aware of appreciating and recognizing individual and group efforts reflect that of a servant leader. Further, servant principals are cognizant of how recognizing individual and team contributions is great for the emotional well-being of their teachers, and it enhances the school's overall success (Taylor et al., 2017). When SETs assisted their peers, took work-related paperwork home, volunteered to participate in school programs, managed severe student behaviors, and worked late to complete lesson plans and other required paperwork, they expected some recognition from their leaders. Throughout the interview process, SETs explained why they needed their school leaders to recognize their influence on the school. More than any workplace factor, teacher recognition was what they most desired from their leader; SETs

wanted to feel a sense of connection and value to their leader. Leaders that are psychological cheerleaders for their followers are more likely have unified relationships with them (Barbuto and Hayden, 2011; Cerit, 2009).

**Fostering creativity and autonomy.** Leadership that promotes employee innovation and creativity is a theme clearly reflected in the data. A key reason top-down leadership was a rejected practice among SETs is its resistance to autonomy. The root of SETs' frustrations stemmed from their desire for a more democratic-like leadership rather than those more restrictive. Special education teachers articulated their need for school leaders that showed authority, but were receptive to supporting their creativity rather than unilateral decision-making. Teachers believe principals that give them creative freedom is a source of professional development and motivates them to do well (AL-Mahdy, 2016). They are also capable, to a great extent, to motivate them. Autocratic leadership was the least desired leadership style that SETs preferred. Special educator teachers become frustrated and resentful when they feel hindered from performing their jobs more creatively and effectively. Democratic leaders are conscious that employees want to be respected as skilled professionals in their field and expect to be treated as such (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). School leaders need to be flexible and receptive in embracing SETs' expertise and ideas to ensure students' academic success. Special education teachers would be more motivated and satisfied in their jobs if they felt school leaders trusted their expertise to make good instructional, group, and problem-solving decisions (Burkhauser, 2016). A more democratic leadership approach would support SETs' pedagogical needs and leader-membership exchange.

**Creating a cohesive culture.** Triangulated data clearly reflected SETs would like their school leaders to engage in affiliative behaviors to create an environment where they feel

connected to their leader and peers. Relationships would have been much stronger if teachers had the opportunity to collaborate and shared knowledge with their leaders. Servant-like leaders thrive to serve others by collaborating with and aiming to empower their followers. They are fully aware of their followers' needs and puts forth the effort to address them. School environments that are cohesive, collaborative, and share knowledge cultivates strong relationships, which improves SETs' self-efficacy and longevity (Boe, 2013; Cerit, 2009). Sharing knowledge and inspiring SETs to think outside the box, not only develops their skills but makes them respected as professionals in their working environment.

**Dedication to serving others.** Opportunities for SETs to interact with school leaders to help SETs manage job stressors was another prominent theme that emerged from the data. Due to the unique job stressors and lack of leadership support that have led to SET burnout, the focus to support and retain them must be predicated on a servant leadership style. Servant leaders have traits that focus their attention on attending to the psychological and emotional need. For example, SETs require additional support with multi-tasking heavy workloads, managing their time, and managing students with chronic behavioral problems. It was shown by the participant responses to the interview questions and journal entries, SETs clearly voiced their need for school leadership that leadership that makes a continuous effort to interact with them. They wanted opportunities for on-going communication with their school leaders to address their concerns and frustrations. In doing so, SETs believed their stress and burnout levels would be minimized. If SETs had positive LMX, they would feel more inclined to communicate their concerns and receive the professional and emotional leadership they require rather than feeling isolated and frustrated. If school leaders want to retain teachers, they will have to embrace a leadership approach that effectively communicates, approachable, and has a high interest in the

professional and emotional health of their followers. A holistic leadership style, such as servant leadership, would be eager to professionally develop their followers and show care for them, which is why they would be successful in increasing workplace satisfaction and create high quality LMX relationships. Wise leaders that have a desire to serve and maintain productive working relationships.

