

The Other Fifty Percent: Expressions From Special Education Teachers About Why They Persist in the Profession

Excelsior: Leadership in Teaching
and Learning
2023, Vol. 16(1), 17-39
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surface.syr.edu/excelsior
<https://doi.org/10.14305/jn.19440413.2023.16.1.02>

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Abstract

We examined reasons special educators are motivated to persist in the profession despite challenges that often lead to attrition for this group. Participants were 21 special education teachers with six or more years of teaching experience across multiple grade levels. Data were collected via the Zoom virtual meeting platform with four focus groups. Semi-structured interview techniques were used, and data were analyzed using deductive coding procedures. Participants shared external, employment, and personal factors associated with Billingsley's (1993) career decision framework that influenced their persistence, such as supports from school administrators with expertise in special education law, passion for students and their achievement, and stressors related to the workforce that motivated them to persist in the profession. Implications for educational practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords

teacher persistence, special education, teacher retention, teacher attrition

Special education (SE) teacher attrition increases overall teacher shortages across the United States

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(Sutcher et al., 2019), and impacts the academic (Hester et al., 2020), social/emotional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), and postsecondary education outcomes of students with disabilities in the United States (Vittekk, 2015). Despite efforts to promote retention, SE teacher shortages continue to occur in many parts of the United States (e.g., Sutcher et al., 2019). For example, California reports that an average of 17% of SE teachers are vacating positions annually (Ondrasek et al., 2020). By year five, some reports indicate that up to 50% of teachers leave the profession (Billingsley, 2004; Cineas, 2022; Neason, 2014). But, why does the other 50% of the United States SE teacher workforce stay?

Special Educator Attrition and Retention

Researchers have studied SE teacher attrition and retention for decades and reported a myriad of reasons for why these teachers leave or stay (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Specifically, researchers have identified working conditions, demands of the profession, and financial compensation as some of the reasons why special educators leave or stay (Billingsley et al., 2020). Others have found that teacher preparedness (i.e., certification pathways; Conley & You, 2017), demographic characteristics, such as race and gender (Scott & Alexander, 2019; Scott et al., 2023), and various mediating factors, such as job satisfaction and autonomy in their roles (Conley & You, 2017) impact teachers' reasons for leaving or staying in their positions.

Notably, much of the research conducted explored teacher retention and attrition through survey research (e.g., Bettini, Wang et al., 2019; Bettini, Gilmour et al., 2020; Billingsley et al., 2004; Gersten et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2013; Miller et al., 1999; Scott et al., 2023). Findings in these studies reveal what is known more generally about SE teacher retention and attrition; specifically, and as previously described, working conditions (Bettini et al., 2020; Miller et al., 1999), certification and experience (Bettini, Wang et al., 2020; Miller et al., 1999), colleague support (Billingsley et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2013), and administrator support (Gertsen et al., 2001) are some of the contributing factors explaining SE teachers' decisions to leave or stay in their careers. These studies provide important contributions to the literature revealing broad categories of reasons why SE teachers leave or stay. In the current study, we aim to gain an even deeper understanding of specifically why special educators stay, or persist in their careers, and the contextual factors that impact their decisions.

To begin exploring the question of why SE teachers persist in their positions, we searched the literature for qualitative studies focused on SE teacher attrition and retention; and at the time of this search only a handful of studies were identified (e.g., Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Lesh et al., 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011a; Prather-Jones, 2011b). Although these qualitative studies provide a deeper understanding of the underlying contextual reasons for why SE teachers choose to leave or stay (e.g., roles and responsibilities ambiguity; administrative or collegial support), and are consistent with findings from survey research, they largely examined SE teachers during the first 3 years of teaching (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2018), focused on specific subgroups (e.g., teachers of students with emotional behavior disorders; Prather-Jones, 2011a; Prather-Jones 2011b), or included sample sizes too small to generate enough data to describe the actual phenomenon (e.g., Lesh et al., 2017). Moreover, we did not identify a single qualitative study that focused exclusively on SE teachers' motivation to persist in their careers beyond beginning years of teaching, suggesting a need to better understand why 50% or more of SE teachers persist beyond that pivotal fifth year. We posit that specifically studying teacher persistence is a critical step toward understanding why SE teachers stay in the profession.

Teacher Persistence. Teacher persistence is a fundamental strength-based research agenda perceived as necessary to improve retention (Schaefer et al., 2012). Teacher persistence refers to teachers' ability to remain in the profession despite barriers that arise (Cockburn, 2000). These teachers are also perceived as more skilled and effective at their craft as their experience increases (Henry et al., 2011), and is associated with a decreased likelihood of attrition from the profession (Guarino et al., 2006). Past research on teacher persistence focused on a multitude of factors associated with why teachers stay or leave. For example, studies on demographic characteristics of teachers found that age is related to teacher persistence. Van Overschelde and Wiggins (2019) analyzed employment and preparation data for 225,000 novice teachers and found that 'older' teachers persisted more than 'younger' teachers. Similarly, the researchers found that teachers of color were more likely to persist when controlling for teacher preparation program type (Van Overschelde & Wiggins, 2019).

