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UNDERSTANDING ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF

SPECIAL EDUCATORS

MORGAN GLASSON

55 Pages

A lack of support from administration is one of the most common reasons special educators are leaving the field of education (e.g. Sutchter, et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to better understand how special educators view and experience support from their administrators. This study surveyed 23 special educators in public schools in Illinois and Wisconsin to identify, what do special educators identify as essential actions of supportive administrators and how administrators have shown or missed opportunities to show support toward special educators. Researchers found five major themes of supportive actions including, (1) promoting collaboration amongst staff, (2) respecting the expertise of special education staff, (3) being present and aware to increase knowledge related to special education needs, which includes three minor themes including (4) student and family management which includes the minor theme, and (5) administrative responsibilities with special education in mind which includes the minor themes.

KEYWORDS: Special Education, administrator, support, retention

UNDERSTANDING ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
SPECIAL EDUCATORS

MORGAN GLASSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Special Education

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2023

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UNDERSTANDING ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
SPECIAL EDUCATORS

MORGAN GLASSON

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Mindy Ely, Chair

Mark Zablocki

CarrieAnna Courtad

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M.G.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Topic Overview

Research shows schools across the country are facing a shortage of special education teachers (e.g. Sutchter, et al., 2016). Several studies have identified potential causes for high levels of attrition and possible retention strategies (Billingsley, 2007; Cornelius & Gustafson, 2020; Fore & Martin, 2002), many of which cite administrator support as an important factor in teacher retention. This study seeks to better understand how special educators view support from their administration. In this study special educators from Illinois and Wisconsin were surveyed about their experiences with their administrator, their views of administrative support, and what they wished administrators would do to better support special educators in their role.

Problem and Justification

Nationwide schools are facing a shortage of teachers, especially special education teachers (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2003; Sutchter, et al., 2016). Making matters worse, special education teachers are leaving the field at a higher rate than general education teachers. More specifically, special education teachers leave the field at a rate of 20%, compared to their general education counterparts who leave at a rate of 13% (Boe, et al. 1997). Research suggests the most common reason special education teachers leave the classroom is due to lack of support from administration (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2020). This was also a common concern in 2007 when Billingsley reported that 25% of special education teachers who left the classroom claimed they left due to inadequate support from administration (Billingsley, 2007). In a 2004 survey, teachers reported that lack of administrative support left them feeling unsupported and burned out (Kaff, 2004). Such findings are consistent across the research. In fact, in several surveys of special educators who had left the field of education dissatisfaction with administrative support

consistently ranked in the top three reasons for exiting the profession (Billingsley, et al., 1995; Billingsley, et al., 1995; Brownell, et al., 1997; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Miller, et al., 1995).

Conversely, research showed that special education teachers reported higher job satisfaction with a higher likelihood to stay in the classroom when they felt supported by administration (Albrecht et al., 2009). Surveys of special education teachers who have remained in the profession report they consider a supportive building administrator as a great incentive and reason to stay (Conley & You, 2017; Schnorr, 1995). Additionally, in a survey of teachers who claimed they would continue teaching long term, Cancio, et al. (2013) found that high levels of support, specifically appreciation, trust, and opportunities for growth were essential components to administrative support. Similarly, McLeskey & Waldron (2012) found job satisfaction among special educators to be highest when administrators communicated openly and allowed flexible teaching strategies. Research (e.g. Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Prather-Jones, 2011) supported the notion that a special educators perceived levels of administrative support greatly impacted job satisfaction.

Yet, in the states of Illinois and Wisconsin training in special education is currently not required for licensure as a school administrator (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d. and Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). In fact, administration candidates are not required to take even a single course related to special education or to have any field experience in this area. However, researchers suggest that, because special education teacher attrition is linked to perceived levels of support from administration, higher education institutions should re-evaluate administrative preparation programs to better understand whether future administrator candidates have enough knowledge regarding special education to adequately support special education teachers (Prather-Jones, 2011; Shen, et al. 2015). Therefore, given that special

educators identify administrative support as essential to job retention rates and to job satisfaction- it is possible that administrators lacking special education training or work experience have insufficient background to provide adequate support to special education teachers.

Purpose and Research Questions

While research shows that special education teachers must feel supported in order to attain levels of job satisfaction that will encourage them to remain in the field, further investigation is needed to better understand how special education teachers view support from their administrators. Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to identify what special educators consider essential actions of a supportive administrator and articulate the current types of support or missed opportunities for administrator support experienced by special educators in Illinois and Wisconsin. Specifically, the questions guiding this study are:

- What do special educators identify as essential actions of supportive administrators?
- How have administrators shown or missed opportunities to show support toward special educators?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to identify research findings related to administrative support of special educators and special education teacher retention. Additionally, studies will be examined to identify the supportive actions of administrators as they have been identified in the research to date (e.g. Albrecht, et al. 2009).

Methods

This literature review was conducted using the ERIC and EBSCO databases. Search terms included, but were not limited to, *special education attrition*, *special education retention*, *effective school administration*, and *school administrator support*. Further, the reference list from found articles were used to identify additional pertinent literature.

The focus of the search was limited to research published after the seminal work of Billingsley, et al. (1995). This decision was made because the work by Billingsley et al. established the research area of special education teacher attrition and retention. Therefore, including publications from 1995 ensured that this literature review was inclusive of our understanding of this topic as it evolved in the field.

To guide this literature review twelve articles were found. These included Berry (2012), Billingsley (2007), Blase and Blasé (2000), Conley and You (2017), DeMik (2008), Fowler et al. (2019), Gehrke and McCoy (2007), Hagaman and Casey (2018), Johnson and Birkeland (2003), Struyve et al. (2018), Sutcher et al. (2016), and Theobald, et al. (2021)

Teacher Attrition

Our country is facing a crisis in teacher retention with significant impact among teachers in special education (McLeskey, et al. 2003; Sutchter, et al. 2016). In fact, Sutchter et al. (2016) found that the teaching areas with highest turnover rates are special education teachers and teachers of English Language Learners. This problem of teacher retention is not due to retirement and/or lack of adequate preparation. For example, the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that only 12.6% of teachers who left the teaching workforce said the *most* important factor for their departure was retirement. Sutchter, et al. (2016) reported on the most recent SASS survey data which showed that retirement represents less than a third of all teacher turnover in 96% of US states. Furthermore, Theobald, et al. (2021) found little correlation between special education teachers leaving the field during their first five years of teaching and their experiences during their teacher preparation program. Therefore, there must be other reasons, aside from a lack of preparation or retirement, that contribute to attrition.

In fact, according to the results from the SASS survey 55% of responding teachers left their last position due to dissatisfaction with working conditions and/or administration (Sutchter, et al., 2016). This outcome is similar to other studies that found special educators are exiting the classroom due to inadequate support from administration (e.g. Billingsley, 2007; Conley & You, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). While these studies identify inadequate administrative support as a major culprit of job retention problems among special education teachers, questions remain regarding what administrators can do to meet these teachers' support needs.

Retention Strategies

In a survey conducted by Berry (2012) special educators were asked to rank colleagues who were the most available and helpful for support. Special education teachers rated other special educators as highest for quality of support but lowest in terms of their availability. Conversely, building administrators were ranked highly in terms of availability but were ranked last in quality of support. Berry concluded that a shared planning time for special educators or grade level teams could be an important supportive action an administrator could take to better support special education teachers. Berry wasn't the first to suggest such a solution. In fact, 10 years earlier Fore & Martin (2002) suggested teacher retention could be positively influenced by school administrators if they created conditions for collegial support and interaction, specifically through shared planning time.

Other researchers found that administrators who provided an inclusive vision for the school increased special education teacher retention rates (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; DeMik, 2008). Many special education teachers reported that they perceived their position and their students were misunderstood, underappreciated, unsupported, and at times even marginalized by colleagues and school administrators (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). These feelings contributed significantly to lower morale and negative school culture which in turn led to special education teacher attrition. These studies (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; DeMik, 2008) suggested that building administrators have a powerful leadership opportunity to support special educators. By doing so, administrators could serve as an example and cast an inclusive vision for the school through supportive words, actions, and policies which could increase teacher retention.

Further, research shows that, new special education teachers need support as they begin their new role. For example, in a review of the literature, Fore and Martin (2002) found that new special education teachers benefit from specific supportive actions including mentor programs, smaller class sizes and/or caseloads, and assistance with special education policies, procedures, and paperwork. The SASS survey has consistently found that teachers, including special education teachers, are most likely to exit the field during their first 5 years of teaching (Sutcher, et al., 2016). By providing specialized programs to assist new teachers in acclimating to their new role administrators can build morale and ensure that new teachers feel a sense of success thus increasing retention.

