Special Education Teacher Job Satisfaction: What Can We Learn from Positive

Organizational Scholarship and Satisfied Special Educators

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Kerra Holden

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COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Committee Chair: Ashlea Rineer-Hershey, PhD

    Doctorate Program Coordinator of Special Education

    Slippery Rock University

_____ Date: __11-30-22__

Committee Member: Toni Mild, EdD

    Professor of Special Education

    Slippery Rock University

_____ Date: __12-1-22__

Committee Member: Robert Isherwood, EdD

    Professor of Special Education

    Slippery Rock University

_____ Date: __12-5-22__

Dr. Keith Dils

    Dean of College of Education

    Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

_____ Date: __12/7/22__

ABSTRACT

Special Education Teacher (SET) job satisfaction and workplace commitment have long remained an elusive goal for many school communities and administrators. Workplace stress and burnout have burdened the role since its inception in 1975, leading to significantly more turnover than in other teaching roles and, more generally, other fields. This turnover, and various efforts to fill SET roles with unqualified educators, negatively affect the learning and school success of over one million students with disabilities each year. This study sought to learn from the small percentage of individuals who choose to stay in the Special Education Teacher role for more than 10 years and report high job satisfaction as well as a sense of thriving at work. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, as well as positive deviance lens, this study sought to understand what school leaders may learn from highly satisfied SETs and which leadership practices and strategies may encourage SET job satisfaction. Furthermore, potential intersections between SET job satisfaction and positive organizational scholarship were examined, to best understand how the field of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) may, if at all, inform the role of special education administrator. The findings of this study extend beyond the intersection of POS and SET job satisfaction and suggest the addition Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives into current conceptualizations of SET job satisfaction and retention.

DEDICATION

To every student who, even for a moment, believed they deserved anything less than an

excellent education and a talented, engaging and enthusiastic teacher.

And to Jesse and Aubriella. Always.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the Special Education Teacher (SET) role, dating back roughly 50

years, attracting and supporting people in the role has proven difficult (Monnin et al, 2021). The

Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 ensured that students with disabilities

received an appropriate public education. While the law has undergone various changes and

revisions over the years, the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act ensured

a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities necessitating the

need for specialized educators to provide the legally mandated services. However, attracting and

maintaining such specialists has proven difficult, both historically and currently.

Special education teacher shortages are reported in 49 states and the District of Columbia

and 98% of school districts nationwide report SET shortages (U.S. Department of Education,

2021). Simultaneously, the enrollment of students with disabilities within the U.S. public

education system continues to rise (Monnin et al., 2021). The intersection of a shortage in SETs

and the increased prevalence of disabilities within the U.S. school system is compounded by an

expected exodus of general and special educators following the COVID-19 pandemic (Vegas &

Winthrop, 2021). Monnin et al. echo the sentiments and fears routinely expressed by

researchers, policymakers and educators in previous decades, "There is a severe need in the field

of special education to address the shortage of educators" (Monnin et al., 2021, para 3). This

national phenomenon requires a response to adequately provide an education for students with

disabilities as mandated by law.

Consistent with national trends, Vermont's educational system experiences a significant

dearth of special education teachers, affecting the learning and experiences of students with

disabilities throughout the state. The commonly used *School Spring* website indicates 162 special

education teacher job openings throughout the state, many of which are expected to remain unfilled (Vermont Agency of Education (AOE), 2021). The SET role remains on the *Vermont Shortage Education Areas for 2021-2022 School Year* (AOE, 2021) list. Additionally, a Vermont publication, *The VT Digger*, reported statewide teacher shortages and added, "Administrators the state over perennially report struggling to find — and keep — educators to work with Vermont's most vulnerable students. And licensing data reflects this" (Duffort, 2021, para. 14).

In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, The Economic Policy Institute described the national teacher shortage as "real, large and growing" (Garcia & Weiss, 2019, para. 3) and suggested districts and communities directly address the workplace factors and conditions which contribute to the plight. Unending research pointed to a clear, looming teacher shortage crisis well before COVID-19 shifted schools, and the role of educators, in the spring of 2020. At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, the National Education Association published poll results in which 32% of respondents indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic lessened the number of years they planned to stay in education (Walker, 2021). Furthermore, additional research indicated that "a much higher proportion of teachers reported job-related stress and depression than the general adult population" (Walker, 2021, para. 2) at the start of the 2021-2022 school year. Research suggests the stress and challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic will likely exacerbate the SET shortage and, thus, students with disabilities access to services and learning.

The Effect of SET Vacancies

In addition to undermining the quality of learning for students in special education, the national SET shortage limits one million students' exposure to highly qualified teachers each year, a trend particularly relevant in low socio-economic and rural schools (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In recognizing and addressing the national SET shortage, the Office of Special Education

Programs (2021), a division of the US Department of Education, indicates the SET shortage

"disproportionately affects children with disabilities and their families due to the many unfilled

positions and high attrition rates among special education teachers, early childhood personnel,

and related services providers" (Office of Special Education Programs, 2020, para 1). It should

be noted that these statistics were calculated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, when SET

shortages persisted though not as intensely. It is likely that the impact of the SET shortage will

increasingly limit access to services for students most in need of individualized instruction.

Projections of the national SET shortage suggest a continued decline of qualified SETs

within our public schools. In an attempt to fill the abundance of open positions, many districts

hire unqualified special education staff with the hopes such employees will become qualified and

skilled during their tenure within the district (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019) though this practice

leads to fewer, if any, effective teaching strategies for students with disabilities (Cancio et al,

2018). Furthermore, constant attempts to fill openings lead districts and special education

personnel to devote limited financial and human resources to recruitment and retention rather

than to learning tools and programs. These challenges are most prominent in high poverty

schools, further limiting the learning and success of students with disabilities living in poverty

(Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Addressing the Gap

While the documentation of the national SET shortage, and its effect on students, families

and communities, dates back five decades, little evidence of closing the gap is found (Jones,

Youngs & Frank, 2013). Currently, 22% of SETs chose to move out of their position, either into

other professions or school communities, each year (Aud et al., 2011). Monnin et al. (2021) note

additional concern about the lack of first-year college students enrolling in special education

teacher preparation programs. As such, the shortage is expected to only worsen in coming years, further limiting the academic and learning success of students with disabilities (Vegas & Winthrop, 2021).

Fortunately, various national and statewide efforts exist to address the SET shortage. In particular, The Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP) *Attract, Prepare, Retain* initiative serves to develop "strategies to attract, prepare, and retain effective personnel—general and special education teachers, early childhood personnel, and related services providers—who have the knowledge and skills needed to provide effective instruction, interventions, supports, and services to children with disabilities" (OSEP, 2021, para. 1). The initiative seeks to achieve these outcomes through hosting a national summit to present research-based strategies to attract and maintain educators. Additionally, OSEP provides recruitment resources to colleges and universities and provides retention resources to states and school systems. The program also serves as a unifying hub for federal and state agencies to share information and materials in supporting educator retention and student outcomes (OSEP, 2021).

Factors Supporting SET Retention & Commitment

In addition to national efforts to attract and retain SETs, researchers persistently attempt to uncover the prevalent challenges in SET attraction and retention. Such research dates back several decades, initially conducted in the 1970s when federal law required the education of students with disabilities in the public school setting (Bettini et. al, 2017). Gersten and colleagues (2001) aptly summarize early research on teacher retention, spanning through the 1970s to 1990s, by identifying the initiation of a "profound revolution (that argued) that in order to increase student learning, we need to understand and then improve the conditions in which teachers work" (p. 550). They argued for an understanding of SET working conditions that

supported job satisfaction and higher workplace commitment rather than merely continued time in the field. That is to say, the research lens shifted from asking, "Who stays in special education?" to, "Who loves working in special education?"

In their efforts to understand SET job satisfaction, Hagaman and Casey (2017) support this shift in research orientation. The authors suggest, "Additional information related to why special education teachers *stay* could also help to further our understanding of protective factors for new special education teachers" (p. 290). While many studies outline special educators' motivations to leave the field of education, few highlight the experiences of highly-satisfied SETs and the factors contributing to their tenure in the field. To this end, the culmination of research addressing the SET shortage reveals that SET commitment and retention are tied to school climate, relationship with colleagues and supervisors, working conditions (Jones et al., 2013), preparedness and professional development opportunities, and student factors (Thorton et al., 2007).

Emerging from resilience theory, *protective factors* and *protective processes* are personal and workplace variables that encourage positive outcomes despite challenging, stressful or disruptive experiences (Richardson et al., 1990). Benjamin and Black (2012) utilized interviews to identify protective factors, both in administrative and collegial support, which encouraged novice SETs to remain in the field. Their work articulated administrative protective factors and processes to include clear expectations, direct observations, positive recognition, and supportive feedback. Protective factors and processes unique to collegial relationships and support included allowing time for colleague connection and support, sharing resources and knowledge, high expectations, and shared responsibility for students across general and special education teachers

(Benjamin & Black, 2012). Their research pointed to a clear need for positive and supportive relationships within special education departments.

SETs Relationships and Retention

In addition to the factors previously outlined, administrative support and relationships emerge as primary influences on SET job retention and commitment. McMahon et al. (2017) indicate that, "Research underscores the importance of collaborative leadership styles and supportive relationships between administrators and teachers and highlights the need for these relationships to be explored…" (p. 503). Specifically, leadership styles which encourage collaboration, support and shared decision-making (Hulpia et al., 2009), and focus on the development of teacher strengths support SET job satisfaction and commitment to the role (Devos et al., 2014). As research points to the impact of leadership style and administrative support on SET job satisfaction, further investigation into the specific leadership strategies and practices that encourage SET retention is warranted.

At the turn of the century, research identified leadership tasks and responsibilities that bolster SET job satisfaction including the provision of adequate resources and learning opportunities as well as ensuring a positive and supportive school culture. Gersten et al. (2001) encouraged special education administrators to set a school culture with particular emphasis on "how the special education program is viewed, by mediating disputes, setting policy, and rewarding meritorious behavior" (p. 551). Gersten et al. also suggested administrators are well suited to design SET roles paying particular attention to four domains (provision of adequate resources, professional development, shared decision-making, and SET support) in pursuit of SET satisfaction with and commitment to their schools.

Research conducted in the recent decade continues to identify discrete practices that support SET commitment and job satisfaction. Opportunities for shared decision-making (Tyler & Brunner, 2014), mentorship opportunities, private and public recognition and thanks, and self-identified areas of professional development (Hagaman & Casey, 2018) are likely to decrease SET attrition and burnout. However, no recent studies are found related to the decision-making process of the 64% of SETs who choose to stay in the field beyond their initial five years of teaching.

Problem Statement

PL 94-142 (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) created the SET role to provide specialized learning services for students with disabilities (US Department of Education, 2020, 1979). However, the critical shortage of SETs has plagued the US public education system since the inception of the role in 1975. Currently, over one million students do not receive needed educational services due to a dearth of skilled educators to deliver necessary and legally mandated instruction (Samuels, 2018). Furthermore, an estimated five million students are exposed to ineffective teaching practices implemented by first-year or unqualified teachers placed in inappropriate roles due to a lack of skilled, qualified educators (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

The factors leading to SET burnout and attrition are well documented and studied. Job stress, lack of student progress, problematic relationships with parents and colleagues, limited collegiality and support, challenging school cultures, and excessive caseloads lead to 14-22% of SETs leaving the field each year (Tyler & Brunner, 2018; Le Cornu, 2013). With such barriers to job satisfaction identified, researchers suggest various means for encouraging SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment such as mentorship programs, adjustment of caseloads

and paperwork requirements, implementation of positive school culture, and opportunities for colleague connection and support (Gilmour & Wehby, 2019). However, suggestions for programmatic changes and increased SET support, supported by decades of research, have yet to result in increased SET retention and workplace commitment within US schools.

Despite the critical influence of the supervisory role on SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment, few studies investigate the decision of satisfied SETs, with demonstrated commitment to the field, to stay in the SET role. That is, research has long asked "Why do SETs leave the field?" though few ask, "Why do SETs stay in the field?" As such, the current research base points to factors that may prevent SET burnout and attrition though few investigate SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment. The experiences of satisfied, committed SETs are not known at this time, nor are the leadership qualities and strategies that support SET retention and commitment. Recent research into SET burnout and attrition indicates, "Effective intervention strategies for burnout do not yet exist" (Park & Shin, 2020, p. 1), urging researchers to move beyond understanding the genesis of burnout towards developing strategies and skills to address this critical dilemma.

Research Purpose & Questions

This study sought to address gaps in research related to understanding the experiences and perceptions of highly satisfied SETs with 10 or more years of work experience in special education and who plan to continue in their SET role. More specifically, the research explored the attributes and strategies of SET supervisors which contribute to SET workplace commitment. That is, how can SET supervisors influence SETs' decision to remain in their school? Furthermore, the study identified parallels between Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)

and SET workplace commitment to investigate if POS practices and research may inform an

understanding of SET retention.

Explored in more detail in Chapter 2, Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) "is

concerned primarily with the study of especially positive outcomes, processes and attributes of

organizations and their members" (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 4). Serving a far broader audience

than the educational domain, POS borrows concepts from positive psychology, appreciative

inquiry, community psychology, organizational development, humanistic organizational

behavior and corporate social responsibility, in addition to POS-specific research, to envision

organizations as virtuous, energizing and thriving communities (Cameron eta al., 2003). SET job

satisfaction and workplace commitment will be explored through the POS lens.

Using a qualitative research approach, the following research questions (RQs) unearthed

factors and practices that promote SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment:

- What can highly satisfied SET's teach us about leadership practices that encourage SET

  retention?

- How might Positive Organizational Leadership practices inform Special Education

  Leadership?

- What leadership practices contribute to SET organizational commitment?

The interview questions posed in the study were designed to answer the questions presented

above. The questions established a research base for future, more narrow research into SET job

satisfaction and workplace commitment. The ultimate goal was to contribute to research

culminating in explicit, discrete practices and strategies special education and school

administrators can implement to encourage SET job satisfaction and commitment.

Conceptual Framework

This research project integrated three concepts in an attempt unravel SET job satisfaction and retention: *positive deviance*, *workplace commitment* and *positive organizational scholarship*. Each of these concepts contributed to the study of SET retention and are explored more explicitly in Figure 1 below. As illustrated in the figure, the intersection of these three concepts supported a deeper understanding of the discreet leadership practices that contribute to SET job satisfaction.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework to Explore SET Job Satisfaction

Positive Deviance
Accessing strategies and perceptions of community members with uncommom responses to a broad problem

Positive Organizational Scholarship
Seeks to identify and highlight factors which contribute to human wellness and thriving, rather than disorder and illness.

Workplace Commitment
Borrowed from the Human Resources field, explores factors which contribute to job satisfaction, contentment at work commitment to the field

Key Terms

The following definitions applied to this study and are important to the reader's understanding of the research purpose and questions.

