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# An Examination of the Relationships Between Campus Administrators and Special Education Teachers and Its Influence on Teacher Retention

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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

*Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.*

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Dr. Nannette Glenn, Dean of  
the College of Graduate and  
Professional Studies

February 27, 2023

Dissertation Committee:

*Jennifer T. Butcher*

---

Dr. Jennifer Butcher, Chair

*Dianne Reed*

---

Dr. Dianne Reed

*Mark Weatherly*

---

Dr. Mark Weatherly

Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

An Examination of the Relationships Between Campus Administrators and Special Education  
Teachers and Its Influence on Teacher Retention

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by  
Tai Lea Peacock

April 2023

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my family—my parents, siblings, and grandparents, who instilled a love of learning in me. They continually encouraged me to learn new things. Over the years, they helped me put together projects, study for tests, listened to me as I told them about the article or book I was reading, and even took an interest in my research. They supported me in earning my associate's, bachelor's, master's, and now my doctorate degree. Thank you for cheering me on and motivating me as I pursued the dream of becoming Dr. Peacock!

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Dr. Weatherly, you may not remember this, but during one of my first courses at ACU, you wrote feedback on one of my assignments that read, "Tai, I'm very proud of your efforts in

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## Abstract

Teacher shortages have plagued U.S. school districts for many years now as special education and other high-need fields struggle to retain highly qualified teachers. School leaders must gain a better understanding of why special education teachers are leaving at such alarming rates in order to formulate a plan for improving retention. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how campus administrators' relationships influence the retention of special education teachers. Leader-member exchange theory, which contends that the relationships between leaders and followers impact our work environment and job satisfaction, served as the theoretical framework of this study. A qualitative descriptive study using the Rashomon effect was designed to gather and share the perspectives of both special education teachers and administrators on the topic. Ten individuals (six special education teachers and four campus administrators) at the elementary school level served as study participants. Semistructured interviews were conducted to gather participants' perceptions and analyzed to find common themes amongst the two groups. The perspectives of the two groups were presented concurrently as well as compared and contrasted. The findings suggest disparities among the two groups regarding the responsibilities of special education teachers and how administrators can best support them. Results suggest that administrators are aware of the challenges special education teachers face; however, they are not in a position to fix some things that the district controls. Suggestions for the local school district and recommendations for future study were discussed.

*Keywords:* Leader-member exchange theory, support, special education, administrators, retention, attrition



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Teacher shortages exist nationwide in several subject areas, but one of the hardest-hit fields is special education (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2020). Robinson et al. (2019) and Billingsley and Bettini (2019) noted that special education teacher shortages have been reported for the last 20 years. Some educational agencies acknowledge as many as 49 states have reported a shortage of highly qualified special education teachers. The number of students receiving special education services has increased over the years, while at the same time, there has also been a decline in teachers willing to serve in special education roles (Otto & Arnold, 2005). This may be due in part to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, which ensures free and appropriate public education for those with disabilities. Initially approved in 1975, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P. L. 94-142) has been reauthorized or amended several times over the course of its history. Currently, this law is known as IDEIA of 2004. As the number of students who qualify and receive specialized education services in public schools has grown due to the implementation of IDEIA, so has the need for highly qualified teachers.

Chapter 1 begins with a background section that provides insight into the problem of special education teacher retention. This chapter also provides a statement of the problem as well as the purpose of the current study and why it is needed, followed by the research questions used to guide the study. A list of key terms and definitions related to the study appears in the section after the research questions. Chapter 1 concludes with a summary of the information provided and a preview of Chapter 2.

## **Background**

The diminishing number of teachers accepting jobs and those moving out of special education roles impacts the entire school system, not just students who receive special education services (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Teacher attrition refers to individuals changing positions, districts, or leaving the field of education; while retention occurs as individuals stay in their current position (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Ansley et al. (2019) revealed that teacher turnover within special education has little to do with the needs of students and more to do with high stress related to poor working conditions. These unfavorable working conditions are among the reasons many cite for leaving special education or the education profession altogether (Ansley et al., 2019). Billingsley et al. (2020) and Conley and You (2017) noted that working conditions (e.g., increased daily responsibilities, student behavior, large caseloads, and administrator support) as well as other factors were influential in the turnover of special education teachers. A lack of support from administrators can increase burnout among special education teachers, which greatly impacts turnover; yet administrative support is also one of the many controllable factors (Bettini et al., 2015; Soini et al., 2019).

The presence or absence of support for teachers can strongly impact teacher retention (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley et al., 2019). According to Asip (2019), administrative support—including opportunities for professional development, behavior interventions for students, and communication—contributes to positive working conditions. In addition to these, Ansely et al. (2019) noted that performance feedback, fair evaluations, and autonomy are all ways administrators can provide support for teachers. With so many teachers leaving the classroom, it is important to understand why and how administrators can improve conditions to help retain teachers, especially those in high-need fields such as special education (Billingsley et al., 2019;

Cansoy, 2018). While teacher shortages within special education exist in districts nationwide, this research focused on Wright Independent School District (pseudonym), a suburban school district in north Texas. Situated in a growing community, Wright ISD has seen considerable growth over the last few years as new housing developments and local industries have brought more people to the area. As Wright ISD continues to expand, so does its special needs population.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Special education teachers are leaving the classroom and the profession at alarming rates, often within the first five years on the job (Cancio, 2018; Hagaman & Casey, 2017). According to the TEA (2020), special education is among several areas where teacher shortages exist, making it a high-need field. General teacher attrition is often attributed to numerous factors, including personal reasons, excessive workload, or a lack of resources and support (Conley & You, 2017). Aldosiry (2020) and Robinson et al. (2019) noted that a lack of administrative support often contributes to stress and burnout, which prompts teacher attrition; however, limited research exists on how administrative support influences special education teacher attrition (Billingsley et al., 2019).

High teacher attrition among special education staff can have unintended consequences for both administrators and students (Aldosiry, 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Hagaman and Casey (2017) and Robinson et al. (2019) reported that administrators seeking to fill vacancies in special education typically encounter candidates who have less experience and may lack adequate qualifications. Constant turnover also impacts students by making it more difficult to build positive relationships with special education teachers and contributes to lower student achievement due to ineffective instruction (Fox et al., 2020; Hagaman & Casey, 2017).



According to Conley and You (2017) and Bettini et al. (2020), workplace conditions, including administrative support, play a significant role in attrition and could be vital in retaining highly qualified special education teachers. Aldosiry (2020) affirmed that school principals and assistant principals play an instrumental role in creating positive working conditions for special education teachers. Thus, a better understanding of how school leaders can effectively support these teachers could help districts improve retention.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how campus administrators' relationships influence the retention of special education teachers. As school districts across the state continually struggle to attract teachers to high-need fields, including special education, it is equally important that districts develop a plan to retain individuals hired to fill these vacancies as well as those actively serving in special education roles (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Vittek, 2015). McLeskey and Billingsley (2008) and Hagaman and Casey (2018) offer numerous reasons why special education teachers leave the profession, while noting that many of these may be preventable.

### **Theoretical Framework Discussion**

The theoretical framework of this qualitative study was the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. According to Uhl-Bien (2006) a key concept of LMX is the relationship between leaders and followers which develops based on how they engage with each other. This relationship-based approach asserts that each person brings their own unique set of characteristics and expectations to exchanges. Sherman et al. (2012) pointed out that the interactions between leaders and members can either result in high-quality/in-group or low-quality/out-group relationships. Leader-member relationships are often divided into four types of

dyadic relationships. These four types include a balanced high group in which both the member and the leader consider the relationship to be high quality and a balanced low group in which both parties consider the relationship to be low quality. These two types of relationships are congruent. In addition, leaders and members could perceive their relationship in different ways. One may think it is high quality, while the other thinks it is low quality. A *follower overestimation* occurs when the follower believes the relationship to be high quality, but the leader perceives it as low quality. A *follower underestimation* occurs when the member's perception of the relationship is low, but the leader's perception is high. These two types are disparate relationships (Sherman et al., 2012). As leaders develop relationships with employees, some may feel that they are part of the *in-group*, while others think they are part of the *out-group*." Gómez and Rosen (2001) noted that employees being able to trust their leader is a major factor in whether they consider themselves to be in the in-group or in the out-group.

LMX can impact turnover depending upon how employees view the quality of their relationship with their boss. According to Muldoon et al. (2018) employees who perceive the LMX relationship with their supervisor as positive are less likely to leave their jobs. Likewise, those who perceive their LMX as negative are more likely to seek alternate job roles. Many special education teachers report a lack of administrator support and feeling isolated (Fox et al., 2020), in which case they may perceive their relationship with their administrator as low quality. This may increase the probability of leaving their position.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the in-group?

RQ2: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the out-group?

RQ3: How does support from campus administrators influence the attrition of special education teachers?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Administrators.** Individuals serving in leadership roles at the campus or district level who hold an administrator endorsement, certification, or license within the state in which they practice. This includes but is not limited to principals, assistant principals, special education directors, and coordinators (Boscardin et al., 2010).

**Administrator support.** Support from administrators, both at the campus and district level, including emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support that helps teachers adequately and successfully do their jobs. Emotional support involves communication, appreciation, and an interest in the work of others, whereas instrumental support refers to ensuring educators have the materials and resources they need. Informational and appraisal support pertain to administrators providing information, strategies, and feedback to guide teachers (Roderick & Jung, 2012).

**Attrition.** The movement of teachers from their current assignment, school, or district from year to year. This movement includes those leaving the profession for jobs in other industries (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

**Communication.** The exchange of information between leaders and followers, often referring to the specific patterns of communication (who is providing and receiving the information), what is being communicated (basic or detailed information sharing), and the quality and quantity of information being shared (Jian & Dalisay, 2017).

**Engage.** To take part in; the continuum of investment between leaders and followers in a reciprocal social exchange or activity (Mao & Tian, 2022).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA).** The law that provides for individuals with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education and related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

**In-group.** Members of the in- group have high-quality relationships with superiors, which may involve preferential treatment, access to more information and resources, increased involvement, and more support from their superiors (Gómez & Rosen, 2001).

**Out-group.** Members of the out-group have low-quality relationships with superiors, characterized by low trust, inferior status, less access to information, and limited effective communication with managers (Gómez & Rosen, 2001; Power, 2013).

**Relationship.** Bonds or trust formed between individuals through experiences (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022).

**Retention.** Employees remaining in the same position or same type of position as they held the previous year. Retention occurs when special education teachers remain in special education roles or when general education teachers remain in general education roles. However, it would not be considered retention if a special education teacher continued teaching but moved into a general education role (i.e., a transfer; Vittek, 2015).

**Special education teachers.** Educators serving in instructional roles who work with students with disabilities and who also hold appropriate special education certification/licensing/or endorsement for the state in which they work. These individuals include but are not limited to individuals who teach in self-contained, inclusion/co-teaching, or resource classes (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

**Trust.** A multidimensional psychological state, which involves individuals who accept vulnerability based on their positive expectations of another individual to follow through or provide accurate information (Mushonga, 2018).

### **Summary**

Special education teachers are leaving the classroom and profession at alarming rates causing school administrators to search for replacements on an ongoing basis (Luckner & Movahedazarhouligh, 2019). Research suggests school administrators may hold the key to improving special education teacher retention (Aldosiry, 2020; Bettini et al., 2015). This study examined the influence of administrator support on special education teachers' decisions to leave or remain in the classroom.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature regarding special education teacher retention and the factors that influence it. The chapter provides information on the parameters and research methods used to find and select the specific literature that was incorporated. In addition, the literature review contains a brief overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework used to conduct this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how campus administrators' relationships influence the retention of special education teachers. A review of current literature helped identify the importance of positive working conditions, including administrative support, and the impact they can have on retention. Long-lasting, nationwide shortages in the field of special education should make the retention of highly qualified teachers a top priority of school districts. The purpose of a literature review was to examine the research that has already been done regarding the topic at hand and determine if there are any areas that still need further research. The following literature review provides a brief overview of the impact of teacher shortages within special education, how working conditions factor into job satisfaction, and how administrator support can influence retention.

### Literature Search Methods

To gain a better understanding of the elements that affect special educator teacher retention, existing literature was gathered from a variety of databases via the Abilene Christian University Brown Library. Databases include but were not limited to EBSCO, ERIC, Sage Journals, and American Psychological Association. Search parameters helped narrow works to include peer-reviewed journal articles containing the following key terms: *special education teachers*, *special education turnover*, *teacher retention*, *teacher shortages*, *teacher working conditions*, *administrative support*, *teacher burnout*, and *LMX theory*. The research was then categorized into themes to depict the significant impact of special educator turnover and how administrators can support retention.

## **Literature Review**

Teacher shortages have existed in various areas across the nation for years. With a growing number of educators choosing to exit the field and teacher preparation programs struggling to produce enough new teachers, it has become critical for school districts to do all they can to retain teachers. Special education is an area that consistently experiences a shortage of highly qualified teachers, which significantly impacts students, campuses, and districts (TEA, 2020; Vittek, 2015). As special education teachers move to general education positions or leave the profession altogether, recruiting new teachers to fill vacancies can be challenging for districts (Vittek, 2015). This literature review includes the following elements: special education teachers, shortages in special education, attrition of special education teachers, and factors that influence attrition. The literature review also provides information about campus administrators, the relationship between special education teachers and administrators, LMX, and the retention of special education teachers.

### **Special Education Teachers**

Across the nation, schools struggle to find and keep highly qualified personnel in special education roles for a variety of reasons (Stephens & Fish, 2010). To better understand why these types of shortages exist, researchers have looked at what factors motivate or deter individuals from pursuing roles in special education (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Ruppert et al., 2018; Stephens & Fish, 2010). A sense of calling, empathy for students, and having a family member with special needs are several reasons many teachers choose to serve students with special needs; yet, these initial motivators may not be enough to keep highly qualified individuals in special education teacher positions (Stephens & Fish, 2010).

Like all positions in education, special education teachers must meet several requirements to become certified teachers. There are five steps to becoming a teacher in the state of Texas: (a) obtain a bachelor's degree, (b) complete an educator preparation program (university-based program or alternative certification program), (c) pass a certification exam, (d) submit a state application, and (e) complete fingerprinting. Each step involves fulfilling specific requirements and paying associated costs (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2022). According to TEA (2022), individuals interested in pursuing roles in special education must pass two examinations: (a) the Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities EC-12 exam, and (b) either the Special Education EC-12 exam, or (c) the Special Education Supplemental exam (which adds-on to an existing certification). While many academic preparation programs provide those entering the workforce with a broad overview of special education topics, many new teachers struggle to use this knowledge within their assigned roles (Sweigart & Collins, 2017).

Certification requirements and other factors such as low social status in schools, excessive job demands (contributing to high stress), and poor working conditions have been linked to unsuccessful recruitment efforts. Such factors may deter individuals from seeking out roles in special education (Stephens & Fish, 2010). As students with special needs often require specific accommodations and modifications to help them be successful with the curriculum, special education teachers must be prepared to use a variety of instructional techniques. For many special education teachers, classes are made up of students who are developmentally years behind their same age peers in academics, social-emotional interactions, behavior, and physical development (Collins et al., 2017). In addition to a range of academic instructional strategies, special education teachers are also often required to perform specific personal care tasks for students with special needs including but not limited to transition services (mobility),



diaper/toileting help, feeding assistance, and behavior regulation depending upon the specific needs of their students (Ruppar et al., 2018). These tasks, while necessary, take away from instructional time. Special education teachers report that other teachers and administrators do not fully understand the roles and responsibilities of special education jobs (Ruppar et al., 2018).

Despite balancing a wide range of academic instructional levels and personal care support for students, many special education teachers report that other school employees do not view or treat them as equals or experts in their field (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Ruppar et al., 2018). This perception of low social status may deter individuals from entering the field of special education, as it has been linked to teacher turnover in the field (Stephens & Fish, 2010). Positive working relationships are crucial to help support new special education teachers and potentially keep them from moving on (Collins et al., 2017). Both formal and informal relationships are necessary for special education teachers to feel supported. Formal relationships are those with administrators, assigned mentors, or instructional coaches; these relationships often involve planned meetings, goal setting, and check-ins. Informal relationships may include co-teachers, paraprofessionals, or other teachers they can confide in, ask questions, or seek advice from (Collins et al., 2017; O'Brien et al., 2019). Many new special education teachers report that having both formal and informal mentors during the first few years on the job that they can trust is highly effective in helping them navigate the many responsibilities of their job roles (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009). They note that these relationships help bridge the gap between what they learned in their preparation programs and the reality of teaching special education classrooms (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009). A lack of supportive relationships with other teachers and campus administrators is often a contributing factor that influences special education teachers' decisions

to leave the classroom and profession, which adds to teacher shortages in this field (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Stephens & Fish, 2010).