Supportive strategies related to professional development for special education teachers are also discussed frequently in the literature as a means to increase retention. After a review of the literature, Fore and Martin (2002) suggested, administrators encourage special educators to observe other special education teachers and to attend stress management workshops. Additionally, Blasé (2000) found that teachers felt the greatest benefit to their practice came from reflective conversations with their administrator regarding instructional strategies. Further, effective administrators created cultures of learning that didn't focus on administration but rather on coaching relationships, action research, or professional learning communities (PLC). This is in direct contrast to administrators who offered learning opportunities that focused on administrative subjects such as building mission statements, policies and procedures, and district financial matters (Blasé, 2000).

Research also suggested that supportive administrators must balance personally assisting special educators with profession specific needs (i.e., classroom management) with deferring such specialized assistance to those with more expertise. For example, in a review of the

literature, Fore and Martin (2002) suggested that administrators can support new special education teachers by maintaining high visibility and assisting with discipline and classroom management. But as stated previously, assistance from fellow special educators who have experience may also be beneficial. Especially given Berry (2012) found that special education teachers identified fellow special educators to be the most helpful but often the least available. Struyve, et al. (2016) interviewed 120 special education teachers and administrators regarding delegation of tasks and empowerment of teachers. Struyve, et al. (2016) suggested that supportive administrators acknowledge the expertise of the teachers in their building and allow colleagues to learn from one another collaboratively. Therefore, to foster teacher's feelings of support, administrators must make collaborative time and teacher leadership a priority within the building both in culture and in scheduling (Berry, 2012; Struyve et al., 2016).

Administrators can also show support toward special educators through active participation in the IEP process. In a survey of 1,467 special educators only 26% of respondents felt their administrator was prepared to support IEP goals (Fowler, et al. 2019). Additionally, this survey found that while 69% of special educators rated outcomes of IEP goals as an essential measure of their effectiveness as a teacher, only 35% of special education teachers were actually being evaluated on this criterion by their administrators. Further, Fowler, et al. found that only 18% of respondents rated their administration as extremely well prepared to support special education instruction (2019).

Finally, school administrators can show support to special education teachers through adequate resources and clearly defined job descriptions. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) note that “the absence of resources essential for effectiveness (e.g., curricular materials, collaborative time for special educators in inclusive settings), may be particularly problematic, as they may prevent

teachers' from experiencing a "sense of success," an important factor in career decisions" (p. 581). Additionally, Fore and Martin (2002) suggest that having a clearly defined job description can assist in reducing stress and burnout which in turn can have a positive effect on recruitment and retention.

Conclusion

A special education teacher's perception of support from their administrator impacts their job satisfaction and retention rates. Additionally, many administrators lack experience in special education. This lack of experience or expertise in the area of special education appears to breed feelings among many special educators of feeling poorly supported by their administration which can ultimately lead to attrition. Through this literature review, many supportive actions by administrators have been identified. These include, providing a shared planning time for special education teachers, planning and executing an inclusive vision for school and students, providing necessary curricular materials for all levels of students, creating intentional relationships with special education students, assisting special education teachers with classroom behaviors and discipline, encouraging professional development through reflective conversations, PLC's, action research, teachers observing teachers and coaching relationships, providing mentor programs for new special education teachers, maintaining high visibility within the building, protecting instructional time, and creating a clearly defined job description for special education teachers that articulates a manageable role.

Given that the research shows special education attrition is influenced by perceived levels of administrative support, it is important to better understand how special educators view support. Prior research identifies potential supportive actions of administrators and provides

suggestions to increase retention but does not explain support from the special educators point of view. Furthermore, future research should investigate special educators' current feelings about the support they receive from administrators.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

While there is much research showing that special education teacher retention rates are tied to administrative support (e.g. Cancio, et al., 2013; Conley & You, 2017; Schnorr, 1995) there is little research to define what administrative support looks like in practice from the viewpoint of special education teachers. Approval was obtained through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Illinois State University to study this problem further. The purpose of this study is to understand administrative support and special education teacher experiences. The questions guiding this study are:

- What do special educators identify as essential actions of supportive administrators?
- How have administrators shown or missed opportunities to show support toward special educators?

Selection Criteria

Participants in this study were made up of certified special education teachers currently teaching students with disabilities in public schools in Illinois or Wisconsin. Teachers had to be currently working in a public K-12 classroom or 18-21 program with students who have an IEP (individualized education plan). Because the research questions were specifically focused on certified special education teachers' experiences, substitute teachers, teacher's aides, administrators, general education teachers, student teachers, and other related service personnel were excluded. Teachers working in settings other than public school settings (i.e., private schools, private clinics, homeschooling, preschools, or in early intervention) were also excluded from the sample. These specific settings were excluded because their interaction with administrators may be drastically different than those working in k-12 public education.

However, a variety of public special education settings were accepted, i.e., self-contained, co-taught, alternative education, home bound, and 18-21 work programming.

Recruitment

Snowball sampling methods were used as recruitment efforts consisted of a survey disseminated to teachers through various social media channels including Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. This ensured a wide range of responses from special education teachers. Social media posts recruiting participants stated that all responses were kept anonymous and no identifying information was obtained. Participants were also assured that there would be no follow up surveys, interviews, or other required participation. Additionally, participants were given researcher contact information and encouraged to reach out if they had questions or concerns regarding their participation and/or the purpose of the study. Questions with exclusion criteria were stated at the end of the demographics section. Respondents who responded in a way that did not meet the inclusionary criteria, were exited from the survey at that point. Because snowball sampling was used it is not possible to identify a response rate.

Participants

Initially, 27 participants responded to the survey but only 23 met the target inclusionary criteria. Participants excluded (n=4) from the survey did not meet the inclusionary criteria of teaching in a public school, teaching Illinois or Wisconsin, teaching students with IEP's, or teaching in a role identified as special education. There were no significant differences between participants excluded and those included, aside from inclusionary criteria. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents before beginning the survey.

Table One below illustrates the demographics of the survey participants. A majority of the participants were white females teaching in resource or self-contained settings. There was a relatively even distribution of teachers from Illinois and Wisconsin representing all different school communities and education levels. Sixty five percent of respondents (n=15) shared that their administrator did not have special education background. Comparatively 30% (n=5) of respondents' administrators did have a background in special education and 4% (n=1) were unsure. Figure 1 displays the number of years taught. While there was an even distribution of responses related to school communities and education levels, there was a pattern of teachers newer to the field. Of the respondents, 52% (n=12) were in their first five years of teaching. Figure 2 shows the number of years respondents had worked with their current administrator. All responses fell within a range of 0 to 6 years with 70% (n=16) of the responses falling in the 2 to 3 year range.

Table 1

<i>Demographics</i>	N	%
Gender		
Female	21	91%
Male	2	9%
Ethnicity		
White	22	96%
Hispanic	1	4%
Level of education		
Bachelor's degree	13	57%
Master's degree	10	43%
Classroom Setting		
Resource	8	35%
Self-Contained	9	39%
Co-Taught	2	9%
Transition Program	1	4%
Other	3	13%
School Community		
Rural	10	43%
Suburban	8	35%
Urban	5	22%