Special Education Teacher: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), "Most special education teachers work in public schools, teaching students from preschool to high school"

(para. 3) and support students with social, emotional, learning and behavioral disabilities. Special

education teachers are responsible, broadly, for the learning and progress of students with

disabilities and the provision of special education services.

Job Satisfaction: Job satisfaction refers to an individual's sense of fulfilment and contentment

experienced in their day-to-day job responsibilities (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Workplace Commitment: Workplace commitment reflects an individual's desire to remain

employed at a given organization (Fornes et al., 2018).

*Attrition***:** Workplace *attrition* refers to the departure of individuals from a given organization or

field that are not readily replaced (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

*Retention***:** For the purposes of this study, *retention* refers to the maintenance of individuals in a

given organization that fuels consistency and high performance with the organization (Monnin et

al., 2021).

*Positive Organizational Scholarship (PO*S): POS examines and supports organizations in

achieving thriving, productive states by "focusing on positive practices and states that occur

within organizational contexts" (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 5)

Emotional Disturbance (ED): ED is one of 13 areas of disability identification as set forth by the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Criteria for Emotional Disturbance requires a

student demonstrate one or more of the following criteria "over a long period of time and to a

marked degree:"

   (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

(B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and

teachers.

(C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

(D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

(E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school

problems. (US Department of Education, 2017, para. 2).

Emotional Behavioral Disorders (EBD): This term serves as broad description for both

internalizing and externalizing problems which manifest in unusual and maladaptive behaviors.

Many diagnoses fall under this umbrella term included Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder,

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Anxiety and Depressive disorders,

Bipolar disorders and conduct disorders, among others (Ogundele, 2018).

Positive Deviance: Established in the field of community health, Positive Deviance is an

approach to understanding and describing phenomenon, and challenges, by focusing on that

which is "going right in a community to amplify it" (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2020, p. 1) as

opposed to scrutinizing deficits and challenges within a given context.

Organizational Commitment: Organizational commitment refers to the intensity of an

employee's commitment to their workplace or employer rather than their chosen vocation.

Research Hypothesis

This research hypothesized an intersection between positive organizational scholarship

(POS) practices and SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment. Specifically, this

researcher posited that POS strategies can support SETs in their daily work leading to increased

job satisfaction, workplace commitment and retention. Secondly, the researcher hypothesized that POS strategies can provide practical solutions to SET supervisors to encourage SET job satisfaction and, therefore, workplace commitment.

Study Significance

Though the impact and origin of SET burnout and attrition are well researched, few practical solutions exist to address this persistent challenge. Affecting over 1 million students and nearly all communities, the SET shortage, fueled by burnout and attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017), remains stubbornly unresolved. This study sought practical, explicit solutions for SET supervisors and school administrators to maintain their school's SET workforce. Furthermore, this study identified areas of further research to more concretely define the factors and strategies contributing to SET job satisfaction and retention and how, if at all, the field of Positive Organizational Scholarship can inform special education leadership practices.

While the national teacher shortage has remained an unresolved puzzle since the inception of the role in 1975, it continues to negatively impact communities, schools, educators and students across the United States (Monnin et al., 2021). The teacher shortage gained ample research attention and resources well before the COVID-19 pandemic and, with few solutions on the horizon, appears to be exacerbated by the vast, abrupt changes in education initiated by the pandemic in early 2020. Since that time, educators report increased stress and mental health symptoms as well as an intention to leave the field earlier than they predicted prior to the pandemic (Long, 2021). With this in mind, providing SET supervisors with effective, discrete practices and strategies to support SETs is of particular import and urgency at this time.

Delimitations

This study took place in Vermont, a particularly rural and racially/ethnically homogenous state. Additionally, the study took place in the fall of 2022 and accessed SETs who identified as highly satisfied in their role. Participants were selected based on their self-identification as "thriving" as well as their score on the *Thriving at Work Questionnaire*. Participants' resumes reflected ten or more years in the field of special education, and they each verbalized their intention to remain in the field for at least 5 more years. Given Vermont's small population, participants yielded from rural communities. This study included participants able to volunteer their time and energy outside of their work hours. Some participants were recruited by the researcher given her knowledge of their meeting of participant requirements.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into four additional chapters, common along Doctorate of Education dissertation students. Following this chapter, Chapter 2 outlines pertinent literature and necessary concepts. Chapter 3 presents the research design, methodology and instruments utilized to answer the research question and Chapter 4 will present and analyze the study's findings. Finally, Chapter 5 will conclude the study and highlight additional areas of research, limitations and future directions.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter 2 outlines research related to the historical trends and current difficulties in establishing SET job satisfaction and retention. SET job satisfaction is explored on a continuum, with burnout and attrition at one end and high job satisfaction and workplace commitment at the other. Additional concepts inherent in this research study, including positive organizational leadership and positive deviance, will also be explored and highlighted. Additionally, positive organizational scholarship and positive deviance will be explored to understand how these concepts may support SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment. Finally, the concept of *thriving at work* will be explored and highlighted as the pinnacle of SET job satisfaction.

Special Educator Attrition

Impact & Imperative

The field of Special Education faces uniquely high attrition rates which require both examination and significant prevention efforts. Hagaman and Casey (2017) report, "This chronic shortage has created a 'revolving door' in which many new special education teachers only stay for a few years before leaving" (p. 277).

Difficulties in finding and maintaining special educators affect the learning of one million students each year and serve as the facilitator for increasing student-teacher ratios in special education. In 2006, the national special educator-to-student ratio was 14:1. In 2016, the ratio rose to 17:1 (Samuels, 2018). While sources site varying attrition rates, data from 2013 indicates 16% of SETs chose to leave their role in 2013 (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), and this trend is expected to only increase as schools and communities navigate the effects of COVID-19 (Walker, 2021). Importantly, halving current attrition rates would eradicate the SET shortage and replenish necessary services for students with disabilities (Carver-Thomas & Carling-Hammond,

2017). Therefore, any solutions that yield even imperfect results may make a sizeable impact on

the educational outcomes of a vulnerable student population.

Consistent with prior decades of research, the current shortage is sharpest in the most

rural and urban of schools as well as in schools serving students with significant disabilities

(Samuels, 2018). However, 98% of all US school districts report shortages in special educators

(Tyler & Brunner, 2014). Title 1 schools, those in which at least 40% of students come from

low-income families, report attrition rates 50% higher than non-Title I schools. Furthermore,

attrition rates are 70% higher in schools with a majority of students of color as compared to

schools with a white student majority (Carver-Thomas & Carling-Hammond, 2017). Each state

reports a trend in teacher movement from highest poverty, lowest paying districts to those with

the lowest poverty and highest pay rates as their experience and skill increase with time in the

field (Goldhaber et al., 2018). Of course, this trend undermines teacher-student relationships,

school stability, and the learning of our most vulnerable students.

High attrition rates present many barriers in Special Education departments and schools.

Attrition rates limit students' access to highly skilled teachers who have developed a repertoire

of skills from which students benefit (Samuels, 2018), undermine positive school and department

climate (Tyler & Brunner, 2014), and create barriers to the establishment of effective home-

school relationships (Frick et al., 2012).

Furthermore, a lack of qualified SETs drives schools to limit the learning services

available to students and increase class sizes resulting in "inadequate educational experiences for

students, reduced achievement levels and insufficient competence of graduates in the workplace"

(Billingsley, p. 39). Shen et al. (2015) research indicated that in addition to previously-

researched effects of SET attrition, student motivation and attendance also decreases as SET

attrition increases. SET burnout and attrition are only associated with harm and poor outcomes

for our most vulnerable students and school communities (Samuels, 2018). Therefore,

understanding the factors contributing to SET job satisfaction, and the administrative skills and

strategies encouraging SET retention, is in the best interest of students with disabilities as well as

their schools and communities.

The Role of Special Education Teachers

Investigation of job satisfaction and career choices of special education teachers (SETs)

requires a deeper understanding and explanation of the SET role. According to the U.S Bureau of

Labor Statistics (2021), "Special education teachers work with students who have a wide range

of learning, mental, emotional, and physical disabilities" (para. 1). More specifically, SETs:

- Assess students' skills and determine their educational needs.

- Adapt general lessons to meet students' needs.

- Develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each student.

- Plan activities that are specific to each student's abilities.

- Teach and mentor students as a class, in small groups, and one-on-one.

- Implement IEPs, assess students' performance, and track their progress.

- Update IEPs throughout the school year to reflect students' progress and goals.

- Discuss students' progress with parents, other teachers, counselors, and administrators.

- Supervise and mentor teacher assistants who work with students with disabilities.

- Prepare and help students transition from grade to grade and from school to life outside

    of school (para. 6).

The US Department of Labor (2021, para. 2) provides additional SET job responsibilities

including:

- Establish and enforce rules for behavior and policies and procedures to maintain order among students.

- Modify the general education curriculum for special-needs students based upon a variety of instructional techniques and instructional technology.

- Develop or write Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students.

- Maintain accurate and complete student records, and prepare reports on children and activities, as required by laws, district policies, and administrative regulations.

- Develop and implement strategies to meet the needs of students with a variety of handicapping conditions.

- Establish rules or policies governing student behavior.

- Modify teaching methods or materials to accommodate student needs.

- Design psychological or educational treatment procedures or programs.

The US Department of Labor (2021) reports the 2020 median U.S. annual salary for Special Education Teachers was $61,820 based on a ten-month contract (*Wages and Employment Trends*, para. 1). Regarding preparation and education, 47% of US SETs earned a Master's degree, 41% a Bachelor's degree and 12% a post-baccalaureate certification (*Education*, para. 2).

SET Burnout

As one can imagine from the job duties outlined above, the SET role is tied to significant workplace stress. Special educators least satisfied with their role often experience burnout. Jurado et al. (2019) indicate, "The burnout syndrome is characterized by dealing with a range of symptoms related to psychophysical exhaustion, impaired relations, professional inefficacy and disillusion" (p. 1).

Teacher stress correlates with decreased feelings of accomplishment and effectiveness,

increased interpersonal stress at work, neglecting work responsibilities and emotional

exhaustion, and, when experienced for a prolonged period, results in burnout and attrition

(Cancio et al., 2018). Emotional exhaustion is reported to be the most detrimental impact of

teacher stress as it limits SETs ability to engage in self-care activities such as hobbies and

supportive relationships outside of their workplace (McCarthy et al., 2016).

Attrition occurs when the negative experience of burnout exceeds an employee's

preferences or motivations to stay in their role. Cancio et al. (2018) indicate, "When teachers do

not find sufficient coping resources to deal with their stress, they may experience a loss of

enthusiasm and motivation, and may no longer find meaning in their work" (p. 459). Coping

resources, similar to protective factors, are the processes and activities SETs engage in to

manage stress and workplace challenges (Hamama et al., 2012). Examples of coping resources

include organizational practices, physical and mental health interventions and positive peer

interaction. Interviews and records reveal that individuals choose to leave the field when their

coping resources are no longer effective. Currently, 13.5% of the nation's special educators who

choose to leave their role each year report doing so due to unmanageable workplace stress and

burnout (Jurado et al, 2019). Special education administrators would be well positioned to learn

how to support and maintain coping resources within their special education departments to

encourage SET retention and supports for students with disabilities.

The History of SET Burnout

Research related to workplace burnout and attrition in special education dates back to the

1970s when Zabel and Zabel (1983) examined workplace factors and job responsibilities that

influenced SET attrition. Initial findings in this research area revealed "more experienced, more

highly trained, and older teachers tend to experience less emotional exhaustion, less

depersonalization toward their students, and greater feelings of personal accomplishment in their

jobs than their less experienced, less trained, younger colleagues" (p. 255). As this remains true

today (Walker, 2021), it is important to understand the resources available to and experiences of

SETs who chose to stay in the field beyond their initial five years. Understanding the knowledge

and experience of veteran SETs may support special education leaders to more effectively

support novice SETs in achieving the job satisfaction of their satisfied, more experienced

colleagues.

In the later 1980s, Bonnie Billingsley (1993) began identifying contributing factors to

special educator attrition and reported attrition correlated with various workplace-related

conditions such as work rewards, work experiences, sense of community, professional training,

and induction experiences. Subsequent research pointed to concerns in policy which complicated

the special educator role (Billingsley & McLesky, 2004), as well as challenges related to

workplace conditions, professional development, teacher preparation, workplace decision-

making and autonomy, and administrative support (Billingsley, 2004). Here, researchers began

to understand SET job satisfaction and retention as a function of their workplace and school

environment, rather than solely personal factors over which supervisors had no control.

Supervisors and special education administrators were conceptualized as important components

in SET job satisfaction and retention.

SET burnout and attrition continued to gain research attention in the early 2000s. In their

review of the literature, Fore, Martin, and Bender (2002) identified "increasing paperwork loads,

stress associated with job requirements, a lack of planning time, lack of support from

administrators, lack of proper self-development training as well as the types of disabilities

teachers deal with in the classroom" (p. 39) as the most prevalent SET job obstacles. Inherent in many SET roles is that of case manager, which includes preparing for and holding meetings, and completing accompanying documentation, to ensure compliance with state and federal laws. The added responsibilities of compliance and paperwork complicates the SET role and one's ability to manage the many responsibilities within legally mandated timeframes. The authors outlined various methods and strategies to support teacher job satisfaction and noted, "Mentoring and supervision may enhance retention by providing more support for beginning special education teachers" (Fore et al., 2002, p. 39). Supporting novice SETs in understanding and managing their many obligations may help manage the stress and burnout common among novice SETs.

Current SET Burnout and Attrition Trends

Despite five decades of research and a plethora of studies aimed at understanding SET burnout and attrition, SET attrition rates in the US remain "about twice as high as in high-achieving countries such as Finland, Singapore and Canada" (Cancio et al., 2018, p. 458), and the U.S. Department of Education reports that 8-10% of SETs continue to leave the field each year (Westervelt, 2016). A 2018 article indicated, "Special educators face increasing or large caseloads, lack of clarity in their roles, lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and minimal collaboration with colleagues" (Concio et al., 2018, p. 459). While the challenge and impact of SET burnout and attrition are well researched and deeply understood, invested individuals and organizations have yet to find a way to deliver solutions and strategies to impact the daunting statistics and negative experiences of SETs (Cancio et al., 2018). The following research outlines what is currently known about SET burnout and attrition in an attempt to understand and intervene in these given domains.

Factors Contributing to SET Burnout

SET stress, burnout, and attrition are attributed to a constellation of difficulties emerging across personal, professional, and workplace domains (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). For the purpose of this literature review, contributing factors stemming from professional (role-related) and workplace (school-related) domains will be explored as they relate to broader research questions. Factors related to demographic, such as race and age, as well as personal, such as coping mechanisms and personality, domains will be excluded. Professional factors include those inherent in the SET role, and workplace factors include those specific to the school or work setting of SETs (Bettini et al., 2017).