**Showing a caring attitude.** Lastly, SETs' need for their school leaders to show concern for their psychological well-being was a prominent theme in this study. Since SETs yearned for a positive working relationship with their school leader; it is needless to say, school leaders must embody attitudes that reflect compassion for others. Caring leaders not only gain the respect of their followers, they have the strongest potential to sensitively connect with their leaders. SETs feel isolated and rejected when school leaders emotionally abandon them. When school leaders show a lack of concern for their SETs, they are left feeling unsupported, which results in negative SET attitudes towards school leaders and the workplace. Consequently, SETs seek other employment options. Caring attitudes, a characteristic of servant leaders, create LMX where diverse perspectives and ideas lead to knowledge creation and collaborative decision-making. Leaders that are motivated by serving others show care by actively listening to their followers' concerns, ideas, and viewpoints and, make it a priority to address their needs.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

This phenomenological case study showed the level and quality of support SETs require to reduce their attrition. Research has shown the challenges that SETs face in educating students with disabilities is compounded by the lack of support they receive to do their jobs (Andrews & Brown, 2015). Thus, SET job expectations are less than ideal experiences as a SET, which has influenced their decision to stay or leave the workplace. Effective school leadership

that develops LMX and selflessly serves their followers is an effective approach that can contribute to SET workplace satisfaction and retention.

Ineffective leadership support was a theme in both this case study and in related literature. It is imperative that school district administrators understand reasons contributing to this problem and what they can do to address it. School district administrators and school leader preparation programs must better prepare future leaders in relational and shared leadership approaches. Unfortunately, research indicates that school administrators are not fully aware of the challenges SET face, and they seldom receive sufficient preparation to effectively support SETs (Bettini, et al, 2017; Burkhauser, 2016; Roderick & Jung 2012). Participants indicated throughout this case study that they perceived school leaders do not fully understand the workplace challenges they face and do not have the pedagogical, student management, and time-management knowledge and skills to assist them. In many leadership preparation programs, special education courses are not required.

One study shared how a school leader's frustration led her to consider whether special educators were lacking the skills to perform their jobs, or she needed to seek better ways to support and retain them (Bettini et al., 2010). In doing so, she discovered strengthening the way in which she supported SETs by participating in collaborative practices and giving them quality feedback, autonomy, and role and task significance, was the key to "higher motivation, commitment, and retention of special educators, and improved outcomes for students with disabilities" Bettini et al., 2015, p. 224). Such reflective leadership discovered some themes that emerged from this case study. Thus, servant leadership trainings for school administrators would be fitting for school environments because servant leaders are attentive and dedicated to serving, and they are cognizant of their followers professional and emotional needs. Servant leaders

value their followers, dedicated to sharing knowledge and developing their followers, promote workplace creativity, and attend to their followers' emotional health.

**Valuing SETs.** In this case study, SETs' employment decisions were highly influenced by how much they felt valued and recognized in the workplace. These themes relate to relational and servant leadership practice because those that have a desire to serve others bring out the best in them by inspiring and catering to their emotional health. It was made clear by SETs in this study and other research, they expect school leaders to acknowledge and respect their contributions to educating students with disabilities. Special education teachers felt emotionally connected to school leaders that appreciated them, and it gave them a sense that they were making a difference in their schools (Cancio et al., 2013). Only 9% of SETs that left their employers for other schools found their principals effectively communicated respect or appreciation for them (Boyd et al., 2011). As the data showed in this study, SETs continue to stress acknowledgement of their exceptional work performances and dedicated professional behaviors needed improvement because it negatively affected their school's culture. They indicated, it lowered SET motivation, morale, and job longevity. Education scholars recommend school practice include periodic evaluation of how school leaders are shaping their culture (Bettini et al., 2017). Servant leaders' altruistic leadership is aware that recognition and appreciation is not an option, but a necessity for providing SETs a sense of meaning in what they do as SETs.