Admin special education experience

Yes	7	30%
No	15	65%
Unsure	1	4%
State		
Illinois	12	52%
Wisconsin	11	48%

Figure 1
Years Teaching

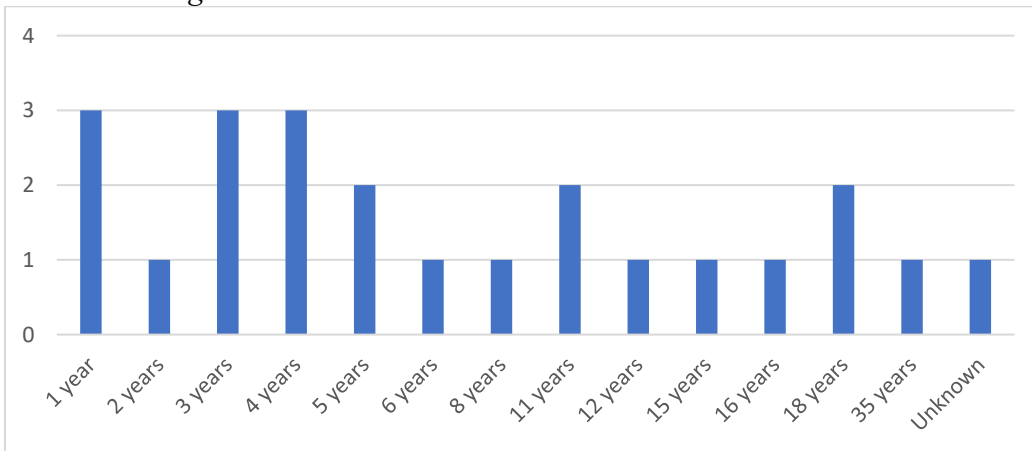
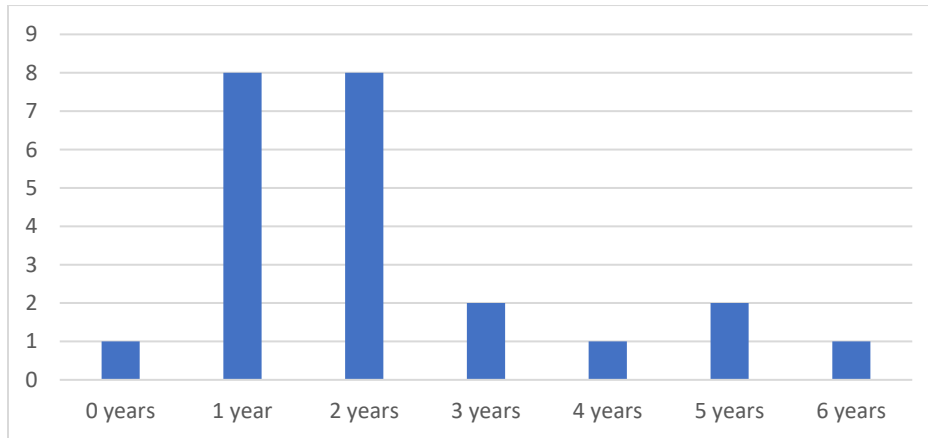


Figure 2
Years with Current Administrator



Measure

No survey was found that fully answered the research questions, therefore a survey based in the literature was developed to answer the two research questions. The survey was divided into two sections including a section on demographics (n=13 questions) and a section on special educator perspectives (n=5 questions). Initially, a survey was developed that used the Principal Instructional Management Rating scale (PIMR) (Peariso, 2011) as primary resource. This rating scale was developed by Dr. Philip Hallinger of Stanford University and has been used in previous studies (e.g. O'Donnell & White, 2005) to gain insight from administrators about their practice. In the current study, the PIMR was used as a guide to develop the five questions in the section of the survey pertaining to special educator perspectives.

Qualtrics was used to collect survey responses in a manner that ensured no identifying information was recorded. This was done to maintain privacy of participants and encourage honest feedback. All five questions in the special educator perspective section were formatted as open-ended responses to gather qualitative data. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A. Respondents took an average of 6 minutes and 30 seconds to complete the survey.

Content of Sections

Section 1: Participant Demographics

There were 13 questions that gathered demographic information and descriptive data from participants. Information collected includes gender, ethnicity, level of education, school setting, and administrator's special education experience. Additionally, respondents identified their current special education classroom placement, grade level, and number of years they have taught under their current administrator. Finally, the last four demographic questions were

inclusionary criteria. These four questions ensured that respondents were public school teachers in a special education position, that serviced a caseload of students with disabilities with IEP's in either Illinois or Wisconsin.

Section 2: Special Educator Perspective

In total, the special educator perspective section contained five questions formatted using short answer. Educators were asked to identify how important a supportive administrator is to their decision to remain in their current position and the reason they left their previous position if this is not their first teaching position. The final three questions in this section invited teachers to identify actions their administrators currently do, or could do, that would make them feel supported (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Research question one, *What do special educators identify as essential actions of supportive administrators?*, was answered primarily through data gathered in survey questions 16, and 17. Research question two, *How have administrators shown or missed opportunities to show support toward special educators?*, was answered through survey question 18.

Following a four week window for data collection, survey data analysis began. Quantitative data was analyzed and reported using descriptive statistics. The questions in the special educator perspective section of the survey were qualitative. These data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify major trends and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Qualitative data is reported using graphic representations along with a narrative explanation.

Upon closing the survey, data were exported from Qualtrics into an excel file. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide six steps for thematic analysis; (a) familiarizing yourself with the data, (b)

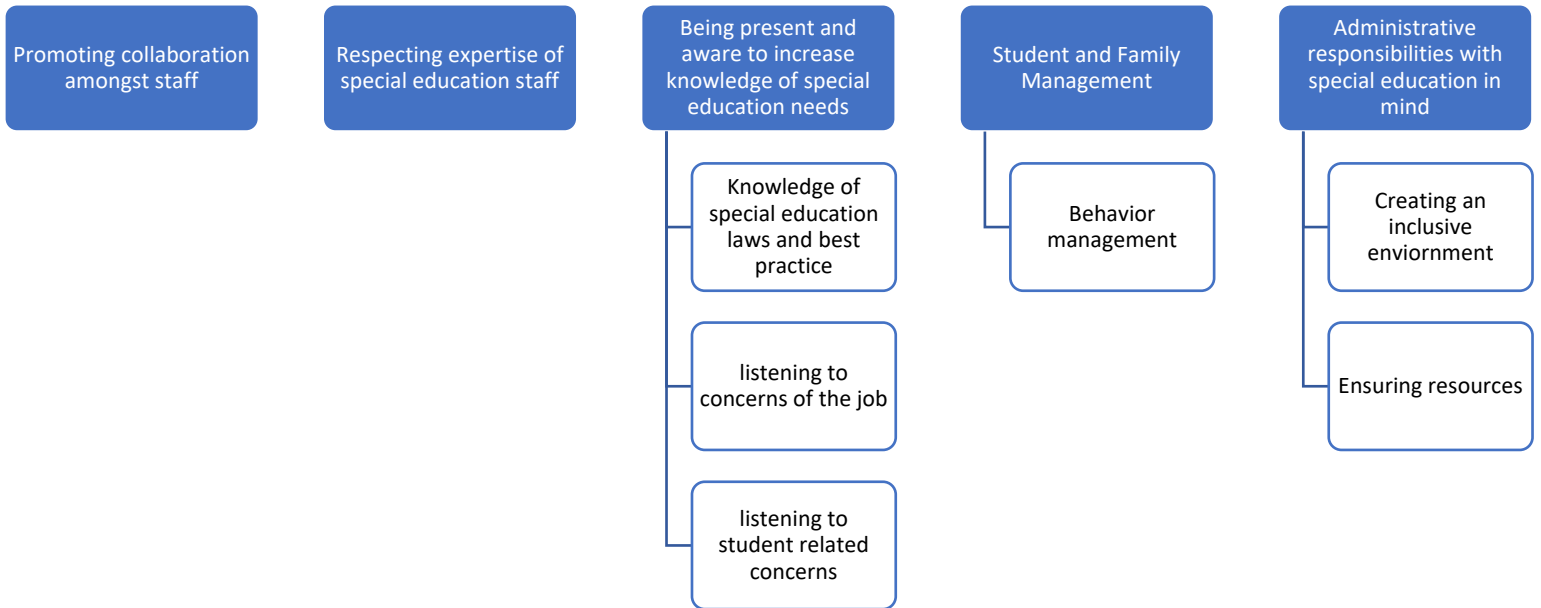
generating codes, (c) constructing themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. To become familiar with the data, it was cleaned by creating an individual sheet for each question and a row for each participant and their response. The primary researcher began coding responses by looking for repeated words and phrases. Repeated words or phrases were highlighted with corresponding colors. These codes were then used to construct themes by identifying categories and commonalities within different participants' responses. Using 22 codes, 14 potential themes were constructed from the data set. Inductive coding was used as the themes constructed came directly from the data and were not created prior to analyzing the data. After initial themes were identified consensus coding was completed with a secondary researcher. The primary and secondary researchers condensed these 14 potential themes into 11 themes and defined the themes. After further analysis, the two researchers organized these themes into five major themes with six minor themes nested underneath. Figure 3 shows the five major themes identified after two rounds of agreement between two researchers and the six minor themes that were identified corresponding to the major themes (see Figure 3).

Finally, patterns were investigated using quantitative data from select survey questions in the demographics and responses in the special educator perspective section. Such patterns provide a deeper understanding of any demographic factors such as years of experience, job position, or current educational degree and their relation to participant responses pertaining to their perspectives of administrator support. The goal was to identify not only how special educators feel about the current support from their administrator but to also identify what common demographic attributes might be found among those respondents who provide similar

qualitative responses to questions about their perspective. Such investigation provided a richer perspective to the data for all three research questions.