Researchers also studied teachers' professional qualifications to understand persistence. Zhang and Zeller (2016) studied 60 traditionally and alternatively certified teachers and found that teachers who were certified through alternative pathway programs were less likely to persist than teachers trained through traditional pathway programs. Similarly, Mason-Williams (2020) had consistent findings, observing that alternative pathway SE teachers leave the profession at higher rates than traditionally prepared teachers. Researchers have also associated school type (e.g., rural, suburban, urban; e.g., Sutchter et al., 2016), administrator support (e.g., Player et al., 2017), induction and mentoring support (Park et al., 2016), and teacher pay (e.g., Imazeki, 2005) with teacher persistence. For example, Scott, Bell and colleagues (2023) found that SE teachers who taught in urban and suburban schools reported higher intent to remain in the classroom when compared to rural SE teachers. Although the research points to evidence of teacher persistence, additional research is needed focused on SE teachers. Therefore, the focus of this study is to examine the reasons why SE teachers persist beyond their fifth year of teaching and provide contextual reasons why they stay.

Conceptual Framework

To explore SE teacher persistence, we turn to Billingsley's (1993) career decision framework. This seminal conceptual model pinpoints a variety of factors and variables that influence SE teachers' consideration to remain or leave teaching. Billingsley (1993) hypothesized that SE teachers' career decisions are made based on external, employment, and personal factors, and their interactions with one another. These factors remain mostly consistent with the current literature investigating the high-attrition rates of special educators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), which makes the groundbreaking model still relevant to examine.

External Factors. External factors include indirect influences, out of a teacher's control, including societal, economic, and institutional factors (Billingsley, 1993). For example, a teacher may choose to persist in their career because the economy is not doing well and, therefore, quitting is not an option because it may lead to joblessness. Also, state policies and regulations around SE teacher preparation and high-stakes testing may influence a teacher's decision to leave the profession (Rooney, 2015). For example, research has identified that teachers are more inclined to leave schools when high-stakes statewide testing is stressed (Grissom et al., 2017). For special educators, compliance requirements related to the IDEA (2004) may also be a factor, as some SE teachers reported struggling with interpreting and tracking the constant changes in special education federal, state, and district policies

(Ondrasek et al., 2020). These external factors are important to acknowledge as they are out of the educator's control and tend to interact with personal and employment factors that can collectively influence career decisions.

Employment Factors. Employment factors include five main sub-categories (i.e., professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards, commitment, and employability) with specific variables identified under each (Billingsley, 2003). Professional qualifications, described as teacher's preparation, certification requirements, knowledge and skills, experience, and initial commitment, can influence a teacher's career decision. For instance, educators who may experience insufficient preparation may lack the knowledge and skills needed to persist in the profession; whereas, SE teachers with more experience in their preparation programs (i.e., coursework, clinical experiences) may lead to greater teacher retention (Connelly & Graham, 2008; Redding et al., 2019).

Work conditions include many variables such as daily work assignments and demands, work culture and climate, as well as supports (or lack thereof) across relationships with administrators, peers, and others that influence SE teachers everyday work circumstances (Billingsley et al, 2020). For instance, those who receive more support or who are provided autonomy and involved in making decisions are more likely to stay in their position (Scott, Bell et al., 2023). Conversely, teachers who have greater work demands, excessive paperwork, and experience role ambiguity are more likely to leave the profession (Billingsley et al., 2019).

Work rewards are a direct result of intrinsic, extrinsic, or ancillary conditions. Many teachers enter the field as intrinsically motivated (i.e., their desire to help children), and this is seen as an important reward with regards to career decisions (Scott, Brown et al., 2021). When teachers feel they have not reached or connected with students, they are more likely to leave the profession due to a lack of satisfaction (Layden et al., 2022). As an extrinsic reward, pay also influences teachers' decisions to stay or leave the profession; those who were paid more were less likely to leave teaching (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Personal Factors. Billingsley (1993) described personal factors as characteristics and events that may influence a teacher's career decision, such as demographic factors, family responsibilities (e.g., maternity, marriage, relocation), or other cognitive/affective factors, such as teachers' personalities, values, and interests. Demographic characteristic factors might include gender and race/ethnicity (Scott, Bell et al., 2023). For example, more recent research indicates that SE teachers of color face tough decisions to leave or stay based on racialized experiences in schools (Scott, Powell, et al., 2021). Similar findings show that Black male SE teachers contemplate their role in the profession because of social gender biases (Cormier et al., 2022; Scott & Alexander, 2019).

Interactions within Factors on Career Decisions. A further understanding of how these factors interact is critical as a need remains to continue understanding why teachers make specific career decisions. Billingsley (1993) mentions that interactions between the variables are fluid; thus, using a qualitative approach to understand a teachers' experiences is critical in identifying these interactions. For instance, as Billingsley (1993) relates that teachers who are well prepared, committed to the profession, receive adequate supports, understand their roles, and are successful in teaching students, are more likely to stay in their positions. Although each teachers' experiences differ, it cannot be assumed that variables interact with one another based on the complexity of these factors. However, to

better understand these factors and experiences related to persistence in the field, the Billingsley (1993) framework was used to guide this study and answer the following research question:

Research Question: How do special education teachers explain factors influencing their persistence in the profession?

Method

In the current study, qualitative focus groups were used to gain a deeper understanding of teacher persistence from the perceptions and experiences of SE teachers. Focus groups can produce a high volume of powerful data in a short amount of time that may be hard to come by in individual interviews (Hatch, 2002). Further, Kitzinger (1997) highlighted advantages to using focus groups, including offering the opportunity to understand shared experiences of participants, certain patterns of participants, and why individuals make certain decisions---which aligned with the goals of our research. Focus groups can have some drawbacks including the focus group moderator taking too much control of the meeting which can limit the range of responses by the participants, and some participants not feeling comfortable speaking out in a group format which may lead to more assertive participants making their points known over others (Hatch, 2002). However, when the interaction between interviewees is cooperative and the moderator encourages all participants to talk, the focus group format can promote candor and clarification of topics requiring more context (Vaughn et al., 2013).