Challenging Student Behavior

Student noncompliance, refusal, distraction, and aggression serve as principal promoters of teacher stress and job dissatisfaction (Owens et al, 2018). Brunsting and colleagues (2014) indicated working with students with Emotional Disturbance correlates with increased stress symptoms such as emotional dissociation, overwhelm, and chronic tension. The authors reported, "Although all SETs are at risk for burnout, those who teach students with Emotional Disturbance (ED) appear to be especially at risk" (p. 684). They emphasize the importance of professional development related to classroom management and the causes of emotional disturbance to support new SETs as well as those working with students with behavioral challenges and ED.

Experiences specific to challenging student behavior which promoted teacher stress and burnout include teacher-directed violence (verbal insults, threats, physical posturing, physical aggression), and the use of physical restraint and physical injury caused by a student (Albrecht et al, 2009). Student absenteeism and withdrawal also encourage teacher stress and, in combination

with acting out and aggressive behaviors, serve as a primary reason for new teachers to leave the profession (Bettini et al, 2020). Gilmour and Wehby (2020) aptly summarize the challenges in managing student behavior in reporting that student behavior serves as "a strong predictor of teacher turnover or intentions to leave teaching" (p. 1045).

Role Conflict & Ambiguity

The definition and expectations of the SET role have changed drastically since its inception in 1975 and continue to ebb and flow depending on school and student needs as well as available resources (Brungsting et al., 2014). In their recent work educating school leaders in SET retention, Billingsley and colleagues (2020) indicate, "SETs' roles are often fragmented, as they are responsible for accomplishing a wide variety of tasks, many of which are not related to students' learning needs" (p. 10). The disconnect between preservice learning and conceptions of the SETs role, job descriptions, and actual daily responsibilities creates confusion and ambiguity related to the SET role and, ultimately, serves as a contributor to SET stress and attrition (Billingsley, 2019). By simplifying the many responsibilities of SETs, school leaders can support SET success in fewer areas rather than the fragmentation of learning in dissimilar areas.

Recent research indicates SETs spend an average of 40% of their worktime on teaching activities with the remaining 60% divided among paperwork, discipline, attending meetings, planning, supervising, and personal time (Billingsley et al., 2020). College students' expectations of the SET role as compared to the lived experience of a SET differ drastically, as do the training programs and the work expectations of SETs. These inconsistencies and large discrepancies between expectations, job descriptions, and daily work requirements undermine teacher

satisfaction and result in burnout and disillusion of SETs, who feel underprepared and

overwhelmed by a role which they did not sign up for (Park and Shin, 2020).

OSEP's *Attract, Prepare, Retain* initiative (2021) offers various solutions to the

challenge of role ambiguity in special education. Such solutions include more robust learning

and oversight of higher-education programs as well as mentoring and induction programs as

SETs begin in a new role or school. OSEP (2021) also outlines the importance of individualized

professional learning opportunities for SETs to seek support in challenging vocational areas.

Finally, the *Attract, Prepare, Retain* program emphasizes the importance of strong relationships

and supports among administrators and novice SETs and situating SETs in roles consistent with

their education and previous roles (OSEP, 2021).

Unsupportive and detached relationships with school leaders and administrators are

often-cited contributors to SET burnout and the decision to leave the profession (Brungsting et

al., 2014; Young et. al, 2011). Salient tasks of school leaders, particularly principals, which

impact SET job satisfaction, include implementing a positive school culture, encouraging SET

and general education teacher collaboration and interactions, providing professional development

activities, and ensuring individualized support to SETs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Surveys of

SETs indicate that school cultures supporting shared responsibility of students with disabilities

and a positive, growth-oriented culture are more likely to retain seasoned special educators as

compared to school cultures that expect SET and general education teachers to operate separately

and hold low standards for students with disabilities (McLeskey et al., 2004).

Administrators' understanding and support of the SET role can be exemplified in various

actions such as examining and adjusting SET caseloads, tailoring professional development

opportunities to individual SET needs, advocating for increased resources with members of the

public and school board, designating time with individual SETs to understand their workload and

needs, and responding to SET requests (Billingsley, 2020). Administrators can also consider

long-term goals to support SET retention such as building trust, communicating regularly,

measuring SET stress, and ensuring necessary skills and knowledge for SET success

(Billingsley, 2020). Billinglsey et al. (2020) indicate SETs are more likely to stay when

experiencing a feeling of success at work while, simultaneously, benefitting from the provision

of necessary supports in order to achieve success. School administrators are well-served to

continuously measure and ensure these two factors to support SET job satisfaction and retention

within their schools.

Professional Development & Teacher Training

In addition to administrative support and relationships, teacher training and professional

development are particularly salient employment factors to which administrators may pay

particular attention. Teachers' ratings of their self-efficacy, or ability to do their job well, and

preparation to engage meaningfully and effectively at work positively correlate with SET job

satisfaction and retention (Pas et al., 2012; Ruble et al., 2011). Furthermore, SETs who perceived

their supervisors as particularly aware of and responsive to their professional development needs

reported increased workplace commitment and job satisfaction (Redding & Smith, 2016). Given

the importance of teacher self-efficacy and sense of capability at work, administrators would be

well positioned to acknowledge the role of student-teaching experiences and undergraduate

training quality on beginner SETs' job satisfaction and, when able, help to fill the gaps left by

underprepared and/or underexposed SETs (Connelly & Graham, 2009).

While ample research highlights the importance of supportive working relationships

among SETs and their supervisors as factors attributing to job satisfaction, Albrecht and

colleagues' (2009) research defined what such support may look like to SETs. Their research

reported that administrative support most closely correlated with SET retention and workplace

commitment and held a balance between "freedom and flexibility to implement programs for

their students" (p. 1014) and, simultaneously, daily check-ins, regular communication, and

positive acknowledgements. Administrative support included the provision of professional

support such as paraprofessionals, adequate supplies and resources, teacher-driven schedules,

and professional development opportunities (Albrecht et al., 2009). The authors concluded, "The

existence of administrative support in schools is a defining factor of the retention of special

educators in schools and their continuance in their current positions" (p. 1018).

      Billingsley and colleagues (2020), many of whom devoted their career to understanding

and preventing SET burnout and attrition, recently published a research plea to school leadership

in understanding and responding to their role in SET attrition. The article, "Improving Working

Conditions to Support Special Educators' Effectiveness: A Call for Leadership," synthesizes

years of research related to the factors contributing to SET attrition and, most importantly,

provides an outlined agenda of necessary future steps for SET supervisors, educational leaders,

teacher educators, and professional organizations invested in student success. Relevant to SET

supervisor and school leadership roles, the following agenda items remain salient to this research

project:

- Ensure principal preparation programs and professional development opportunities
  address special education laws, the role and responsibilities of the SET position, specific
  learning related to supervising and supporting SETs, and strategies for increasing positive
  work environments for SETs (p. 21).

- Create short and long term plans to improve SET working conditions based on both

  national and regional data and research as well as facilitated conversations with local

  SETs related to the supports necessary in order to achieve high performance within their

  roles.

The authors note, "Repeatedly, research findings and professional reports have identified

working conditions that have interfered with SETs main goal- improving student outcomes"

(Billingsley et al., 2020, p. 22). It is the aim of this research to support SET supervisors and

school leaders with practical solutions to replacing such working conditions with those

supportive of SETs and student learning.

Additional Factors Leading to SET Attrition

While salient to the SET job experience, the aforementioned phenomena (challenging

student behavior, role conflict and ambiguity, and administrate support) do not encompass an

exhaustive list of factors contributing to SET job stress and attrition. While these factors

represent the most often cited and most impactful workplace and professional challenges, the

decision to leave the field of special education involves many intersecting dynamics. Other

important variables deserving of additional research attention include slow student progress and

lacking engagement (Park & Shin, 2020), SET decision-making and autonomy (Klassen & Chiu,

2010), and post-secondary training and preparation (Brunsting et al., 2014).

SET Job Satisfaction

While this paper has outlined the catalysts and reasons for SET burnout and attrition,

much research points to many factors that may support special educator job satisfaction and,

ultimately, retention. For example, Boyd et al. (2011) found that schools which prioritize staff

relations, school climate, and administrative support are more likely to retain highly qualified

special educators. Similarly, Hagaman and Casey's (2017) research indicated that lacking

support and unproductive collegial relationships may serve as a primary reason for special

educators to leave the field within their first three years of service. The authors posited,

"Providing a mentor was an effective way to support new teachers in developing skills and

relationships that should result in lower attrition rates" (p. 286). Mentor support included peer

connections, navigation of the building and personnel resources, clarifying role expectations and

answering questions as they arise (Hagaman & Casey, 2017).

Koutrouba and Michala (2017) identified additional components of educator job

satisfaction. Autonomy in the classroom and cooperation among teachers, school staff, and

administration served as primary catalysts for educator job satisfaction followed by collegial and

professional support and, lastly, "shared experiences in a collegial atmosphere" (2017, p. 85).

Interestingly, Rutkowska and Zalech (2015) explored community and colleague perceptions of

job satisfaction among physical education (PE) teachers and the impact such perceptions and

assumptions had on the PE teachers' job satisfaction. Additional research related to PE teacher

job satisfaction found a correlation between PE teacher job satisfaction and self-efficacy and

classroom autonomy (Yildirim, 2016). As this research in physical education is relevant in

special education, the concept of job satisfaction more broadly is explored to inform that of

SETs.

Job Satisfaction Globally: What Can We Learn From Other Fields?

Research on job satisfaction among the general employment base may provide insights

for the field of Special Education. Mavromaras at al. (2012) explored correlations between

education-job match (specifically under-employment), gender, and wages among the general

Australian population. Their findings regarding university graduates offers insight related to gender in the workplace: "Both males and females dislike being over-skilled, but it is females who suffer an over-skilled wage penalty" (p. 304). Given that the large majority of SETs are female (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020), this data may be particularly relevant to the conceptualization of SET job satisfaction.

Similarly, Brinia et al. (2021) compared the roles of financial gain and moral satisfaction in teacher's work gratification and efficiency. The researchers learned that the presence of both variables contributed to the highest levels of teacher satisfaction and job performance. The presence of strong workplace relationships and managerial support emphasized the impact of financial compensation and moral satisfaction at work, suggesting the necessary components of teacher satisfaction include not just relational support and emotional connection but, also, adequate financial compensation (Brinia et al., 2021). It is interesting to note that most research related to SET job satisfaction and retention focused on workplace and personal factors though limited research focused on financial compensation and teachers' perceptions of their wage. This, perhaps, serves as an area for additional research and understanding in considering avenues to address the national SET shortage.

Further considering the role of financial compensation in public sector roles, Lee and Sabharwal (2016) explored the influence of education-job match, task variety, work-related training (professional development), and monetary compensation on employees in public and private sector work. Their research revealed, not surprisingly, "that public and non-profit employees are more likely to be motivated by intrinsic rewards than by extrinsic rewards compared to for-profit workers" (Lee & Sabharwal, 2016, p. 41) though correlations are discussed related to education-job match, salary and professional development opportunities.

These findings prompt an important question to be considered in future research related to educator pay: How might increased financial compensation attract more workers to the field of education, thus addressing the SET shortage, if educator pay were that of higher-paying professions?

In the realm of financial compensation, other research indicates workers with bachelor's degrees or beyond generally "do expect a satisfactory pay level" (Jayasingam & Yong , 2013, p. 3914), and "the absence of an adequate pay does dampen their desire to remain in the organization. However, high levels of pay satisfaction do not have the ability to keep them committed" (Jayasingam & Yong, 2013, p. 3915). Their findings related to pay and organizational commitment are well summarized in stating, "An acceptable pay appears to be a prerequisite for them to want to stay but not a factor that keeps them motivated to stay" (Jayasingam & Yong , 2013, p. 3915). This research may be particularly important to understand SET mobility and the tendency of educators to move from one school to another to access higher salary schedules.

Regarding promotions and upward mobility in organizations, Kosteas' (2011) research indicated that promotions, moving into a role with increased responsibility and compensation, increases job satisfaction for approximately two years before the affects begin to decline. Similarly, the expectation of a promotion in the near future also increases job satisfaction. As such, the prospect and experience of "moving up" appear to play an important role in job satisfaction.

SET Job Satisfaction and Relationships

Both in education-specific and general employment research, findings point to the importance of colleagueship and positive relationships within the workplace. This remains particularly true in special education programs. Ramos and colleagues note, "When teachers feel good in their work environment and experience warmth, empathy, affection and positive emotions, satisfaction levels tend to rise" (Ramos et al, 2017, p. 7).

This information informs Platsidou's research findings which indicate that teachers with higher Emotional Intelligence "are likely to experience less burnout and job satisfaction" (Platsidou, 2010, p. 60). The author defines emotional intelligence (EI) as the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions and to identify and affect other people's emotions (Platsidou, 2010). Emotional Intelligence is a crucial factor in managing stress as well as in seeking and providing support to others. EI skills enable teachers to build resiliency and coping skills within their work (Platsidou, 2010). With such skills, SETs are more adept at managing the stress that undermines their workplace satisfaction and ultimately supports the decision to the leave the field.

Similarly, Dapula and Castono (2017) place emphasis on the role of school leaders in encouraging teacher job satisfaction in declaring

> …It is the responsibility of school leaders to foster positive attitude, understand what matters to people, and in particular, know precisely what makes them stay in the organization which are crucial to effective leadership…Overall, the success of the institution is dependent on the working relationship of school leaders and followers (p. 11).

While it is clear that supportive relationships and an emphasis on emotional wellness support SETs in remaining in their role, the impact of special education and building-based administrators in SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment is less clear. In their research on cultivating an effective special education community, Bettini and colleagues found, "Although emerging research suggests principals play an important role in cultivating effective special educators, the roles of district leaders, specifically, the roles of local special education administrators (LSEAs), have been less closely examined" (Bettini et al., 2017, p. 111). Similarly, Ingelsby's (2017) research revealed a dearth of resources and training programs for elementary educators charged with supervision of special educators. To this end, Bettini et al reported, "Systemically cultivating a high-quality special educator workforce has, therefore, become a central responsibility for LSEAs...though few, if any, resources exist to support LSEAs in doing so effectively" (Bettini et al., 2017, p.113). While current research points to the role and responsibility of administrators in preparing and supporting SETs, such research has yet to provide practical solutions to clarify these expectations. As is the intention of this study, the necessary strategies and skills of SET leaders to support their SET workforce remain vague.

How to Keep SETs Satisfied: A Gap in Research

Despite the research base highlighting the imperative of positive community and relationships within special education departments, little research is found related to strategies for cultivating positive community within special education departments. That is to say, the challenge is well identified and understood, though practical solutions to address the challenge remain ambiguous. As noted above, there is a clear need to improve school leadership's ability and capacity to build positive relationships and community in an attempt to secure educator job commitment though without adequate solutions to address this need.