Figure 3

Major and Minor Themes



Cultural Humility and Reflexivity

The nature of qualitative research requires the author to reflect on personal beliefs and characteristics that may influence interpretation of data. The author is a white female who at the time of this study is a graduate student at a large Midwestern university and a teacher at a midwestern high school in a special education classroom. Participants from the study were also special education teachers working in the Midwest.

The author believes in the importance of understanding all the aspects of support and including voices from diverse backgrounds. Different cultures often have different priorities when communicating and supporting others in the workplace. Specifically, many cultures have

differing preferences when it comes to eye contact, voice volume, and sharing feedback with superiors. These differences do not make one more superior than the other but rather are differences based on culture, language, and personal preference. Therefore, to ensure the survey did not imply one communication or support style is superior, special educator perspective questions were written in an open response format. This allowed respondents from diverse backgrounds and experiences to authentically share their perspective and ideas related to administrator support. Additionally, the survey was distributed through social media channels to assist in capturing a diverse set of voices and experiences in the special education classroom in Illinois and Wisconsin.

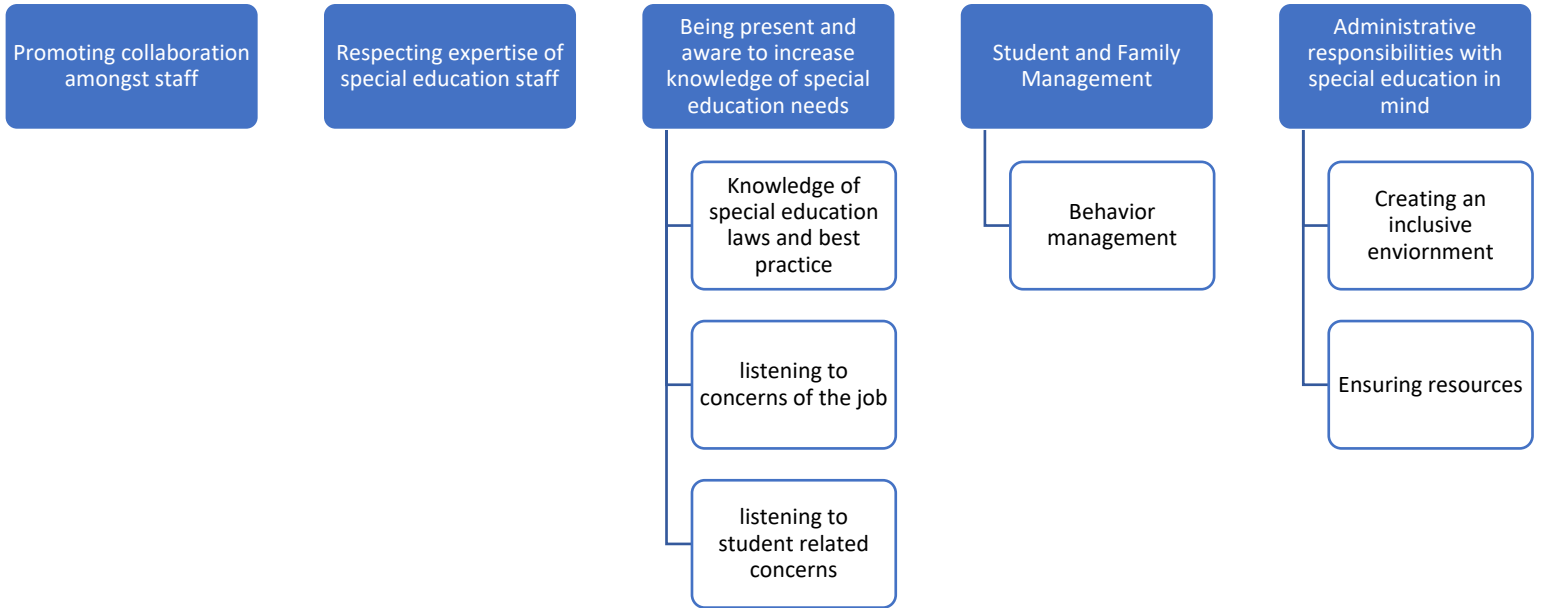
CHAPTER IV FINDINGS

Themes

The data revealed eleven themes indicating how special education teachers explain support and perceive their current level of support. From these eleven themes five major themes emerged with six minor themes nested beneath them. Figure 4 illustrates the five major and six minor themes and how they relate. These themes include (1) promoting collaboration amongst staff, (2) respecting the expertise of special education staff, (3) being present and aware to increase knowledge related to special education needs, which includes three minor themes including (3a) knowledge of special education specific laws, procedures, and best practices (3b) listening to special education staff concerns related to the job, and (3c) listening to special education staff concerns related to student needs, (4) student and family management which includes the minor theme (4a) behavior management, (5) administrative responsibilities with special education in mind which includes the minor themes (5a) ensuring access to resources specifically staffing, space, and supplies, and (5b) creating inclusive environments. In the section below, each major theme is described followed by descriptions of the corresponding minor themes. Lastly, a section of patterns will be described. Figure 4 illustrates the five major and six minor themes and their relationships.

Figure 4

Major and Minor Themes



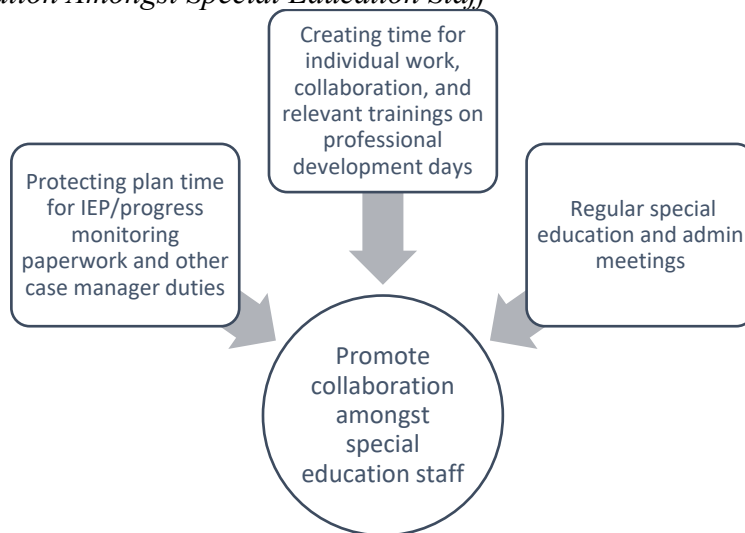
Promoting Collaboration Amongst Staff

The most prevalent theme within the data was administrators supporting special educators through *promoting collaboration amongst staff*. This theme appeared in 17 responses from ten participants. Several respondents noted the importance of administrators respecting special educator’s time and ability to connect with one another as well as other staff, administration, and parents. Initially this theme was viewed under the lens of respecting the time of special educators or providing time for various aspects of the special education job such as writing IEP’s or progress monitoring. But upon consensus coding and condensing the themes present in the data it became clear that what educators were really asking for was the ability to collaborate with their colleagues and administrators on a regular basis and in a meaningful way.

Figure 5 illustrates how three common sentiments in multiple responses integrate to create the larger theme of administrators *promoting collaboration amongst the staff*. Based on the data, this is done largely through the specific allocation of time for various duties including specific collaborative meetings as well as individual plan time. Three respondents stated administrators could support special educators through allocating time for collaboration with colleagues. Ten respondents felt supported when provided time to work on individual tasks. One respondent lamented that, they would feel more supported if they were provided with, “More time to plan or write IEPs, not filling up institute days with meetings that could be emails. I just feel like I run from one crisis to the next every day and there is no time to do a good job at my case-manager part of my job, or no time to do a better job at the teaching part of my job.” Advocating for planning time or relevant trainings for special educators during institute days and allocating time for special education staff to meet together were also common answers, each coming up in responses from four different participants.