**Promoting SET autonomy.** Professional freedom was desired by SETs. It is the responsibility of school leaders to increase followers' creativity and autonomy. It was extremely important to SETs that school leaders understand the value of SETs' autonomy and innovative skills. Job empowerment is a motivator for SETs, and it builds leader-teacher connections



because SETs felt their school leaders' respect and trust their expertise and knowledge. Ultimately, it is the school leader's responsibility to inspire and ensure the growth in their SETs to foster a culture of collective creativity. In addition to developing SETs educational skills, more democratic styles of leadership promote the sharing of successful creative ideas and practices. In addition, organizational learning takes place when SETs leaders employees share knowledge. Research, including this case study, showed that SETs become unfulfilled when their school leaders restricted their ability to express their expertise in the classroom. Although SETs wanted more autonomy, it is high stakes testing that often influence school leaders' instructional compliance and resistance to SET autonomy (Bettini et al., 2015).

**Providing SETs with professional development.** School leaders must choose leadership styles that focus on the school's vision and individual needs of SETs. Participants relayed that school leadership should provide them with training that allows them to be competent in their jobs and meet goals for the school. School leaders that are aware of their professional purpose are highly proactive in supporting their followers. New SETs in this study felt like "fish out of water" because they rarely received the guidance and support needed to feel confident in their roles. Novice SETs consistently expressed they had expected mentorship, guidance, and feedback with day-to-day responsibilities of their jobs. For example, SETs indicated that leadership support and feedback in managing IEP-related duties, lesson plans, instructional practices, and classroom management would increase their workplace satisfaction (Boe, 2013; Cancio et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2011; Tyler, 2012). Studies indicate that novice SETs expect and value feedback from their school leaders (Bettini et al. 2015). This case study's data showed that both novice and veteran teachers felt school leaders did not provide them with ample performance support or feedback. Both novice and veteran SETs expressed not having

the time to complete their lesson plans, grade papers, or finish other related paperwork. Some SETs wanted to “throw in the towel” because they become stressed and felt isolated, incompetent, and undervalued. Further, they were not provided with professional development to handle their job responsibilities. School leaders that guide and develop their teachers nurture caring LMX relationships. Special educator teachers perceive servant principals more effective than those employing other leadership approaches because serving leaders inspire, engage, work collectively, and encourage the heart (Taylor et al., 2007). Principals should adopt behaviors and a mindset for serving and developing others; in turn, they can create higher SET performance, higher morale, and healthy professional relationships.

**Emotionally supporting SETs.** Another theme that occurred in both the literature review and the study’s findings was SETs’ need for emotional support to aid them in managing the demands of their job. An affiliative leadership approach is essential for special educational settings because of the nature of SETs’ responsibilities. Expressing a concern for others’ emotional well-being was a key characteristic that SETs desired in a school leader. This study found that SETs would be less frustrated in their jobs if they felt that their leaders cared for their emotional health. Followers would benefit from servant leadership because servant leaders are highly empathetic and have the ability to show sensitivity to others. Studies showed that affiliative school leadership behaviors influence teachers’ professional commitment. Emotional connections are made by maintaining caring and supportive teacher-leader interactions. The SETs in this study found such interactions lacking. Leaders that have an emotional bond with their teachers will have quality relationships with them (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011), which this study’s SETs indicated would make their jobs easier and more satisfying. This and past studies confirm there is a positive correlation between servant leadership behaviors that build high-

quality relationships with their followers and job satisfaction (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016). Satisfaction with the nature of work had the highest mean of all the nine facets of job satisfaction.

Although the SETs indicated they had a passion for their jobs and dedication to serving a difficult student population, they still found it difficult to remain in their positions. Participants noted that the degree to which SETs felt valued, professionally empowered, professionally developed, and emotionally supported by their school leader. SETs believed that school leaders must form and maintain LMX by adopting a selfless leadership approach.

### **Limitations**

This case study had several limitations. First, the sample did not include SETs that left their school or the field prior to the study. Special education teachers who had left either their position or their profession would have provided important perspectives on the phenomenon of SET turnover and the impact of school leadership on teacher retention. Second, the study was restricted to one school; therefore, transferability to similar setting might be perceived as limited. There is no way to determine whether behaviors identified in this study would achieve the same results in other schools.