### **Special Education Teacher Shortages**

Teacher shortages exist in several disciplines, including the field of special education (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2020). These shortages prompted my research, aimed to learn more about the reasons special education teachers leave the field and how administrators can help improve retention. Studies on the nationwide shortage of special education teachers revealed that nearly half of new special education teachers leave within the first four years (Bettini et al., 2015). The constant turnover of new teachers and the loss of more experienced teachers (via retirement or obtaining advanced roles) coupled with a limited number of individuals specifically seeking to enter the field of special education have created chronic teacher shortages (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). This decrease in teachers pursuing careers in special education is important because as teachers leave school districts have smaller pools of highly qualified applicants to replace them with (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). As the number of highly qualified special education teachers across the nation has declined the number of students being identified with disabilities has increased, exacerbating already existing teacher shortages (Peyton et al., 2021). These shortages not only impact students, but entire school systems as administrators struggle to fill or replace teachers as they leave (Vitteck, 2015). According to Watlington et al. (2010), teacher shortages in special education disproportionately impact schools with lower socioeconomic status, which often have larger populations of at-risk students or students with special needs.

Many factors can influence turnover among teachers, both internal and external (Conley & You, 2017). Ruppert et al. (2018) reported a mismatch between what administrators perceive

as the role of special education teachers and the actual daily responsibilities of these teachers, which creates a tremendous amount of stress for teachers. Stephens and Fish (2010) noted that excessive demands and a lack of support from administrators and general education personnel often contributes to job dissatisfaction for special education teachers. Studies consistently show that if teachers feel their workload is manageable, they are less likely to experience burnout or exhaustion associated with their job. While multiple factors can play a role in a teacher's decision to move on, poor working conditions may be the most compelling reason (Bettini et al., 2020). Ansley and Houchins (2019) report that teachers often report high levels of stress and dissatisfaction with their job due to poor working conditions as their reason for exiting a role. Bettini et al. (2020) also point out that when teachers feel workloads are more manageable, they experience greater positive aspects of work and are more likely to stay in their current roles. Understanding why special education teachers leave can help administrators improve recruitment and retention efforts to alleviate this problem (Ansley et al., 2019).

### **Factors Influencing Attrition of Special Education Teachers**

For decades teacher shortages have existed within special education, with nearly all 50 states reporting vacancies and trouble securing highly qualified individuals to fill these positions (Billingsley, 2019; Hagaman & Casey, 2017). Attrition among special education teachers is a major factor in the shortages, as more than half of special education teachers leave within their first four years (Bettini et al. 2015; Hagaman & Casey, 2017). Teacher attrition can be broken into several categories including those who leave the school or district, those who leave for general education positions, or those who leave the education field altogether (Billingsley, 2019; Otto & Arnold, 2005; Vittek, 2015;). Teachers leaving special education cite a variety of internal and external factors (Otto & Arnold, 2005). Job satisfaction and well-being at work are two

important internal factors that contribute to teacher burnout and attrition (De Statiso et al., 2017). Poor working conditions, a lack of administrator support, and excessive job demands are just a few of the most widely referenced factors attributed to special education teachers leaving the classroom or the profession (Otto & Arnold, 2005). Although several factors contribute to special education teacher attrition, many internal factors are preventable and can be addressed to improve retention (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

### ***Working Conditions***

Working conditions play a vital role in the decisions of special education teachers to leave the classroom or profession. Studies reveal that poor working conditions significantly impacts the retention of special education teachers (Bettini et al., 2020; Billingsley et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Vittek, 2015). Working conditions influence the quality of teachers' work, which can positively or negatively impact student learning (Ansley & Houchins, 2019). Research indicates that poor working conditions, such as high job-related stress, lack of administrator support, role conflict, poor workplace relationships, lack of resources, and large caseloads contribute to the attrition of special education teachers (Ansley & Houchins, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2019).

**Job-Related Stress.** While most people experience job-related stress at one time or another, the stress that comes with being a special education instructor may be a contributing factor behind teacher shortages in this area (Cancio et al., 2019 & Robinson et al., 2019). Prolonged job-related stress often leads to burnout, which impacts special education teacher attrition and retention. With constant turnover in special education, many new teachers report job-related stress from problems they inherit from the previous teacher, a lack of curriculum and

resources needed for instruction, and ambiguity among other professionals who interpret the role of special education teachers in different ways (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018).

**Lack of Administrator Support.** Although campus administrators within the state of Texas are required to hold an advanced degree, they are not required to have any previous teaching experience in special education or training specifically designed to prepare them to lead special education programs (Boscardin et al., 2010). This can leave many administrators feeling ill-prepared when it comes to overseeing special education programs, especially since the scope of job responsibilities has grown for both special education teachers and administrators (Asip, 2019; Bettini et al., 2015). If campus administrators do not have previous teaching experience in special education, they may find it challenging to adequately support these teachers (Luckenr & Movahedazarhouligh, 2019; Templeton, 2017). Also contributing to confusion among administrators and special education teachers regarding their roles and responsibilities is that most special education teachers are often responsible for reporting to multiple departments (Roderick & Jung, 2012).

**Role Conflict.** Like their general education peers, teachers serving in special education roles are responsible for a variety of instructional and non-instructional duties; however, these may not always be clearly defined (Conley & You, 2017). Special education teachers' roles often encompass a wide variety of responsibilities depending on the students' needs, including academic instruction, personal care services, behavior management, and sometimes supporting medical care (Ansley & Houchins, 2019; Conley & You, 2017). Often, special education teachers spend less than 40% of their day providing academic instruction due to other tasks they are required to complete (Billingsley et al., 2020). Special education teachers report feeling as though their supervisors do not know the extent of what they do (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018).

Trying to balance contradictory roles and manage unclear expectations puts special education teachers at greater risk for burnout (Soini et al., 2019). Clearly defining special education roles and reducing conflicts amongst work demands has been shown to decrease stress and the effects that lead to burnout (De Stasio et al., 2017).

**Poor Work Relationships.** Positive working relationships with colleagues and superiors are vital in any career, especially in educational settings where special education teachers engage with other teachers, service providers, and other professionals to meet students' daily needs (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). Although this is not always the case for many special education teachers who report feeling isolated and even inferior to their general education peers (Hester et al., 2020). Successful collaboration across multiple grade levels and departments is often challenging for special education teachers while trying to manage other job demands (Billingsley et al., 2020). One of the most important things campus administrators can do is to help staff build and maintain positive relationships through clear communication (Ansley & Houchins, 2019). Special education teachers report that having a network of other educators to support them, especially those who serve as mentors, can help them cope with job-related stress and assist them with navigating their many responsibilities (Cancio et al., 2018). Creating a positive work environment where good relationships can thrive can improve job satisfaction among special education teachers and positively impact retention (Ansley & Houchins, 2019).

**Lack of Resources.** One factor that can lead to high-stress levels for special education teachers is a lack of resources to include curriculum materials, assistive technology to help students access curriculum, planning and preparation time, and appropriate professional development activities (Robinson et al., 2019). The lack of planning time to collaborate with general education teachers and other service providers adds to the level of stress (Billingsley et

al., 2020). Having the resources needed to complete all of the tasks associated with their job allows special education teachers to focus more on students' needs (Fox et al., 2020).

**Large Caseloads.** Due to staffing shortages in the area of special education, teachers serving in these roles are often tasked with larger caseloads as schools struggle to find highly qualified teachers to fill vacancies (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). As special education teachers' workloads grow, they can become unmanageable, adding to stress that causes burnout and contemplating exiting the classroom in favor of general education positions or other professions (Cancio et al., 2018). Many special education teachers serve students from multiple grade levels who have a variety of diagnoses and needs, making their role even more challenging (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). These large caseloads stretch teachers thin as they try to balance the needs of their students and collaborate across grade levels and multiple departments (Billingsley et al., 2020). Research indicates that large and complex caseloads contribute to special education teachers' intent to leave the classroom or profession, as they feel the workload is unmanageable (Billingsley, 2020).

For many special education teachers, these factors contribute to burnout within the first few years, causing them to seek other roles in schools or even outside of the field of education (Cancio et al., 2018). Burnout is comprised of three components: (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) depersonalization, and (c) decreased personal accomplishment (Cancio et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). Emotional exhaustion can occur as special education teachers experience prolonged job-related stress that they are unable to cope with. This decreased state of well-being can significantly impact teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Fox et al., 2020 & Robinson et al., 2019). Emotional exhaustion produces feelings of inadequacy as a teacher; it can often manifest as physical deterioration, including physical and mental fatigue and lack of energy

(Robinson et al., 2019). Depersonalization occurs when special education teachers feel they no longer have control; they are detached from their job and just complete tasks like robots. Often, this may result in teachers socially distancing themselves from co-workers and students and expressing a negative attitude about their work (Robinson et al., 2019). As special education teachers develop these negative attitudes toward their job, they often experience a decline in personal accomplishment from feeling unsuccessful and ineffective in their roles (Cancio et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). It is important for administrators to provide good working conditions for all staff, but especially for special education teachers, whose roles are often more demanding (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley et al., 2020). Administrators should deliberately think about the well-being of special education teachers—as this can fluctuate during the school year—and what they can do to provide good working conditions (Billingsley et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2020). Bettini et al. (2020) eloquently summed up the impact of working conditions when stating, “When demands and resources are balanced, people feel able to manage workloads and experience positive affective outcomes; when demands exceed resources, employees feel overwhelmed and consequently experience stress and emotional exhaustion, leading to attrition” (p. 210).

### ***Administrator Support***

One of the most significant controllable influences on teacher retention is administrator support (Bettini et al., 2015). Support for teachers can include induction programs, mentors, professional development, autonomy to make decisions, and opportunities for collaboration. Many campus administrators do not adequately support special education teachers (Roderick & Jung, 2012). This lack of administrator support has been consistently linked to attrition among special education teachers; however, pinpointing behaviors that constitute administrator support



is not so clear (Frahm & Cianca, 2021; Hester et al., 2020)). Special education teachers report that campus administrators who are less supportive give them and their students very little attention and try to pass off responsibility for them to district administrators (Otto & Arnold, 2005). The absence of administrator support makes it difficult for special education teachers to manage the many roles and responsibilities of their jobs (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

Reitman and Karge (2019) noted that the most beneficial types of support came from positive relationships with administrators and trusted colleagues (mentors). Trust is defined as “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something; one in which confidence is placed” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2022). Building trust in a relationship allows each party to rely on the other and provides a sense of security or support by setting the stage for more positive working conditions. Positive work relationships or connections with administrators increase teacher performance and job satisfaction (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). While providing resources is helpful, relationships are key in supporting special education teachers. Positive relationships that help teachers feel connected and valued within the school community can greatly reduce stress and improve their well-being (Fox et al., 2020). The most beneficial support special education teachers can receive is from administrators, often in the form of mentoring or scheduled times for collaborating with others regarding students’ needs. It is also noted that such methods of support are most effective when provided continuously throughout the year rather than just at specific times (i.e., beginning of the year or before important events; Reitman & Karge, 2019).

While most of the literature pointed to factors generally identified as administrative support, much of the research did not explore the correlation between administrative support and teacher retention. A lack of administrative support has been linked to increased teacher stress and

burnout, which is directly correlated with teachers' intent to leave (Aldosiry, 2020). It is also important to note that perceptions of support can differ between administrators and teachers, as highlighted in the work of Roderick and Jung (2012). Often what administrators perceive as supportive may actually add to the stress of special education teachers (Roderick & Jung, 2012). Administrators and special education teachers have very different roles and perspectives; thus, it is important to gain a better understanding of the types of support that positively impact teacher retention (Otto & Arnold, 2005). Investing in new special education teacher onboarding, providing mentors, offering appropriate and meaningful professional development, and assigning clear and reasonable workloads are ways administrators can support special education teachers (Vitteck, 2015). While minimal literature exists on the specific practices administrators can take to recruit special education teachers and provide a supportive environment where teachers feel valued, current research suggests that administrative support can have a significant impact on special education teacher retention (Mcleskey & Billingsley, 2008).

### ***Excessive Workloads***

The working conditions of special education teachers can differ vastly depending on the school and the district; however, studies have shown that special education teachers often have more unspoken responsibilities than their job description entails (Bettini et al., 2020; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Bettini et al. (2020) pointed out that special educators are often tasked with extensive and demanding responsibilities beyond curriculum instruction to implement students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP). These duties may include behavior management and providing personal care (i.e., feeding, toileting or diapering, dressing, etc.), which can increase stress and lead to burnout (Bettini et al., 2020). Work-related demands associated with teaching students who have various levels of academic and behavioral needs include increased paperwork,

little planning or prep time, additional meetings, and being accountable to numerous individuals (campus and district administration, various departments, and or grade levels, etc.). Such demands present challenges for special educators and can create additional stress (Aldosiry, 2020). A special education teacher's role can change drastically based on the needs of their current students. Consequently, they may provide student support in inclusion settings, self-contained settings, small group pull-out instruction, or a mixture of these (Ansley & Houchins, 2019). Shifting between these roles can cause role ambiguity for special education teachers who may have insufficient knowledge about what is expected of them. Likewise, other campus professionals may not know exactly what special education teachers do (Billingsley et al., 2019; De Stasio et al., 2017). Excessive workloads are often a factor in special education teachers' intent to leave special education roles or the field of education entirely, which only exacerbates the shortage of special education teachers (Billingsley et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018).

### **The Role of Campus Administrators**

Campus administrators play a vital role in the success of students and teachers in schools (Roderick & Jung, 2012). Depending upon how a campus is structured, campus administrators typically include principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, counselors, and other various personnel. Regardless of their titles, campus administrators are a fundamental part of a school's success (Reid, 2021).

The role of the campus administrator encompasses a wide variety of roles and responsibilities that can often differ from campus to campus (Asip, 2019; Reid, 2021). Like the role of special education teachers, campus administrators have a plethora of responsibilities and challenges that they must navigate daily (Asip, 2019). Leading teachers, selecting instructional programming for students, interacting with parents and community members, monitoring campus

security, and evaluating personnel are just a few of the tasks regularly assigned to campus administrators (Miranda & Iriani, 2021; Reid, 2021). Leading a school campus is a constantly changing role, where administrators are tasked with overseeing many interconnected pieces (Reid, 2021).

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA; 2022), to obtain administrator certification, individuals must meet five requirements: (a) hold a master's degree from an accredited university, (b) hold a valid teaching certification, (c) have two years of experience as a classroom teacher, (d) complete a principal preparation program, and (e) successfully pass the required exam. Despite the TEA requirements, many administrators report being ill-prepared to effectively lead special education programs, which may be due in part to how principal preparation programs are set up and what coursework they require (Bettini et al., 2015; Boscardin et al., 2010). Milligan et al. (2012) asserted that effective leadership is not an accident; education and preparation help ensure that administrators are able to effectively lead special education programs (p. 179).

Although many campus administrator roles require advanced degrees, not all do. Further, many do not require prior experience working with students with disabilities to lead special education programs (Thompson, 2017). According to Boscardin et al. (2010), 96% of states require a master's degree to obtain certification as an administrator; however, only 54% require specific certification, licensure, or endorsement in special education, and only 58% of states require candidates to complete an internship or practicum in administration (pp. 65-69). Adequate preparation of administrators is a key factor in the successful leadership of special education teachers (Milligan et al., 2012). Although research suggests that a lack of special education-specific training can impact how administrators lead and evaluate their special

education teachers, it is not the only factor that matters (Rodl et al., 2018). The relationship between special education teachers and administrators is examined further in the next section of this chapter.

### **Relationships Between Teachers and Administrators**

Work relationships, especially those with administrators, are also critical for special education teachers as they are often accountable to multiple people and/or departments (De Statiso et al., 2017). Special education teachers report difficulties with responding to both district-level and campus-level administrators, who often have different expectations of their programs (Roderick & Jung, 2012). Each tends to have a positive working relationship with campus administrators, which is noted by special education teachers as being one of the most beneficial elements of working with students with special needs. These positive working relationships build trust in administrators and encourage collaboration (Reitman & Karge, 2019). Regardless of research pointing to the benefits of these positive work relationships, there is often a disconnect between the two groups' perceptions of each other's roles, which can cause confusion and create stress in the relationship (Roderick & Jung, 2012). Campus administrators often admit that they do not know all of the responsibilities of a special education teacher because they do not have experience in special education; therefore, they struggle to support teachers adequately in certain areas (Boscardin et al., 2010). When campus administrators are knowledgeable and experienced in special education, it can improve their relationship with teachers who serve in special education roles (Templeton, 2017). As administrators are responsible for all students on campus, it is important that they are knowledgeable about and able to support both general education and special education teachers (Cansoy, 2018; Roderick & Jung, 2012).

Communication is an important element in all relationships, including those between teachers and campus administrators. Open communication and transparency are critical to teacher well-being and the culture of a school campus. Yet, open lines of communication do not always exist, which may result in confusion and frustration (Fox et al., 2020). The next section examines the relationship between administrators and special education teachers through the lens of LMX theory.