Positive Organizational Leadership & SET Job Satisfaction

As poor relationships and ineffective leadership are routinely identified as deterrents to Special Educator retention (Samuels, 2018), identifying positive leadership practices can be assumed to be a supportive factor to encourage SET retention. Hagaman and Casey (2017) found that a lack of supportive relationships could serve as a primary catalyst for first year SETs' departure from the field. Similarly, Bettini et al. (2017) reported that supportive relationships encourage resilience and retention among new special educators and may serve as the primary means of retention.

Cameron (2013) emphasizes the impact of positive relationships in stating that positive energy "is the most powerful and important predictor of organizational and personal success" (p. 49) and posits, "Positively energizing leaders create extraordinary high performance in their organizations and in their people" (p.4). He further states:

> When individuals are exposed to a positively energizing leader in their workplace, they
> have significantly higher personal well-being, higher satisfaction with their jobs, higher
> job performance and higher levels of family well-being than those without exposure to
> positively energizing leaders. (p. 55)

Examples of these practices include identifying positive values, seeing the common good among employees and the company, mapping positive energy within the organization, and enhancing positive relationships (Quinn, 2015). The more specific of these strategies is *Positive Energy Mapping.* This activity asks all employees to complete a survey identifying positively energizing individuals and potential leaders within the organization. The identified *positive energizers* are then interviewed to understand their values, beliefs and practices and to understand the intersection of their beliefs with the behaviors and attitudes identified as positive

and productive by their peers (Quinn, 2016). This activity supports leaders in identifying positive

energy within the organization as well as the individuals most valuable in raising positive

energy, productivity and resilience in times of stress.

The above-noted positive practices are hypothesized to contribute to special educator

retention, job satisfaction and job performance. As such, it is in the best interest of school

districts, students, families and communities to adopt positive leadership practices. It is the

assumption of this researcher that doing so will likely lead to increased Special Educator job

satisfaction, resilience, and retention.

Thriving at Work: A New Lens for Understanding SET Retention

The field of Positive Organizational Scholarship offers an important conceptual shift to

the SET attrition research base. Proposed by Spreitzer and colleagues (2005), the concept of

thriving at work can be considered the ultimate in employee job satisfaction and workplace

commitment. The authors broadly describe the workplace emotional continuum in stating,

"Employees vary in the degree to which they languish or thrive at work. Whereas languishing

captures the subjective experience of being stuck, caught in a rut or failing to make progress,

thriving captures the opposite" (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 537). Employees are noted to thrive at

work when achieving "the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of

vitality and a sense of learning at work" (Spreitzer et al, 2005, p. 538).

Interestingly, the authors posit three behaviors that support thriving at work, each that

aligns with research related to SET job satisfaction: task focus, exploration, and heedful relating.

These behaviors, when observed consistently and with vigor, result in the experience of thriving

at work. *Task focus* describes "the degree to which individuals focus their behavior on meeting

their assigned responsibilities at work" (Spreitzer et al, 2005, p. 540). *Exploration* refers to a

sense of curiosity, engagement and learning with the individual's role, and *heedful relating* refers

to employees "look(ing) out for one another" and understanding how their successful work

completion and reliance "fit within the jobs of others to accomplish the goals of the system"

(Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 541). Examples of these three aspects of thriving at work specific to

special education include:

- Task Focus: Planning and facilitating an Evaluation Planning meeting for a

  student referred for special education services with specific attention paid to the

  requirements and timeline of an Evaluation Planning meeting (task focus).

- Researching supports and strategies for working with parents initially learning of

  their student's eligibility for special education due to a diagnosis of Autism

  Spectrum Disorder (exploration).

- Seeking support from colleagues who previously shared a newly-identified

  disability area with a family at an Evaluation Results meeting and asking for

  advice and support in doing so (heedful relating).

These three areas align with research indicating SETs are more satisfied in their roles

when feeling effective and productive, offered opportunities for professional development and

shared learning, and when operating within a positive school culture and benefitting from

supportive collegial relationships (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

In addition to the three identified behaviors, Spreitzer and colleagues (2005) outline

contextual factors within a workplace supportive of thriving at work. These factors include

decision-making discretion, broad information sharing, and a climate of trust and respect.

Decision making discretion is the autonomy and respect granted to employees which enables

them to make decisions as they see appropriate and supportive of the organization's goals and

values. *Broad information sharing* references regular and reliable communication to and among employees which allows them to complete their work as required and to seek answers and support as needed. A *climate of trust and respect* includes a workplace environment and culture which engenders appreciation for individuals and their roles (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Again, these factors directly align with research results of SET job satisfaction in which autonomy and shared decision-making (Devos et al., 2014)), appropriate and targeted communication (Tyler & Brunner, 2017), and positive school culture (Bettini et al., 2017) were found to support SET job retention.

Organizational Commitment & SET Job Satisfaction

Similar to positive organizational scholarship and thriving at work, the concept of and research related to organizational commitment has much to offer the current, national retention plight in special education. As noted by Jordan et al. (2017), "Individuals who are more psychologically attached to the organization, will be more productive and satisfied" (p. 19). Haque et al. (2019) report organizational commitment increases positive workplace culture, supportive relationships, and general morale.

Given the parallels between these outcomes and the previously highlighted special educator job preferences and needs, educational leadership would be well served to not only increase special educator job satisfaction but, most importantly, organizational commitment. This, of course, raises the following questions: What leadership practices increase organizational commitment? What can be gleaned from research at the intersection or organizational commitment and special education?

Defining and Operationalizing Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is defined as "an individual's identification and involvement with a specific organization" (Jordan et al., 2017, p. 19) and, as proposed by Meyer and Allen (1991 & 1997), presents in three subparts: affective, normative, and continuance commitment. *Affective commitment* refers to an employee's emotional attachment, identification with, and involvement in an organization. *Continuance commitment* refers to the employee's perceptions of the costs and benefits related to leaving the organization, and *normative commitment* refers to an employee's perception of their obligation to remain within the organization (Jordan et al., 2017).

In earlier research, Barge and Schlueter (1988) provide two theoretical frameworks of organizational commitment: moral and calculative orientations. The authors posit, "Organizational commitment from a moral orientation is measured along three attitudinal factors: identification, involvement and loyalty" (p. 2), whereas calculative organizational commitment, as the name suggests, refers to a "careful calculation of the costs and benefits of remaining within an organization" (Barge & Schlueter, 1988, p. 2). While these orientations most often function simultaneously, the authors indicate individuals, based on personality and circumstance, may consider and differently weigh various variables when deciding their organizational commitment.

The benefits of organizational commitment are vast, suggesting organizational leadership is well served to prioritize and encourage such commitment among employees. The benefits include lower turnover rates and costs, greater productivity (Westover et al., 2010), increased organizational citizenship behavior (Pohl & Paille, 2011), increased decision making behavior (Barge & Schlueter, 1988), and increased positive interactions and relationships among

employees (Jordan, Miglic, Todorovic & Maric, 2017). It is clear that these benefits would greatly affect special education and provide a potential buffer against special education attrition.

Organizational Commitment in Special Education

School effectiveness and quality have long been measured in a myriad of ways, including though the lens of teacher commitment and longevity (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994; Ebmeier, 2003). Gersten and colleagues (2001) indicate that organizational commitment, or commitment to one's school and community, often predicates commitment to teaching. That is, educators are more likely to commit themselves specifically to their colleagues and students rather than, more broadly, to the teaching profession. SETs are more likely to state *I want to work in this school community* before declaring *I want to be a special education teacher*.

Examining the intersection of organizational commitment and SET job attrition, Jones et al. (2013) indicate, "One important predictor of teachers' career decisions is their commitment to their schools and to the teaching profession" (p. 366). They add that teachers demonstrating organizational commitment are "more likely to exert effort in their jobs, work towards school goals and stay in their schools" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 366). Their findings indicated that colleague relationships and support correlated with workplace commitment and retention, an observation found to be particularly true for new SETs. They noted, "When novice teachers feel that support is available to them- and when they value this support- it is likely they will feel more committed to their schools" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 377). While this link between supervisory support and teacher commitment received ample research attention in previous decades, research attention on the topic has been somewhat peripheral in recent years.

Anderman (1991) initially discussed the link between teacher commitment and school factors in finding "that relational constructs were the most important predictors of teachers' dispositions toward their work" (p. 17). Additionally, he made various recommendations for school leaders to encourage teacher commitment including emotional and practical support, establishing a caring school culture and encouraging teacher interactions and shared decision-making (Anderman, 1991). Cherkowski (2012) continued this line of research in noting that leaders' ability to demonstrate compassion and care towards teachers was a primary contributor to teacher satisfaction and school commitment. Cherkowski's research is echoed by that of Dumay and Galand (2012) in which school leadership's capacity to demonstrate compassion and motivation correlated with increased teacher organizational commitment.

Organizational Commitment & Positive Leadership Practices

Previously presented research makes clear that the practices and behaviors of school leadership greatly influence SETs' commitment to both their school and position. With organizational commitment serving as an antidote to SET burnout and attrition (Hulpia et al., 2009), leadership practices that amplify organizational commitment should be prioritized in special education settings. As previously presented, it is likely that the field of Positive Organizational Scholarship, and practices unique to this field, have insight to offer school leaders and special education administrators. The following research highlights connections between positive organizational leadership and workplace commitment, an area particularly salient to school leaders and SET supervisors.

Haque et al. (2019), in discussing the connection between "desirable, responsible action by leaders" (p. 2) and organizational commitment, state positive leadership practices "would reduce employee uncertainty about their work roles and increase positive attitudes towards their

work roles" (p.2). Akar (2018) reported a strong correlation between teacher perceptions of

leadership, their relationship with their supervisor, and organizational commitment. Similarly,

Cansoy (2018) reviewed various research literature "highlighting the integral role of leadership

practices and perceptions in employee organizational commitment" (p. 41). These findings can

likely inform and support special education administrators in understanding how their actions

and leadership affects SETs job satisfaction and workplace commitment.

Using a Positive Defiance Framework to Understand SET Job Satisfaction

Given the thorough and historical research base related to special educator attrition,

inquiry into effective, thriving special educators is warranted. Using a Positive Deviance

framework and studying particularly satisfied and committed SETs, the goal of this study is to

identify and learn from special educators who report high job satisfaction and a sense of thriving

at work. Such special educators, those who report, "I love my job" while acknowledging the

difficulties inherent in the position, are exactly the focus of study in Positive Deviance work.

Defining & Positioning Positive Deviance in Research

Rooted in community health, Positive Deviance is "an asset-based approach that

identifies what is going right in a community to amplify it, as opposed to focusing on what is

going wrong in a community and fixing it with outside expertise" (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2020,

p. 1). Others describe Positive Deviance as "thriving in a hostile environment" (Lapping et al.,

2002, p. 128) and "the intentional departure from institutional performance norms towards the

achievement of something greater" (Walls & Hoffman, 2013, p. 253). Singhal and Svenkerud

(2020) summarize Positive Deviance (PD) in stating, "The PD approach is based on the premise

that every community has individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies

enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers although everyone has access to the same resources and challenges" (p. 3). Given that the overwhelming majority of research attention has been paid to the challenges inherent in the SET role, a PD approach enables an understanding of the factors supportive of SET job satisfaction and retention.

Established in the field of Community Health in the 1990s, the concept of Positive Deviance (PD) proves helpful in other fields, as well. For example, a PD framework supported researchers in understanding strategies that reduced school dropout in Argentina (Singhal & Svenkerud, 2019), encouraged school nurses to identify and build their leadership capacity within schools (Ladd, 2009), cultivated practices among boards of directors which influence positive organizational outcomes (Walls & Hoffman, 2013), and identified practices which encourage moral business practices within an organization (Sekerka, Comer & Godwin, 2014, p. 119). In each of these instances, seeking to understand the positively positioned outliers enabled researchers to identify and explore factors which enabled exemplars to succeed in a demanding, if not disparaging, environment.

Marsh and colleagues (2004) outlined the six steps of the Positive Deviance (PD) approach First, researchers develop case definitions followed by the identification of "four to six people who have achieved an unexpected good outcome despite high risk" (Marsh et al., 2004, p.1177). Next, the researcher "interviews and observes these people to discover uncommon behaviors or enabling factors that could explain the good outcome" (Marsh et al., 2004, 1177). Researchers then analyze the findings to "confirm that the behaviors are uncommon and accessible to those who need to adopt them" (Marsh et al., 2004, p.1177). Subsequent steps require the design and implementation of behavior change activities, and finally monitoring and measuring such changes for effectiveness (Marsh et al., 2004).

For the purposes of this study, the initial steps of the PD approach are most appropriate,
in which positive outliers are identified and interviewed to understand the aspects of their
thinking, behaviors, and assumptions that are supportive of achieving exemplar results. A visual
summary of the six steps of the PD approach follows.

Figure 2.

The Six Steps of the PD Approach

1. • **Develop** case definitions (key terms)
2. • **Identify** 4-6 individuals who achieved positive outcomes despite risks
3. • **Interview** and/or **observe** these individuals to identify and understand behaviors that contributed to uncommonly positive outcome
4. • **Analyze** behaviors to connect with uncommon outcome and consider how to promote behaviors in other individuals and the group/community
5. • **Design** behavior change activities for group/community implementation
6. • **Monitor** intervention and **evaluate** results, **consider** effectiveness of intervention

(Marsh et al, 2014)

PD and POS to Support an Understanding of SET Workplace Commitment

Cameron and Caza (2004), primary researchers and theorists in the field of Positive
Organizational Scholarship (POS), highlight the intersection of POS and Positive Deviance (PD)
practices in stating, "POS investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and
their members flourish and prosper in especially favorable ways" (p. 731). That is, POS is a
framework for understanding individuals and organizations who thrive, as opposed to fail. PD
sits in opposition to traditional methods of understanding what is wrong with individuals and

systems and, instead, seeks to understand what is right and most successful in unfavorable conditions.

While POS has long served as a lens to evaluate financial and community health problems through PD practices, such a perspective (POS) and framework (PD) have yet to be embraced by organizational and educational scholars. Lavine (2012) suggests furthering POS and PD practices related to human resources and management in stating, "I propose that organization and management scholars follow the lead of the health and nutrition sciences and make greater use of PD as a learning method or applied technology" (p. 1015). The pervasive and seemingly impenetrable SET shortage and attrition rates present an ideal opportunity to apply POS and PD practices to organizations and management. Given that POS "is an area of study that is concerned with what people and organizations are like at their very best" (Heynoski & Quinn, 2012, p. 118), its utilization is ideal in uncovering the factors which support SET job satisfaction and commitment.