This case study was conducted in a special education school, and the interview and journal data were collected from participants employed in only one independent school. Including teachers from both independent and public schools would have provided a wider range of SETs' perceptions of their workplace experiences. Nevertheless, the study's findings were valuable for understanding how some special educators perceived the value of leadership behaviors. Third, obtaining interviews from the current and past school leaders would have provided in-depth narratives of their experiences and perceptions leading SETs. It would also

have been valuable to examine school leaders' perspectives about the SET turnover problem. Gaining this information would have given insight into how school leaders' perceptions of their job performance influenced their behaviors.

### **Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, & Theory**

Given the increasing turnover rate for SETs, finding school leadership practices that support and promote career longevity for special education teachers has become extremely important. The influence of school leadership on SETs' workplace satisfaction is hardly surprising—previous research has indicated that SETs with affiliative and supportive principals were more satisfied with their work (Taylor et al., 2007). Leaders who aim to effectively serve others are more attuned to the emotional and professional needs of their followers.

Unfortunately, principals are not always fully aware of the pedagogical and emotional challenges SETs encounter. Many school leaders underestimate the time SETs need for planning, instruction, behavior management, and paperwork because they simply lack adequate knowledge of a special education teacher's daily routine. Regularly scheduled leader-teacher meetings to discuss scheduling, duties, time management, and school safety could prevent misconceptions about workload and other workplace challenges facing SETs. School districts could also adopt policies that give school leaders opportunities to learn the theory and practices of servant leadership that support SETs. School leaders should also be expected to lead with a balanced approach that includes building an atmosphere of collaboration, autonomy, shared knowledge, and altruism. By engaging in this servant leadership approach, school leaders not only help their followers grow professionally, but grow professionally themselves by serving others (Barbuto & Hayden, 2011). Specifically, it would be valuable for school districts to adopt policy requiring ongoing holistic and research-driven school leadership in-services and

additional college coursework which includes, collaborative decision-making, serving others, and primal leadership skills that can be used to support SETs. Further, it is crucial that post-secondary schools include in-depth school leadership coursework geared towards leadership internships working closely with teachers in challenging special education schools. Each state's Department of Education could assist with these policy recommendations by requiring school leaders to participate in leadership coursework and professional development to meet each state's continuing education requirements.

This study supported other reports of school leaders that do not effectively support SETs due to a lack of knowledge about and experience in special education (Roderick & Jung, 2012). Specifically, many school leaders use top-down and unprepared leadership methods rather than democratic and relational ones. In light of SETs negative perceptions of school leadership, schools would benefit from policies that mandate school leaders' participation in ongoing reflective practices to self-monitor their leadership practices.

Although various leadership practices can be successful in different contexts, serving others selflessly and passionately is clearly necessary to provide the emotional and professional support SETs indicated as necessary for their success. School administrators who practice stewardship and wisdom as part of servant leadership enhance their own sense of purpose. This in turn helps them be more effective in supporting and developing LMX relationships with their followers.

Building leader-teacher relationships was a prominent theme in this study. Excluding SETs from major decisions that affected their work hinders LMX relationships. Participants in this study believed that they should have input in decisions about instruction, professional development, and student management; being allowed to give this input would show them that

their leaders valued their expertise and psychological well-being. Collaborative decision-making is a practice that servant leaders embrace; it gives their followers a sense of ownership for outcomes (Taylor et al., 2007). Collective decisions also facilitate collective energy, trust, and respectful leader-follower relationships. School leaders who embrace their roles as servant leaders are committed to developing both themselves and their followers, which is facilitated by sharing knowledge and working collaboratively.