Participants

A purposeful sampling method was used to answer this study's research question as this method could potentially provide more information-rich data based on our sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). An email invitation was sent to potential participants once across three consecutive weeks. Participants were identified from a dataset of graduates from several special education programs across four states in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants' demographic data was disaggregated by years of experience to ensure that only those who had six years or more would qualify for the study. The primary reason was that the literature suggested that retention rates are higher for SE teachers that continue beyond year five (e.g., Hale, 2016).

Forty-five SE teachers expressed interest in the focus groups; however, 21 ultimately participated due to failure of follow up for some SE teachers who initially expressed interest or scheduling conflicts. Focus group participants' ages ranged from 31 - 64 years; 62% were White ($n = 13$), 33% Black ($n = 7$), and 5% Latina ($n = 1$); and approximately 29% were male ($n = 6$) and 71% female ($n = 15$). Participants had 6 - 22 years of teaching experience. Seven participants had some teaching experience in high school (grades 9-12), seven had teaching experience in middle school (grades 6-8), and eight had teaching experience in elementary settings (grades P-5). A majority were employed in suburban school districts ($n = 14$), seven SE teachers had employment experience in urban school districts, and one SE teacher reported having some level of experience in a rural school district. Participants taught in a variety of settings, such as in co-taught classroom settings ($n = 12$), inclusion type settings ($n = 12$), and self-contained classes ($n = 14$). They were able to report all levels of experiences in grade levels (e.g., elementary schools), school districts (e.g., urban), and teaching settings (e.g., inclusion); therefore, totals reported do not match the number of participants in the study. Table 1 shows the varied

demographic characteristics, including classroom demographics, years of experience, level of education, teacher preparation route, and other factors that ensured a variety of perspectives.

Table 1.
Special Education Teacher Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Year(s) Teaching Experience	Instructional Setting	Pathway to Licensure	Grade(s) Taught	District Type
1	Female	Black	43	14	CT, Inclusion, ST	Traditional/Bachelors	K-8	Urban
2	Female	Black	49	11	CT, Inclusion	Traditional/Masters	6-8	Urban
3	Male	Black	34	6	ST	Residency/Masters	2-3	Urban
4	Female	Black	33	8	ST	Traditional/Masters	6	Urban
5	Female	Black	40	20	ST	Traditional/Masters	K-5	Urban
6	Female	Black	49	18	CT, Inclusion, ST	Traditional/Ed. Specialist	9-12	Suburban
7	Female	Latina	37	7	CT, Inclusion	APL	9-10	Suburban/Rural
8	Female	White	47	13	Private Day School	Traditional/Bachelors	K-2	Suburban
9	Female	White	49	14	CT, Inclusion, ST	Traditional/Masters	K-5	Urban
10	Male	White	46	15	CT, Inclusion, ST	Traditional/PhD	6-8	Suburban
11	Female	White	61	22	CT, Inclusion	Traditional/Masters	9-11	Suburban
12	Female	White	49	15	ST	Traditional/Masters	K-5	Suburban
13	Female	Black	42	15	CT, Inclusion	APL/Masters	5	Urban
14	Male	White	33	7	CT	Traditional/Bachelors	9	Suburban
15	Female	White	47	8	CT, Inclusion, ST	Traditional/Masters	6-12	Suburban
16	Male	White	41	10	Inclusion, ST	APL/Masters	8	Suburban
17	Male	White	33	8	ST	APL/Bachelors	9-12	Suburban
18	Female	White	64	6	ST	Traditional/Bachelors	9-12	Suburban
19	Female	White	52	8	ST	APL/Masters	6-8	Suburban
20	Male	White	31	6	CT, Inclusion	APL/Masters	10-11	Suburban
21	Female	White	46	20	CT, Inclusion, ST	Traditional/Masters	P-5	Suburban

Note: CT = co-taught classroom; ST = self-contained classroom; APL = alternative pathway to licensure program

Data Collection

Interview questions were developed based on a review of the literature regarding teacher retention and attrition (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Castro et al., 2009; Cockburn, 2000; Guha et al., 2017; Spurgeon & Thompson, 2018). A semi-structured interview process was used to guide the focus group discussion. The first two questions for each category of the framework were intended to create a dialogue with participants about their role in their school districts, and how they define their role as special educators based on their varying experiences (e.g., years of experience, characteristics of a school district, personal characteristics). For example, participants' answers varied based on whether they have work experience in a suburban or urban school district. The other related questions were intended to create a more focused dialogue about challenges and overcoming barriers in their careers. Finally, the remaining questions were more focused and included sub-questions that concentrated on the phenomenon of motivation to persist in the profession, including some questions about specific topics (e.g., positive working and learning climate, having strong administrator support, passion for working with students with disabilities). The interview protocol is attached in the appendix.

The focus group interview questions were piloted with two doctoral students who were former SE teachers. Two questions were clarified, and three questions were removed because of repetitiveness,

and these changes were verified and agreed upon by the research team. The protocol was then shared with a researcher external to the study for feedback. This person is familiar with qualitative focus groups and is experienced in teacher attrition and retention research; no additional changes were recommended.