Research Questions

This study utilized a Positive Deviance framework to understand the leadership practices that support special educator job satisfaction and workplace commitment. Additionally, the research uncovered how, if at all, Positive Organizational Scholarship may inform special education leadership practices to support SET workplace commitment. More specifically, the study answered the following questions:

- What can highly satisfied SETs teach us about leadership practices that encourage SET retention?

- How might Positive Organizational Leadership practices inform Special Education

  Leadership?

- What leadership practices contribute to SET organizational commitment?

Importance of this Study

This literature review outlined the prevalence and effect of SET job dissatisfaction and

attrition and the many ways in which SET turnover negatively impacts students, schools,

families, and communities. Research related to the importance of school, and specifically special

education, leadership was also reviewed, though no concrete strategies or practices were found to

support SET job satisfaction. This study sought to increase the knowledge base and skillsets of

special education administrators to support, energize and encourage the SETs with whom they

work.

As *Chapter Two* identified a need for practical, specific strategies for school

administrators to support their SET staff, *Chapter Three* outlines the methods and procedures

utilized to understand the experience of satisfied SETs and to focus research on the positive

experience and career trajectories of satisfied SETs. The methodology for the research project, as

well as rationale and specific steps of this process, are outlined in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The research cited above references the stubbornly unresolved national challenge of SET burnout and attrition spanning several decades (Billingsley &McLeskey, 2004; Frick, Faircloth & Little, 2017). According to research, the role of SET has long been challenging, frustrating and short-lived by many. And yet, though less acknowledged in research, some SETs continue to love their jobs. While this is, of course, not the current norm, a purely doom and gloom picture of special education is not true for all SETs. In fact, as noted in Prather-Jones' (2011) article, up to 25% of SETs report "high satisfaction" with their roles and continue in their SET roles for the majority of their working years. These are the SETs this research sought to learn from in an attempt to uncover their positive experiences and commitment to their work. Noting that many SETs report at least moderate levels of job satisfaction, this researcher hoped this project may contribute to a shifting narrative regarding the SET role.

To learn from satisfied SETs, this chapter outlines the methods, procedures, and ethical considerations of data collection, as well as the data synthesis and analysis strategies employed throughout this study. This qualitative study extracted the experiences and perceptions of currently employed SETs who continue to report high job satisfaction and workplace commitment. An important factor in participant selection was participant engagement in special education for ten years or more. It should also be noted that the research took place following the 2020-2021 school year, a time in which schools were described as stressful and chaotic (Long, 2020), and learning was reported to be decreased by as much as 70% due to school closures and virtual learning (Kuhfeld et al., 2021, para 23).

The forthcoming sections of this chapter outline the research questions, methodology and design, population and sample selection, data collection and analysis, and the ethical

considerations and delimitations of this study. By the chapter's end, the reader will fully

understand the rationale and necessary processes for answering the research questions with the

chosen research design and methodology.

Rationale for Methodology

Statement of the Problem

As outlined in Chapter 1, the field of Special Education has long experienced a dearth of

SETs, carrying a profound impact on students with disabilities and their school communities.

Ample research was reviewed in Chapter 2 outlining the many factors contributing to SET

burnout and attrition. These factors result in approximately 10-16% of SETs leaving the field

each year (Tyler & Brunner, 2018; Le Cornu, 2013), over one million students with disabilities

missing services to which they are entitled (Samuels, 2018), and five million students with

disabilities receiving services from ineffective and novice SETs (Hagaman & Casey, 2018)

While challenges inherent in the SET role are well-researched and documented, far fewer

research projects seek to uncover the experiences of satisfied SETs in an attempt to replicate

them. This research project utilized a qualitative approach to begin understanding and outlining

the practices and strategies SET administrators can utilize to encourage SET job satisfaction and

retention.

Research Questions

The broad research question motivating this study sought to address the lack of information

and strategies for SET administrators to encourage job satisfaction and retention among their

SETs. Furthermore, the researcher posited that insights from the fields of human resources,

organizational psychology and positive organizational scholarship may inform the field of

special education and possibly provide resources to encourage SET retention. More specifically,

the research project sought answers the following questions:

- What can highly satisfied SET's teach us about leadership practices that encourage SET
  retention?

- How might Positive Organizational Leadership practices inform Special Education
  Leadership?

- What leadership practices contribute to SET organizational commitment?

The reviewed literature emphasizes the challenges inherent in the SET role and the impact of

SET stress and attrition on students and schools. Among other personal and workplace factors,

administrator support and relationships emerged as a primary factor in SET job satisfaction

(Hulpia et al., 2009) with collaborative and supportive leadership styles correlating with SET job

satisfaction, resilience, effectiveness and retention (Devos et al., 2014). However, additional

research findings reveal few practical solutions and discrete leadership practices that are

recommended to address the persistent dilemma of SET burnout and attrition (Hagaman &

Casey, 2018).

With few solutions derived within the field of special education, the literature review also

included relevant findings from other fields. Concepts such as workplace commitment, job

satisfaction, and thriving at work emerged from the fields of human resources, organizational

psychology, and positive organizational scholarship. This study's research questions sought not

only to uncover the administrative practices that encourage SET job satisfaction and retention

but also to understand what concepts from these fields may contribute to, and intersect with, SET

retention.

This study utilized a qualitative research design in which interviews and focus groups were utilized to answer the research questions. The data gathered in this study emerged from participants in the field of special education. Interviews and follow-up focus groups allowed participants to explore their job satisfaction and workplace commitment individually with the researcher and, after initial data interpretation, to reflect on the preliminary findings with similarly satisfied and committed colleagues.

Why a Qualitative Approach?

Creswell and Poth (2017) state qualitative research is indicated when "a problem or issue needs to be explored" and further, "This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured or hear silenced voices" (p. 45). The authors further that a qualitative research approach is ideal in seeking to understand complex and nuanced phenomena and issues (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Unraveling the complexities of SET workplace commitment and the various leadership practices supportive of its occurrence was best suited to a qualitative approach given the varied and nuanced factors that contribute to SET retention.

In order to illuminate and understand a social phenomenon, qualitative research gives voice to the individuals in the study (Pathak et al., 2013). A qualitative research approach uncovered job satisfaction and one's decision to remain in a chosen field, a complex, nuanced and quite personal decision. It also provided opportunities for the researcher and participants to engage in more sincere and personal interactions, thus engaging a less formal data gathering process (Pathak et al., 2013).

Interviews to Understand Phenomenon

In their documentation of best practices for qualitative research in education, DeJaeghere and colleagues (2020) indicate, "Interviews are particularly appropriate when the subject matter is highly complex or sensitive, when detailed information is needed, and when a process of progressive exploration may be beneficial" (p. 15). They add that interviews can "add deep narratives to the topic being studied" (p. 22). Given the complexity of workplace commitment and job satisfaction, and the many factors influencing one's vocational decisions, individual interviews were most appropriate to achieve the research objectives.

Interviews vary in their structure, ranging from unstructured to highly structured. Interviews in the center of this spectrum are semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews offer participants the opportunity to comprehensively answer previously identified questions with little guidance or direction from the researcher. Such interviews typically last 30-60 minutes and are recorded and transcribed to achieve fidelity and accuracy in interpretation (Darjaeghere et al., 2020). This research project was ideally suited for semi-structured interviews as they provide enough order to maintain focus on the research topic without burdening the participants' direction or responses. A semi-structured interview design allowed exploration of participants' job satisfaction and workplace commitment with opportunity to respond and explore as appropriate within the given interview.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a type a qualitative research that "moves beyond a description to generate or discover a theory" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 85) and supports the evolution of *description* to *theory* by careful coding and understanding of data to understand a process or action "shaped by the views of participants" (p. 82). A grounded theory approach supports the

development of the qualitative data to establish a theory, or explanation, for SET job satisfaction

to provide practical strategies to support SET retention. A deeper understanding of SET

satisfaction contributed to an explanation of the ways in which administrators can encourage

SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment. As explored in the Literature Review (Chapter

2), such practical strategies remain elusive at this time.

This qualitative study unearthed the experiences and perceptions of employed SETs who

continue to report high job satisfaction and workplace commitment. An important factor in

participant selection was their engagement in special education for ten years or more.

The goal of this research project was to move from describing the experiences of

satisfied, committed SETs to generating a theory of SET workplace commitment. Information

and data gathered in the semi-structured interviews informed the integration of concepts and

practices supportive of their continued participation in the field.

Action Plan: Intervention

The research was conducted in the northern and central counties of Vermont in the fall of

2022. Participants included SETs throughout the region, including those teaching in grades pre-

kindergarten through graduation, who met criteria related to tenure in the field and measures of

thriving at work. As noted in Chapter Two, employees are noted to thrive at work when

achieving "the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a

sense of learning at work" (Spreitzer et al, 2005, p. 538). Interested SETs responded to an email

sent to special educators in the region asking for volunteers for the study. Participants met the

following criteria:

- Certified Special Education Teacher

- 10 or more years in the role of SET

- Meet criteria for *thriving at work* (TaW)

- Planning to remain in the SET role for the 2022-2023 school year (with the

  exception of retirement)

Once achieving the above-outlined vocational criteria for participation, conditions for

thriving at work were measured through an abbreviated version of the *Thriving at Work (TaW)*

Questionnaire (Peters et al., 2021).

The *TaW Questionnaire* encapsulates both the energy and vitality of thriving, as well as the

learning and curiosity towards one's craft characteristic of those found to be thriving within their

employment (Porath et al., 2012). Peters and colleagues (2021) present an array of questions to

measure employees' sense of vitality, curiosity and contentment at work in their *Thriving at*

Work Questionnaire: Final Candidate Questions and note these questions may be minimized to

suit the needs of the research or employer (Porath et al, 2012). The full list of questions included

in the *TaW Questionnaire* are found in Appendix A and those selected for participants in this

study are listed in Appendix B. To meet criteria for participation, participants answered 13 or

more of the 16 items (81.6%) found in the abbreviated version of the *TaW Questionnaire* with

affirmative ("true" or "yes") responses.

Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview with the researcher to understand the

SETs commitment to the field of special education, level of job satisfaction, and the impact of

their administrator/supervisor on their job satisfaction and commitment. Each interview included

the following questions and prompts though follow-up and anecdotal questions and

conversations remained unstructured:

- I see that you identified as (highly) satisfied in your role. Tell me about that.

- Tell me about the role of your supervisor or school leader/principal. How does school leadership impact your job satisfaction and decision to stay in your role?

- What can school leaders and administrators do in their daily practices to support SETs? How can they encourage SETs to stay in their school?

Participants: Demographics & Recruitment

The researcher conducted interviews in schools throughout Northern and Central Vermont, in Washington and Caledonia counties. Data emerging in the 2019 US Census Bureau indicate Washington County's population is 59,807 people and Caledonia County's population is 30,233 people. The counties are 94.1% and 96.1% white respectively, with less than 1% of the population identifying as Hispanic or Latinx, Black or African American and Asian. The median household income in Washington County is $62,791 per year, and is $50,563 per year in Caledonia County. The socio-economic differences between the counties are also reflected in the poverty rate: in Caledonia County 15% of residents live at or below the poverty rate, and in Washington County 8% of residents live at or below this rate (US Census Bureau, 2019).

The two counties are comprised of nine school districts or supervisory unions, four in Caledonia County and five in Washington County. Washington County schools include 12,396 students, and Caledonia County schools include 6,002 students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Special Education Services are provided to 17% of Washington County students and 21% of Caledonia County students (Vermont Agency of Education, 2022).

The initial step of participant recruitment required the researcher to contact superintendents of five local school districts to ask for permission to conduct research with SETs within the district. Once provided with approval to do so, the researcher next shared an email with the superintendent to be shared with the special education department to identify SETs who met

criteria and were available for a 45-minute interview and follow-up focus group to enable

member reflection.

After demonstrating achievement of participation criteria and a desire to participate in the

research project, the researcher established informed consent from the participants. This process

included making the participants aware of any risks inherent in the study as well as their right to

conclude participation in the study at any time.

Once providing possible risks and addressing participants' questions and concerns

regarding their participation in the study, the researcher initiated the interview stage. This

includes conducting 30-45 minute individual interviews with each participant. Once completed

with the individual interviews and analyzing the data gathered in these interviews, the researcher

conducted a follow up focus group. The follow-up focus group reflected findings and themes to

the participants and asked for clarification and/or further illumination of themes that arose from

the individual interviews.

Participation in the study took place exclusively on a volunteer basis and participants

were made aware that they may revoke their consent to participate at any time. In this case, an

additional participant would be sought. Given consistent concerns related to the COVID-19

pandemic, participants were provided the option to participate in interviews and focus groups via

an on-line platform. All participants elected virtual interviews and the focus group was held

virtually, as well.

Consistent with the ideal number of participants for a qualitative study, the research

aimed for 4-6 participants for this study, with four participants serving as the minimum

(Creswell & Poth, 2017). To increase generalizability of the study, the gender ratio of

participants equaled that of the general US teacher population of 75% female (National Center

for Education Statistics, 2022). If recruitment yielded ample volunteers to allow the intentional

selection of participates, the researcher planned for additional considerations to be paid to

personal factors, such as race and degrees obtained, to increase generalizability of this study.

This however, was not the case as 5 participants volunteered and were readily available to

engage in the data collection process.

Ethical Considerations

Various ethical considerations required particular thoughtfulness unique to the study's

setting and participants. Northern and Central Vermont are especially rural communities with

small school communities. The researcher took care to ensure anonymity of participants given

that criteria to engage in the study could result in few available individuals. As the selection

process could complicate efforts at maintaining anonymity, participants were made aware of this

consideration early in the recruitment process. Though the researcher ensured all efforts to

maintain anonymity, Vermont's small school communities complicated attempts at ensuring

participant anonymity.

Strategies to ensure anonymity of participants included using pseudonyms in place of

participants' names, avoiding naming characteristics of individual schools, and limiting the

number of participant job-specific criteria as well as personal details of each participant. For

example, rather than stating, "Ellen is a high school SET of 12 years at a small high school in

northern Caledonia County," the researcher indicated, "The third interviewee reported serving in

the SET role for more than ten years at a high school in the catchment area of this research

project."

A second ethical consideration was the current professional standing of the researcher.

Previously a school psychologist in Washington Central Unified Union School District

(WCUUSD), the researcher moved into the Director of Special Services role at WCUUSD at the

start of the 2021-2022 school year. This transition increased the likelihood that the researcher

knew and worked with the participants' supervisors, a dynamic that could impact participants'

feeling of safety and perceptions of confidentiality. This potential perception was addressed and

the researcher made clear, in written and spoken word, that no information would be shared with

the participants' supervisors.