Figure 5

Promote Collaboration Amongst Special Education Staff



Respecting Expertise of Special Education Staff

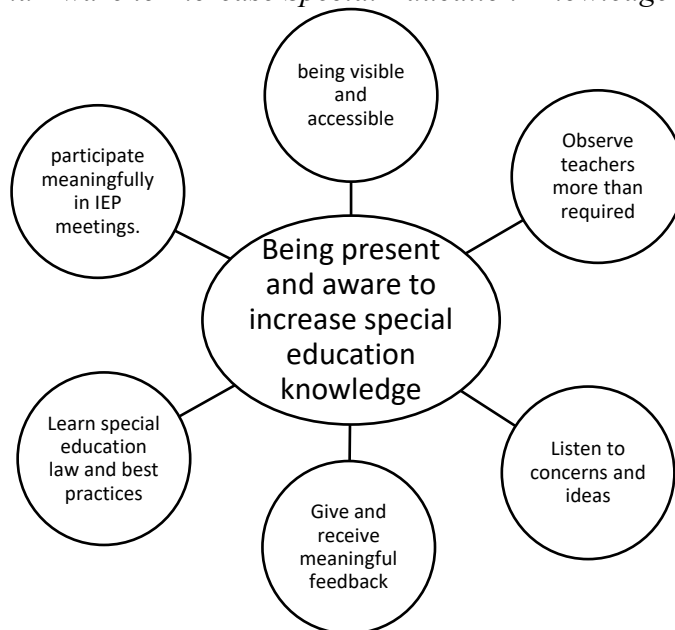
The second most common theme in the data was administrators supporting special educators through *respecting the expertise of special education staff*. This theme appeared in a total of 14 responses from seven participants. When asked how administrators had missed opportunities to support special educators, one respondent said that their administrator had, “Ignored the unique challenges that are inherent in the special education department” and another stated the administrator had, “Not provided a safe space to talk about concerns you're having with students. Those conversations left me feeling unheard.” Additionally, participants identified other actions administrators could take *to respect the expertise of special education staff*. The actions of listening, respecting opinions of special educators, and encouraging teachers to learn from each other all appeared numerous times in the data. Listening was mentioned as a supportive action by six respondents, respecting opinions of special educators in four respondents’ answers, and encouraging teachers to learn from one another through classroom observations was mentioned by one respondent.

Being Present and Aware to Increase Knowledge Related to Special Education Needs

The third major theme centered around visibility in the school building and engaging in activities and conversations to increase special education knowledge. This is of note because of the respondents, 65% (n=15) of their administrators did not have a special education background. Three respondents shared their desire for administrators to come into their classroom to observe or visit more than the required amount for evaluations. When asked what three things an administrator could do to support you, one participant responded, “1. Stop by/pop in my room to see what we are doing. 2. Observe me teaching and offer suggestions from their viewpoint. 3.

Encourage other teachers to observe my classroom to learn from me.” Other themes that came up frequently were being visible within the building and accessible to listen to concerns and ideas. These ideas were mentioned by four participants. Five respondents went even further when mentioning communication, asking for dialogue that allows meaningful feedback from both teachers and administrators. One respondent noting they feel supported when administrators, “seek help when they don’t know the answer.” Three minor themes are nested under the major theme of *being present and aware to increase special education knowledge*. These minor themes include, *knowledge of special education specific laws, procedures, and best practices, listening to special education staff concerns related to the job, and listening to special education staff concerns related to student needs*. Figure 6 illustrates the synthesis of these ideas to create the major theme of *being present and aware to increase special education knowledge*.

Figure 6
Being Present and Aware to Increase Special Education Knowledge



Knowledge of Special Education Specific Laws, Procedures, and Best Practices

Nested under the theme of *being present and aware to increase special education knowledge* is the minor theme administrator's knowledge of special education laws, procedures, and best practices. Two participants shared their desire for their administrator to be a meaningful participant in IEP meetings rather than only attending meetings to sign documents as the local education agency (LEA). When asked in question 18 about missed opportunities to show support, one respondent shared, "My previous two administrators do not understand special education laws and give no guidance on specific problems." One respondent shared the importance of administrators attending all IEP meetings to serve as the LEA rather than designating a teacher or related service provider to sign documents as the LEA. Another respondent went further saying they would feel supported if their administrator was "participating in an IEP as a leader not just a listener." It is important to note that no respondents specifically indicated a desire for administrators to have a special education background or experience but rather the importance of administrators understanding special education laws and meaningfully participating in the IEP meeting process. No pattern was found in respondents' answers related to this theme when compared to their indication of their administrator's special education background and experience.

Listening to Special Education Staff Concerns Related to the Job

The second minor theme nested under *being present and aware to increase knowledge of special education* is *listening to special education staff concerns related to the job*. Initially this theme, *listening to special education staff concerns related to the job*₂, was coded as "positive feedback" due to the number of respondents, four, who listed some sort of positive affirmation as

a supportive action of an administrator. But as the coding process continued, it became clear that there was a link between positive feedback and listening to concerns of the job. Therefore, these two categories were condensed into one theme. Often when talking about positive feedback, what respondents stated was an understanding from their administrator about the unique role they play in the school and in students' success. For example, one respondent, when asked what their current or former administrator(s) have done that made them feel supported, they wrote their administrator had "recognize[d] and acknowledge[d] the difficulty of working within the special education community." Another respondent simply stated that their administrator had, "advocate[d] for us." Some participants shared specific stories of instances where their administrators failed to listen when teachers were faced with difficult situations with students. For one respondent, feeling unheard and unsupported in a difficult situation led them to finding a different job in another school district.

Listening to Special Education Staff Concerns Related to Student Needs

The third minor theme, *listening to special education staff concerns related to student needs*, was originally coded as open communication. What was prevalent through all the responses, however; was the need for administrators to listen to special education staff as they shared about their student needs and their proposed solutions. Data consisted of several specific stories from respondents' experiences. Some of these included altering mastery levels for students, providing accommodations related to testing and concerns with their scores, student safety, and student considerations in classroom placement. For example, one participant shared this anecdote, "There are no considerations for our students who have specific needs. I have a kiddo in my caseload with autism, who has to go outside to the portable buildings for health

class, and this has been a hard transition for that student and many of our kids with special needs. There are other health classes of gen[eral] education students who are in the main building for health, so it would have been an easy switch. I get that our building is packed, but our sp[ecial] ed[ucation] kids are often regarded as afterthoughts. There are even ass[itant] principals who are afraid of our kiddos.” Another respondent shared that when they brought up concerns regarding a child’s wellness, they left that conversation “feeling unheard and like the "whole student" wasn't truly (sp) being watched after.” These anecdotes, as well as responses from four other participants, denote the importance that teachers place on feeling they are being heard by administrators who take these concerns seriously and work to resolve them.

Student and Family Management

Ideas pertaining to, *student and family management*, the fourth major theme, came up most frequently in question 18 which asked, “what supportive actions have your current or former administrator(s) not done to support you as a special educator that you wish they would have?”. Four participants responded with occurrences of administrators missing an opportunity to support special educators through *student and family management*. One respondent shared a specific situation when their health and safety were put at risk when working with a student when the administrator failed to provide proper supports. This participant felt unheard after sharing their concerns with their administrator. This lack of support eventually led the teacher to find employment at another school. Another respondent simply stated their need for, a supportive administrator who would “hold parents and students accountable”. Responses related to *student and family management* came up a total of five times when asked to identify three supportive actions of an administrator and what supportive actions their current or former administrator has

demonstrated. For example, one respondent said, “I don’t necessarily care about being personally supported. I just want an Administration that maintains discipline, routines with students, and holds parents and students accountable.”

Behavior Management

The minor theme of *behavior management* was mentioned by four respondents in the data. Notably, when respondents mentioned support with behavior the responses did not include responding to crisis situations. Rather responses focused on maintaining consistency for student expectations and routines as well as holding students accountable for their actions. Additionally, two respondents included elements of communication as important in *behavior management* support. One respondent identified that a way their current administrator supports their staff is by maintaining transparency about their *behavior management* procedures. One respondent identified that a supportive administrator makes a priority of, “Keeping us in the loop about our students.” This distinction is important because it illustrates that supporting educators with behaviors also includes communication prior to, during, and after behavior incidences.

Administrative Responsibilities with Special Education in Mind

The final major theme that was found in the data was maintaining administrative responsibilities while remembering the unique challenges and needs of special education programming. The central idea to this theme was leading with an inclusive focus that prioritizes the needs of diverse students. Within this theme, data showed that special educators value when administrators ensure access to resources and when they create inclusive environments for students with diverse needs. This theme appeared in ten responses from seven participants but was most commonly found in the question in which special educators were asked what they

wished their administrator would have done. Four respondents indicated administrators had not ensured access to resources or created an inclusive environment which left special educators feeling unsupported. When comparing demographic information to responses of qualitative questions, a notable pattern emerged within this theme. Specifically, of the seven participants who mentioned support from administrators through inclusion and access to resources, four participants were teachers in a self-contained setting. Furthermore, all of the respondents (n=3) who specifically mentioned administrators supporting educators through adequate staffing, were teaching in a self-contained setting.