Data were collected across four different focus group interview sessions with three groups of five, and one group with six participants. Focus groups were conducted online using synchronous audio and visual video meeting software Zoom, which maximized opportunities for participants to meet while also allowing the research team to collect data while maintaining ethical qualitative considerations (Archibald et al., 2019). Focus groups were conducted by four members of the research team, with each lasting between 45 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Data Analysis

Recordings of the four focus groups produced 112 total pages of data to transcribe. Transcription was completed by three members of the research team. A deductive approach was used to analyze the data (Moretti et al., 2011). Four of the authors (first, second, sixth, and seventh) analyzed transcripts using a process that allowed for a line-by-line read of the data and to formulate initial codes (Miles et al., 2014). One hundred and nine initial codes were produced and sorted into categories aligned with the literature and conceptual framework (e.g., barriers, motivations, advocacy, and supports; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). During this process, a codebook was developed that allowed us to explore the relationship of codes to the conceptual framework (e.g., external, employment, and personal factors) and define codes (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2012). A sample of the codebook is provided in Table 2. The codebook provided an opportunity to further analyze and revise codes to gain a clearer insight into the data (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2012). For example, the code *professional qualifications of colleagues* was created based on the employment factors, a construct in the conceptual framework. Initially, this code was interpreted as any peer or colleague that worked closely with the SE teacher in schools. However, once the code was reread and defined in context of the conceptual framework, we realized that participants were referring to school administrators. Thus, the code was changed to reflect the essence of their experiences with *administrators that had special education backgrounds*.

Data were reread and codes were eliminated that did not answer the research question, reducing the total number of codes to 28. For example, *teacher personality* was coded and defined since some participants expressed that having a friendly personality factored into why they stayed at their schools. The research team determined during the final coding and sorting process that this code was not well-defined and did not clearly align with the conceptual framework, and therefore was excluded from the current study. Codes were further compared and discussed to determine what data best represented the research question, and final codes were sorted again to align with the conceptual framework (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2012).

The four members of the research team worked together across the qualitative data analysis process. The first author provided an overview of the coding procedures to the research team, modeling techniques, providing examples of code development, and developing and using the codebook (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2012). Although authors two, six, and seven had some experience with coding, we needed to ensure a shared understanding of our collaborative work to avoid idiosyncratic interpretation of data (Bratlinger et al., 2005). The team met for approximately two-hour blocks of time weekly across 10 weeks to partake in the analytic process, and this also included reliability of our views

of the codes and themes which was found to be at a high rate of 100%. Reliability was determined when the researchers' reached a consensus in labeling initial codes of interviews with little variation in meaning (Miles et al., 2014). The research team coded several pages of text, then met and deliberated frequently which could explain the high consistency in agreement on codes (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2012).

Table 2.
Initial Deductive Codebook

Code	Conceptual Framework Theme	Definition
Societal beliefs about teachers	External factor	Descriptions of emotions prompted by society's views about teachers/SE teachers
Professional qualifications of colleagues	Employment factor	Descriptions of experiences and circumstances related to working with a knowledgeable colleague in the school building
Teacher personality	Employment factor	Descriptions of how SE teachers described their personality traits
Student success in the classroom	Employment factor	Explanations of any student success and any how this promoted SE teacher persistence
Fear of failure	Personal factor	Descriptions of SE teacher's concerns about leaving

To ensure credibility across the research process multiple quality indicators were used: research reflexivity, member checks, and collaborative work (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Trainor & Graue, 2014). Reflexivity practices were used by the research team directly following each focus group interview. Specifically, we monitored our emotional responses to experiences discussed by participants, reflected on potential biases, and recorded preliminary ideas using reflective journaling techniques in reply to the initial data (e.g., Brantlinger et al., 2005; Patton 2015). Additionally, the ability to work as a collaborative team during the data analytic process helped our effort to interpret the data. Finally, first- and second-level member checks were conducted with six participants who followed up with the research team. The six participants had no additional changes to the transcriptions or interpretation of the data.

Researchers' Positionality

We acknowledge our experience as former teachers who left the classroom to pursue roles as teacher education researchers. Although on many occasions we were able to relate to the classroom experiences that our participants described, as researchers we also challenged our own assumptions and those of each member of the team to ensure we were best representing the views of the participants. Our prior experience as classroom teachers allowed us to understand SE teachers' experiences from a unique perspective. For example, often during the team discussion and analysis, we discussed whether SE

teachers' descriptions of supports they were receiving as classroom SE teachers would have made a difference in our decision to stay in the classroom. This allowed for deep exploration behind the meaning of our codes while examining biases based on experiences from our time in the classroom.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to further understand the factors surrounding SE teachers' persistence in the teaching profession. Findings suggest that their decision to persist is influenced by several variables. In the next section, special educators' perspectives and decisions to persist are discussed in terms of the external, employment, and personal factors associated with Billingsley's (1993) conceptual model.

External Factors

Special educators' described the types of communities that surrounded their schools and the views society holds about teachers and teaching as dominant external factors influencing persistence. First, they discussed society's views of teaching as a factor for persistence. Second, they explained how community characteristics influenced persistence.

Societal Views of Teachers and Teaching. Participants ($n = 15$) expressed frustrations with how teachers were portrayed in the media, lack of pay, and how other teacher colleagues perceived the role of a SE teacher. Specifically, participants communicated that the broader U.S. society has little respect for the teaching profession, particularly SE teachers. One participant stated,

Teachers are always in the news. Trying to fight for more pay. Trying to fight for fully funding schools and education. If people thought that education and teachers deserve respect then we wouldn't have to fight for these things. It will be automatic ... teachers in other countries are superstars. Here in America...[pause]...we are at the bottom of the barrel. Especially special education teachers. It's sad. But I try my best to not let it get to me. I try to ignore the noise. And sometimes the noise makes me want to fight even harder for teachers. It makes me want to stay and fight even harder for teachers because we are not who some people think that we are.