### **LMX Theory**

The most important assets of any organization are its employees, which makes the relationship between leaders and employees crucial (Ahmadi et al., 2014). Work relationships are formed through continuous reciprocal exchanges between leaders and followers, which creates interdependence (Dulebohn et al., 2012). LMX theory focuses on the relationships between leaders and followers and the process of relationship development (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Unlike other theories that focus solely on leadership, LMX highlights the diverse relationships the leader establishes with different followers (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2012). LMX theory asserts that relationships are a shared experience that can change throughout time based upon the interactions between the leader and individual followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leader and follower characteristics influence social interactions and help shape the interpersonal relationship between two individuals (Dulebohn et al., 2012). These relationships can have a variety of outcomes for both participants as well as the organization (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2012). High-quality exchanges have been found to reduce work-related stress and increase organizational commitment, performance, and job satisfaction of followers (Cogliser et al., 2009; Muldoon et al., 2018). Low quality exchanges can increase

stress and decrease job satisfaction when followers do not feel valued; this often contributes to followers' intent to leave the organization (Power, 2013).

LMX theory explains the dyadic relationships a leader forms with each of their followers, categorizing them into either the in-group or the out-group (Cogliser et al., 2009; Power, 2013). Yet, followers may have a different perception of which group they are categorized into than their leader (Sherman et al., 2012). This results in following four groupings:

- balanced high: both the leader and follower perceive the relationship as high quality (in-group);
- balanced low: both parties consider the relationship to be low quality (out-group);
- follower overestimation: disparate member high and leader low, the follower perceives themselves as being in the in-group while the leader regards them as out-group; or
- follower underestimation: disparate member low and leader high, the follower considers themselves as part of the out-group while the leader deems the follower to be part of the in-group (Cogliser et al., 2009; Sherman et al., 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

A balanced high relationship is the most desirable because of its congruence among leaders and followers. Consequently, these are the most mutually beneficial relationships with the best potential of increasing organizational commitment (Ansley et al., 2019; Branson & Marra, 2019; Power, 2013).

As leaders and followers interact and engage with each other, their perspectives can influence the congruence or contrasting perception of the relationship (Cogliser et al., 2009). Although a leader may perceive that a follower is part of the in-group, the follower may feel as though they are part of the out-group and vice versa (Branson & Marra, 2019; Cogliser et al., 2009). Social exchanges are the foundation of work relationships; therefore, positive reciprocity

increases loyalty and commitment (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Exchanges that are more supervisory in nature and limit a follower's response to completing delegated tasks tend to breed resentment and job dissatisfaction (Sherman et al., 2012). Leaders who actively support and engage employees in positive ways can help foster mutually beneficial relationships focused on putting people first rather than outcomes (Branson & Marra, 2019).

### ***In-Group***

Followers in the in-group are often given preferential treatment in the form of more attention and resources from leaders, high trust, support, desirable job assignments or promotions, benefits and rewards, as well as better work evaluations (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2012). Those in the in-group are typically selected based on their skills, competence, and motivation to complete tasks; therefore, they have a higher-quality relationship with the leader (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Members of the in-group often experience more high-quality exchanges with their leaders, which can correlate to the level of trust leaders have in followers in this group (Gómez & Rosen, 2001). Trust from leaders plays a role in the amount of information that followers receive and often increases a follower's autonomy in making decisions as well as their organizational commitment (Gómez & Rosen, 2001). In-group members often demonstrate greater commitment to the organization because of the level of trust they have with their leaders; therefore, they take on more responsibility to ensure the organization's success (Power, 2013).

### ***Out-Group***

Followers who are in the out-group experience lower-quality relationships with leaders (Power, 2013; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Out-group relationships are more likely to include only simple supervisory interactions as leaders communicate less with this group and typically only in a



formal capacity (Sherman et al., 2012). Out-group members are typically given less responsibility, routine/uninteresting tasks, fewer resources, and receive more unfavorable evaluations (Ahmadi et al., 2014). As a result, out-group members may eventually resent their lesser status and experience more stress (Power, 2013). These low-quality exchanges also tend to lead to lower expectations from leaders and decreased organizational commitment and performance from followers (Sherman et al., 2012). A followers' intent to leave the organization increases when they feel as though they are not valued or part of the in-group (Power, 2013). However, school leaders are an essential part of creating a positive work environment for special education teachers and administrator support is one of the biggest factors influencing retention (Bettini et al., 2015, Reid, 2021).

### **Retention of Special Education Teachers**

Special education teacher retention is important because turnover impacts student success, reduces campus staffing and morale, and causes financial implications for the district as a whole (Frahm & Cianca, 2021; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Although some teacher turnover is normal and to be expected, continuously losing special education teachers significantly impacts school and district programs (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Vittek, 2015). Despite mandates like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)—both of which were meant to ensure that at-risk students receive instruction from highly qualified individuals—many districts struggle to meet these requirements due to special education teacher shortages (Watlinton et al., 2010). Turnover often reduces teacher quality as districts hire individuals who may be less qualified than those leaving or those who are not yet fully qualified. In addition, special education turnover causes districts to

routinely spend funds on the recruitment and training of new special education teachers (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

While there are many costs associated with teacher turnover, it is estimated that districts spend roughly \$4.9 billion annually recruiting and training new teachers due to attrition (Watlington et al., 2010). A better understanding of the variables influencing special education teacher attrition is essential to helping districts recruit and retain high-quality teachers (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

The quality of training that individuals receive in educator preparation programs has been shown to influence new teachers' desire to remain in special education (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). As mandates like the NCLB and the IDEIA call for high quality instructors, districts struggle to recruit and retain individuals in high-need fields, especially special education (McLeskey & Bilingsley, 2008). Adding to the confusion is that special education certification or licensure varies depending upon where it is obtained. Although some states require initial certification in general education and then allow for certification in special education; some states offer a standalone special education certification. Either way, special education certification is usually comprehensive, encompassing grades K-12 (Billingsley, 2019). Gilmour and Wehby (2020) pointed out that the manner in which a teacher is prepared can significantly impact whether they will remain in the field. Gilmour and Wehby noted that individuals who receive training through traditional university preparation programs are more likely to remain in the field than those who receive training in an alternative or accelerated preparation program (p. 1044). Research indicates that teachers who receive specifically designed instruction in education through university preparation programs are more able to cope with the demands of special education roles; yet many districts are forced to hire individuals with

emergency certification to fill vacancies (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020). Further, many new special education teachers—regardless of which type of preparation program they completed—report a lack of adequate knowledge and preparation to meet the demands of special education roles; therefore, supporting these roles is crucial (Hagaman & Casey, 2017).

### **Induction and Mentoring Programs**

Induction programs and mentoring can positively impact the retention of special education teachers (Billingsley et al., 2019; Vittek, 2015). Induction programs aimed at supporting growth and effectiveness are another tool school districts can use to help retain teachers, especially those serving in high-need roles such as special education (Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2019). Helping new teachers through their first few years can give them a better understanding of their assigned roles and how to successfully navigate and manage the various responsibilities of being a special education teacher. Induction programs are often needed to help bridge the gap between preparation programs and service in the education industry (Billingsley et al., 2019; Vittek, 2015). Comprehensive induction programs may include (a) support for writing and implementing students' IEPs; (b) professional development specifically for special education teachers; and (c) guidance on curriculum and instruction, mentoring, and training to understand the systems used to evaluate teacher effectiveness (Billingsley et al., 2019). Mentoring, although sometimes used in place of induction programs, is only one piece of the puzzle (Billingsley et al., 2019; Vittek, 2015). Providing mentors for new special education teachers can be done through formal programs or informal meetings with other staff, which can have a positive impact on retention (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Vittek, 2015). Formal mentoring programs provide assigned mentors and give new teachers a structured avenue to address concerns, seek assistance, and learn new skills from more experienced teachers/staff

(Vitteck, 2015). Informal mentoring gives new special education teachers an outlet to seek advice, observe other teachers in practice, and create positive connections with other staff (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Vittek, 2015). While both formal and informal mentoring programs have benefits, studies show that mentors need to be trained and assigned to the same teaching role as their mentee. For instance, pairing a general education with a special education teacher may not be as effective as pairing a special education teacher with a special education teacher (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). One major drawback regarding induction programs is that each district can determine whether they will implement a program and what it will look like (Vitteck, 2015). This is important because research has shown that employee engagement improves and the intent to leave is reduced when employees feel supported by administrators (Shuck et al., 2014).

### **Summary**

This chapter explored key concepts related to teacher shortages in special education and the connection high-quality relationships between administrators and special education teachers can have on retention efforts. The literature review began with a look at special education teachers, teacher shortages in special education, and then examined attrition of special education teachers and factors that influence attrition. Following this, the literature review presented information regarding campus administrators, the relationships they form with special education teachers, how LMX theory relates to relationships, and the retention of special education teachers.

Chapter 3 introduces qualitative descriptive methodology and explains the appropriateness of using this methodology for this study. Information regarding the research setting and as well as an explanation of how the population of participants were selected is also included within this section. The following chapter addresses the assumptions, limitations, and

delimitations of the current study. Chapter 3 concludes with an explanation of the researcher's role in the study and the ethical assurances taken to protect study participants.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how campus administrators' relationships influence the retention of special education teachers. Due to teacher shortages, filling teacher vacancies is a challenge in many districts. Shortages in high-need areas, such as special education, have increased over the years in part because of ongoing turnover and fewer individuals pursuing work in the field of education (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; TEA, 2020).

This chapter introduces important research design elements including the selected methodology. Focusing on the experiences of participants, this study utilized qualitative descriptive methodology to gather and present findings in a natural way (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). The materials and instruments used in the data collection and analysis of information are also introduced in this chapter including open-ended interview questions to be used in individual interviews and focus groups. Following these, the chapter addresses the limitations, assumptions, delimitations, and ethical considerations of the proposed study. This chapter closes with a summary and brief preview of the information to be presented in chapter four.

#### **Research Design and Method**

Qualitative research is the capturing of a story; it's the story of a person, a group, or even an entire organization that is written and presented in a simple, easy-to-understand format (Stake, 2010). This type of research presents the subjective reality of participants who may experience the same events in very different ways; yet their perceptions are not isolated. Rather, their perceptions are part of an interconnected story that must be presented and studied holistically (Ryan et al., 2007). By providing as many contextual details as possible, qualitative research is

aimed to tell the whole story to readers (Stake, 2010). Many methodologies could be used to examine the impact of administrator support on the retention of special education staff; however, a qualitative descriptive methodology was the most appropriate design to address the specific research questions of this study. Specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the in-group?

RQ2: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the out-group?

RQ3: How does support from campus administrators influence the attrition of special education teachers?

A qualitative descriptive methodology allows the participants' descriptions of their experiences to be gathered and presented in a natural way (Sandelowski, 2010). Despite limited descriptions and clear definitions, there are several characteristics that are consistent in most qualitative descriptive research studies, including (a) a naturalistic approach to examining a subject, (b) flexible theoretical framework, (c) data collection in the form of semistructured interviews or focus groups, (d) purposeful sampling, and (e) content or thematic analysis (Kim et al., 2016). Although qualitative descriptive studies are often viewed as being unsophisticated, eclectic, or the least rigorous method of research, these types of studies can present the most comprehensive view of the phenomenon being studied (Sandelowski, 2000).

Qualitative descriptive methods allow researchers to adapt and combine data collection and analysis techniques to increase understanding of the topic being studied (Kim et al., 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). Data collection involves an individual's experiences or an event to determine basic information such as who, what, and where. Qualitative descriptive studies involve an exhaustive approach to gathering data and representing the experiences of individuals

who endure common events (Ryan et al., 2007). Focus groups, interviews, surveys, and observations are techniques that can be used for data collection in qualitative descriptive research (Kim et al., 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). In this study, I conducted individual interviews and focus groups. Collecting data in this manner allowed me to gather the experiences of special education personnel and school administrators in a way that was natural and comfortable for participants (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000).

Data analysis in qualitative descriptive research involves looking for patterns that exist within the context of information gathered and simply presenting it, but not necessarily interpreting it (Sandelowski, 2000). There are several ways researchers can present the data collected, but it is important for the researcher to select the method that best suits the data (Sandelowski, 2000). Data can be presented chronologically, in reverse chronological order, by using a progressive focus (starting from a broad lens and narrowing), an excerpt of time (day, week, month, year), or using the Rashomon effect in which the same topic or event is described from multiple perspectives (Sandelowski, 2000).

### **Recruitment of Participants**

Upon completion of CITI training (see Appendix A) and approval from the Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B), I requested permission from Wright ISD via a letter that explained the purpose of the study, participant criteria, and a description of the data collection and analysis procedures to be used. After district permission was granted, I requested an email list with contact information for special education teachers and campus administrators of elementary campuses serving students in special education programs. I contacted potential participants via email to explain the study and solicit their participation (see Appendix C). I then contacted the pool of potential participants and asked them to provide



background information regarding their current role and how long they have served in the role of special education teacher or as a campus administrator. This helped me ensure that the final participants met the predetermined criteria and possessed the experience necessary to respond to the research questions for this study.

### **Target Population**

The setting for this study was a public school district in north central Texas that serves approximately 6,500 students within nine schools. The district employs nearly 900 teachers and experiences a high turnover of staff each year. The target population for this study included individuals who served in special education for at least 3 years and those serving in school administrator roles. Because turnover rates in special education roles are typically higher than in general education roles, the sample was appropriate for this study and helped me gain a better understanding of how administrator support influences retention among those serving in special education roles. The inclusion of both special education staff and administrators allowed me to explore and present findings from various perspectives using the Rashomon effect (Sandelowski, 2000).

### **Study Sample**

Participants were selected from a convenience sample of education personnel within Wright ISD. Participants represent the following categories: elementary special education teachers and campus administrators. The study included several participants from each category for a total of 10 subjects. For this study, teachers needed to have a minimum of 3 years of experience in a special education role. As the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of administrator support on special education teacher retention, individuals with experience in special education roles were best suited to provide information on the research topic. Individuals

actively serving as an administrator on a campus serving students with special needs were also eligible to participate. Participants who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study. The human resources department for the district provided the email addresses for elementary campus administrators, who then identified special education teachers serving at the elementary level with at least 3 years of experience. Once candidates were identified, they were invited to participate in the study and schedule a time with me for an individual interview.

### **Materials and Instruments**

In this research study, I used a variety of materials and instruments to elicit participant participation and collect data. Individuals who met the established criteria received a participant invitation letter (see Appendix C), which explained the study and asked for their participation. Once selected, I obtained their informed consent (see Appendix D) and scheduled individual interviews with participants. I developed open-ended questions for participant interviews that were based on the literature review, the theoretical framework, and the research questions. The interview questions were created to gain a better understanding of the experiences of participants. These questions comprised the interview protocol guide (see Appendix E).

### **Data Collection**

Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom or Teams, depending on which video conferencing platform the participants had access to. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and allowed participants to fully answer questions. As participants logged on to their preferred online communication platform, they were assigned a participant number which was used to conceal their identity during the presentation of data.

Participants were informed that recordings and transcripts of their interviews would be made. These recordings of interviews assisted me in accurately documenting the experiences of

participants. After interviews were transcribed, I had the participants read their interview dialogue and check it for accuracy. This practice is referred to as member checking and serves as an opportunity for participants to confirm or clarify any parts of the information they provided (Candela, 2019). Once interview transcripts were reviewed and approved, I began the analysis procedures. Analysis of qualitative content is typically focused on summarizing the data collected, but not necessarily interpreting it (Sandelowski, 2000).

To ensure security of the data and participant's information, all materials (i.e., interview notes, recordings, and transcripts) were stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer where they will remain for three years. While study data is stored on my personal computer, a backup of all information is maintained on an additional portable hard drive as well.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the qualitative descriptive data for this research study by examining the individual interview transcripts of multiple groups who work with special education students within the elementary school setting. Using the Rashomon effect, which uses multiple perspectives to describe the same topic or event, I present the perspectives of both special education teachers and campus administrators who participated in this study (Sandelowski, 2000). Using qualitative descriptive research data analysis, I looked for and presented any patterns that existed but did not attempt to interpret the data collected (Sandelowski, 2000). In data analysis for this study, I looked for patterns among individual interview transcripts and coded commonalities according to themes.

### ***Transcripts***

To accurately capture the experiences and perspectives provided by study participants, I recorded the interviews. Since interviews took place via video conference, the software

application used to record interviews transcribed the participants' answers. I also checked transcriptions for accuracy by hand. All transcripts were transcribed verbatim, regardless of how intelligible it sounds when read from the written transcript. I also included notes indicating pauses, laughter, or other contextual information about the interview (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

### ***Coding to Identify Themes***

To better understand the perspectives and experiences of each participant, I coded participants' transcripts to identify commonalities and themes among participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I looked for concepts related to communication, support, attrition, retention, and other associated themes based on the research questions for this study.