An extension of this ethical challenge was the possibility of the researcher interviewing

SETs who work within the supervisory union in which she served as the Director of Special

Services. While the researcher did not directly supervise SETs in the supervisory union, a role

more closely aligned with the building-based principals, she did supervise the special education

staff more peripherally. Participants achieving the criteria of 10 or more years in Special

Education had a breadth and depth of experience to reflect on related to their tenure in the field

rather than the brief time (6 months) the researcher had been in the supervisory role. This

dynamic, and possible ethical challenge, was explicitly discussed to ensure participant comfort

and consent.

Data Collection

Data collection tools included a questionnaire, semi-structured interview and focus group.

The *Thriving at Work Questionnaire* (Appendix A) was adapted to an abbreviated version

(Appendix B) for this study. The questions included in the abbreviated version are most

applicable to the SET role and school setting. Furthermore, items were selected from the initial

TaW Questionnaire that align with research on SET job satisfaction. These items include feeling

valued and supported at work (Brungsting et al., 2014; Young et. al, 2011), understanding and

achieving the expectations of the role (Park and Shin, 2020), experiencing autonomy in the

workplace (Koutrouba & Michala, 2017) and perceiving compensation as fair and adequate (Jones et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

To structure this process, the researcher utilized Thematic Analysis (TA) techniques in the initial phase of data analysis. TA is defined as "an umbrella term, designating sometimes quite different approaches aimed at identifying patterns across qualitative datasets" (Lester et al., 2020, p. 844) and serves as practical tool for novice researchers. Furthermore, qualitative researchers in the fields of human resources and development, education and organizational psychology routinely utilize TA in qualitative studies (Lester et al., 2020) indicating its appropriate use in this study, as well.

As proposed by Lester et al. (2020), TA involves seven steps that are summarized here. Step 1 requires the preparation and organization of data to enable thorough analysis. This stage involves typing and storing data electronically, and organizing the data to be imported to a qualitative data analysis software program. Step 2 involves the transcription of data which, for this research project, includes the verbatim transcription of the recorded interview (likely via *Zoom* or *Microsoft Teams*). At Step 3 the researcher becomes familiar with the data on a surface level. Here the researcher becomes initially familiar with the data in a process considered "light or initial analysis" (Lester et al., 2020, p. 99). After the initial data analysis occurs, researchers memo the data in Step 4. At this step, the researcher begins to notice their reactions and findings emerging from the initial analysis, creating memos, which "serve as an invitation for further analysis" (Lester et al., 2020, p. 100). At Step 5, the researcher moves through the crucial phases of coding. Lester et al. (2020) suggest this step in three phases which are explored in more detail below and aligned with Tracy's (2013) grounded theory framework for data analysis and coding.

In Step 6, the researcher broadens their research lens from the primary codes and begins to

establish categories, and themes emerge at the final stages of data analysis. Finally, the

researcher makes the analytic process transparent. This final step relies on the establishment of

consistent documentation and transparency throughout the TA process and can be supported by

detailed notetaking of one's process and analytic progression. These notes are later transferred to

a visual guide or map to ensure transparency and accountability throughout the TA progression

(Lester et al., 2020). The TA process was initially supported by *Nvivo*, an internet based

qualitative data analysis software program, though the researcher ultimately chose to move to a

manual style of coding to complete the TA process.

Lester et al.'s TA process steps 1-4, particularly Step 5, align with Tracy's (2013)

guidelines for data analysis rooted in Grounded theory. Tracy (2013) indicates grounded theory

"provides a systematic and rigorous framework for researchers who desire an inductive, emic

approach to data analysis" (p. 184). For the purposes of this study, the researcher manually coded

the data by transcribing and printing the interviews, highlighting various themes and statements

and combing the information for emerging stories. Tracy (2013) suggests asking questions such

as "What is happening here?" and "What strikes you?" (p. 188) in the primary stage of coding.

Here, the researcher began to sense themes, commonalities, and differences emerging from the

interview data.

Secondary level data analysis requires "critically examin(ing) the codes that have already

been identified in primary cycles and beginning to organize, synthesize and categorize them into

interpretive concepts" (Tracy, 2013, p. 194). This secondary stage of data analysis, in alignment

with the TA process steps 5-seven, built bridges with other "fields, models and assumptions" (p.

194). Additional areas of investigation were explored to further illuminate the data particularly in the field of positive organizational psychology and diversity, equity and inclusion.

To further ensure credibility, multivocality and member reflection remained central in the data analysis. Tracy (2013) defines multivocality as "the inclusion of multiple voices" and "means analyzing social action from a variety of participants' points of view and highlighting divergent or disagreeable standpoints" (p. 237). To achieve this end, diversity among participants was sought out and, additionally, differing perspectives on SET job satisfaction were explored in the data analysis stage.

Additionally, member reflection strategies supported "sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study's findings, providing opportunities for reflections, critique, feedback and even collaboration" (Tracy, 2013, p. 238). A focus group was conducted after the coding of individual interviews to collectively explore themes which emerged from the initial stage of analysis. Further analysis of the data which emerges from the focus groups encouraged a preliminary understanding of how the study's findings resonated with participants (Tracy, 2013).

Site Permission

Site permission was obtained initially from district superintendent's. As interviews were held virtually to promote ease of engagement, building principals will be asked for permission, as well, when necessary. As the school districts do not have Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and district Handbooks indicate no policies in the area of research, the researcher's institution's IRB will oversee ethical guidelines and practices to be followed.

Presentation of Results

Consistent with Slippery Rock University's EdD graduation requirements, results were presented at the researcher's dissertation defense at the conclusion of the research process. Results of this study will be shared within the researcher's supervisory union and offered to local school districts as well as the Vermont Agency of Education at the conclusion of the dissertation defense. Beyond the requirements of the researcher's institution, a presentation of results will take place at the researcher's supervisory union with local school district employees and Agency of Education stakeholders invited, as well. These additional presentations are expected to take place in the spring of 2023.

Limitations

Vermont experiences a significant dearth of cultural and ethnic diversity, potentially limiting the resonance of this study among a broader range of educators. Districts accessed in this study are predominately rural with less than 2,000 students which, again, potentially limits the generalizability of this study to other regions and demographics. Additionally, a potential limitation of this study is the standing of the researcher, who recently transitioned into an administrative role as Director of Special Services, and serves as a peer to many of the administrators referenced throughout participant interviews. Participants possibly were less honest in their interviews, particularly in offering constructive feedback, for fear the researcher would share information with the participants' supervisors, despite acknowledgement of confidentiality and ethical codes.

Conclusions

This chapter detailed the research questions and qualitative research design to address the broad and specific goals of this project. A justification for a qualitative design, semi-structured

interviews and focus groups was provided, as well as the data analysis and coding practices chosen to synthesize and interpret the data gathered in this research design. The forthcoming chapters will outline the findings of this research project and the implications for the field of Special Education.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

Introduction

Special Education Teacher (SET) job dissatisfaction and attrition are well-documented dilemmas leading to the lack of appropriate educational services for over one million students annually (Samuels, 2018). Despite this persistent dilemma, present since the inception of the role in 1975, research continues to highlight the salient reasons why 16% of SETs leave the field each year (Monnin et al., 2021). However, few research efforts seek to learn why 64% of special educators remain in the field beyond the initial, challenging first five years (Westervelt, 2016). Furthermore, no research was found related to the experiences and perspectives of seasoned, satisfied SETs who, despite the difficulties inherent in the role, remain thriving in and committed to their work. There was an urgent need to uncover the factors leading to SET job satisfaction and retention as well as the leadership practices that may encourage SETs to remain in their role.

Grounded Theory, a type of qualitative research that seeks to move from description to theory, served as the foundational framework for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In an effort to establish a theory for SET job satisfaction and, therefore, practical solutions to offer to school leaders and special education administrators, Grounded Theory provided the framework for data analysis. Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews and a focus group in order to explore the experiences of satisfied SETs and the impact, if any, of their supervisors on their job satisfaction. This research design is particularly appropriate for the research purpose as qualitative research is "good for research on topics or in settings where little is known, few theories exist or the population is hard to reach" (Patten & Mewhart, 2018, p. 22). While researchers indicate a need to focus attention on SET retention and job satisfaction (Owen et al, 2018; Brunsting et al., 2014), few research studies have done so at this time. A qualitative

methodology facilitated the initial illumination of themes and attributes of SETs most satisfied in their role. Furthermore, a Grounded Theory approach allowed the researcher to move from data collection and analysis to the generation of a theory for SET job satisfaction and retention.

The research questions that guided this study sought to address the gap in research to uncover the experiences of highly satisfied SETs who remained in the field for ten or more years. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology enabled the researcher to understand the experiences of thriving SETs and the role of their supervisor in their job satisfaction and commitment to the field of special education. Furthermore, the research questions explicitly wondered about a potential connection between SET job satisfaction and Positive Organizational Scholarship practices. The below research questions served as the foundation of this study. The first research question provides an opportunity for broad exploration of the knowledge and wisdom gained from seasoned, satisfied SETs. The second and third research questions more directly explore the role of school leadership in SET job satisfaction and retention as well as the possible supportive integration of Positive Organizational Scholarship practices to encourage SET retention.

- What can highly satisfied SET's teach us about leadership practices that encourage SET retention?
- How might Positive Organizational Leadership practices inform Special Education Leadership?
- What leadership practices contribute to SET organizational commitment?

To answer the research questions, individual interviews and a group focus group were conducted with five participants. Each participant met the following criteria:

- Certified Special Education Teacher

- 10 or more years in the role of SET

- Met criteria for *thriving at work* (TaW)

- Employed in the SET role for the 2022-2023 school year

Each participant engaged in an individual semi-structured interview with the researcher and, once themes were identified from each interview, participated in a follow-up focus group with the researcher and the participants. The two sources of data, individual interviews and a focus group, encouraged triangulation or "the use of multiple sources of data or multiple methods for obtaining data on the research questions" (Patten & Newhart, 2018, p. 157). The study's design also ensured multivocality or "the inclusion of multiple voices" (Tracy, 2013, p. 237) as well as member reflections which encourage research participants to engage "in the analysis of data and findings" (Tracy, 2012, p. 238). These factors align with increased trustworthiness of the research project, ensuring its applicability to school leaders and value to the field of special education.

This chapter presents the outcomes and findings of this qualitative research project. The thematic analysis utilized to organize and interpret the data is explained and the findings of this analysis are presented. More specifically, themes identified in the semi-structured interviews will be presented related to each interview question. Furthermore, the reflection of these themes back to participants in the focus group, and the outcomes of the focus group, will be presented, as well. The possible impact of Positive Organization Scholarship strategies will be explored in the focus group section to conceptually tie SET job satisfaction and retention to both theories and practices readily accessible to school leaders.

Study Overview

This research study utilized two sources of data including individual participant interviews as well as a whole-group focus group. Each semi-structured interview focused on three questions though also allowed for participants to expound as necessary and, similarly, allowed the researcher to ask probing and clarifying questions to gain deeper insight and clarification as needed. The following questions framed each individual participant interview:

- I see that you identified as (highly) satisfied in your role. Tell me about that.

- Tell me about the role of your supervisor or school leader/principal. How does school leadership impact your job satisfaction and decision to stay in your role?

- What can school leaders and administrators do in their daily practices to support SETs? How can they encourage SETs to stay in their school?

After the completion of the five interviews, transcription and analysis of each interview took place to identify themes, commonalities and differences among participants' experiences and reflections. The researcher then reflected the data back to the participants in a focus group. Concepts and strategies specific to Positive Organizational Scholarship were also presented during the focus group to allow members to reflect and comment on the potential impact of POS on SET job satisfaction and retention.

The researcher designed the study to address the research questions through an iterative process of exploration and data analysis. That is, the process of data collection and interpretation occurred concurrently in that both collection and interpretation informed one another, as evidenced by interviews and focus group. This structure allowed the researcher to respond to the emergent categories and codes and integrate the data analysis into data collection, as was the case with the focus group. Additionally, the researcher provided numerous opportunities for

participants to respond to and reflect on the collected data throughout the data gathering process. This ensured both an iterative data analysis process as well as one inclusive of all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Descriptive Findings

This section outlines study participants' demographic and professional information as well as specific information related to data collection and analysis. Each of the five study participants met the criteria for participation including holding current licensure as a special education teacher, serving for 10 or more years in the SET role, achieving 80% or higher on the *Thriving at Work Questionnaire* and gainfully employed as a SET in the current, 2022-23 school year.

Setting

This study was conducted in the Central and Northeast regions of Vermont. More specifically, in the Washington and Caledonia Counties, both which possess rural, small school districts with student populations of 1,000-2,000 students. Participants' places of employment included both public and independent schools and grade ranges spanned from kindergarten through graduation. Participants attended the virtual interviews from their place of employment and the researcher attended from her place of employment, as well. Individual interviews and the focus-group were conducted via virtual meeting platforms, Zoom or Google Meet, at varying times of day. The researcher attended the interviews from her office, which allowed privacy and confidentiality as the office door remained closed and a noise machine was utilized to muffle and disorganize any portion of the interview which may be overheard.

Participation Process

To gain access to interested participants, the researcher emailed local superintendents for their permission and support in surveying local SETs for their participation in this study

(Appendix C). Recruitment of participants took place through email communication with

superintendents, who approved participation recruitment in the given district, and special

education administrators, who notified SETs of the opportunity to participate in the research

study and provided the researcher's contact information. Participants then expressed their

interest in the study via email communication. The researcher responded to participants' emails

and provided the necessary information and consent forms, as well as offered times to meet

virtually to discuss study participation and the participants' eligibility to participate.

 Once agreeing to participate in the study, participants signed the required informed consent form

(Appendix D) and completed the *Thriving at Work Questionnaire* and virtual interviews were

scheduled. Individual interviews were conducted in the second and third weeks of September,

2022 and the focus group was conducted the afternoon of October 4, 2022. All communication to

schedule the focus group was conducted via email (Appendix E), with participants blind carbon

copied (bcc'ed) as to maintain confidentiality until the time of the focus group. Findings of the

five individual interviews and the focus group are presented in a forthcoming section of this

chapter.

Participants

Study participants included five SETs each with at least 10 years of experience as a SET,

reporting high levels of job satisfaction and serving in the SET role for the current 2022-2023

school year. All participants volunteered to participate, communicated their interest in

participation to the researcher and were informed of their ability to remove themselves from the

study at any time.

To ensure participant confidentiality, details related to participants' places of employment

and years in the field of special education were broadened to categories as opposed to specific

responses. Each participant responded affirming at least 80% of the 16 items on the abbreviated

Thriving at Work Questionnaire (*TaW Questionnaire*, Appendix B) with more specific

percentages provided. The average year range of experience was 20-30 years and the total of

years of experience among all participants was 132 years. The average positive response rate

among the five participants was 93.75%. The table below outlines the gender, years of

professional experience, employment setting of each research participant as well as their positive

response rate on the *TaW Questionnaire*.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics & Employment Data

Participant	Gender	Experience	Employment Setting	TaW "Yes" Response Rate
P1	F	20-30 years	Elementary	100%
P2	M	10-20 years	Secondary	93.75%
P3	F	10-20 years	Secondary	81.25%
P4	F	30-40 years	Elementary	93.75%
P5	F	30-40 years	Elementary	100%

Virtual Interviews

Participants engaged in an individual, semi-structured interview with the researcher.