Overall, this case study's finding supported the existing theory that leaders dedicated to holistically serving and attending to their followers' emotional health develop cohesive LMX that maintains leader-follower relationships. Since the SET participants explicitly stated that a strong collaborative leader-teacher relationship affected their feelings towards their workplace, servant leadership and LMX is a potential key to retaining them. I searched to find aspects of this study that could have skewed this theory; however, the narratives were very consistent and data analysis confirmed servant leadership nurtures cohesive leader-teacher relationships that influences SETs' workplace longevity.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The special education teachers at the school where this study was conducted provided rich and valuable data. However, this study's findings could be strengthened by conducting a more expansive study that includes more schools and more SETs to make the findings more transferrable. Including school leaders in the sample would provide another point for data triangulation and thus aid in establishing greater credibility. School leaders' experiences would provide researchers with data to compare with SETs' perceptions. Researchers could then examine any disconnect between the two groups' experiences. Studies showed there was a significant difference in the perceptions between what administrators and special educators felt

were valuable educational supports; therefore, administrators should focus on providing the support that is perceived by SETs as most valuable while taking advantage of professional development to improve upon their leadership weaknesses. Further studies would inform district- and school-level leaders about best practices for retaining SETs.

Future studies could also be conducted to examine leadership preparation in college/university programs. Specifically, how extensive are leadership programs in college/university and are they effective in preparing leaders who can support and lead SETs in special education schools? For example, studies might examine the prevalence and effectiveness of school leadership internships conducted at special education schools.

## **Conclusion**

This phenomenological case study has shown that SETs require leaders that are dedicated to developing and serving them in order to be satisfied, successful, and committed to their job. Selfless, attentive, and wise school leaders are effective in school environments because they are able and eager to meet the needs of their SETs. Leaders who view their position as service-oriented very supportive, collaborative, caring, and focused on building LMX. They provided the support that SETs wanted in areas such as instructional practices, and time, classroom, and student management. The study found that leaders who showed genuine concern for the well-being of their SETs and appreciation for the work of teachers developed tighter leader-teacher bonds. Servant principals generated their leadership purpose and priorities intrinsically. They created a shared school vision that included collective efforts and individual empowerment. In addition to teacher independence, collaborative leadership resulted in positive emotional health and professional development. According to this study, school leaders that have an emotional connection with their SETs will have the most positive LMX with them. Like the real estate

adage, “location, location, location,” I maintain that the key factor to retaining SETs is “relationships, relationships, relationships.”



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## **Appendix A: Informed Consent**

Concordia University–Portland Institutional Review Board  
Approved: March 27, 2018; will Expire: March 27, 2019

### **CONSENT FORM**

Research Study Title: Special Education Teacher Turnover & Leadership Support  
Principal Investigator: Patricia Moore  
Research Institution: Special Education School  
Faculty Advisor: Floralba Arbelo, Ed.D.

#### **Purpose and what you will be doing:**

The purpose of this study is to explore school leadership practices that impact special education teacher turnover. The rationale for this study is to provide a greater understanding and insight into the level of support special education teachers require in their roles and what impact support has on their career decision. We expect approximately 8 volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment on April 10, 2018 and end enrollment on May 1, 2018. To be in the study, you will be required to participate in an hour one-on-one interview, journal your attitudes experiences related to school leadership support, and participate in an hour focus group interview. The one-on-one voice-recorded interview will consist of 10 questions. The voice-recorded focus group interview will consist of 8 teachers describing and interacting with each other and the researcher about their experiences as special education teachers. During the study, you will have the opportunity to journal your teaching experiences and support you receive from your school leader. Your participation in the research should take less than five hours of your time.

#### **Risks:**

There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. I will record interviews. The recording will be transcribed by me, the principal investigator, and the recording will be deleted when the transcription is completed. Any data you provide will be coded so people who are not the investigator cannot link your information to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption on my password protected computer locked inside the cabinet in my office. You will not be identified in any publication or report. The recording will be deleted as soon as possible; all other study documents will be kept secure for 3 years and then be destroyed.

#### **Benefits:**

Information you provide will add to the current research, and provide better insight and understanding about what special education teachers require to make them successful and

satisfied in their role. Further, your voice will provide school leaders with knowledge to help school leaders make changes necessary to retain special education teachers.