### **Provisions of Trustworthiness**

Ensuring trustworthiness in any study is an essential element and can be addressed in a variety of ways throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing processes. Trustworthiness within qualitative research involves the following elements:

- credibility: Does the study measure what it said it would?
- transferability: Can the findings be applied to other situations?
- dependability: Can the work be repeated and produce similar results? and
- confirmability: Results and findings are based on the participants experiences and responses, not the researchers' preferences. (Shenton, 2004).

Member checking and triangulation are two methods that I used in this study to ensure accuracy of the data collected. My role, including my educational background and work experiences were also considered when compiling and presenting data. Member checking and triangulation are explored more thoroughly in the next section.

### ***Member Checking***

Member checking, sometimes referred to as participant feedback or validation, is a process that researchers typically use to check the accuracy of the data they have collected (Birt et al., 2016; Motulsky, 2021). This process allowed me to verify the perspectives and experiences divulged by participants during interviews using several methods including:

- having those participants read what they stated to check for accuracy,
- using a follow-up interview based on the participants' initial responses,
- having participants check data that has been analyzed and synthesized into themes (Birt et al., 2016; Candela, 2019).

Motulsky (2021) points out that member checking is essential to establishing trustworthiness and credibility. For the purpose of this study, participants were given their interview transcripts, which were transcribed verbatim, and asked to check them for accuracy of their experiences. In doing this, participants had the opportunity to confirm their statements, clarify any miscommunications, and make any additional remarks (Birt et al., 2016; Yin, 2014).

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation involves cross checking data to demonstrate validity (Candela, 2019).

There are several different forms of triangulation researchers can use including:

- data triangulation: using different sources of information,
- investigator triangulation: having multiple investigators in a study,
- theory triangulation: using multiple perspectives/theories to interpret data,
- methodological triangulation: applying multiple qualitative or quantitative methods to one set of data, and
- environmental triangulation: looking at the same data in various location or in different

times (Carter et al., 2014; Guion, 2002).

Data triangulation is amongst the most popular of these methods as it is typically simple to implement and well-suited for accessing various stakeholder groups invested in a common goal or organization (Guion, 2002).

Qualitative research typically uses individual interviews or focus group interviews to collect data; both methods have advantages and disadvantages (Carter et al., 2014). Individual interviews can seem more time-consuming as the researcher must meet with each participant; however, individual interviews may allow participants to feel more comfortable and speak more freely. While focus groups may be easier to schedule and implement, a group interview format may deter participants from providing the whole truth in their responses and can be more difficult to transcribe and analyze (Carter et al., 2014).

For the purpose of this study, I used data triangulation with multiple participant groups. Participants were organized into two groups based on the role they are actively serving in: one group of special education teachers and one group of campus administrators. Participant groups were asked the same questions to gain their perspectives on their experiences serving in these roles and their working relationship with individuals in the other participant group. This allowed me to triangulate data across groups by looking for commonalities among each of the stakeholder groups (Guion, 2002).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As an educator, many experiences have shaped my career, all of which led me to pursue a doctorate degree and conduct this study. Through my educational background and work experience, I gained knowledge of the roles of special education teachers and administrators, as well as how vital positive relationships between these two groups can be. As a first-generation

college graduate, I obtained my bachelor's degree in elementary education, then went on to earn a master's degree in instructional leadership. Currently, I hold three Texas educator certifications in the following areas: elementary generalist (EC-4), English as a second language (ESL), and special education supplemental (EC-4). In addition to these teacher certifications, I also hold my principal/administrator certificate (EC-12). Along with these educator certifications, I am trained as a licensed speech and language pathology assistant in the state of Texas. With 19 years of experience in the field of education, I have served in a variety of roles. These include serving as a general education teacher in pre-K, kindergarten, and second grade; special education teacher in both a preschool program for children with disabilities (PPCD) and in an early childhood special education (ECSE) program; co-teach inclusion teacher, special education interventionist for grades pre-k through second grade, and as a special education ARD facilitator.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Upon receiving approval from the Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the study as well as consent from the district, I began soliciting participants and collecting data. The purpose of obtaining approval and consent was to ensure that participants were protected from unnecessary harm. All study participants were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they were permitted to withdraw at any time for any reason. All interviews were recorded and materials stored in a safe place to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Before beginning any research, I thoroughly explained the purpose and need for the study that was being proposed. To provide confidentiality and protect the identity of the district as well as individual participants, pseudonyms and participant numbers were assigned. As participants logged into Zoom or Teams for interviews, they were assigned a participant number to conceal

their identity from other participants. Participants were asked to refrain from stating their real names, the names of others, and their campus name when responding to questions.

### **Assumptions**

Researchers sometimes have specific beliefs or ideas about their study that they believe to be true; these are called assumptions (Sandelowski, 2010). In this study, it was assumed that since the school district has a high turnover rate among special education personnel, there are poor working conditions for individuals in these roles. It was also assumed that administrator support plays a role in the retention of staff. It was further assumed that study participants provided honest accounts of their experiences and did not withhold information during individual interviews.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are out of the control of the researcher, and that may be a potential weakness of the study (Simon, 2011). As the sample size is limited to a specific school district, it is likely that employees may have similar experiences with administrators skewing the data one way or another. Since administrators are also included in the study, special education personnel may report occurrences inconsistent with their actual experiences to stay in good graces with their superiors.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are those characteristics that define the scope of a study. These are parts of the study the researcher controls by setting parameters (Simon, 2011). For instance, using a convenience sample of participants in this study may limit generalizability to other populations. There are several other delimitations that apply to the current study. Criteria that I established for participation limited the selection of participants to those who had 3 or more years of experience



as a special education teacher or were actively serving as a campus administrator. I determined several other boundaries for this study. One such delimitation was limiting participants to special education personnel and administrators at the campus and district level. This excluded many members of the school staff but allowed me to focus specifically on the retention of special education personnel. Another boundary imposed on this study was the study setting, which only included one school district. This may limit the transferability of results but inform the specific school district on how to improve their own practices.

### **Summary**

In chapter 3, I presented information on several key pieces of this study. Beginning with an introduction to qualitative descriptive research, I explained that the study design incorporates a variety of methods and is no less rigorous than other methodologies. In fact, qualitative descriptive methods are very comprehensive and present participant experiences in a natural way. The chapter captured how I identified prospective participants for the study and narrowed selection based on their work experience in special education or administrator roles. The chapter was concluded by addressing the known limitations, assumptions, delimitations, and the ethical considerations of this study.

In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the research questions. The interview protocols from participants were coded for relevant themes related to the impact relationships with campus administrators can have on the retention of special education teachers. To better understand which factors contribute to special education teachers' intent to leave and what campus administrators can do to improve retention, Chapter 4 presents the perspectives of both campus administrators and special education teachers through their lived experiences.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how campus administrators' relationships influence the retention of special education teachers. Perspectives from both campus administrators and special education teachers were collected from a convenience sampling of educators. Study participants took part in semistructured interviews using the interview protocol designed based on the theoretical framework of LMX theory. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the in-group?

RQ2: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the out-group?

RQ3: How does support from campus administrators influence the attrition of special education teachers?

In this chapter, I provide a review of the study's focus and processes, present the perspectives of participants attained from semistructured interviews, and summarize my findings. Using qualitative descriptive methods, I present a description of the study participants, themes that emerged during the analysis of interview transcripts, and a synthesis of the lived experiences of both participant groups.

### **Review of Study Focus and Processes**

The purpose of this study was to examine how campus administrators' relationships with special education teachers influence their retention. Conducting a literature review highlighted the importance of retaining special education teachers since many leave within a few years of beginning roles in special education. While the literature review pointed to many factors that contribute to attrition, research on the influence of administrators' relationships with teachers was limited. To better understand the perspectives of administrators and teachers leading special

education programs, I conducted semistructured interviews with individuals from both groups to evaluate whether administrators' relationships with special education teachers play a role in their retention. Using the predesigned interview protocol (see Appendix E), I conducted individual semistructured interviews with 10 participants. The interview protocol consisted of 20 questions, which gathered demographic information and addressed the three main research questions. I transcribed interviews, and the participants and I checked for them for accuracy before I analyzed the data to identify common themes.

### **Description of Participants**

Study participants were selected from a convenience sample of educators and administrators who worked with or led special education programs at the elementary level. Individuals had to meet specific predetermined criteria to qualify as a study participant. These criteria included actively serving as an administrator on a campus leading special education programs or special education teaching experience for three or more years. The names and email addresses of educators potentially meeting these criteria were obtained from district administrators, who granted permission for me to contact these individuals and solicit their participation in the study.

Initial participation solicitation emails were sent to this list of individuals. However, due scheduling conflicts and illness, two individuals were not able to participate in the semistructured interviews. Ten individuals (i.e., four administrators and six special education teachers) who met the criteria and consented to participate in the study were scheduled for individual interviews via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Although the initial research proposal specified that interviews would be conducted via Zoom, several participants did not have access to this video-conferencing

platform but had access to Microsoft Teams. I had access to both platforms and could accommodate these participants by using their preferred platform to conduct interviews.

Prior to scheduling individual interviews, participants were given a consent form explaining the purpose of the study and how interviews would be structured. Consent forms were distributed, signed (in person or via intra-office mail) and returned to me. Participants were also given a brief overview of LMX theory and a copy of the questions contained in the interview protocol (Appendix E).

I took the time to address any questions participants had regarding the structure of the interview or the concept of LMX theory prior to individual interviews. Once consent was obtained each participant worked with me to schedule an individual interview via Zoom or Teams. As everyone was scheduled for an interview, they were assigned a pseudonym (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) in order to maintain anonymity. In addition to this, all potentially identifiable information such as names of individuals or specific school names were concealed with alternate pseudonyms within transcripts.

As part of the interview protocol (Appendix E) some demographic information was collected from each participant. These questions were used to determine (a) the role of each participant (i.e., special education teacher or administrator), (b) how many years participants served in their current role as well as in education altogether, and whether they worked primarily in a general education or special education roles.

Several participants made it known that they had taught in both public and private schools. In addition to this information, there were a number of questions regarding the participant's educational background and training. This included questions about the type of educator preparation program they attended (traditional/university or alternative certification

program) and what type of educator certifications they possess. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic information collected from study participants during individual interviews.

The participants have between 13 to 34 years of experience working in education. At the time of the study, all participants worked for a public school district in north central Texas as an elementary school teacher or administrator. Of the 10 participants, four were administrators (i.e., principal, AP, coordinator) and six were special education teachers at the elementary school level. The participants who were working as special education teachers served students ranging from early childhood (3- and 4-year-old pre-kindergarten children) through fifth grade in settings that ranged from inclusion to self-contained.

As noted in Table 1, the participants held a variety of educator certifications including elementary education generalist, special education, English as a second language, gifted and talented, diagnostician, speech-language pathologist, reading specialist, and principal or administrator. While most of the participants held multiple teacher certifications, several of the participants had degrees in fields other than education. Seven of the 10 participants obtained their teaching certification as part of a traditional university degree-based program.

Three participants earned degrees in other fields and obtained teaching certification through an alternative teacher preparation program. While all of the participants serve students with special needs, there are three study participants that did not hold certification in special education. These three participants without special education certification were administrators for campuses with special education programs.

**Table 1***Demographic Information of Participants*

ID	Educator preparation program	Certifications	Years in education	Current role
1	Traditional/University	EC-4, Sped EC-12	23	Life Skills teacher
2	Traditional/University	Elem. Ed 1-8, Sped EC-12, Reading Specialist	12 public, 18 private	ECSE Inclusion Teacher
3	Alternative	EC-6 Generalist, Sped EC-12	23 public, 2 private	K-2 <sup>nd</sup> Sped Teacher
4	Traditional/University	1 <sup>st</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> Generalist, ESL, Principal	26 public	Principal
5	Traditional/University	Elem. Ed, Sped, EC-4, SLP	23	EC-5 Sped Teacher
6	Traditional/University	1 <sup>st</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> Generalist, Diagnostician, Principal EC-12	34	Elementary Assessment Coordinator
7	Alternative	EC-8 Generalist, Principal EC-12, ESL, GT	20	Assistant Principal
8	Traditional/University	Special Ed 1 <sup>st</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup>	23	3 <sup>rd</sup> -5 <sup>th</sup> Sped Teacher
9	Traditional/University	Generalist 1 <sup>st</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> , Sped EC-12, Principal	31	Principal
10	Alternative	EC-4, ESL, Sped EC-12	13	Pre-k Inclusion Teacher

*Note.* ID = Assigned participant number; EC = Early Childhood; ECSE = Early Childhood Special Education; ESL = English as a Second Language; GT = Gifted and Talented; Sped = Special Education; SLP = Speech Language Pathologist

## **Presentation of Findings**

This study made use of the qualitative descriptive method known as the Rashomon Effect to present the perspectives of two groups of participants on the influence of administrator relationships on the retention of special education teachers. While this method allowed me to highlight similarities and differences between the participant groups or individuals that occur, the intent of this method was to present the data collected rather than to interpret it. In this study, participants were grouped into two categories: special education teachers and campus administrators. I asked all participants the same questions from the interview protocol (Appendix E), which allowed me to gain multiple perspectives on the same topic.

Although transcripts of each interview were automatically created via the video conferencing platform used (either Zoom or Microsoft Teams), I also used recordings of the interviews to manually create transcripts for each participant. This allowed me to check the transcripts that were automatically generated for accuracy. I also asked participants to view the transcripts for their interview and offer any clarification or corrections needed.

Interview transcripts were analyzed to identify common themes among the participant groups and a coding matrix was created (Appendix F). The coding matrix organized participant remarks based on common themes and categories. In the next section, I present the findings of the research. Common themes that were identified among both special education teachers and campus administrators are presented as they relate to the research questions. Finally, a summary of the findings is provided.

The next section presents the perspectives of campus administrators and special education teachers in response to each of the three research questions. Participants were provided with a brief overview of LMX theory and an explanation of the idea of in-groups and out-groups

among staff in order to help them be able to better answer the research questions. Participants were given time to review and reflect on the topic of LMX theory and ask me any clarifying questions prior to and during the semistructured interviews.

### **Common Themes Related to Research Questions**

In analyzing the interview transcripts several common themes emerged in regards to the research questions. These themes included positive work relationships, communication, support, and the workload of special education teachers. Factors that contribute to the retention of special education teachers also emerged as a theme of research question 3. In the next section, I describe each theme that emerged from the research questions from the views of each group of participants.

Before addressing the research questions, participants were first asked which group they thought they belonged to and why. With a basic understanding of LMX and what in-groups and out-groups are, participants discussed whether in-groups and out-groups existed on their campus, and which group they thought they belonged to. Most participants agreed that in-groups and out-groups did exist on their campus. Only one participant indicated that she was not really aware of whether in and out groups existed.

In response to the question regarding which group participants belonged to, four participants perceived that they were part of the in-group, three participants categorized themselves as members of the out-group, while two participants thought they could belong to both groups, and 1 participant said she really didn't belong to either group. Participants also gave a variety of reasons to support why they thought they belonged to a specific group. Table 2 summarizes each participant's response regarding which group they perceive they belong to and the reasons why they think they belong to that particular group.



**Table 2***Participants' Perceptions on Belonging to the In-Group or Out-Group*

ID	Role	Group	Reasons
1	Teacher	In-group	Maybe because I'm well liked or because I don't need a lot of attention.
2	Teacher	Out-group	I'm not clickish like some teachers are. I get left out of things.
3	Teacher	Neither	I just try and fly under the radar.
4	Administrator	In-group	I'm deliberate about making everyone feel included.
5	Teacher	Out-group	I don't know, I just am.
6	Administrator	In-group	You have to find your people; I found my people.
7	Administrator	Both	Depends on administrators. I'm easy to like, but some have their favorites.
8	Teacher	Both	With my Sped team and EA's, I would say I'm in the in-group, but with GenEd or everyone as a whole I'm in the out-group.
9	Administrator	In-group	I made an effort and volunteered for more things when I was just starting out and that helped me be in the in-group.
10	Teacher	Out-group	Administrators don't acknowledge me.

*Note.* ID = Assigned participant number; EA = Educational Assistant; GenEd = General

Education; Sped = Special Education

### ***Theme 1: Communication***

Research questions one and two examined how administrators engage with special education teachers in the in-group and the out-group. As part of the interview protocol, follow-up questions addressed what communication from administrators looks like for both groups and whether it was viewed as effective. Both teachers and administrators had much to say about communication. Overall, both groups of participants (special education teachers and administrators) agreed that communication was a key part of creating and maintaining a positive work environment. Of the 10 participants interviewed, all 10 mentioned communications in the form of an open-door policy, constructive feedback, or ways of providing information to the whole staff (i.e., newsletters, emails, PLC's, or staff meetings).

**Research Question 1.** How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the in-group? To address this question, participants were asked to describe how administrators communicate and engage with staff members in the in-group and whether their efforts were effective. In addition to communication and engagement, participants were also asked how administrators support staff in the in-group.