Interviews were recorded on Google Meets or Zoom and stored on the researcher's password-

protected computer and within her password-protected email. Each interview lasted 30-40

minutes and began with a brief description of the participant's professional background and

years of employment in special education. This information is removed from the transcripts (to

preserve confidentiality. After describing their employment experience, participants were asked

the first interview question. For each interview, the researcher asked follow-up, probing or

clarifying questions after all research questions. That is to say, participants were asked the same

three questions and provided equal opportunity to expound on and clarify their response.

After completion of the interviews, each recording was transcribed by the researcher and

checked for accuracy in the following days. The transcribed interviews totaled 42 pages of

double-spaced transcription pages in Times New Roman font, font size 12. The average

interview was 9 pages of transcription and the five interviews ranged from 5 to 12 pages once

transcribed.

Virtual Focus Group

Research participants engaged in a focus group three weeks following the initial, individual

interviews on Oct 4, 2022. After culminating the transcribed interview data and analyzing the

data for themes, commonalities and differences, the findings of the interviews were reflected

back to the participants for their consideration and responses during the follow-up focus group.

The focus group integrated *member reflection* into the data analysis process to encourage

reflection, feedback and collaboration with research participants (Tracy, 2013).

Also at this time, relevant Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) theories and practices

were reviewed and discussed as potential leadership strategies supportive of SET job satisfaction

and retention. The goal of integrating the POS strategies into the focus group was to understand

participants' perceptions and opinions of POS strategies as a practical leadership solution to the

long-researched and well-documented dilemma of SET attrition. The focus group session

enabled participants to reflect on the data gathered in the interviews and to also support the

researcher in considering the appropriateness of POS strategies as a tool for special education

administrators and school leadership. Also consistent with Tracy's (2013) description of and call

for *member reflection*, this portion of the focus group encouraged collaboration between

researchers and participants in actively pursuing solutions to the national dilemma of SET

attrition.

The focus group portion of data collection also supported the generation of a theory of SET

job satisfaction as is the function of Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory moves the researcher

from description to theory (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The researcher selected a Grounded Theory

approach for this study in an effort to provide practical solutions for school administrators to

bolster SET job satisfaction. Engaging in the focus group after analyzing interview data also

allowed the study participants to actively engage in the process of creating a theory of leadership

style or practices. This process is called member checking and is crucial in Grounded Theory

analysis and qualitative research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Member checking ensured the

trustworthiness and dependability of the results as the participants, those most intimately aware

of and engaged in the study topic, served as critical participants data interpretation.

<p align="center">**Data Analysis**</p>

Thematic Analysis & Tracy's Grounded Theory Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic Analysis (TA) provides a set of procedures for analyzing and interpreting

qualitative data and is useful for research projects utilizing a methodology based in Grounded

Theory (Tracy, 2013). As such, this research project followed TA procedures to culminate,

analyze and interpret the data. Simultaneously, the researcher also utilized Tracy's (2013)

framework for analyzing data in a Grounded Theory study. The synthesis of both Thematic

Analysis and Grounded Theory data analysis procedures assured a robust, thorough review of the

research data.

Data analysis through the TA procedures followed the steps outlined by Lester (2020) for thorough and robust qualitative data analysis. TA requires seven steps for data analysis. Step 1 includes the preparation and organization of the data. For this project, the researcher recorded each virtual interview, downloaded the interview onto her laptop computer and maintained the interviews in a specific folder. Storing the interviews on a password-protected computer ensured confidentiality as well as simple access and streamlined organization of the study data. Folders were accessed through the researcher's secure email account, providing an additional layer of protection and confidentiality. The second step of TA requires the transcription of the data into verbatim documents. The researcher transcribed the interviews and stored the transcribed interviews in Microsoft Word documents, also maintained in a secured folder on her laptop. Pseudonyms (P1, P2, PS, ect.) were used as the file names to, again, safeguard participant confidentiality.

After organizing, transcribing and securely storing the research data, the researcher began the initial stage of data analysis at Step 3 of the TA process. At this stage, the researcher "must become familiar with the data they collected" (Lester et al., 2020, p. 99) and "take note of the ideas or experiences described by participants (p. 100). For this research project, the researcher carefully read and reread the interviews, noting themes and patterns within and among the interview data. *Nvivo*, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used at this stage to identify emergent themes and patterns.

Step 4 of the TA process encourages the researcher to then memo the data. This stage required the researcher to note emergent themes, potential biases and general understandings emerging from the data. Lester et al. describe the fourth stage as the opportunity for the researcher to have a conversation with themselves about the data and their experience of the data

(2020, p. 100) and to take careful notes, or memos, of this process. The fourth stage of the TA

process provided the opportunity for the researcher to observe assumptions, reactions and

potential themes without prematurely coding the data prior to adequately noticing her own initial

reactions and assumptions. At this stage, the researcher moved from the online software

program, *Nvivo*, to manually analyze the data. This transition occurred as the visual

representation of the data served as a more practical and productive means for data analysis than

that provided by the online software program. The researcher assigned a large poster board to

each interview to which the transcribed interview was attached to allow for viewing, considering

and reflecting on the data with necessary ease and fluidity.

An obvious bias held by the researcher was the assumption that Positive Organizational

Scholarship theories and strategies would emerge as useful and important to the field of special

education leadership in its likely ability to increase SET job satisfaction and retention. To

address this bias, the researcher highlighted areas of the data which she felt pointed to or aligned

with POS practices. In these instances, the researcher noted her bias, paused in her review of the

data and returned to the data with the question, "If not POS, how else might these challenges be

resolved?" Doing so allowed the researcher to memo the instances of bias and approach the data

with a more neutral stance.

Step 5 of TA required the careful coding of the research data. A code is "simply a short,

descriptive word or phrase that assigns meaning to the data related to the researcher's analytic

interests" (Lester et al., 2020, p. 101). This stage of the TA process aligns with Tracy's primary

cycle coding stage of qualitative data analysis. Here the researcher focused on first-level codes or

"*what* is present in the data" (Tracy, 2013, p 189). This initial coding process focused on the

who, *where* and *what* as opposed to the *how* and *why* of the data (Tracy, 2013).

The sixth step of the TA process required the researcher to move from codes to categories and then to the development of themes (Lester et al, 2020, p. 101). This step corresponds to Tracy's secondary-cycle coding "which are similar to what others have called 'focused codes'" (Tracy, 2013, p 194) and required the researcher to "organize, synthesize and categorize" codes into themes. It is at this stage that Tracy introduces *theoretical conjecture* (2012, p. 194) in which the researcher considers the intersection of the research with other fields and "borrow from other fields, models and assumptions" (p. 194). At this stage, Step six of the TA process and in the secondary-cycle coding of Tracy's data analysis process, the researcher began to consider the intersection of SET job satisfaction and retention with POS theories and strategies.

At the conclusion of TA's Step 6 and Tracy's secondary-cycle coding, multivocality and member reflection were particularly crucial components of the data analysis process. Multivocality ensured that diverse voices and perspectives, both in agreement and disagreement with the researcher's findings, were integrated into the data analysis (Tracy, 2013). Additionally, member-reflection served to integrate the participants' opinions and thoughts into the secondary-coding cycle. The focus group took place at this point in the data analysis process to ensure various perspectives and voices were integrated into the research findings and to gain perspective on the researcher's conclusions and suggestions. The step ensured the co-creation of the study's findings as is foundational in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017)

The following sections of this chapter outline the codes, themes and categories that emerged from the data, organized by each interview question. The emerged themes and categories are then applied to the research questions that guided the creation of this study.

Results

Thematic Analysis of Interview Transcripts & Focus Group Data

Data collection for this research study took place through individual virtual interviews and a focus group which were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher through the Thematic Analysis (TA) process outlined above. The interview transcripts were organized by interview question initially in a Word document and uploaded to *Nvivo* qualitative data analysis software. When the researcher transitioned to a manual analysis process the Word documents were printed and pasted onto an array of poster boards. Consistent with Step 2 of the Thematic Analysis process, the researcher repeatedly read the interview responses in relation to the interview question and provided memos for assumptions, themes and ideas that initially stood out to her. Thematic Analysis of the focus group data occurred similarly though the researcher solely utilized manual coding, having established a preference for manual coding with the interview data.

The following sections explore the codes, categories and themes derived from the Thematic Analysis of the interview data and are summarized in the introductory table presented below. Table 2.

Themes and Categories Emerging from Interview Questions

Interview Question	Themes	High-Level Categories
IQ 1: I see that you identified as (highly) satisfied in your role. Tell me about that.	• Inclusion • Relationships • Collective efficacy • Student Growth • Strengths-based	Positive School Community Student Centeredness
IQ 2: Tell me about the role of your supervisor or school leader/principal. How does school leadership impact your	• Special Education Knowledge & Interest • Balance of trust & support, autonomy & control	Valuing special education Respect

job satisfaction and decision to stay in your role?	• Leadership style • Confident in SET	
IQ 3: What can school leaders and administrators do in their daily practices to support SETs? How can they encourage SETs to stay in their school?	• Positive school culture • Collective efficacy • Special education knowledge & advocacy • Task-based support	Prioritizing special education Positive School Community

Interview Question 1

The researcher began interviews by exploring participants' general perceptions of their role

and the explanations for their tenure in the field of special education. The first interview question

asked participants to expound on their identification as a satisfied special education teacher and

to "tell me about" their job satisfaction and decision to remain in the field of special education.

The following table outlines the codes and themes emerging from interview data related to

Question 1 followed by a discussion of the themes emerging from participant responses.

Table 3.

Interview Question 1: Data Analysis Process

Codes	High-Level Categories	Themes	Participant Responses
Special and general education "in it together"	Inclusion Relationships	Community Student-Centeredness	(P1) I've never had the experience where a teacher says, "Oh, I don't want that kid in my school" or, "I don't know what to do with that kid" or, "You are the special educator. That's your kid." It's really always been a team. (P2) To get back to kids' strengths, you know, looking at kids' strength and realizing how many
All of our kids-shared responsibility	Collective efficacy		
Students with disabilities with non-disabled peers	Student Growth		
Students reaching goals	Strengths based		
Student trust & vulnerability			
Relationships with students			

Relationships with parents			different parts they have to their personality and what they're really strong in and what they have to offer is so cool. It's so meaningful.
Relationships with colleagues			
Mentor role with new colleagues			P3. Somehow it all clicks and you and the student and everyone have been working so hard. Oh man, I can't imagine anything as good as that in the whole world; It's worth all the frustrations and challenges and minutia.
Each student & family as unique			
Knowing & understanding students			
Problem Solving			
Finding the good/positive/skills			P5. I come from the old school when everything was a pull out. I read about co-teaching and decided that was what I wanted to do and decided that was what I was going to do. It takes all of us, the whole school, to make that happen. And we do it.
Pivoting, adjusting, adapting			

    Theme 1. Community. Relationships, support, colleagueship and shared responsibility for all students emerged consistently from all participant responses for Interview Question One. This theme emphasizes the critical role that relationships both inside and outside of the school play on SET job satisfaction. This includes relationships with special and general education colleagues, administrators, families and students. High-level categories that contributed to *Community* as a central theme include inclusion, relationships, and collective-efficacy. Each of these categories speak to a broader theme of healthy and strong community ties woven throughout the school as a contributing factor to SET job satisfaction and retention.

Theme 2. Student Centeredness. Each participant emphasized the importance of student-centeredness as a basic element of their job satisfaction and workplace commitment. This included finding and sharing student strengths and growth, contributing to student growth and success, engaging in student-centered problem solving with colleagues and engaging with families both to learn about and provide support related to individual students.

It is important to note that both *Community* and *Student Centeredness* emerged as interrelated themes as opposed to individual contributing factors for SET job satisfaction. That is to say, participants discussed these themes as essential components that work in conjunction to support their job satisfaction. This collective agreement towards student success was evidenced by statements such as, "Then I came here and it really is that I am on a team, that we are all taking a responsibility for every kid here, every kid" (participant 2) and, "When my supervisor understands parents and I need to learn from each other to best support their kid, that's when I feel like we're doing the best work" (participant 3).

Interview Question 2

The second interview question prompted participants to, "Tell me about the role of your supervisor or school leader or principal" and asked, "How does school leadership impact your job satisfaction and decision to stay in your role?" Interview Question 2 more explicitly asked participants to consider and explore the link between their job satisfaction and school leadership practices. The table below outlines the interview data gathered from Question 2 and presents codes, categories and themes emerging from participant responses.

Table 4.

Interview Question 2: Data Analysis Process

Codes	High-Level Categories	Themes	Participant Responses
Understands the SET role			P1. Our current principal is definitely knowledgeable and very supportive. He's interested in our kids in special education. He comes to all our meetings, asks questions, knows parents and knows about each kid's needs.
Knows the paperwork load	Special Education Knowledge & Interest	Valuing special education & neurodivergence	
Understands disabilities & neurodiversity	Balance of trust & support, autonomy & control		
Attends meetings		Respect for special education teachers	
Interested in kids with IEPs	Leadership style		P2. Right now, I have an administrator who I really like. He pushes me to do better and wants me to excel. My current supervisor has been the most motivating supervisor that I have had… He'll say, "Hey, check this out." He cares about me as a learner and a professional, too.
Kid-centered	Confident in SET		
Accountability for all kids	SET as a learner		
Interested in me as a learner			
Supports my own development			
Thinks about my growth			P3. I prefer to be proactive and creative as opposed to reactive and brash in our decision making, if that makes sense. So that collaborative, creative approach is really critical for me. I like that we're all in it together, learning and doing together.
Believes in my abilities			
Curious about me as an employee and learner			
Believes I can grow			
Trust			
Respect			
Shared problem solving			P4. When I have worked under leaders who did start with a base of respect, trust and a belief in my professional judgment, then I felt like a flower being watered. It was just like "Wow, I can do so much."
Collaboration			
Creative			
Flexible			
Reliable			
Committed			

Theme 1. Valuing Special Education & Students' Neurodivergence. Each participant

provided responses aligning with the theme of a value for special education including the

students, teachers, laws, regulations, demands, knowledge and complexities of the field. Some

responses suggested that leadership understand the SET role and others, sometimes from the

same participant, encouraged involvement in and knowledge of the experiences, plans and

performance of students on IEPs. The underlying demand from research participants which

emerged from this theme is the expectation that school leaders value and prioritize students with

disabilities at the same degree they do neurotypical and non-disabled students. This theme

emphasizes the critical role that school leaders play in understanding the high demands of the

SETrole, the need for inclusion, as well as the plea for additional time and support for students

with unique abilities and presentations.