Even though teacher pay was discussed in detail by a majority of participants, many of them noted that they did not become teachers believing that they would someday be rich and would not leave because of low pay. Another point on this topic was emphasized when a participant commented:

It makes it hard when you feel like teachers aren't valued in this country...parents lack respect for teachers, and I feel like students are losing respect too. General education teachers are perceived as real teachers, and special education teachers are seen as helpers.

Although these participants expressed difficulty with societal views of them as SE teachers, they discussed trying to ignore the media or the views of others in their school districts in a way that would allow them to move forward in their careers.

School Communities. Although all special educators reported a connection to their respective district that was largely associated with the characteristics of the community (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban), it was teachers in urban school districts ($n = 7$) who stood out as they communicated persistence

based on schools' reputation in these communities. For example, one Black male teacher in an urban district said,

I had a choice to teach in the county [suburban district views as more prestige according to the participant] or in the city [urban school district seen as less prestige]. I'm still going [teaching in the profession] because I know people think these areas are filled with students that can't learn and that teachers who will go teach in the city will just give up. Nope, this community and these kids mean a lot to me even though some people don't care. I have [happen] to still be teaching because I care about these children and this community.

Another SE teacher who teaches in urban schools stated that,

I've only taught in urban schools and I see the community in positive ways that others may not. Although some [teachers] may think it's crazy to teach in my school, I say it's crazy not to have experience teaching in urban schools. A lot of teachers only hear or read negative stories about teaching in urban schools without getting any actual experience. But yet, folks want to cast judgement. I don't see myself teaching any place else because the love I have for these schools and this community is above the negativity that I see and hear about.

As indicated by both SE teachers, they have quite an appreciation for teaching in their respective locales. This is despite their perceptions of how others might portray what it is like to teach in urban schools. These reflections were similar across others SE teachers, including a few teachers from suburban schools ($n = 4$) who expressed appreciation for teaching in these schools and could not see themselves teaching in other types of school settings.

Employment Factors

Special educators explained several employment factors that influenced their persistence. First, they described support from administrators with special education backgrounds, specialized instructional personnel, and induction support. Second, they discussed rewards of working work like student achievement and positive adult outcomes for students.

Administrators with Special Education Backgrounds. Fifteen participants described how having support from their administrator (i.e., principal or assistant principal) helped with alleviating stress and burdens they carried, thus providing a reason they were motivated to stay in the profession. However, these participants noted that, in order to maximize the amount of support these administrators can provide, they must have specific training (e.g., special education compliance) or a background (e.g., degree or certification) in special education. The participants noted how having a principal or assistant principal in their building that is knowledgeable of special education law and compliance concerns meant that they were not the only personnel in their school buildings attending Individualized Education Program team meetings and enforcing legal and compliance statutes regulated by special education law. More than half of the participants agreed that having a principal or assistant principal with knowledge in special education legal and compliance matters also meant that their advocacy was not viewed in an adversarial way, but was accepted by other administration and colleagues because their choices were better understood and supported. One participant explained, "When you have a principal that knows special education then they trust you and you can trust them,

and you feel like they have your back...like you feel supported.” One participant, in comparing her move from a school that had an administrator with special education training to her current school where the principal was not versed in special education law, described how this impacted her ability to get support, adding that “I learned my lesson, and because I know the value of having an administrator who knows special education, this is my motivation in my next school choice.” Additionally, one participant passionately stated,

I am blessed to have a principal that I find supportive. I don't think I could continue like I have if she didn't know special education. Like, as a special education teacher you have to have a principal or assistant principal in your building that knows special education law stuff, and you can trust. It keeps you going.

Support from Colleagues who Provide Specialized Supports. A majority of participants ($n = 14$) described the importance of having related services colleagues and general education colleagues as supports. Related services colleagues are described by these teachers as individuals who provide specialized services to students with disabilities and can be from multiple education disciplines. For example, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 terms specialized instructional personnel as school counselors, physical therapists, school nurses, school social workers, etc., that provide services to students with disabilities. In the current study, SE teachers described specialized instructional professionals, and general education teachers, as personnel capable of providing effective and specialized supports to students with disabilities. One participant explained how having a strong relationship with the paraprofessionals in her classroom is an important part of her support and ultimately why she is not planning to retire any time soon. She stated,

I could retire soon but I have such great relationships with my parapro [paraprofessional] that I will only retire when she does.” Another participant explained that she teaches in a low incidence classroom where one student requires medical services. She recalled how the school nurse at her first school was not helpful because “she did not think it was her job to change the student's feeding tube. However, the nurse that I have now does the work, no complaints, and if it wasn't for her help I [*sic*] probably leave.

Participants also reported how specialized instructional support personnel provide much-needed relief throughout the day for SE teachers and how working alongside these professionals in a meaningful way keeps them motivated. One participant stated, “seeing how hard my team of related services people work with my student keeps me going and motivated to work just as hard, especially when they know what they're doing.” All participants worked in schools where students received some form of access to the general curriculum and viewed collaboration with their general education colleagues as necessary. They believed that general education teachers provide a specialized service, particularly when it comes to academic content areas (e.g., math, science). They believed that when general education colleagues are “tuned in [to the needs of students with disabilities],” as one participant stated, there can be “meaningful and collaborative relationships that motivate you to want to stay working with the kids.”