***Special Education Teachers' Perspectives.*** While Participant 1 noted that administrators have favorites, she believes she is part of the in-group because she is well liked and does not need a lot of attention. Participant 1 described administrators as engaging with the in-group by respecting their time and offering help when needed. Similarly, Participant 10 shared that she thought the in-group received more attention than others:

Administrators can sometimes have their favorites—those teachers that are always recognized and praised. These are the in-group, and it's never the special education teachers/staff. These people are always in their offices chatting and hardly ever in their

own classrooms. I feel like they get a lot more attention and recognition, but I'm not sure if they are really doing anything to earn it.

Participant 2 said she felt like there were clear groups on previous campuses where she worked, but that at her current campus, it is not as noticeable whether favorites exist. She offered, "maybe that's because I'm in my own little world." When asked how campus leaders engage with teachers in the in-group on the campus, Participant 5 responded, "There is a familiarity, connection, and comfort in the relationships that are more relaxed." She said that this is something the out-group doesn't feel. Several of the special education teachers who were interviewed remarked that they often felt excluded by and less than general education teachers (Participants 3, 5, & 10). Participant 3 explained:

The in-group often gets more attention. Maybe because they are more active and vocal about things. The more active people are in the school, the more attention they get. Yet, some of us don't have time for extra things because we are struggling to keep up with all of the job responsibilities that come with sped. Administrators treat us well. It's the other staff that can make us feel inferior. We, the sped team, feel like others think they are better than us. They never want to share resources or include us. We are often an afterthought.

***Campus Administrators' Perspectives.*** When asked how administrators communicate and engage with in-group members, Participant 7 noted:

Two-way communication and transparency are essential factors in creating and maintaining a positive work environment. Information for everyone at the same time is important, but teachers also need to know you can listen. Sometimes they just want to

talk and have someone listen, not necessarily provide a solution, just listen, and let them feel like they are being heard by someone.

Participant 4 acknowledged that in-groups exist although she looks at them differently as an administrator. She noted:

It may appear that administrators have inside jokes or are more friendly with this group sometimes because they are the ones that are always around. I am deliberate about making those out-group members feel more at ease by creating a relationship with everyone and knowing what each individual teacher needs. Some want a chatty friend type, while others need a listening ear. Heck, some just want to be left alone to do their job, and I'm okay with that.

Participant 6 noted, "It keeps things fair when everyone gets the same information, and some have difficulty with this, which makes it hard." Both participants 4 and 6 remarked that providing information to everyone on the campus at the same time helps keep communication breakdowns to a minimum, but staff may still perceive that the in-group gets information first.

While special education teachers noted that the in-group received more attention because they were always volunteering for extra things or hanging around the office, a few of the administrators who participated in the study viewed this differently. Participant 7 described teachers in the in-group:

These are the "go to" people—the ones that can be counted on to do what they are asked. They win favor because they are reliable and put in extra effort. These people are easy to like, but then it becomes a double-edge sword because administrators come to rely on and seek these people out first, which appears like they are playing favorites.

Participant 6 stated, “We know who we can count on, and we have our go-to people. We are okay if these people say no.”

**Research Question 2.** How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the out-group? For this question, participants were asked to think about the out-group and how administrators engage and communicate with them. Although both administrators and special education teachers agreed communication was important for a positive work environment, their responses about the effectiveness of administrators’ current communication were not as cohesive.

*Special Education Teachers’ Perspectives.* When asked how administrators engage with the out-group, Participant 2 remarked, “Administrators avoid those that are not their favorites. It's like they think all we do is complain.” When asked what communication looked like for the out-group, Participant 10 described:

Again, like I said, we (special education) usually find out things second-hand from others who are her friends. Admin rarely comes to talk to us. They do not regularly attend our PLC meetings like they do for the other grade levels. They just kind of leave us alone—except when there is a problem and it looks bad on the school or on them. You know like parent complaints, students physically hurting each other. Then they expect to show up and provide a solution that makes them look good and then leave. I just wish they would spend a full day or two with us and see what it is like and how much we do.

Participant 3 remarked that “the ‘in people’ are constantly talking so I’m not included or acknowledged.” She went on to say that she feels like special education teachers, in general, are pushed off to other departments or instructional coaches because administrators don’t know what to do for them. According to Participant 5:

Campus administrators do attempt to communicate and engage with the out-group, but this is usually if the teacher takes the first step and goes to them; administrators don't seek them out. The personality of both administrators and special education teachers plays a big role in how they engage with each other. Effort has to be expended by both [groups] to acknowledge the out-group; otherwise, the exclusion will get worse.

Participant 10 expressed that her campus principal does not acknowledge special education teachers in the out-group: “She doesn’t acknowledge that we exist except on paper. We are a number and are treated as such.” Conversely, Participant 1 shared a different experience with one administrator indicating that the assistant principal treats them differently. Participant 1 explained that the assistant principal often seeks out teachers in the out-group and gives them more attention. Participant 5 (special education teacher) stated, “More communication is needed—not necessarily to make you [teachers] aware of things, but to provide you with opportunities to voice concerns and needs.”

*Campus Administrators’ Perspectives.* When explaining how administrators engage with the out-group, Participant 7 noted:

I believe the out-group needs more guidance and prompting from administrators. The out group is more reserved, anxious, and almost terrified when interacting with us [administrators]. This might be because they often seem unsure if what they are doing is correct. They need validation.

Participant 6 had a different view and remarked that often special education teachers in the out-group can be viewed as those who “want too much” or are “too needy.” Participant 4 noted that when first becoming an administrator she made herself “overly accessible” but learned that she had to “dial that back.” Conversely, Participant 4 stated:

Administrators often have limited engagement with out-group members because the teachers do not seek it out. It's like they have this preconceived notion that we don't want them to be successful and that it's punitive when they don't have certain things, like we withhold resources. No, you didn't get it because you didn't ask like the other teachers did.

Although both administrators and special education teachers agreed communication was important for a positive work environment, their responses about the effectiveness of administrators' current communication were not as cohesive. Despite the participant groups having differing perspectives on the effectiveness of communication, it is clear that communication can play a key role in creating a positive work environment and the retention of teachers.

### ***Theme 2: Lack of Administrator Support***

A lack of administrator support was another common theme that emerged in relation to the research questions. Again, both research questions 1 and 2 had follow up questions within the interview protocol which addressed what administrator support looks like for both the in-group and the out-group; and whether this support is effective. These questions provided a wide array of responses from both special education teachers and administrators as to what support looks like. For some, support was as simple as being visible on the campus and in the classrooms, while others pointed to administrators providing resources or support staff to help lighten the load. Of the participants interviewed, eight of 10 asserted that support from administrators created a positive work environment essential to retaining special education teachers.

**Research Question 1.** Participants were asked to explain how campus leaders support staff in the in-group and to describe what such support looks like or includes.

*Special Education Teachers' Perspectives.* Overall, when teacher participants discussed the support that in-group members receive from administrators, they mentioned things such as more attention, resources, and being given more favorable classes. Participant 10, a special education teacher with 13 years of experience, remarked:

Oh, they get everything they want handed to them. It's so unfair. They don't get any of the behavior kids, and they are always the "test/pilot" rooms for new programs or resources offered by the campus or district—many of which come with more aides or interns to help in the classroom.

*Campus Administrators' Perspectives.* When asked what support looked like for special education teachers in the in-group. Participant 4 remarked:

Administrators have to be supportive. There are lots of things I cannot control, things from higher up, but I can support the things I can. That means listening and seeing where the frustration is, alleviating the workload if I can, and getting them what they need. Whether that is resources, support staff, or just being an advocate for them and what they need. You have to get in there [visit the classrooms] and see what is going on because what might seem good on paper is not manageable in reality.

Participant 9 noted that making special education teachers feel supported, like their voice matters, and being visible are important aspects to creating a positive work environment and retaining teachers.

**Research Question 2.** After describing how administrators support special education teachers in the in-group, participants were asked to explain how campus leaders support staff in the out-group and describe the types of support provided.



***Special Education Teachers' Perspectives.*** When responding to the question about how campus leaders support special education teachers in the out-group, Participant 2 shared:

Some administrators have never listened to anything I said. I felt so degraded, very flawed, and shrugged off. While some administrators will try and be sympathetic, I still don't think they have an understanding of all we [special education teachers] do or what our program is.

Participant 3 remarked that administrators often push special education teachers off on others like instructional coaches or other departments. Likewise, Participants 1 and 3 noted that central administrators often put things back on campus administrators, so nothing ever gets done. Participant 1 elaborated by saying that she feels there is a "lack of support because campus and district administrators are constantly going back and forth on who we [special education teachers] belong to, leaving us not knowing who to ask for help." These sentiments were shared by Participant 5 who said:

As special education teachers, we are overloaded and overlooked. Even when we are doing a good job, we get no resources or help. I don't know; it's like admin doesn't look at the big picture, and I feel dumped on. Honestly, I'm doing the best that I can with what I have.

***Campus Administrators' Perspectives.*** Administrators who participated in the study had mixed views about how the out-group is supported. Of the four administrator participants interviewed, two noted that staff may perceive that the out group is treated differently, but that administrators try not to do this. Participant 4 pointed out that while she may have limited engagement with the out-group, it is because they are not asking for things like other staff do. She added that some of the individuals in the out-group may be part of that group because of

their own actions in many ways or preconceived notions they hold. She stated, “They think you [administrator] don’t want them to be successful, like we are looking for punitive things.”

Participant 6 noted that she needed to better engage and support the out-group by sending words of affirmation and providing time for staff to do all of the tasks included in their jobs. Yet, she also noted that some members of the out-group can be too needy. She has learned to limit how accessible she is to some individuals because she cannot solve all their problems.

### ***Theme 3: Factors Contributing to Attrition***

Special education teachers often have demanding jobs that extend well beyond the instruction of curriculum. Special education teachers give a number of reasons why they choose to leave special education. These reasons include factors related to students, professional roles and responsibilities, relationships with other staff (administrators and teachers), and other factors. The factors contributing to attrition was one theme that emerged from RQ3.

**Research Question 3.** Participants were asked how support from campus administrators influenced attrition of special education teachers. Participants shared what they thought contributed most to special education teachers' attrition and how retention could be improved.

***Special Education Teachers’ Perspectives.*** Support is not just one thing but a variety of little things that administrators can do to help teachers be successful; however, administrators and special education teachers often have different views of what support looks like. Participant 10 noted:

Teaching has changed so much over the years, and teachers are having to take on more responsibilities than ever before. The paperwork/documentation that comes with teaching special education is something that could be a full-time job all on its own. Yet, teachers are not given adequate time during the workday to get it all done. It really depends on the

district you are in as to what kind of documentation you have to do, as some other districts—like where my daughters are—have special education clerks and other personnel who take care of some of the paperwork, so teachers don't have to.

Participant 5 commented that support is “not necessarily supplies and resources, but an acknowledgement of what we are doing.” Participant 2 commented that support could also be administrators following through with the things they said they would do. Participants 1 and 8 noted that having administrators respect and trust their abilities was an important way administrators could show their support for special education teachers in the out-group.

Participant 8 elaborated:

Support from administrators is important because it makes me feel valued and appreciated. I have administrators I love to work for because they trust my decisions and are supportive of what I am doing. I feel as though I have a good relationship with them. They let me teach without being overbearing.

***Campus Administrators' Perspectives.*** While three out of the four administrators interviewed acknowledged that positive working relationships with special education teachers are key to retention, they countered that there is only so much they can do at their level.

Participant 7 remarked:

Campus administrators can be great at two-way communication; they can be transparent with staff, respect their time, and show them grace, but when it comes down to decreasing large caseloads and implementing initiatives, some things have to come from above at the district level and often, we get shut down.

Participant 6 had a similar view stating, “Many of the district initiatives do not apply to special education; yet teachers are asked to implement them anyway.” She added that the “ever

changing demands from parents, TEA, and districts” tie the hands of campus administrators sometimes. Participant 4 remarked that campus administrators need to be supportive advocates for those (teachers and students) working and learning in special education programming, “We have to get in there and fight with them for what they need.”

Participant 9 noted that making special education teachers feel supported, like their voice matters, and being visible are important aspects to creating a positive work environment and retaining teachers. Participant 9 stated:

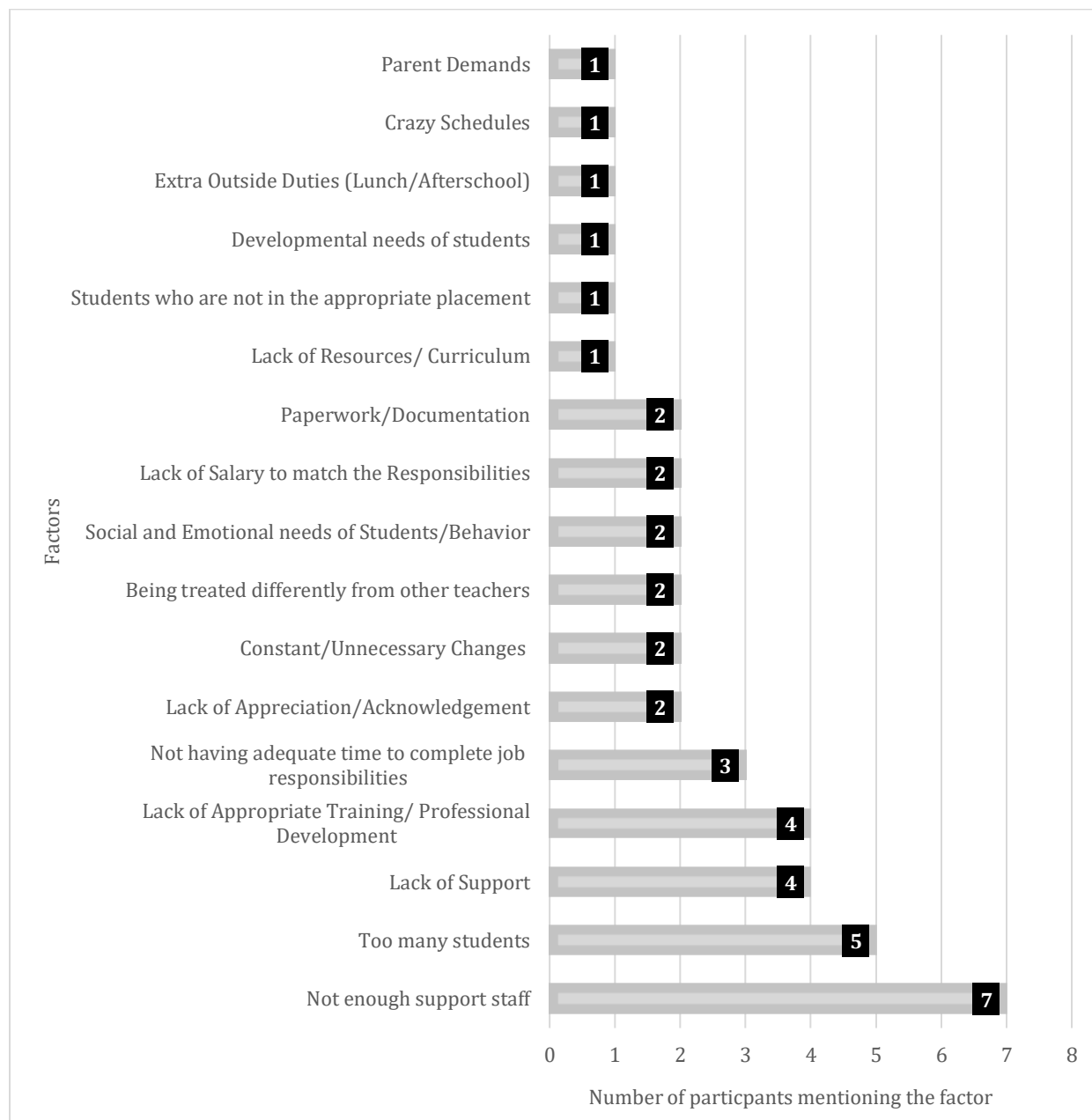
Administrators have to be a voice for all teachers, including special education personnel. We have to be visible and out in the classrooms, all of them, even if special education classes make us uncomfortable. Special education teachers need to feel our support.

Participants identified numerous factors that contribute to attrition (see Figure 1). Insufficient support staff was the most frequently noted factor that participants believed contributed to attrition (identified by seven of 10 participants). Having too many students or large caseloads was the second most frequently noted factor (identified by five participants). Lack of support and lack of appropriate professional development were noted by four participants, while insufficient time to adequately complete job responsibilities was identified by three participants. Other factors cited by participants included a lack of appreciation and acknowledgement, constant unnecessary changes, being treated differently from other teachers, social and emotional needs of students, behavior of students, the lack of salary to match the job responsibilities, and too much paperwork or documentation. Finally, participants also believed contributing factors to attrition include a lack of resources or curriculum, serving students not in the appropriate placement, meeting a wide range of developmental needs for students, extra duties assigned to teachers (e.g., monitoring lunch or after school groups), and juggling crazy

schedules. Figure 1 summarizes the factors participants identified and the frequency mentioned by each participant group.