**Confidentiality:**

This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

Concordia University – Portland Institutional Review Board  
Approved: March 27, 2018; will Expire: March 27, 2019

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

**Contact Information:**

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Patricia Moore at [email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

**Your Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_____	_____
Participant Name	Date
_____	_____
Participant Signature	Date
_____	_____
Investigator Name	Date
_____	_____
Investigator Signature	Date

Investigator: Patricia Moore\_ email: [email redacted] c/o: Professor Floralba Arbelo, Ed.D.  
Concordia University – Portland 2811 NE Holman Street Portland, Oregon 97221

## Appendix B: Participant Research Invitation

April 10, 2018



Dear Teachers

As part of my doctorate studies in Educational Leadership at Concordia University, Portland Oregon, I am conducting interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of special education teachers' responsibilities and role in the workplace. Because you are in the position to provide valuable lived experiences from your perspectives, you are invited to participate in an individual, 10-question, 90-minute interview and 90-minute follow-up focus group interview with 7 of your colleagues. I am simply trying to attain your views and perceptions in your position as special needs educators. All participant responses are confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone in your organization. Additionally, neither the school's leadership or the name of the school will be identified in the study. Moreover, to ensure participants' anonymity, the study's analysis and findings will identify participants by alphabetic or numeric coding.

There is no compensation to participate in this study and participation is voluntary. Your participation in this study will be valuable and paramount to future research lead to a greater understanding of special education teacher workplace experiences level of leadership support you require to be successful and affect they have on their employment decisions.

If you would like to participate in this study, please respond by simply replying: "*Yes, I would like to participate in this study*". I will make every effort to ensure your participation in this study is expedient and comfortable for you. If you decide to participate in this study, I will be contacting you to discuss providing you with a brief orientation of the study's process. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me at [email redacted] or contact me at [phone number redacted].

Thank you

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patricia Moore".

Patricia Moore  
Concordia University Doctorate Student

## **Appendix C: One-to-one Interview Questions**

### Special Education Teacher Turnover & School Leadership

#### One-to-one In-Depth Interview Questions

1. Describe how your school leader assists you in navigating the challenges you confront in your role as a special education teacher?
2. How does your school leader support your overall role as a special education teacher?
3. Describe the professional development you require from your school leader to be successful special education teacher? Why?
4. Describe the leadership approach you feel would be most appropriate to meet your professional needs? Why?
5. Describe the most important quality of supportive leadership? Why?
6. Describe your professional relationship with your school leader?
7. Describe any school leadership practice at your current job that has contributed to your success as a special education teacher?
8. What workplace factors would affect your decision to stay or leave your job? Why?
9. Describe how your school leader affects your longevity in your teaching position?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your current experience and school's leadership practices?

**Appendix D: Participant Demographic Form**

Case Study

Special Education Teacher Turnover & School Leadership

Participant Demographics Form

Participant Identifier Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Please respond to the following questions.

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

What teaching endorsement(s) certification do you possess?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What college/university did you attend? \_\_\_\_\_

What college degree (s) do you hold? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been teaching? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been teaching in special education? \_\_\_\_\_

How many schools have you been employed as a special education teacher? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been teaching at the Mary A. Dobbins School? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been supervised by your current school principal? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the shortest time you have remained in a school as a special education teacher? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you

Patricia Moore  
Principal Investigator  
Concordia University

## **Appendix E: Focus Group Questions**

### Special Education Teacher Turnover & School Leadership

#### In-Depth Focus Group Interview Questions

1. How does the school's leadership approach influence the school's culture?
2. How is the teacher turnover perceived in your school?
3. Describe the most satisfying aspect of teaching in your school?
4. Describe the most dissatisfying aspect of teaching in your school?
5. What workplace factor would affect your decision to separate from your school?



## **Appendix F: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

What does “fraudulent” mean? “Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

### **What is “unauthorized” assistance?**

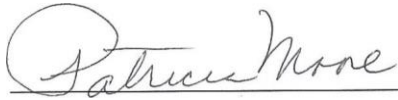
“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

**Appendix F: Statement of Original Work (continued)**

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association



Digital Signature

*Patricia Moore*

Name (Typed)

*September 5, 2018*

Date