Ensuring Access to Resources, Specifically Staffing, Space, and Supplies

Within the data three ideas consistently came up related to resources. Special educators felt supported when administrators ensured appropriate staffing, space, and supplies. In relation to staffing, respondents referred to having an adequate number of paraprofessionals in the room as well as the availability of coverage for certified staff for IEP meetings, sick days, and professional development. Staffing concerns appeared in the data four times from three participants. In terms of space, respondents shared that their buildings were overcrowded causing (a) some students to have to walk outside to portable classrooms and (b) a lack of meeting space for IEP meetings resulting in distress amongst staff and an increase in virtual meetings. Responses related to ensuring adequate space were shared by two respondents. Finally, two respondents shared that support included availability of with appropriate materials and supplies or the funding to purchase appropriate supplies (i.e. AAC devices and other accommodations).

Creating Inclusive Environments

Creating inclusive environments is the final minor theme and appeared in responses from five participants across all three survey questions. Respondents noted that a supportive administrator assists in promoting awareness week activities, sets the tone of *creating inclusive environments* for all students, and follows through with inclusive practices in specific situations. This follow through can be illustrated by one respondent who said, “Sometimes we feel pressure to meet grade level standards for our students or to do so in a timeframe that is not reasonable for our students’ individual learning needs. This is a tough position because my administrator is held responsible for how our students as a whole school are learning so I understand the desire to have “desirable” data.” Another respondent shared they would feel supported if an administrator made a special effort to, “include special education students in the school community.”

Patterns

Patterns were found by comparing demographic data to responses from the open-ended responses and searching for patterns. It is notable that a majority of responses, four out of seven, in the minor theme of *ensuring access to resources* were from teachers working in self-contained settings. In fact, all responses dealing with the resource of adequate staffing (n=3) came from teachers working in a self-contained setting. Another pattern found in the data was that all but one response (n=5) regarding *behavior management* came from teachers with students in 7th grade or higher. Finally, of the respondents that indicated administrator support is demonstrated by listening to student specific concerns, 67% (n=6) were teachers who taught in a resource room setting.

CHAPTER V DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

The first research question asks, what special educators identify as essential actions of supportive administrators? This research question was answered through survey questions 16 and 17 which asked, “In your role as a special educator, list the three most important things your administrator could do to make you feel supported (these could be things your administrator has done or things you wish your administrator would do)” and “What has your current or former administrator(s) done that you have felt supported you as a special educator?” As stated previously, five major themes were identified along with six corresponding minor themes. It is clear from the data that special educators value their time, their students, and the unique aspects of their field.

Promote Collaboration Amongst Staff: Give Time

Sentiments regarding the value of time were mentioned by 43% of respondents across the three survey questions defining support. Special educators feel administrators are supporting them when they are (a) given time to collaborate with each other, (b) work on IEP's or progress monitoring, (c) attend meetings, and (d) attend trainings that are applicable to their unique setting. If administrators want to be supportive of their special educators, they must give educators more of their most valuable resource: time. The data suggests that professional development days are the perfect opportunity for extra time to be given. Three participants noted that time during professional development days to catch up on paperwork or collaborate with colleagues would be supportive. One respondent suggested that some topics that are currently the focus of professional development days could be sent out as emails thereby opening up these

days for other, more important topics. Another respondent shared their desire for applicable trainings for special education staff instead of attending the general sessions that may not apply to their unique role. Additionally, participants (n=3) shared a desire that time be set aside to collaborate with other special educators and/or grade level teams. One respondent suggested monthly meetings for special educators and administrators to check in with each other. Special educators feel supported when administrators are conscientious to concentrate meetings and training on topics that are relevant to the unique job of a special educator.

Be Present and Aware to Increase Special Education Knowledge: Ask Questions

A major theme from the data suggested that administrators can support special educators by attending to special education specific issues and topics. While this could be done through observing teachers and attending special education specific professional development, as suggested by four participants, it also can be accomplished by simply asking questions. Based on the data, special educators do not expect their administrator to be experts in special education but rather, they feel support when their administrator acknowledges the educator's expertise. However, the data from this study shows that this does not mean that special educators feel supported when administrators leave them to their own devices or simply say yes to every idea. Rather, special educators who responded in this study showed a desire for their administrators to (a) become an active member of the IEP team, (b) participate in *behavior management*, (c) communicate with families, and (d) be available for idea generation to solve problems. However, if an administrator doesn't have background knowledge related to special education, it is advantageous for them to ask relevant questions to their special educators to increase their knowledge. In doing so, they are participating meaningfully in the conversation, increasing their knowledge, and *respecting the expertise of the special educator*. It is important to note, however

that asking questions is only seen as supportive if it comes from a genuine place of increasing knowledge. One respondent when asked about missed opportunities of administrators to show support commented, “Don’t ask for suggestions when you are not really needing or wanting them.” This suggests that while special educators value when their administrators ask for suggestions, they do not want this to be a routine or as a means to appease without action. This is seen by special educators as unsupportive as it diminishes the *respect for their expertise* and unique position.

Be Present and Aware to Increase Special Education Knowledge: Listen

Similarly, special educators feel supported when their administrator listens to their concerns. Two minor themes from the data focused on listening, to student specific concerns and concerns of the job. These minor themes were nested under the major theme of *being present and aware to increase knowledge of special education*. As previously stated, special educators do not view it as necessary for their administrator to have a special education background, but they do feel supported when their administrator makes a concerted effort to understand their unique role, point of view, and needs. This can be done through either asking questions, listening, or observing needs in the classroom. In order to fulfill the supportive action of listening an administrator first must schedule time or create routines for meaningful communication with staff. Four respondents suggested monthly check ins with special education staff, regular classroom check ins and observations, or being available for impromptu meetings with staff.

It is important to note that listening as supportive action cannot be done as a check list item and then considered accomplished. Rather, special educators view supportive listening as the ability to have conversations about concerns related to the job and students in a manner that

allows administrators to offer feedback if necessary. The data suggests that often special educators share concerns with administrators but feel that action plans or necessary following up do not always occur. This leaves special educators feeling unheard and unsupported. Six respondents shared ideas about supportive actions focused on listening to concerns and administrators taking action. Of those six respondents four shared anecdotes of sharing concerns and then feeling unheard or no action being taken to remedy the situation. For this reason, it is important for administrators to act on concerns that are shared. Support through listening might include (a) taking notes, (b) asking questions, (c) creating an action plan to reach out to experts, other supports, or (d) putting a plan into place, and then following up with the special educator as needed. In doing so special educators know their concerns are heard even if their desired resolution is not met.

Student and Family Management: Be Consistent

Next, special educators feel supported when administrators demonstrate consistency. This is especially important in the areas of *behavior management* and family relations but can extend to staff accountability as well. One participant shared that a supportive action they wished an administrator would take is “Checking on those who don’t do their job.” Additionally, five participants cited the importance of clearly communicated *behavior management* systems that administrators put in place and then follow through. Special educators feel supported by administrators when students are held accountable for their actions as this allows teachers to focus on educating rather than managing behaviors. Furthermore, special educators feel supported when administrators have clear boundaries and when expectations and accountability for parents is maintained. One participant stated they feel supported when their administrator “supports staff in the face of parent complaints.” This could include (a) taking phone calls from

parents, (b) helping staff to answer emails containing complaints, or (c) intervening if a parent comes to file a complaint in person. Administrators can support special educators by empowering educators to maintain a positive relationship with families which is facilitated when the administrator helps by handling difficult conversations and complaints.

Listening to Special Education Staff Concerns Related to Student Needs and Creating Inclusive Environments: Consider Unique Needs

Finally, administrators can show support for their special educators by considering the unique needs of special education students and the staff that work with them. One respondent shared that one of the ways they feel most supported by an administrator is when they, “acknowledge the difficulty of working within the special education community.” This can be done through positive feedback via email, note, or in person. In fact, five respondents mentioned that administrators could cultivate a culture of inclusion and celebration. Further, given the unique needs of the special education position, administrators should explore structuring professional development days with more appropriate options. Three respondents suggested the need for administrators to allow special educators to attend trainings or hold meetings that are relevant to them on professional development days.