**Figure 1**

*Factors Contributing to Special Education Teacher Attrition*



*Note.* Numbers within each section represent the number of times each factor was mentioned during interviews.

When asked what job-related factors had the greatest impact on a special education teacher's decision to leave, Participant 2 noted that they do not have enough help but have large caseloads, too much paperwork, extra duties, and the way other teachers treat special education (teachers and kids). She added, "It's like we are less or don't matter as much." Participants 4, 6, and 8 also remarked that the demands and responsibilities of special education teachers are too much. Participant 6 (administrator) commented that the demands of special education teachers are constantly changing and that increases frustration. When asked about the factors that contribute to attrition of special education teachers, Participant 7 remarked:

The increased workload and less resources make teachers feel unsuccessful. The system is set up for failure. There is too much for too few people to do. If I could, I would reduce or lower the caseload of students for special education teachers because even with aides, the job is unmanageable. We have to stop dumping on them to decrease their workload, but that has to come from the district where we are top-heavy with administrators.

The excessive workloads of special education teachers are something Participant 8 (a veteran teacher with more than 17 years of experience in special education) commented on when asked about factors influencing attrition:

The special education teachers have a different type of job, in my opinion, and the turnover rate reflects that difficulty. Many years, including my current one, I've had students with such high developmental needs that it just drains me physically and emotionally. Giving 100% doesn't seem to be getting the job done, so frustration follows.

Participant 10 also commented on how difficult it is to be a special education teacher because of all of the extra job responsibilities that often come with meeting the individual needs of multiple students. Participant 10 said:

Teaching has changed so much over the years and teachers are having to take on more responsibilities than ever before. The paperwork/documentation that comes with teaching special education is something that could be a full-time job all on its own. Yet, teachers are not given adequate time during the workday to get it all done. It really depends on the district you are in as to what kind of documentation you have to do as some other districts—like where my daughters are—have special education clerks and other personnel who take care of some of the paperwork so teachers don't have to.

***Theme 4: Positive Work Relationships Between Teachers and Administrators***

Having a good relationship with campus administrators was a factor that special education teachers indicated was critical for creating a positive work environment and for contributing to teachers' decisions to remain in special education roles.

**Research Question 3.** For research question 3, participants were asked how administrator support influences attrition of special education teachers. As part of this section participants discussed their ideal relationship with administrators and elements of the working relationship that are most important.

***Special Education Teachers' Perspectives.*** Participant 3 noted that visibility of administrators helps create and maintain a positive work environment. She stated, "For admin to actually talk to you and care, they have to come into the classroom sometime other than your formal evaluation. Administrators never come in here." When asked what factors are needed to create and maintain a positive work environment, Participant 1 noted:

When administrators respect and trust that I know what I am doing, instead of micromanaging my job, is important. I don't like it when they [administrators] waste my

time with extra things that don't necessarily pertain to me or my students. Offer help when I ask for it, when I need something, I'll ask.

Interestingly, Participant 5 suggested there is often a “disconnect between admin and the trenches.” She added, “admin should have a good idea or understanding of all their teachers' job roles; yet they don't, and it's frustrating.”

*Campus Administrators' Perspectives.* Of the four administrators interviewed only one (Participant 9) had previous experience teaching and certification in special education. Another administrator (Participant 4) said that a positive work environment is “100% relationships and having empathy; that's where all relationships begin”. Participant 6 suggested that administrators must “recognize and acknowledge employees for success and effort, as well as be in tune when things are not right and provide support.”

When asked about creating and maintaining a positive work environment, Participant 9 remarked:

I strongly believe in relationships first. We all have family needs, so we have to think of each other that way first. We have to build trust. As a principal, this means never forgetting what it is like in the classroom. Everyone has a job and should have equal value. You have to value feedback.

### **Retention of Special Education Teachers**

As a follow up to research question 3 regarding factors that influence attrition, participants were asked what factors could positively impact retention (i.e., help retain special education teachers). This question prompted an array of responses ranging from materialistic things (e.g., more pay, resources, and training) to things that contribute to psychological and emotional well-being (e.g., having a voice, being supported, and feeling valued).



Although many of the factors uncovered during the interviews came from a mixture of administrators and special education teachers, several factors originated only from the group of teacher participants. These included (a) administrator support, (b) resources, (c) being treated like an equal to other teachers, (d) having a voice or being listened to, and (e) follow-through from administrators. Coincidentally, many of the factors only mentioned by special education teachers dealt with administrators and their role in creating a positive work environment for special education teachers on campus. Table 3 breaks down the frequency of responses of interview participants by roles.

**Table 3**

*Factors Positively Impacting Retention*

Factor	Participant ID#	Frequency of occurrence		
		Teachers ( <i>n</i> = 6)	Admin ( <i>n</i> = 4)	Total ( <i>N</i> = 10)
Increased Pay/Incentives	1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10	4	2	6
Planning/Prep Time/ “Gift of Time”	3, 6, 7, 9, 10	2	3	5
Smaller Class Size/Caseload	5, 6, 7, 10	2	2	4
Administrator Support	2, 3, 4	3	0	3
More Teachers/Staff to Share the Load	2, 6, 7	1	2	3
Being treated Like an Equal to Other Teachers	3, 10	2	0	2
Resources	1, 3	2	0	2
Having a Voice (Teacher)/ Being Listened To	1, 10	2	0	2
Professional Development/ Training	5, 9	1	1	2
Follow Through from Administrators	2	1	0	1

The most commonly noted factor that participants thought could positively contribute to the retention of special education teachers was increased pay and incentives. Of the six times it was suggested, four of the occurrences came from special education teachers. Participant 8 shared:

Teaching has changed so much over the years;—more single parent homes, increased behavior problems because kids are addicted to video games and do not know how to socialize appropriately with others all factor into our day. The education system needs a transformation to retain its good teachers. It's sad, but the lack of salary that is equivalent to someone with our level of education in other professions has sent many of my peers to pursue other fields.

While pay and incentives topped the list for special education teachers, planning and prep time was viewed by administrators as the factor that would most positively impact retention. Three of the four administrators interviewed remarked that giving the “gift of time” to special education teachers to complete paperwork or training would help with retention. Participant 7 explained:

Special education teachers I've worked with before felt overwhelmed by all of the paperwork and documentation; yet, [they] don't have uninterrupted time to complete them during the workday, because they are always with students. Those [are] jobs that always seem to get taken home. Providing teachers with uninterrupted time to complete these tasks, I think, would be helpful, but all we seem to do is fill up their conference times with meetings and more meetings. They need the gift of time.

Two participants (both teachers) spoke to the specific reasons why they continued working within the field of special education for so long. Participant 2 stated, “The kids, I have a

heart for the kids. I feel like I am making a difference helping those kids who need it the most.”

Participant 8 explained:

I suppose the reason I've taught for so many years is because I absolutely love kids, and always have. I've wanted the best for them and treated them the way I would want my own daughters treated by a teacher. The education system needs a transformation to retain its good teachers.

### **Summary**

The introduction to this chapter began with a review of the purpose of this study and the research questions investigated. Next, a review of the research focus and processes were explained including how participants were selected, the interview structure, and how transcripts were analyzed. I presented the findings by addressing themes that emerged during transcript analysis as well as by exploring each research question individually through the perspectives of the two participant groups. The next chapter includes a discussion of the findings in relation to prior literature, study limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Special education teachers often point to a variety of reasons that contribute to their decision to leave the profession, but many of the reasons they mention are preventable (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). As teacher shortages continue to grow, especially in high-need fields such as special education, schools struggle to attract new teachers and to retain teachers serving in special education roles (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Vittek, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to examine how campus administrators' relationships influence the retention of special education teachers.

This qualitative descriptive study was designed to present the perspectives of both special education teachers and campus administrators as it examined the influence of relationships on retention. Working with the theoretical framework of LMX theory, which contends that both leaders and followers bring expectations and individual characteristics when engaging with each other, I sought to gain a better understanding of the influence of these relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the in-group?

RQ2: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the out-group?

RQ3: How does support from campus administrators influence attrition of special education teachers?

Participants were solicited from a convenience sampling of special education teachers and administrators working at the elementary level. Once identified, I sent emails explaining the purpose of the study and asking for participation. I scheduled semistructured interviews with those who consented to participate. Data gathered during the interviews were analyzed and coded based on common themes. These common themes from the perspectives of special education

teachers and administrators were presented to address each of the research questions. This chapter contains a discussion of the findings in relation to prior literature, implications for practice (i.e., application in the local school district) and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature**

According to Sandelowski (2000), the Rashomon effect occurs when a topic or event is described from multiple perspectives. This method was used to present the findings of the two groups participating in this study: special education teachers and administrators. LMX theory contends that relationships are developed by the exchanges between the two members; leaders and followers, and that building relationships is a continual process (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006). As leaders form relationships with followers, these followers can be categorized into either the in-group or the out-group according to LMX theory (Cogliser et al., 2009; Power, 2013). Yet, the perceptions of which group individuals belong to can differ between leaders and followers (Sherman et al., 2012). The findings of this study support that in-groups and out-groups do exist between administrators and their followers.

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

According to Dulebohn et al. (2011), members of the in-group typically have higher quality relationships with leaders because of their competence in certain areas or skills and due to increased motivation to complete job-related tasks. It is thought that individuals in the in-group receive preferential treatment from leaders such as more attention, support, resources, and are given more benefits and rewards at work such as promotions or the most desirable jobs, and better marks on performance reviews (Ahmadi et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2012). Special education teachers who were interviewed remarked that the in-group may receive more attention and praise because they are more vocal and active on the campus and hang around the

administrators' offices, which makes them seen and heard. Several administrators interviewed agreed that the people in the in-group are their "go-to people" because of their dependability and reliability.

Both administrators and special education teachers in this study noted that the people in the in-group appear to be the administrators' favorites. It was noted that individuals in the in-group seem to receive more attention, recognition, and praise than other staff members. How administrators communicated with and engaged with members of the in-group was perceived by participants as being more friendly, allowing in-group members access to information before others.

Ansley and Houchins (2019) contend that clear communication is necessary for administrators to build and maintain positive work relationships with followers. Study participants across both groups agreed that key factors to building and maintaining positive work relationships involve transparent communication, open-door policies, and practices for providing information to everyone on staff such (e.g., newsletters or regular staff meetings). Yet, some participants felt administrators provided in-group members with information before others. According to Gómez and Rosen (2001), the amount of information the in-group receives is often based on administrators' level of trust in them. This idea correlates with the remarks of the administrators I interviewed who acknowledged that they have "go to people" that they can rely on and trust to complete tasks.

**Communication.** RQ1 addressed how administrators communicate with special education teachers in the in-group and the effectiveness of this communication. Clear communication is one of the most important things campus administrators can do to help build and maintain positive relationships with staff (Ansley & Houchins, 2019). Despite some

administrators making a conscious effort to include all staff members and make sure information gets to everyone at the same time, some participants still thought members of the in-group received important information before members of the out-group. Study participants from both groups identified communication as a key element in forming good relationships with one another. However, some of the special education teachers remarked that it was important that they have a voice within the school and that administrators had to be available to listen, not just be the ones giving out information.

**Administrator Support.** RQ1 also addressed how administrators support special education teachers in the in-group. According to Bettini et al. (2015), administrator support is one of the biggest controllable factors that influences retention of special education teachers. Support can include a variety of things; however, what teachers and administrators perceive as support may differ (Roderick & Jung, 2012).

Participant groups in this study had some disagreement as to what constitutes support. Special education teachers who participated in the study identified examples such as administrators respecting and trusting their abilities (i.e., not micromanaging), listening to their concerns, and providing resources (e.g., curriculum and support staff) to help them successfully perform their job. Conversely, administrators pointed to examples of support as visibility on campus and having good communication with teachers. While the perspectives of administrators and special education teachers were aligned on how administrators communicate and engage with the in-group, the groups had different perspectives on how administrators treat out-group members.

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

For followers in the out-group, relationships with leaders can appear to be of lower quality than those relationships leaders have with members of the in-group (Power, 2013; Uhl-Bien (2006). According to Power (2013), out-group members may feel they hold a lesser status or are not as valued as members of the in-group. Of the 10 participants interviewed, three individuals, (all special education teachers) believed they were part of the out-group. As part of the out-group, these participants reported that they sometimes felt as though administrators and general education teachers treated them as inferior or less than other staff members. Ahmadi et al. (2014) reported that out-group members usually have less responsibility within the organization; therefore, they are often given routine or uninteresting job roles, fewer resources, and less favorable performance reviews from leaders.

While some considered themselves part of the out group, other interview participants had mixed perceptions about whether they belonged to either group. A few participants felt they could be part of both groups depending upon their relationships with administrators or other group members. Interactions between leaders and followers in the out-group are often more formal in nature and typically only include simple communication which occurs less frequently than leader interactions with those in the in-group (Sherman et al., 2012).

Several of the special education teachers interviewed noted that they were not acknowledged unless they sought out the administrator or that they were “pushed off” to other departments or district personnel. On the other hand, some administrators perceived the out-group as needy or anxious, and believe individuals in the out-group often need more guidance. According to Sherman et al. (2012), the low-quality interactions followers in the out-group receive can lead to more stress and decrease their commitment to the organization. Followers in



the out-group who feel undervalued and stressed due to low quality interactions may begin to resent their jobs and may eventually leave the organization (Power, 2013).

**Communication.** Communication between administrators and special education teachers in the out-group was equally important to both participant groups, but interviews revealed that administrators' efforts may not be effective. Successful communication between special education teachers and administrators can be challenging as special education teachers are often responsible for reporting to both campus and district administrators while also collaborating with multiple teachers and service providers—all who may have very different expectations (Billingsley et al., 2020; Roderick & Jung, 2012). As previously mentioned, one study participant remarked that campus administrators push them off on other departments or instructional coaches, who in turn defer back to campus leaders. This creates frustration for teachers who do not know who to turn to for support. The constant back-and-forth (a) adds to the stress of special education teachers who are seeking support, (b) decreases trust in administrators, (c) increases job dissatisfaction, and (d) leads to burnout (Aldosiry, 2020).

**Administrator Support.** When discussing how administrators support special education teachers in the out-group, there was also some disconnect between the two participant groups. Each group had slightly different perspectives on what constituted support from administrators. Special education teachers viewed administrator support as providing time or resources and recognition for all of the things they are doing. Several of the participants indicated that having administrators respect and trust their abilities was a way that they could show support. On the other hand, administrators viewed support as being an advocate or a voice for special education teachers. They noted they can only control so much of what teachers are responsible for. Nevertheless, research indicates that when followers feel supported by administrators, job

engagement increases and employees' intent to leave the organization decreases (Shuck et al., 2014).

Not having enough staff, having too many students on their caseloads, and a lack of support were reasons study participants provided as the greatest influence on special education teacher attrition. Although the administrators who were interviewed agreed that support was a key to retaining special education teachers, several reported their hands were tied and there was only so much they could do to support special education teachers. This sentiment, in many ways, echoed what Participant 5 stated, "Honestly, I'm doing the best that I can with what I have." Administrators participating in the study acknowledged the need to add more support staff, increase planning and prep time, and decrease the workload of special education teachers; yet they stated there is only so much they can do since they must get approval from district administrators for some of these things and continually get shut down.

### ***Research Question 3***

Although some turnover is normal from year-to-year, as special education teachers move to other positions or leave the profession altogether, campuses and districts are impacted greatly (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Vittek, 2015). Whether teachers are leaving special education for a different position in education, moving to another district, or leaving the profession altogether, both internal and external factors influence their decision (Billingsley, 2019; Otto & Arnold, 2005; Vittek, 2015).

**Factors Contributing to Attrition.** When study participants were asked about factors that contribute to special education teachers' decisions to leave, they noted increased professional roles and responsibilities, unsupportive relationships with administrators and other staff members, and a handful of other reasons. Figure 1 provided a breakdown of these reasons

identified by study participants according to the frequency they were mentioned by each group during the semistructured interviews.

**Challenging Workload of Special Education Teachers.** Factors that study participants believe contribute to special education teacher attrition included (a) managing caseloads that are too large; (b) providing instruction for students with a vast range of developmental needs; and (c) increased social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. Participant 8 adequately summed up how exhausting the excessive workload of special education teachers can be:

The special education teachers have a different type of job in my opinion, and the turnover rate reflects that difficulty. Many years, including my current one, I've had students with such high developmental needs that drain me physically and emotionally. Giving 100% doesn't seem to be getting the job done, so frustration follows.

Special education teachers are pouring everything they have physically, mentally, and emotionally into their jobs and students, which is leading to burnout. A teachers' role is no longer limited to academic instruction; special education teachers are often tasked with performing personal care services and carrying-out behavior plans to implement student IEPs—all of which requires documentation that further increases the workload of special education teachers (Bettini et al., 2020). While documentation is a necessary part of ensuring students receive the services and specially designed instruction to help them be successful at school, the increased workload for educators can have crippling effects on teachers.