Induction Support. The value of an effective induction model during their beginning years in the profession resonated with some participants. For this study, induction was described as early-career supports such as mentoring, professional development, observations and feedback, study-groups, and other supports offered through school districts during a new teachers' first few years (e.g., Ronfeldt &

McQueen, 2017). Over half of the participants ($n = 12$) noted key induction strategies that helped prepare them for challenges they might encounter and how these supports factored into their ability to persist in the profession. One participant stated,

I graduated from a residency program and I just feel like the mentoring supports that this program put into place during my first few years was invaluable. I feel like I can continue to teach for a long time because of those early supports.

Another participant responded that in her school district there was strict policy for maintaining monthly contact with an assigned mentor during the first three years, along with attending monthly professional development workshops with her mentor as a requirement for new teachers. She commented that “this foundation [induction and professional development] helped me to stay so motivated over the years because it helped me understand early on what I was getting into and where I can go for supports.” They described these supports as tools that helped them more effectively navigate their understanding of the special education profession and to find tools to overcome challenges that they faced across their careers.

Student Achievement. All participants described convincing moments in their careers when students with disabilities achieved academic success and these moments drove their motivation to stay in the profession. More precisely, 12 teachers noted that seeing students show academic growth influenced their motivation to stay (i.e., when one participant echoed a sentiment, others agreed). One participant captured this moment during one of the focus groups when she commented, “I think this [see students academically achieve] is why some of us keep going. We know our students can learn and when we see this it makes leaving impossible.” Another participant reiterated this point saying, “I just love to see my children grow academically and seeing their personal growth...this is why I stay.”

Positive Adult Outcomes. Some participants ($n = 11$) talked considerably about student success beyond K-12 school life (i.e., with one participant echoing a sentiment and others following in agreement). In particular, they engaged in dialogue about building a foundation to support and increase the number of students with disabilities that graduate from high school and lead productive adult lives. Regardless of levels (e.g., elementary, high school), participants hoped that the foundation they were building as K-12 SE teachers would eventually lead to seeing their current students as adults who could be employed, live independently, and possibly go on to postsecondary education. One participant stated, “If one of the students that I am working with now goes on to college, after the difficulties he had, then that is motivation enough for me.” A frequently shared feeling was the hope of seeing students that they have worked with integrated and living independently in their local communities. One participant explained,

I continue to do this [teaching] because I know the seeds that I am planting will grow and students that I am working with are going to go on to be valued people living in my community and going to college. And that keeps me going.

Prior Experiences. Interestingly, almost half the teachers in the study ($n = 11$) had some level of experience (e.g., previous job) or relationship (e.g., parent) to a person with a disability before employment as a SE teacher that played some role in their choosing the profession and motivating them to persist. Participants defined experiences or having a current relationship with a person with a

disability as empowering and an invested motivation for persistence. They emphasized how students with disabilities can be productive members of inclusive schools and society. One participant reflected on his dual role as the father of a child with a disability and teacher of students with disabilities, commenting,

For me [persisting], it has everything to do with my family...as a parent, I have a child that was identified [diagnosed with a disability], the idea that there could be somebody that is out there completely uncertified working with my son or daughter or someone else's son or daughter is really troublesome. And that's part of the motivation.

Another participant explained that his previous work in a group home inspired him to become a teacher. He explained that he trained to become a teacher to help students focus on academic and functional skills that would lead to greater independence for students with disabilities. The participant stated that "as a former group home manager, I wanted to teach Black students with disabilities that they could live more independently after finishing high school."

Personal Factors

Three themes emerged as stressors for SE teachers that motivated their persistence. Stressors were anxieties concerning relapses in the academic success of students, failing in their role as special educators, and lack of representation in the field. The response to these stressors appeared to create positive forms of motivation for persisting in their careers.

Relapse in the Academic Success of Students with Disabilities. All but one participant ($n = 20$) discussed that they were motivated to stay because they were concerned about their students' success deteriorating. They spoke at length about supports and practices at the school and classroom level that they put into place themselves and were deeply concerned that these supports and practices would crumble if they decided to leave, causing students' academic harm. These supports and practices included (a) instructional approaches; (b) inclusive practices (e.g., benefit of access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities); and (c) support programs for students and families. One participant shared, "If I go then I worry my students will go back to being in self-contained classes. I worked too hard to move them from self-contained to inclusion." This was a commonly shared feeling as another participant stated that she was motivated to persist because

We worked too hard to build partnerships with parents and colleagues, and that all falls apart for me. I am the only one in my school doing that type of work across the aisle, and I think my students' success will suffer if I go because no one else will come in and do that work.

They also felt apprehensive about leaving the profession, concerned that there is a lack of trained professionals to work with students with disabilities and this could harm the inclusion and success of these students in their school districts. Although the SE teachers identified earlier that they do rely on general education teachers for support, they explained that students with disabilities needs are best met when the general education and SE teacher are working together using a collaborative approach. One participant stated that "you know, it's complicated ... sometimes I think about leaving but I got to protect my babies. I don't know what my babies [students] would be left with...they may be pushed back into self-contained classes." Without both types of educators on a student's team, SE teachers believe

students with disabilities cannot have proper inclusive education. For example, one participant stated that they “fear leaving because I don’t know if my kids would survive [academically] because some general education teachers don’t feel like they can learn and don’t feel like they belong in their class.” This protector complex appeared to resonate with a majority of the teachers.