Administrators must also consider the unique needs of the students within the special education program. It is important that administrators think about special education students when planning the school environment, schedules, athletic activities, field trips, guest speakers, class sizes and more. In reference to planning schedules with special education students in mind, one participant said their administrator, “helps us create cohesive schedules and is flexible as needs and service minutes change.” A supportive administrator takes care to be involved in the

planning process, proactively accommodate for special education students, and remains flexible as things change frequently in special education settings. It is also important for administrators to consider the needs of special education students when planning the use of building space. For example, when asked about missed opportunities to show support, one participant noted their concern regarding the location of their student's health class, in a detached portable classroom, and the dysregulation that specific space would cause for the student. In this example the special educator is left feeling unsupported because the unique needs of their student are not considered when planning schedules and use of various spaces. The administrator could show support for the special educator by switching which classes attend health outside so the students with disabilities can attend health class in the building. The administrator could go further ensuring that all schedules made moving forward are made with consideration for the environment of the classroom and students in those classes. Administrators must pay close attention to the specialized needs of children as articulated in the IEP. This is especially essential to ensure a free and appropriate education is provided to all students as required in federal law (IDEA, 2004).

Research Question 2

The second research question asked, "How have administrators showed or missed opportunities to show support toward special educators." This question was answered through survey questions 17 and 18. These questions asked respondents to identify situations in which their administrators either supported them as special educators or missed the opportunity to do so.

Listening to Special Education Staff Concerns Related to Student Needs and Creating Inclusive Environments: Unique Needs of Students

As previously discussed, administrators can show support toward special educators by considering the unique needs of students. When administrators proactively plan for the unique needs of students it creates an inclusive environment where both students and staff feel acknowledged and a part of the larger school community. Three respondents indicated that their administrator missed opportunities to consider the unique needs of their students. Participants discussed how they often felt that after expressing concerns they were not heard and consequently the various needs of students were not being met. These concerns covered a wide array including access to the learning environment, accommodations for tests, concerns about test scores, and student mental health. Conversely, question 17 which asked about instances of support from their current administrator only one respondent shared about considering the unique needs of students. They remarked their administrator had shown support through, “Valued spec Ed staffs opinion in order to include special education students in the school community.” When an administrator considers the unique needs of students it creates an inclusive environment for student and staff, but often when this isn’t the case students and staff feel excluded and unheard.

Administrative Responsibilities with Special Education in Mind: Communication

The area of communication came up in responses across several major and minor themes within questions 17 and 18. When asked about missed opportunities to show support one respondent reported their administrator texts and emails staff “all hours of the weekend” while another remarked, “sometimes the communication is lacking.” These missed opportunities demonstrate two ends of the spectrum in administrator communication. The first is not respecting the boundaries of special education staff and communicating about work issues outside of contract hours. The second is a lack of communication that could lead to frustration and not feeling heard. In the data collected for question 17 there were five references from five

respondents to positive communication from administrator to special educator. The data suggests this could look like positive feedback, especially after a special educator handles a difficult situation well, regular check ins with administrators and special educators, being available to listen to concerns about behaviors or other unique needs, keeping special educators in the loop about student needs, and giving advice when appropriate. These examples illustrate what special educators view as effective communication and demonstrate the importance special educators place on communicating with their administrators.

Implications for Administrators

The data gathered through this survey provides insight that can help administrators become more supportive of the special educators in their buildings. Several actionable suggestions for administrators are evident from the data.

Plan Professional Development Days with Special Educators in Mind

The importance of time could not be understated when viewing the data. Special educators are in desperate need of this precious resource to collaborate with each other, general education teachers, and administrators. Additionally, special educators need extra time to prepare for meetings, prepare specific modified materials, progress monitor student growth, and write IEP's. As noted previously three respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the way their time was allocated on professional development days. Therefore, administrators can support special educators by planning professional development with their unique needs in mind. This could include allowing special educators to attend a conference or training specific to their needs or allowing special educators to opt out of trainings that are not relevant to them in order to collaborate or catch up on other job duties. It may also be appropriate to analyze the amount of

staff meeting information that could be disseminated through email or newsletter format. In doing so administrators can free up more of special educator's most valuable resource and allow them to focus more on their job specific tasks rather than checking a box that they attended a meeting.

Prior research from Berry (2012) revealed that special educators viewed other special educators as the most valuable and helpful collaborators but most often the least available. Conversely, special educators viewed administrators as the most likely to be available but the least helpful. This along with the findings of this survey that showed collaboration time as the most important action of administrator support illustrates the necessity to plan for collaborative times for special educators to meet. Administrators can support their special educators by making time available to collaborate with each other on professional development days. This meets the need of collaborating with colleagues while also improving practice through learning from the expertise of teachers on staff (Struyve, 2016).

The data showed that special educators desire professional development to be relevant to their unique job needs. Blasé (2000) also found that special educators had unique preferences when it came to professional development. In their study Blasé (2000) found effective administrators created cultures of learning that didn't focus on administration but rather on learning from the expertise of other educators or guiding special educators in self reflecting on their own practice. This could be done through coaching relationships, action research, professional learning communities. Furthermore, Blasé (2000) found administrators who offered learning opportunities that focused on administrative subjects such as building mission statements, policies and procedures, and district financial matters ineffective.

Schedule Regular Check ins with Special Educators and Follow Through

While time and collaboration for special educators with their colleagues is important, special educators also value time and collaboration with their administrator. Special education teachers feel supported from their administrator when they regularly communicate and problem solve around student and procedural concerns. One suggestion from a participant was a monthly check in meeting with special education staff and administrators. This may look different depending on the size of the school. By checking in with special educators on a regular basis, administrators are joining in on the collaboration that is crucial to a special educator's job. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for administrators to remain engaged with their special education staff. By having regular communication, administrators will be aware of concerns about the job, concerns related to specific students, resource needs, and behavior support needs. Regular check ins could also improve the inclusive environment of the school simply can act on needs in a timely manner. DeMik (2008) found that administrators being intentional about casting an inclusive vision for their school could improve teacher retention rates. Scheduling regular check ins with special educators sets the tone of an inclusive vision and allows special educators to share their perceptions of how inclusive the environment is for staff and students with administrators throughout the year.

Prioritize Resources for Special Educators

A minor theme that appeared in the data was a lack of resources for special educators, specifically support staff, space for students, and supplies. Administrators can show support to their special educators by making it a priority to provide adequate resources for the services teachers provide. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) found that when teachers lack materials critical

to their job performance such as curricular materials, they are less likely to experience the sense of success that contributes to teacher retention. To improve the access of materials the administrator must begin with being aware of what resources are needed. This can only be accomplished if administrators are fulfilling the actions of the third major theme *being present and aware to increase special education knowledge*. Once administrators are aware of the needs within the special education program, they can work to assist the educators in acquiring the resources. This could include prioritizing special education staffing needs, allocating appropriate funds in the budget for specific special education supply needs, and planning the building layout and schedules with special education needs in mind. For example, when planning the layout of classrooms administrators can make sure students using wheelchairs have access to all their classrooms. They may also consider reviewing schedules to ensure electives have manageable ratios of students with IEP's and students needing paraeducator support.

Ask Questions and Seek Out Ways to Increase Knowledge

In the data set, *respecting expertise of special educators and being present and aware to increase special education knowledge*, appeared in responses 28 times from 13 respondents. This frequency suggests that special educators feel especially supported by their administrator when they feel their administrator asks good questions of their staff, themselves, and other experts in an effort to seek out answers and increase knowledge. This could include bringing in or consulting with experts. For example, an administrator could set up an observation from an autism expert. This could also involve the administrator attending professional development related to the IEP process. It may also include relying on the expertise of their staff as suggested by Berry (2012) and Struyve, et al. (2016). In this way, administrators may encourage teachers to observe and learn from one another.

Maintain Consistent Expectations for Students and Families

Finally, administrators can support their special educators by maintaining consistent expectations for students and families. When asked about missed opportunities for administrators to show support one respondent shared, they chose to find a different job after they were not provided the necessary supports to work safely with a student. In this situation consistent expectations and clear communication about those expectations could have reduced turn over. Administrators can (a) speak up in meetings to assist special educators in advocating for a particular viewpoint, (b) have consistent *behavior management* routines, and (c) assist in communicating with families regarding behavior. This aligns with Fore and Martin (2002) who also found that teacher retention could be positively impacted by an administrator who is involved in the classroom management and school discipline process. In short, it seems that special educators have a desire an administrator will provide support so they can focus on educating students rather than managing students and families.

Limitations

This survey was only offered in an online format and dispersed through social media channels. It is possible potential participants were not reached because participation required access and comfortability with technology. Additionally, a smaller sample size was collected as only special educators from Illinois and Wisconsin were included. A small sample size did not allow for answers to be exhausted. This impacts the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the format of this survey being open ended questions answered anonymously does not allow researchers to verify data collected. For this reason, there is no possibility of confirming the accuracy of information self-reported in survey responses. This includes accuracy of information

given related to factual questions such as administrator special education experience, as well as information reported related to specific experiences of administrator support or the lack thereof. The data gathered from this study represents the perspectives and experiences as shared by special educators.