Participant 10 argued that the paperwork and documentation of special education teachers could be a full-time job on its own and noted that some districts have personnel that complete some of these clerical tasks to help reduce the load of special education teachers. Increased workloads based on the academic and physical needs of students increase job duties, prep time,

and paperwork for special education teachers, which may create more stress that leads to burnout (Aldosiry, 2020).

The stress that increased work responsibilities creates was addressed by special education teachers and administrators. One administrator (Participant 6) suggested that the constant changes in the field of special education creates frustration. Another administrator (Participant 7) agreed that the workload of special education teachers is too great for too few people; however, she added that relief must come from the district level because campus administrators do not have the power to change some things. Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) pointed out that staffing shortages in special education are a major factor contributing to difficulty managing caseloads because districts increase class sizes of those already serving in these roles when they are unable to fill job vacancies.

Different perceptions regarding the role of special education teachers may also contribute to some difficulty in creating positive work relationships (Roderick & Jung, 2012). Several of the special education teachers interviewed noted that administrators and other general education teachers have no idea of what all their job includes. The roles and responsibilities of all teachers have grown and changed a great deal over the years; however, many people (including administrators) are unaware of all the things special education teachers do to meet the needs of their students.

Special education teachers are often tasked with providing personal care (e.g., feeding, toileting, and medical care services) in addition to planning and facilitating individualized instruction to meet the needs of their students (Ansley & Houchins, 2019; Conley & You, 2017). All of these tasks also require special documentation from special education teachers, who often

have to complete this paperwork on their own time because they do not have time during the school day.

Billingsley et al. (2020) noted that special education teachers may spend less than 40% of their day actually providing academic instruction due to all of the other tasks they are responsible for. Additionally, many of these tasks go unrecognized by other staff members including administrators. Participant 7 (administrator) remarked that she thought giving special education teachers uninterrupted time to complete these tasks during the regular school day could help improve retention. However, Participant 10 (special education teacher) pointed out that some of the extra roles teachers take on could be a full-time job in themselves and, in some places, extra personnel are hired to complete those tasks instead of having special education teachers be responsible for them. As Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) suggested, many special education teachers feel as though administrators do not know all of the things they are responsible for.

De Stasio et al. (2017) and Soini et al. (2019) addressed how contradictory views of special education teachers' roles can lead to increased stress and burnout as teachers try to manage all of these responsibilities, often without acknowledgement. Templeton (2017) noted that it can improve relationships with teachers when campus administrators are knowledgeable about and have experience working in special education roles. Although this was not specifically addressed in this study, it is worth pointing out that two of the four administrators interviewed held certification in and had previous experience working in special education. It is possible that having this background and experience allows these administrators to have a better understanding of the role of special education teachers on their campus and all of the tasks withing their responsibility.

**Positive Work Relationships.** Research has shown that administrator support is a key component for creating positive work environments and a factor that influences the retention of special education teachers in schools (Bettini et al., 2015, Reid, 2021). When asked how relationships between administrators and special education teachers influence attrition, both groups agreed that positive working relationships with administrators are important.

Bettini et al. (2015) and Reid (2021) pointed out that positive work environments (i.e., positive relationships and administrator support) greatly impact retention. As previously noted, study participants in both groups agreed that positive working relationships were an important factor in the retention of special education teachers. Participants identified important elements for administrators in creating a positive work environment as (a) being visible in special education classrooms, (b) having good communication, and (c) trusting teachers' abilities by not trying to micromanage them. However, it was surprising to hear participants speak about poor relationships with other staff members contributing to thoughts of leaving.

Poor working relationships with administrators and other staff members was another factor study participants identified that contributes to attrition. Several of the special education teachers noted that other staff members did not treat them as professionals or equals. Participant 2 stated, "It's like we are less or don't matter as much."

Bay and Parker-Katz (2009) pointed out that many special education teachers feel as though other school employees do not see or treat them as equals. This view of special education as *less than* has influenced teacher turnover (Stephens & Fish, 2010). Participant 3 remarked that administrators can treat them well, but the general education teachers don't share resources or include special education teachers in things unless it's an afterthought. These unmanageable caseloads and poor relationships with staff only add to the frustration of an already stressful job,

causing special education teachers to burnout faster and seek roles outside of special education or in other professions (Cancio et al., 2018).

Reitman & Karge (2019) noted that positive working relationships between campus administrators and special education teachers are critical to building trust and encouraging collaborations. Of the four administrators who were interviewed, three specifically mentioned the importance of having good relationships with followers. According to Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018), positive work relationships and connections with administrators can increase overall job satisfaction. Many special education teachers report to multiple individuals at both the campus and district level, so it is important to have good relationships with administrators.

One study participant noted that she felt campus administrators often “push off” special education teachers to other district personnel such as instructional coaches or coordinators. De Statiso et al., (2017) asserted that because special education teachers often report to people at both the campus and district levels of the school system, work relationships are critical. Yet, as study participants pointed out, being accountable to multiple departments can create confusion and frustration about who to turn to for support and guidance.

**Retention.** While teacher turnover is normal, constant changes in personnel within special education programs impacts students, schools, and districts (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Vittek, 2015). To help districts improve recruitment and retention of highly qualified special education teachers, it is important to understand this attrition and the factors that influence it (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). When asked what factors could positively impact special education teacher retention, study participants had several ideas including (a) more pay and incentives, (b) increased time for planning and preparation, (c) smaller class sizes, (d) additional support staff, and (e) appropriate training and professional development.

Increased pay or incentives was identified by six of the 10 participants as a factor that could positively impact retention of special education teachers. Participant 8 remarked that the higher salaries of people in other professions with similar education or degrees has enticed other special education teachers to move on. Although administrators agreed that current salaries are not adequate to cover all of the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers, they contend there is not much they can do about this since they do not control compensation schedules for staff.

Billingsley et al. (2020) found that a lack of planning time to collaborate with other staff and service providers added to the stress of special education teachers' jobs and contributed to burnout and attrition. Half of the study participants mentioned the importance of having more planning and preparation time as a factor that could positively influence retention. Participant 7 noted that special education teachers are often so consumed with taking care of students and other responsibilities that they often have to complete paperwork and documentation on their own time because there is not enough uninterrupted time during the day for these tasks.

Smaller class sizes are another factor that study participants noted could help retain special education teachers as this would decrease their workload. Billingsley (2020) noted that research also indicates that special education teachers' decisions to leave the classroom and the profession may be the result of large caseloads that feel unmanageable. In this study, four participants noted that decreasing class sizes for special education teachers could improve retention.

Not having enough staff was also a factor that seven of 10 participants believe to contribute to the large caseloads that cause teachers to leave. Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018)



reported that special education teacher shortages add to the workload of those serving in those roles, as districts struggle to find and retain highly qualified teachers to fill existing vacancies.

Professional development and training were another factor mentioned by multiple study participants to improve retention of special education teachers. Billingsley et al. (2019) and Vittek (2015) asserted that induction and mentor programs were necessary to help special education teachers understand all of their assigned roles and how to manage these responsibilities as a new teacher. This is important because almost half of special education teachers leave within their first four years on the job (Bettini et al., 2015). Conversely, Participant 6 (administrator) remarked that special education teachers are often tasked with implementing district initiatives or programs that require training although the programs or initiatives do not apply to special education students. Two study participants (one teacher and one administrator) voiced a need for more appropriate training and professional development for special education teachers, rather than having them waste time learning and trying to implement things that don't apply to them.

Stephens and Fish (2010) pointed out that many teachers who take on special education roles do so out of empathy for students, because they have a family member with special needs, or out of a sense of calling. Two study participants (both special education teachers) spoke about why they have remained in the field for so long. They emphasized their love of the students and feeling like they are making a difference. However, as special education teachers' jobs continue to become more challenging, these reasons may not be enough to retain good educators in the classroom.

## **Implications for Practice**

The following section reflects on the study findings in relation to previous literature and provides suggestions for improving practices within the local school districts. In addition to these suggestions, this section also contains recommendations for further research.

### ***Application in the Local School District***

According to McLeskey & Billingsley (2008), many of the internal factors that contribute to special education teacher attrition are preventable and can be addressed to improve retention. As participants all work for the same school district, findings of this study could help improve day-to-day practices in hopes of positively impacting retention of special education teachers within the district. Understanding the variables that influence special education teacher attrition is key to helping districts retain teachers in special education roles (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Based on the data gathered from study participants, administrators at both the campus and district level should consider (a) adding more staff, (b) addressing the use of and potentially increasing planning time, and (c) learning more about all of the roles and responsibilities assigned to special education teachers.

Hiring additional special education teachers and other support staff members could help reduce the workloads of current special education teachers, which may decrease stress and other factors that lead to burnout. Not having enough staff was the number one factor participants thought contributed to attrition of special education teachers, and multiple participants suggested that adding more staff could help retain teachers. Research has shown that excessive workloads factor into special education teachers' decision to leave their roles, which only increases the teacher shortages (Billingsley et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018).

In hiring additional special education staff, administrators could also reduce the large class sizes, which was another factor participants in both groups agreed contributed to attrition. Adding additional staff members to help educate students could also help ensure that special education teachers are able to take advantage of any allotted, uninterrupted planning and prep time. Increased paperwork, meetings, and having limited planning time all create stress for special education teachers (Aldosiry, 2020). Participants in both groups state that special education teachers did not have time to complete all of the extra duties including documentation. Being able to effectively utilize daily planning time would reduce the number of tasks special education teachers have to complete on their own time.

Two special education teachers who participated in the study mentioned a disconnect or lack of understanding between the jobs they do and what administrators think they do. Gee and Gonsier-Gerdin (2018) pointed out that special education teachers often report that their supervisors do not know what exactly they do each day. Special education teachers' often take on a wide variety of roles and responsibilities to meet the needs of their students. These extra responsibilities mean that some special education teachers are actually spending less than 40% of their day on providing academic instruction (Billingsley et al., 2022). To address this, special educators and administrators could meet regularly so special education teachers can voice any concerns, challenges, or needs that they may have and provide administrators with a regular opportunity to learn about all of the roles and responsibilities that special education teachers perform.

Regular meetings could also help improve communication among these two groups and potentially increase the type of support administrators offer to special education teachers. This would need to be incorporated into the day in such a way that special education teachers were

not just attending another meeting that took time away from their already exhausting responsibilities. Providing support staff to cover classes while special education teachers regularly check in with administrators would allow teachers to have the opportunity to use their planning time for other duties. Further, it may be beneficial for the school if the campus administrator team always included someone with special education certification and knowledge. This could potentially help all administrators better understand the roles of special education teachers and allow them to provide more suitable support.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

This study made use of a small convenience sample comprised from one school district. While using a convenience sample of participants allowed me to gain a better understanding of the practices and perspectives of individuals within the school, the findings may not be generalizable to other schools or districts. It is recommended that future research consider including participants from other schools and or districts in order to get a broader picture of the topic and how it impacts other campuses.

Results may also be limited by the parameters I set up for the study, to include limiting the sample to individuals actively working as campus administrators or special education teachers with 3 or more years of experience. While this criterion was intended to ensure participants had enough experience and background knowledge in the field of special education to adequately respond to the research questions, it also limited the participant pool. As previous literature suggests, many special education teachers leave the field within their first few years on the job, but this study did not gather perspectives from this group. I recommend future research include individuals who have left the field of special education in order to gain their unique perspectives regarding why they chose to leave special education.

Future research could also include special education support staff as both special education teachers and administrators consistently pointed out the need for more support staff. A lack of support staff was noted as being a key factor contributing to attrition, and also one that if increased or improved could positively impact special education teacher retention.

This study was also limited to participants working at the elementary level; however, attrition of special education teachers occurs at all levels. Including participants from all levels—elementary, intermediate, and secondary—may provide more comprehensive data for school districts regarding attrition and retention of special education personnel. Further, expanding the criteria for participants to include those working at all levels; those in administrator, teacher, and support staff roles; and individuals who may have recently left these roles in favor of other positions, could also help researchers better understand special education teacher attrition and how to improve retention. Additionally, future research could also include a personality test of study participants. This could help determine whether participants are more likely to view themselves as part of the in-group or the out-group based on their specific personality traits.

### **Summary of Findings**

Conducting interviews with both administrators and special education teachers allowed for each group to share their perspective on the critical issue of special education teachers shortages, its causes, and how it can be improved. It is clear that both groups agree that in-groups and out-groups exist within their campus. However, how administrators communicate, engage, and support these groups was viewed differently by the administrators and special education teachers interviewed. When it comes to factors that contribute to attrition and things that could positively impact retention of special education teachers, both participant groups mentioned a lot of the same things. Despite agreeing on many of the factors that contribute to attrition or could

improve teacher retention, there were several factors that only teachers acknowledged. For example, lack of administrator support was one of the most cited factors leading to attrition. Yet, Bettini et al. (2015) noted that administrator support is one of the biggest controllable factors influencing teacher retention.

## **Reflections**

Over the course of my 19-year career, I have had the privilege of serving in many roles including as a general education teacher, a special education teacher, as well as a special education interventionist and Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) Facilitator. During this time, I have witnessed many amazing and highly qualified teachers leave special education for other teaching positions or leave teaching altogether to pursue other professions. Each time a special education teacher leaves, it creates a ripple effect that is felt by students and other teachers and staff of the campus. Having started my career in general education and then transitioning into a special education role; it was not until I had fully experienced this world that I began to understand why so many teachers chose to leave. Although being a special education teacher was rewarding in many ways, it was also physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. At first glance, many assume the role of special education teachers is easier because of lower student-to-teacher ratios; however, numbers on a page rarely tell the whole story, especially when it comes to the demands of the role of a special education teacher.

Having experience in both an administrative and a special education teacher role, I was curious to know if something could be done to improve special education teacher retention. By reading the previous research on this topic, I was able to learn more about the importance of positive work relationships, communication, and support. In many ways, conducting the literature review and then interviews with participants for my own data collection validated my

personal experiences as a special education teacher and opened my eyes more to the perspective of campus administrators. Gathering the perspectives of both groups and presenting them using qualitative descriptive methods ensured that each group had a voice. Presenting their perspectives simultaneously using the Rashomon effect allowed me the opportunity to provide a comparison and contrast of their viewpoints without including judgment.

It is my hope that this research study can positively impact the practices within the Wright ISD as well as other districts who face similar challenges in retaining special education teachers. As educators continually take on increased responsibilities, it is critical for campuses and districts to look at why special education teachers are leaving to address issues and increase retention.

## **Conclusions**

This study examined how campus administrators' relationships with special education teachers influence retention. The theoretical framework of LMX, in which followers are categorized into in-groups and out-groups based on their exchanges with leaders, guided the study. Special education teachers and administrators from a north central Texas school district shared their perspectives regarding being in either the in-group or the out-group and how it impacts teacher retention. Participants provided their views via semistructured interviews, which were transcribed and analyzed. Using the qualitative descriptive method known as the Rashomon effect, the perspectives of both groups were presented to address the research questions.

During the analysis of interview transcripts, participants' answers were coded based on common themes such as communication, support, workload, positive work environment including relationships with administrators and peers, and factors influencing retention like pay, training, resources, and planning/prep time. Each of these themes as well as the findings for the

three research questions were addressed by presenting the perceptions of the participants in each group. Participants from both the special education teacher group and the administration group agreed that, to some degree, in and out groups exist on their campus. Positive work relationships were discussed by both groups and noted as a contributing factor influencing retention of special education teachers. This study's findings suggest that while special education teachers and administrators have different perspectives on how administrators engage with in and out groups, positive work relationships matter and can have an impact on retention of special education teachers.