Professional Failure. Participants ($n = 16$) overwhelmingly described fears around failing personally as a as a teacher that motivates them to persist (i.e., again, when one participant echoed a sentiment, others were in agreement). It became evident as the data were analyzed, that a majority of participants entered the profession believing they would have long-lasting careers as SE teachers. Furthermore, participants spoke in a manner suggesting they had little to no desire to leave the classroom to become school administrators or serve in another school-based role. For example, one participant emphasized her concerns through this anecdote:

I spent a lot of my own personal money to become a teacher. This is what I wanted to do. I’m not going to let these issues drive me out of teaching. I will not fail because I can’t fail at this. I would be so disappointed in myself if I fail. I think failing at this is what motivates me too.

Another participant stated that,

I see myself retiring as a classroom teacher because this is all I want to do. I battle in my mind sometimes about how hard it is to be a special education teacher, but I said this is what I was going to do and I can’t let my thoughts defeat me. I got to keep pushing.

They passionately discussed and believed that this was the career that they had chosen and were almost afraid of failing which kept them focused on moving forward with their careers.

Lack of Representation. Quite a few participants ($n = 13$) acknowledged having some awareness of teacher shortages in special education, and some specified shortages based on demographic characteristics or the cross-section of these characteristics that caused them to fear to leave. One participant commented:

I went into special education partly because I knew that I wanted to do good and I knew about the special education teacher shortage. I knew that it was a tough field. If I leave I’m just giving up like the other teachers and factoring into the shortage which goes against why I got into this.

Moreover, Black participants discussed the shortage of teachers of color and how this motivated them to stay in their school building. One Black female educator explained, “I look at all the Black students with disabilities in my school. I’m all they have.” This point was emphasized when a Black male educator participant passionately stated,

As a Black man I’m not represented at my school [as a teacher] but I see a lot of Black boys that look up to me. If I go, then they will have absolutely no one in my school that they can look up to.

Participants who accepted this belief voiced how burdened they are as often the only persons in their school that look like them; however, although this issue created an internal conflict, the participants viewed leaving their students as far worse than having to endure the burden of being an underrepresented minority teacher.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore reasons why SE teachers persist in their careers. Given that special educators are more likely to leave the field at higher rates than their general education colleagues (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), the results of this study provide vital insight into why this phenomenon is ongoing. Overall, many of the study findings aligned with past research and Billingsley's theory that external, employment, and personal factors contribute to SE teachers' decision making. School communities and societal views of teaching emerged as external factors that have an influence on teachers' motivation to persist. The focus group process allowed participants to provide insight into these topics that were raised in the current study, including how these teachers perceive that societal views can influence their beliefs about their role. Additionally, teachers explained major employment factors that influenced their decision to persist. For example, the prominent role of support from school administrators in participants' choice to persist in the field is consistent with the findings of Bettini et al. (2020) who found that a strong predictor of SE teachers' persistence in the profession was their opinion that they had strong administrative support. The findings are also consistent with literature indicating that administrator support is associated with teacher persistence overall (Player et al., 2017). This makes it all the more concerning that this study suggests that such support may be unusual. Participants in the current study stated that they had received the strongest support from administrators who had a background in special education, and it seems likely such backgrounds are rare. For example, research consistently report certification programs for administrators seldom include any formal training on special education (Gümüş, 2015) which backs up participants' impressions that most administrators know little about special education.

Likewise, participants' discussion of the importance of collaborative relationships aligns with the literature and draws attention to a possible source of SE teachers' failure to persist. Vast research suggests that collaboration between SE teachers and other school personnel, including general education teachers, is vital to serving students in the least restrictive environment (e.g., Murawski & Scott, 2019; Scott, Brown et al., 2021). Research is mixed in terms of the effects of collaboration on student outcomes (Van Garderen, et al., 2012) but unproductive collaboration with colleagues remains a barrier for why SE teachers leave the field (Miller et al., 1999; Scott, Bell et al., 2022).

At the same time, findings point to SE teacher passion as a source of promoting teachers' persistence. Specifically, many participants in this study had a relationship with a person with a disability and they connected this relationship with their persistence in the field. This aligns with the findings of Cormier (2020), who found in a study of Black male preservice teachers that these teachers were passionate about entering the field because they had a family member who received special education services or because they themselves had received such services. Likewise, Cormier (2020) quoted an in-service SE teacher who participated in the study who said that the choice to enter and remain in the field could be attributed in part to having a child with autism, and his passion to advocate for his child.

Personal factors that motivated these teachers to persist aligned mostly with Billingsley's (1993) summary of cognitive and affective constructs. Personal factors mostly showed up as psychological stressors and concerns that were adverse, but provided significant reason for participants to persist, including for two Black participants who said they believed it was important, particularly for Black students, that they provide representation. Past research on Black male teachers in special education showed that this concern about representation is common (Cormier et al., 2022; Scott & Alexander,

2019). However, research on the unique challenges involved in being a SE teacher of color is still in its infancy (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Scott, Powell et al., 2021). A larger literature also shows the negative impact of the scarcity of male teachers in K-12 settings (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010) and there is some understanding that racial diversity among teacher educators can improve student outcomes (Atkins et al., 2014; Dee, 2004, 2005; Egalite et al., 2015; Milner & Howard, 2013).