Suggestions for Future Research

The goal of this research was to understand administrator support from the perspective of special educators. Through the data collected actionable items administrators can take to support their special educators were identified, but it leads to more questions regarding effective administrators for special educators. Below is a summary of suggestions for future research.

Additional similar studies

Because of the small sample size of this study and the impact that has on generalizability of results further studies similar to this one would benefit the field. The problem justification for this study relates to teachers in all states of the country and therefore it would be beneficial to disseminate similar surveys to teachers across the United States to further expand or in more detail define administrator support.

What does effective professional development look like for special educators?

In the data it became clear that special educators value their time and are particularly frustrated with the time that is spent during professional development days on irrelevant meetings, trainings, and tasks. This begs the question, what does effective professional development look like for special educators? What skills do special educators feel that they are lacking or need more training in? What method is most effective and preferred by special

educators (i.e., PLC, conference, webinar, or a guest speaker coming to the school)?

Investigating this further could improve professional development outcomes for special educators and provide administrators with a road map to improve one aspect of support.

What professional development could be created to empower administrators to be more supportive of special educators.

Finally, it is likely that targeted professional developments could empower administrators to be more supportive of special educators. Creating effective professional development to better equip administrators could improve support for special educators and increase retention.

Conclusion

Special educators are leaving the field of education at an alarming rate. When asked why they are leaving, administrator support is often mentioned in their reply. This study sought to understand “administrator support” through a survey of special educators in public schools in Illinois and Wisconsin. It was found that administrator support encompasses five major themes (1) promoting collaboration amongst staff, (2) respecting the expertise of special education staff, (3) being present and aware to increase knowledge related to special education needs, (4) student and family management (5) administrative responsibilities with special education in mind.

Administrators can support their special educators through giving them time to collaborate and complete the extra responsibilities of their job, asking meaningful questions to increase their knowledge related to special education, listen to the concerns and suggestions of special educators, consider the unique needs of special education students and staff, and be consistent with routines, behavior management, and expectations for students and parents. Through these

actions, administrators can better support their special educators and increase retention in their schools.

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APPENDIX A: SPECIAL EDUCATOR SURVEY

Part 1

Demographic Information: Please provide the following information.

1. Your gender: male female non-binary prefer not to answer
2. Your ethnicity: Caucasian African American Hispanic Asian
Native American Other
3. Highest education level obtained

B.A./B.S M.A./M.S./M.Ed. Ed.S. Ed.D./Ph.D.
4. Number of years you have been a special education teacher: _____
5. As a special education teacher, in what setting do you currently teach?

Co-Taught Self Contained Resource Other: _____
6. As a special education teacher, what grade level of students do you currently teach
(choose all that apply): Pre-School Kindergarten 1st 2nd 3rd 4th 5th
6th 7th 8th 9th 10th 11th 12th Beyond 12th grade
7. Number of years you have taught under your current principal: _____
8. Describe the setting of your current school community.

Urban Suburban Rural
9. Does your administrator have a special education background?

Yes No I don't know
10. Do you currently teach in a public or private school?

Public Private

11. Are you currently working in a K-12 classroom in a position that is identified as special education? Yes No

12. Do you currently have students on your caseload with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)? Yes No

13. Do you currently teach in Illinois or Wisconsin?
Yes No

Part 2: Special Educator Perspective

14. Is your current position your first special education position, if not what were your reasons for leaving your previous position(s)?
15. As you continue in your current special education position, how important is a supportive administration?
16. In your role as a special educator, list the three most important things your administrator could do to make you feel supported (these could be things your administrator has done or things you wish your administrator would do).
17. What has your current or former administrator(s) done that you have felt supported you as a special educator?
18. What supportive actions have your current or former administrator(s) not done to support you as a special educator that you wish they would have?

APPENDIX B: LITERATURE TABLE

Author/Year	Title	Participants	Method	Findings
Berry (2012)	The Relationship of Perceived Support to Satisfaction and Commitment for Special Education Teachers in Rural Areas	Special education teachers who were employed in rural districts over the span of 2 school years. 522 teachers in 33 states.	Survey	Special education teachers identify other special educators as the most helpful but least available when needing assistance. Whereas, special educators identified administrators as being the most available but least helpful. Berry concluded that a shared planning time for special educators or designated collaboration time would be ways administrators could support special educators.
Billingsley (2007)	A Case Study of Special Education Teacher Attrition in an Urban District	Special education teachers leaving a Crockett City (pseudonym) school district. Crockett City has 100000 K-12 students; it has about 150 schools and employs more than 5200 teachers, approximately 600 of whom are special education teachers.	Survey	Findings suggest that the district might retain more teachers by designing responsive induction programs, improving work conditions, and providing teachers with opportunities to transfer to other schools.
Blase and Blasé (2000)	Effective instructional leadership: teacher's perspectives on how principals promote teaching and learning in schools	809 teachers	Survey	Teachers felt the most instructional improvement when engaging in reflective conversations with colleagues and administrators compared to teachers whose professional development centered on administrative tasks such as mission statements or procedures. Administrators can support their educators by creating a learning centered culture through the use of small group discussion and professional learning communities (PLC) rather than administrator lecture.
Conley and You (2017)	Key influences on special education teachers' intention to leave: The effects of administrative support and teacher team	2060 special education teachers	Analysis of SASS data	Administrator support and teacher team efficacy had a strong direct impact on the probability of special education teachers leaving a position. Conversely, administrator support is a strong faction in retention of special educators. The longer a special

	efficacy in a mediational model.			educator has been in the field the less likely they are to leave the field.
DeMik (2008)	Experiencing attrition of special education teachers through narrative inquiry	5 special educators	Narrative inquiry	An administrator has a large impact on an inclusive and positive school environment which in turn has an impact on special education teacher retention. All special educators in this study felt time was their most valuable but most difficult to attain resource.
Fowler et al. (2019)	The state of the special education profession survey report	1,467 special educators	Survey	Administrators can also show support toward special educators through active participation in the IEP process. 26% of respondents felt their administrator was prepared to support IEP goals. 69% of special educators rated outcomes of IEP goals as an essential measure of their effectiveness. 35% of special education teachers were being evaluated on this IEP outcomes by their administrators. 18% of respondents rated their administration as extremely well prepared to support special education instruction.
Gehrke and McCoy (2007)	Considering the Context: Differences between the Environments of Beginning Special Educators Who Stay and those who Leave.			New special education teachers are 2.5 times more likely than their general education colleagues to leave their positions.
Hagaman and Casey (2018)	Teacher Attrition in Special Education: Perspectives From the Field	52 preservice teachers, new teachers, and administrators.	Focus groups	Teachers indicated stress related to the workload: large caseloads and high needs students as well as lack of cooperation with administration and colleagues as top reasons for leaving a position. Administrators did not name large caseloads or high needs of students as a reason for attrition. Both groups identified mentors as a possible support for new teachers.
Johnson and Birkeland (2003)	Pursuing a sense of success: New teachers explain their career decisions	50 new teachers	Longitudinal interview	A lack of resources sets teachers up for increased stress levels and creates a feeling of ineffectiveness in their teaching strategies.
Struyve et al. (2018)	Teacher leadership in practice: mapping the negotiation of the position of the special educational needs coordinator in schools	120 special education teachers and administrators	survey	Administrators can support special educators through acknowledging the expertise of the teachers in their building and allow colleagues to learn from one another collaboratively. Findings encouraged administrators to make shared planning or collaborative time a priority in scheduling.

Sutcher et al. (2016)	A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S	SASS Teacher File 2003–04, 2007–08, and 2011–12, the SASS Teacher Follow–Up Survey 2004–05, 2008–09, and 2012–13, The Common Core of Data (CCD), years 1999–00 through 2012–13, and universal data on teacher preparation programs collected by the U.S. Department of Education under Title II of the Higher Education Act	Modelling demand, modelling supply, projection modeling	<p>The teaching areas with the highest rates of turn over are special educators and educators of English language learners. Retirement only represents less than a third of exits from the field.</p> <p>Teachers are most likely to exit the field in their first five years of teaching. A majority of teachers who had left the field cited working conditions or support from administration as their reason for leaving the field.</p>
Theobald, et al. (2021)	The special education teacher pipeline: teacher preparation, workforce entry, and retention.	1,300 graduates of a special education teacher preparation program in Washington.	Factor analysis, survey	There is little correlation between what a teacher experiences in their preparation program and their likelihood to leave the field during the first five years of their career.