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**Appendix A: CITI Certificates**

		Completion Date 26-Mar-2022 Expiration Date 25-Mar-2026 Record ID 48129655
This is to certify that:		
<b>Tai Peacock</b>		
Has completed the following CITI Program course:		
<b>All Researchers (RCR)</b> (Curriculum Group)		
<b>All Researchers (RCR)</b> (Course Learner Group)		
<b>1 - RCR</b> (Stage)		
Under requirements set by:		
<b>Abilene Christian University</b>		
		
Verify at <a href="http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w01583718-1886-4e7b-9056-cf675b2d7038-48129655">www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w01583718-1886-4e7b-9056-cf675b2d7038-48129655</a>		



Completion Date 28-Mar-2022

Expiration Date 27-Mar-2026

Record ID 48129654

This is to certify that:

**Tai Peacock**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

**Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher**

(Curriculum Group)

**Social/Behavioral/Education**

(Course Learner Group)

**1 - Basic Course**

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Abilene Christian University**

**CITI**  
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

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## Appendix B: IRB Approval

Date: 9-27-2022		
<b>IRB #:</b> IRB-2022-32		
<b>Title:</b> An Examination of the Relationships Between Campus Administrators and Special Education Teachers and its Influence on Teacher Retention		
<b>Creation Date:</b> 9-11-2022		
<b>End Date:</b>		
<b>Status:</b> <span style="color: red;">Approved</span>		
<b>Principal Investigator:</b> Tai Peacock		
<b>Review Board:</b> ACU IRB		
<b>Sponsor:</b>		
<hr/>		
<b>Study History</b>		
<hr/>		
<b>Submission Type</b>	<b>Review Type</b>	<b>Decision</b>
Initial	Exempt	<span style="color: red;">Exempt</span>
<hr/>		
<b>Key Study Contacts</b>		

### **Appendix C: Participation Invitation Email**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

The purpose of this email is to request your participation in a study concerning the impact of campus administrator' relationships with special education teachers on attrition. Research suggests that special education teachers leave the field at increased rates as compared to general education teachers, yet there are several things campus administrators can do to help retention of special education teachers. This study will be part of a doctoral dissertation designed to describe the lived experiences of teachers serving in special education roles and campus administrators leading special education programs. This study aims to offer insight into the factors influencing attrition as well as strategies campus administrators can use to increase retention of special education teachers.

The study will consist of semi-structured interviews, held via Zoom, which will take approximately 30 - 45 minutes to complete. Although the semi-structured interview will be audio/video recorded and transcribed for accuracy in the data analysis, the information you provide for this study will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be reported.

If you are interested and willing to participate in such an interview, please reply to this email affirmatively, and a Consent Form will be sent to you. If you have further questions, please let me know. I may be contacted at xxxxxxxxxx@acu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Tai Lea Peacock  
Abilene Christian University, Doctoral Candidate

## Appendix D: Consent Form

### Consent Form

**Title of Study:** An Examination of the Relationships Between Campus Administrators and Special Education Teachers and its Influence on Teacher Retention

**Principal Researcher:**

Tai Lea Peacock  
Abilene Christian University  
Email Address: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

**Purpose of Study:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. It is important that you understand the purpose of the study and next steps before proceeding. Please read the following information carefully. Please notify the researcher if you have any questions or concerns.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive research study is to examine how campus administrators' relationships influence the retention of special education teachers.

**Study Procedures:**

You will be asked a series of questions in which you will describe your personal experiences during your career as a special education teacher and/or campus administrator. You may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will be recorded (both audio and video). These recordings will assist the researcher in making sure your responses are accurately transcribed. You have the right to refuse the audio and video recording.

Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio and video recording: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**Time required:** Approximately 30 – 45 minutes.

**Risks and Benefits:** There are risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur: The risks associated with this study are minimal. It is possible that a breach of confidentiality may occur given the procedures utilized in this study (e.g., email exchange, virtual meetings, file downloading); however, steps have been taken to minimize this risk. There is no incentive for participating; therefore, you will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

**Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept confidential. Your name and any identifying information will not be used. Any identifying information concerning you or any others you speak about will be changed to provide confidentiality. Exact quotes may be used in the data or quoted without identifying



you specifically. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the data will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report or publication.

**Contact Information:**

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher Tai Lea Peacock. Tai Lea Peacock may be reached at xxxxxxxxxx@acu.edu. If you are unable to reach the primary researcher or wish to speak to someone other than the primary researcher, you may contact Dr. Jennifer Butcher, xxxxxxxxxx@acu.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Researcher, please contact Dr. Megan Roth, ACU Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, at xxxxxxxxxxxxxx@acu.edu or xxx-xxx-xxxx.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be required to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you may still terminate your involvement at any time if you choose. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

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**CONSENT:**

I have read and I understand the provided information. I have had the opportunity to ask the Primary Researcher any questions that I may have. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I may terminate my involvement at any time. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

---

Signature of research participant

---

Date

---

Signature of researcher

---

Date

## **Appendix E: Interview Protocol**

### **Introductory Questions:**

1. Tell me about your educational background (type educator preparation program you attended: traditional university or alternate, degrees earned, certifications, etc.).
2. How many years have you worked in education?
3. What is your current role?
4. How many years have you served as a special education teacher or campus administrator?

### **Interview Questions Associated with Research Questions**

The researcher will explain the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory including in-group and out-group to participants before asking the guided questions in this section. LMX theory asserts that relationships are a shared experience that can change throughout time based upon the interactions between the leader and individual followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006). These relationships can have a variety of outcomes for both participants as well as the organization as a whole (Sherman et al., 2012; Ahmadi et al., 2014). High-quality exchanges have been shown to reduce work-related stress and increase organizational commitment, performance, and job satisfaction of followers (Cogliser et al., 2009 & Muldoon et al., 2018). LMX theory explains the dyadic relationships a leader forms with each of their followers; categorizing them into either the in-group or the out-group (Power, 2013 & Cogliser et al., 2009). Yet, dyad agreement or disagreement is important as followers may have a different perception of what group they are categorized into than their leader (Sherman et al., 2012).

1. What factors are needed to create and maintain a positive work environment with your special education teacher/campus administrators?
2. Based on what you know about LMX and your experience, explain the groupings at your campus. Is there an in-group and an out-group?
3. Tell me what group you think you belong to and why?

### **RQ1: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the in-group?**

- A. Describe how campus leaders engage with the in-group on your campus.
- B. What does communication look like for this group? Is it effective?
- C. Explain how campus leaders support staff in the in-group? What does support look like or include?

**RQ2: How do campus leaders engage with special education teachers in the out-group?**

- A. Describe how campus leaders engage with the out-group on your campus.
- B. What does communication look like for this group? Is it effective? How could it be more effective?
- C. Explain how campus leaders support staff in the out-group? What does support look like or include?

**RQ3: How does support from campus administrators influence the attrition of special education teachers?**

- A. Describe your ideal relationship with your administrator/special education teachers.
- B. What elements of the working relationship are most important to you? Why?
- C. Tell me about the job-related factors that you think would have the biggest influence over a special education teachers' decision to leave and why these are important.
- D. Explain what factors positively impact special education teacher retention and why.

## Appendix F: Coding Matrix

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Communication	In-Group	Thoughts on why she is in the in-group and how administrators engage with in-group members	<p>#1 In-group- well liked and does not need a lot of attention.</p> <p>Administrators engage with in-group by respecting their time and offering help when needed</p>
Communication	In-Group	How administrators engage and communicate with in-group	<p>#10 “Administrators can sometimes have their favorites; those teachers that are always recognized and praised. These are the in-group and it's never the special education teachers/staff. These people are always in their offices chatting and hardly ever in their own classrooms. I feel like they get a lot more attention and recognition, but I'm not sure if they are really doing anything to earn it.”</p>
Communication		Existence of in-group and out-group	<p>#2- Not sure if groups exist- “maybe that's because I'm in my own little world”</p>
Communication	In-Group	In-group relationship with administrators	<p>#5- Explaining the difference between in and out groups relationships with administrators- “there is a familiarity, connection and comfort in the relationships that is more relaxed”</p>

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Communication	In-Group	Communication/relationships	The in-group often gets more attention. Maybe because they are more active and vocal about things. The more active people are in the school the more attention they get. Yet, some of us don't have time for extra things because we are struggling to keep up with all of the job responsibilities that come with sped. Administrators treat us well, it's the other staff that can make us feel inferior. We, the sped team, feel like others think they are better than us. They never want to share resources or include us. We are often an afterthought.
Communication	In-Group	Communication and creating a positive work environment	#7 Two-way communication and transparency are essential factors in creating and maintaining a positive work environment. Information for everyone at the same time is important, but teachers also need to know you can listen. Sometimes they just want to talk and have someone listen, not necessarily provide a solution, just listen, and let them feel like they are being heard by someone.
Communication	In-group	Everyone gets the same information at the same time	#6 "keeps things fair when everyone gets the same information, and some have difficulty with this which makes it hard"
Communication	In-group	Go to people	#6- "We know who we can count on, and we have our go to people. We are ok if these people say no"

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Communication	In-group	How administrators engage and communicate with in-group	#4 It may appear that administrators have inside jokes or are more friendly with this group sometimes, because they are the ones that are always around. I am deliberate about making those out-group members feel more at ease by creating a relationship with everyone and knowing what each individual teacher needs. Some want a chatty friend type, while others need a listening ear, heck some just want to be left alone to do their job and I'm ok with that.
Communication	In-group	Go to people	#7-These are the "go to" people, the ones that can be counted on to do what they are asked. They win favor because they are reliable and put in extra effort. These people are easy to like, but then it becomes a double edge sword because administrators come to rely on and seek these people out first, which appears like they are playing favorites.
Communication	Out-group	Favorites	#2 "Administrators avoid those that are not their favorites, it's like they think all we do is complain"
Communication	Out-group	Not acknowledged	#3"the "in people" are constantly talking so I'm not included or acknowledged"
Communication	Out-group	More attention than others	#1 often seeks out teachers in the out-group and gives them more attention

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Communication	Out-group	Avoidance by administrators, administrators not knowing what special education teacher do	Again, like I said we, special education, usually find out things second hand from others who are her friends. Admin rarely comes to talk to us, they do not regularly attend our PLC meetings like they do for the other grade levels, they just kind of leave us alone, except when there is a problem, and it looks bad on the school or on them. You know like parent complaints, students physically hurting each other. Then they expect to show up and provide a solution that makes them look good and then leave. I just wish they would spend a full day or two with us and see what it is like and how much we do.
Communication	Out-group	Lack of communication/engagement from administrators	#5 Campus administrators do attempt to communicate and engage with the out-group, but this is usually if the teacher takes the first step and goes to them; administrators don't seek them out. The personality of both administrators and special education teachers plays a big role in how they engage with each other. Effort has to be expended by both to acknowledge the out-group otherwise the exclusion will get worse.
Communication	Out-group	Not acknowledged, only a number	#10 "She doesn't acknowledge that we exist except on paper. We are a number and are treated as such"
Communication	Out-group	Needy	#6 "want too much" or are "too needy"

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Communication	Out-group	Having a voice, need more than just someone giving information	#5 “more communication is needed, not necessarily to make you (teachers) aware of things, but to provide you with opportunities to voice concerns and needs”
Communication	Out-group	Higher needs, guidance	#7 I believe the out-group needs more guidance and prompting from administrators. The out group is more reserved, anxious, and almost terrified when interacting with us-administrators. This might be because they often seem unsure if what they are doing is correct, they need validation.
Communication	Out-group	Limited engagement, asking for resources	#4 Administrators often have limited engagement with out- group members, because the teachers do not seek it out. It's like they have this preconceived notion that we don't want them to be successful and that it's punitive when they don't have certain things, like we withhold resources. No, you didn't get it because you didn't ask like the other teachers did.
Administrator Support	In-group	More resources, aides, better classes, etc.	#10 Oh, they get everything they want handed to them. It's so unfair. They don't get any of the behavior kids and they are always the “test/pilot” rooms for new programs or resources offered by the campus or district. Many of which come with more aides or interns to help in the classroom.



Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Administrator Support	In-group	Things we can control and things we can't	#4 Administrators have to be supportive. There are lots of things I cannot control, things from higher up, but I can support the things I can. That means listening and seeing where the frustration is, alleviating the workload if I can, and getting them what they need. Whether that is resources, support staff, or just being an advocate for them and what they need. You have to get in there (visit the classrooms) and see what is going on, because what might seem good on paper is not manageable in reality.
Administrator Support	Out-group	Administrators do not fully understand job role of special education teachers	#2 Some administrators have never listened to anything I said. I felt so degraded, very flawed, and shrugged off. While some administrators will try and be sympathetic, I still don't think they have an understanding of all we (special education teachers) do or what our program is.
Administrator Support	Out-group	Lack of support, don't know who to ask for help	#1 "lack of support because campus and district administrators are constantly going back and forth on who we (special education teachers) belong to. Leaving us not knowing who to ask for help"
Administrator Support	Out-group	Excessive workload, overlooked	#5 As special education teachers we are overloaded and overlooked. Even when we are doing a good job, we get no resources or help. I don't know; it's like admin doesn't look at the big picture and I feel dumped on. Honestly, I'm doing the best that I can with what I have"

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Administrator Support	Out-group	Preconceived notion	#4 “they think you (administrators) don’t want them to be successful. Like we are looking for punitive things”
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Excessive workload, reasons for leaving	Teaching has changed so much over the years and teachers are having to take on more responsibilities than ever before. The paperwork/documentation that comes with teaching special education is something that could be a full-time job all on its own. Yet, teachers are not given adequate time during the workday to get it all done. It really depends on the district you are in as to what kind of documentation you have to do as some other districts, like where my daughters are, have special education clerks and other personnel who take care of some of the paperwork so teachers don’t have to.
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Resources, lack of acknowledgement	#5 “not necessarily supplies and resources, but an acknowledgement of what we are doing.”
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Need to feel appreciated	#8 Support from administrators is important because it makes me feel valued and appreciated. I have administrators I love to work for because they trust my decisions and are supportive of what I am doing. I feel as though I have a good relationship with them. They let me teach without being overbearing.

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Reasons for leaving	#7 Campus administrators can be great at 2-way communication, they can be transparent with staff, respect their time, and show them grace, but when it comes down to decreasing large caseloads and implementing initiatives some things have to come from above at the district level, and often we get shut down.
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Advocate, visible in classrooms	#9 Administrators have to be a voice for all teachers, including special education personnel. We have to be visible and out in the classrooms, all of them, even if special education classes make us uncomfortable. Special education teachers need to feel our support.
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Too much work	#6 “many of the district initiatives do not apply to special education, yet teachers are asked to implement them anyway”
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Excessive workload, unmanageable expectations	#7 The increased workload and less resources make teachers feel unsuccessful. The system is set up for failure, there is too much for too few people to do. If I could, I would reduce or lower the caseload of students for special education teachers because even with aides the job is unmanageable. We have to stop dumping on them to decrease their workload, but that has to come from the district where we are top heavy with administrators.

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Excessive job roles, draining	#8 The special education teachers have a different type of job in my opinion, and the turnover rate reflects that difficulty. Many years, including my current one, I've had students with such high developmental needs that it just drains me physically and emotionally. Giving 100% doesn't seem to be getting the job done, so frustration follows.
Factors Contributing to Attrition		Excessive job demands, not consistent across school districts.	#10 Teaching has changed so much over the years and teachers are having to take on more responsibilities than ever before. The paperwork/documentation that comes with teaching special education is something that could be a full-time job all on its own. Yet, teachers are not given adequate time during the workday to get it all done. It really depends on the district you are in as to what kind of documentation you have to do as some other districts, like where my daughters are, have special education clerks and other personnel who take care of some of the paperwork, so teachers don't have to.
Positive Work Relationships		Visible administrators	#3 "for admin to actually talk to you and care, they have to come into the classroom sometime other than your formal evaluation. Administrators never come in here."

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Positive Work Relationships		Trust me, don't micromanage	#1 When administrators respect and trust that I know what I am doing, instead of micromanaging my job is important. I don't like it when they (administrators) waste my time with extra things that don't necessarily pertain to me or my students. Offer help when I ask for it, when I need something, I'll ask
Positive Work Relationships		Administrators don't know what special education teachers do	#5 "disconnect between admin and the trenches", "admin should have a good idea or understanding of all their teachers' job roles, yet they don't and it's frustrating"
Positive Work Relationships		Recognition	#6 "recognize and acknowledge employees for success and effort, as well as be in tune when things are not right and provide support"
Positive Work Relationships		Trust, relationships everyone has value	#9 I strongly believe in relationships first. We all have family needs, so we have to think of each other that way first. We have to build trust. As a principal this means never forgetting what it is like in the classroom. Everyone has a job and should have equal value. You have to value feedback.

Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Retention	Reasons for leaving, need for more pay	Reasons for leaving, need for more pay	#8 Teaching has changed so much over the years; more single parent homes, increased behavior problems because kids are addicted to video games and do not know how to socialize appropriately with others all factor into our day. The education system needs a transformation to retain its good teachers. It's sad but the lack of salary that is equivalent to someone with our level of education in other professions has sent many of my peers to pursue other fields.
Retention	Overworked, need more time	Overworked, need more time	#7 Special education teachers I've worked with before felt overwhelmed by all of the paperwork and documentation; yet, [they] don't have uninterrupted time to complete them during the workday, because they are always with students. Those jobs that always seem to get taken home. Providing teachers with uninterrupted time to complete these tasks I think would be helpful, but all we seem to do is fill up their conference times with meetings and more meetings. They need the gift of time.
Retention	Reasons for staying	Reasons for staying	#2 "The kids, I have a heart for the kids. I feel like I am making a difference helping those kids who need it the most"

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Themes	Categories	Description	Evidence
Retention	Reasons for staying		#8 I suppose the reason I've taught for so many years is because I absolutely love kids, and always have. I've wanted the best for them and treated them the way I would want my own daughters treated by a teacher. The education system needs a transformation to retain its good teachers.

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