Additional research on teacher persistence indicated that teachers of color struggle emotionally with deciding whether to leave or stay, and the source of this emotional tug-of-war is rooted in personal struggles with racialized working conditions in schools (Scott, 2021). For example, in a recent qualitative study, Scott, Brown and colleagues (2021) found that Black SE teachers persisted in schools because they were afraid that if they quit then students on their caseload may never be taught by another teacher of color during their time in K-12 schools. Although researchers who study teacher persistence have found that teachers of color persist when controlling for what type of program they were enrolled in, for example, (e.g., traditional teacher preparation program (Van Overschelde & Wiggins, 2019), understanding the context and working conditions may better elucidate other reasons, such as those explored in this study, that also explain the persistence of these teachers.

New Considerations

The results of this study provide new insights into the reasons SE teachers choose to persist in their careers. In this study, participants described administrators who have a background in special education as those who provide the most beneficial support. Although not startling, this information provides context for administrator supports noted in survey research (e.g., Bettini et al., 2020; Gertsen et al., 2001). For example, it is not simply enough to have support from an administrator, but participants in this study felt more motivated to persist when their administrators supported their work that was associated with special education compliance and other regulatory topics; milieu that has commonly not been unpacked in previous research on SE teacher retention.

It also should be mentioned that for many participants various indicators of stress drove their choice to persist in the field. The idea that stress and fear may influence persistence for a majority of SE teachers in this study raises questions around how this may impact performance, and whether embracing stress and fear creates a paradox for retention that the field should interrogate. It was also fascinating to discover how some participants interpret the societal views of teaching. However, despite their perception that U.S. society does not value teachers or the teaching profession, they have used this as a driving mechanism to remain in the field.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, although there were some similarities across participants, results were not fully disaggregated by race, gender, participants' length of time in the field, teacher license, classroom setting, or the type of school environmental differences (as defined by geography—urban, rural, suburban—or income level and community resources). Thus, further research should examine perceptions and views of participants on this topic that considers different characteristics of participants, group interactions, relationships between participants, and focus group dynamics. Second, we did not collect detailed information about why some teachers in our sample moved schools or districts during their career. This information could have implications about

their experiences that might influence our discussion about SE teacher persistence.

Additionally, given that the protocol questions were open ended and the general flow of discussion during focus groups, some participants may not have had the opportunity to fully express a response to a question; thus, data is reported in such a way that reports the commonality of themes based on responses from participants that vocalized these expressions. Although the focus group format can promote participation (Vaughn et al., 2013) we cannot attach meaning to participants that were unable to express thoughts to a question. Furthermore, as with all focus group research since these interviews were not individualized it is difficult to determine if some or all of the responses were influenced by responses of other members of the focus groups. Finally, this sample contained the beliefs of 21 SE teachers. Focusing on the beliefs of a higher number of these teachers can help validate the results of this study. Finally, this study included participants with as little as six years' experience and as much as 22 years. Experiences of participants might play a role in the underlying causes of persistence and transferability of the findings.

Implications for Practice and Future Direction

The finding provides a richer understanding of factors special educators associated with persisting in the profession. Future interventions should explore administrative support as well as encourage collaboration by educating administrators and other staff about the special education field. Therefore, based on the findings it may be important to provide specialized training (e.g., professional development, postsecondary education) to school administrators on special education legal and compliance policies, as this may foster positive working relationships between school administrators and SE teachers, and support expectations that are often shouldered solely by these teachers. Second, findings suggest that special educators in the study view support from other colleagues and induction models as potential moderators for persistence. Hence, the implementation of effective induction models for schools could focus on improving collaboration between special educators, general educators, and support personnel. Furthermore, findings demonstrated SE teachers' persistence could be related to cognitive-affective stressors as many of these teachers talked about an intermediate state of emotion, as in being trapped between having a passion for their work and also stressors that motivates them to persist. For teachers with these beliefs, we argue that stakeholders (e.g., teacher preparation programs, school district leaders) should commit to creating spaces and working conditions that eradicate these stressors so these teachers' experiences and decision-making is not reliant on anxiety and fears but is more contingent on the positive attributes of teaching that drives their persistence. Thus, developing and sustaining systems within schools that equips specialized support personnel, school leaders, and other stakeholders with knowledge and skills to implement special education services may be important. Additionally, ways to address lack of representation (e.g., professional development to include culturally responsive pedagogy, and hiring more SE teachers of color) should be considered.

We urge future scholars to devote more time to investigating through qualitative means the experiences of SE teachers, particularly the other 50% of teachers that quite often stay in the profession. The data illuminated the reasons these teachers persist in the profession, but many additional questions remain. For example, how do school administrators without special education training provide support to retain SE teachers? Also, what are the implications for persistence given our sample included teachers licensed through alternate pathway programs (e.g., APL). This point is particularly salient as teacher persistence literature indicated that alternative pathway teachers leave at higher rates than traditionally

prepared teachers (Caver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). How do stressors impact the decision making of SE teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching? Which induction supports are critical for the long-term retention of special educators? Although this study uncovered new knowledge on the topic of SE teacher retention, additional examination including the above-mentioned questions can help to further this discussion.

Concluding Thoughts

Researchers have not fully explored the reasons SE teachers have chosen the field or why they decide to stay, and how those two sets of reasons might relate to each other. Although the research on understanding why SE teachers stay or leave, in general, is robust, the current study highlights that there are unique contextual reasons for why those who teach special education choose to stay. Given the nationwide difficulty in staffing special education positions, further research on this topic is vital. Recruiting the next generation of teachers who have a yearning to make a difference in the lives of students with special needs depends on expanding teacher persistence research and making the necessary changes based on what is discovered.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for this research.

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