Theme 2. Respecting special education teachers. In addition to genuinely valuing students

with unique learning, social, emotional and behavioral needs, research participants expressed the

imperative of respect for the special education teacher role. Respect for special education

teachers was articulated through leadership style, school leader regard for and interactions with

the special education teacher as well as an understanding of and interest in the special education

teacher role. As stated by participant 4, "You can't expect a principal to step in and help with all

these paperwork tasks if they don't take the time to understand what it is that we are doing, all

that we are juggling every day."

Interview Question Three

The third interview question asked, "What can school and special education leaders do to

promote SET job satisfaction & commitment?" This final interview question followed the broad

exploration of the factors that contribute to participant job satisfaction and retention and asked

for more narrow recommendations and reflections related to strategies and practices to establish

SET job satisfaction and commitment. This question encouraged participants to utilize their

experience and wisdom within the SET role to provide more practical solutions for special

education and school administrators. The table below highlights the codes, themes and categories

that emerged from Interview Question Three.

Table 5.

Interview Question 3: Data Analysis Process

Codes	High-Level Categories	Themes	Participant Responses
Promoting team culture			P1. Having a team around kids, a team that supports our most challenging kids, that's so important. Having a team makes you feel like, even if the challenge is really great, it's not all yours.

P2. This goes back to what the special education teacher does during the day, really understanding their role…It comes down to time and support. If you care about our students, you should know what it takes to help them succeed.

P3. Human connection is human nature and a craving many of us have so being with my colleagues just feels good. It feels better than being in my office doing paperwork. And, it's also problem solving and effective to be |
| Care & concern for students on IEPs/with disabilities | Positive school culture | Valuing special education & neurodivergence | |
| Shared accountability for all students | Collective efficacy

Special education interest, knowledge & advocacy | School community | |
Awareness of isolation for SETs			
Support	Task-based support		
Prioritize teacher well-being			
Delegate responsibilities of non-IEP activities			
Break down silos between general & special education			
Share information			
Consistent communication to all school employees			
Flexible in the time and place to complete tasks			
Serve as role model			

Creative			sharing information. Then we can really support kids.
Resourceful			
Make life better for kids			P4. All this said, special educators need to have trust and autonomy to teach their students. They need to be agile. You can't just set up a lesson plan and go sometimes. You have to be responsive to (student needs), immediately.
Clarify paperwork responsibilities			
Carve out time in schedules for paperwork			
Educate peers on SET role			
Role model social-emotional learning			
Collaborative problem solving			P5. I think if, when they're here, understanding what the role is. I don't know how many administrators understand what special educators are doing every day.

Theme 1. Prioritizing Special Education and Students' Neurodivergence. Consistence

with responses to Research Question 2, prioritizing the learning, unique attributes and

contribution of students on IEPs emerged as a theme from Interview Question Three. All

participants discussed supporting special education teachers and understanding the demanding

role. Importantly, this suggestion served as a mechanism for supporting students on IEPs. That

is, the suggestion of task-based support was discussed as a means to best support students on

IEPs as opposed to a method for lessening the workload of special education teachers. However,

it is insincere to suggest that all references to task-based support emerged as an extension of

student support. For example, one participant stated, "Someone can always help me with all the

clerical work. There's so much paperwork and coordinating and scheduling; I can always use

some help with that" (participant 4). Though, the majority of suggestions related to task-based

support served the function of either expressing interest and value in the special education

teacher role or supporting special education teachers in order to best serve the students with unique learning, social, emotional and/or behavioral needs.

Theme 2. School Community. Establishing and nurturing a positive school community emerged as a theme from each participant. Positive school culture and a collaborative, supportive school culture emerged as a primary leadership focus from all participants. References to working in silos, special education teacher isolation and singular responsibility for students on IEPs occurred in each individual interview and were discussed as primary challenges of the SET role. An increased emphasis on collective efficacy, collaboration and shared problem solving were noted as opportunities for increasing SET job satisfaction and retention.

Focus Group

Engagement in the focus group enabled participants to reflect on the data analysis and the researcher's findings, as well as the potential intersection between Positive Organizational Scholarship and SET retention. Additionally, as is the intention with Grounded Theory, reflecting a theory of SET leadership which encourages job satisfaction and retention was enabled by knowledge gained through the focus group.

Interview Question One Member Reflection. Participants confirmed the themes emerging from the first interview question, *Community* and *Student Centeredness*. After the researcher presented these themes, the participants provided minimal response. After allowing for a 15-second silent pause, the researcher inquired about the silence in stating, "Do these themes seem accurate or are there surprises?" Participants confirmed the themes in stating, "They're spot on" (participant 4) and, "No surprises here" (participant 5). Other participants (1, 2 and 3) nodded in agreement. After another pause to allow for and encourage continued discussion, Participant Four stated, "My thoughts are that these are words what we see in every article about education.

We know this as special educators and you know it as a human. So what I want to know is where are you going to take it from here?" (participant 4).

Interview Question Two Member Reflection. Similar to participants' reaction to the themes emerging from Interview Question 1, the themes of *Valuing Special Education and Neurodivergence* and *Respect* emerging from Interview Question 2 were confirmed by the research participants with statements such as, "No surprises again" (participant 4) and, "Yup, sounds just right to me" (participant 5). When asked if participants could offer alternate interpretations of the data and suggest different themes, the participants shook their heads and stated, "No, I think it is just right" (participant 2) and, "It's wild to me how accurate this is. How much it sums up our work" (participant 3). With such responses, the researcher considered the participants' reactions and statements as confirmation of data analysis findings and continued into Interview Question Three.

Interview Question Three Member Reflection. In considering themes emerging from the prompt, "What can school leaders and administrators do to promote SET job satisfaction and commitment?," participants again confirmed the data analysis. Different from participants' responses to Interview Question One and Two, participants offered additional insight and suggestions. These included the sharing of resources, acknowledging and dismantling "the invisible barriers between special and general education" (participant 3) and increasing school leaders' knowledge of disabilities and special education.

Participants' comments within the discussion of methods for increasing SET job satisfaction culminated around the concept of special education as *second best* which emerged from Participant Four. The conversation initiated with the following dialogue and continued for several minutes, with each participant offering validation and insight related to this concept.

(P5): They're doing something associated with the learning and they're working their

hardest. And you still have the teachers who feel their work isn't good enough, no matter

how hard they try. And the kids know that. They know it's not valued, that their learning

and product isn't valued.

(P4): Right. It's second best.

(P5): Yes, that's it! Treating special education like it's second best. That's the problem.

(P2): Yes, that's so perfectly put. We spend so much time and energy trying to convince

our colleagues that our work, these kids, are just as important as the A+ kids. If our

leaders knew how important these kids, how hard they're working and how hard we're

working, it would all be so much easier.

(P1): Yeah, if you put it that way, that's the truth. To value what we're doing, to value

that a three-paragraph essay is just as important and well-done as a five-page essay, that

would change everything in special education. Then we wouldn't have to spend so much

time advocating for our kids and we could just actually support them, support their

learning and progress, help them grow.

   Research Question Two Member Reflection. Following review of the themes emerging from

the three interview questions, the researcher offered Research Question Two to the participants,

How might positive organizational scholarship (POS) inform special education leadership?

Additionally, the researcher provided a summary of POS as well as three leadership practices

unique to the POS framework. These included energy mapping, building a culture of abundance

and supportive communication and feedback. Similar to participants' response to data analysis

of Interview Question Three, participants offered both insight and interest in their responses to this focus group prompt.

Affirmation of POS practices, particularly those highlighted by the researcher, persisted throughout the remainder of the focus group. Participants shared interest in the different, specific practices and no POS practice was viewed as insufficient or impractical for use with SETs. Participants' statements regarding POS leadership strategies follow:

- I would love to know more about energy mapping and how that would look in an educational setting. I'm so fascinated by that concept. In my mind, it's identifying strengths and capitalizing on the strengths in your staff. The idea of recognizing strength in everyone and truly believing that everyone has something to offer. That everyone can be valued in some capacity. It comes back to valuing and respecting people (participant 3).

- I want to hear exactly what I am doing well, I want my leadership to be specific and to tell me what I am doing well. Authentic and specific. I think positive leaders do that. They're aware and they're watching and they're giving that critical, positive and authentic feedback (participant 1).

- I love the idea of a culture of abundance. It's so much of what we're doing every day, of finding the good and the strengths and amplifying those rather than trying to fix what's wrong here or there. To me, this Positive Organizational Scholarship is just a label for leadership to understand what special educators are doing each day (participant 4)

Though participants supported POS as a useful framework for school leaders and special education leadership, some participants offered caution with its use, particularly related to the word *strategy*. These participants expressed concern that elements of leadership, particularly

related to an individual's values and belief system, cannot be taught or subscribed to. Rather,

such attributes, the participants indicated, are likely to be intrinsic as opposed to learned.

Furthermore, participants expressed a strong aversion to practices that suggest the central tenets

of POS, such as respect and positive regard, though are delivered without congruence with these

tenets. The following statements exemplify this inconsistency which participants identified as

nearly as objectionable as practices which blatantly disregard respect, collaboration and integrity.

- The worst is when a problem is identified, a principal says they will solve it and listens to

  our challenges and proposed solutions and then they try to solve it and it fails…They

  always say, "Oh, I though such and such fixed it" and we just laugh (participant 5).

- It's a style that comes from their personal values and beliefs. It's not clothes that you put

  on and take off. For people to actually do this, they have to actually respect others. They

  have to actually believe in people. It cannot be just a strategy. These things absolutely

  would make all the difference in the world in a school, but they cannot be strategies

  (participant 4).

- The word *authentic* comes to mind. The positive leaders in our community are the ones

  who give authentic feedback, ask how we're doing, jump in to support us and hear us. It's

  not an act or an effort, it just is, it's how some leaders are and I don't think they learned it

  (participant 5).

- There's nothing worse than when administration pretends or talks about this being their

  style and then they act in the complete opposite way. Some people treat this as though it's

  a box to check off or an agenda item rather than a way of just being like (P5) is saying

  (participant 3)

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the Thematic Analysis process for qualitative data analysis and presented the findings of this study. Themes emerging from the three interview questions were outlined as well as the outcome of the focus group, which enabled member reflection and ensured multivocality as foundational tenets of the qualitative data analysis. The following chapter highlights the ways in which the findings of this research study both align with current research and also extend the current understanding of special education teacher job satisfaction and retention.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

For decades researchers have pondered the burnout and attrition so common among special education teachers (SETs) and have sought to understand the roots of this nationwide dilemma (Jones, Frank & Young, 2013). Despite the ample resources and research devoted to SET retention and job satisfaction, the national shortage of SETs persists, leading to a lack of services for over one million students each year (Samuels, 2018). Unfortunately, the shortage continues to only grow (Bettini et al., 2017) and impacts students across all U.S. states. Though the factors leading to SET burnout and attrition are well studied and understood, practical solutions to offer school and special education leaders remain elusive (Park & Shin, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of satisfied SETs and to offer school leaders practical solutions to encourage SET job satisfaction and retention.

Though SET burnout and attrition receive ample research attention and resources, little is known about the experiences of satisfied SETs who remain in the role for the tenure of their career and report high job satisfaction (Darling & Hammond, 2017). Since 2006, the SET-to-student ratio has increased from 14:1 to 17:1 (Samuels, 2018) though research has yet to identify a solution to the stubbornly unresolved SET shortage (Hagaman & Casey, 2017). This qualitative case study was essential to move research from seeking to understand SET burnout and attrition to, instead, exploring the leadership practices and workplace conditions that encourage SET job satisfaction and retention. The shift in perspective from asking, *"Why do people leave the SET role?"* to *"Why do people stay in the SET role?"* is critical to learning from and understanding the experience of satisfied SETs with a demonstrated commitment to the field of special education.

This research addresses the problem statement that little is known about the factors and leadership styles that contribute to SET job satisfaction and retention. Furthermore, little is known about the experiences of SETs who report high job satisfaction and an intention to remain in the field of special education. To address this gap in research, this qualitative study learned from satisfied, committed SETs to best understand their vocational experiences. Additionally, this study surveyed satisfied SETs to gain their recommendations and wisdom related to school and special education leaders and how they might contribute to SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment. The concept and potential applicability of Positive Organizational Scholarship was explored, as well, as a prospective resource for school leaders interested in maintaining their SET workforce.

Chapter 1 served as an introduction to this research project and included the foundational context of the study, an introduction to the problem of SET burnout and the research questions posed in search of a solution to the identified problem. Key terms, delimitations and the importance of this study were presented, as well. Chapter 2 provided a thorough examination of the literature conducted in recent decades which sought to define, explain and address SET burnout and attrition. The conceptual framework was also presented in Chapter 2 in addition to research outlining the critical impact the SET shortage has on students with disabilities. Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) and Positive Deviance were presented as foundational concepts to the study's structure and organization. Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology and its suitability in answering the three research questions. This chapter also outlined the methods for participant selection, data collection and data analysis.

The findings of this qualitative research study were presented in Chapter Four. Thematic Analysis (TA) was defined and the researcher explained the data analysis process in alignment

with the TA process. Chapter 4 presented codes, categories and themes revealed through the data

analysis and utilized quotes deriving from data collection to illuminate the themes and their

importance to answering the research questions. This chapter further aligns the findings of this

study with current research and discusses the theoretical, practical and future implications of the

study's findings. The chapter concludes with the strengths and weaknesses of this study as well

as proposals for future research related to this study's findings.

Summary of the Study

Research examining Special Education Teacher burnout dates back to the 1970s,

emerging shortly after the inception of the role. SET burnout and turnover remain a highly

studied phenomenon. However, the plethora of studies related to the SET workforce shortage

and high attrition rates have failed to result in tangible results for students with disabilities

(Hagaman & Casey, 2017). SET workforce shortages result in over one million students with

disabilities lacking services to which they are legally entitled; This trend is most prevalent in the

most rural and most urban of schools where poverty and traditionally marginalized students are

the overwhelming majority (Carver-Thomas & Carling- Hammond, 2017). Furthermore, high

attrition rates serve to limit schools' and communities' ability to establish educator consistency

as such rates lead to decreased school climate, less satisfying colleague relationships and

decreased resilience among members of a school community (Tyler & Brunner, 2014).

Despite the overwhelming body of research highlighting the negative impact of SET

burnout and attrition, up to 16% of SETs choose to leave their role each year (Carver-Thomas &

Darling-Hammond, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic and its tremendous impact on schools,

students and educators is expected to only exacerbate this trend and result in an increase in SETs

choosing to leave special education (Walker, 2021). By all accounts, SET burnout remains a

stubbornly unresolved and insidious burden on school communities across the US.

Burnout is a syndrome "characterized by dealing with a range of symptoms related to

psychological exhaustion, impaired relations, professional inefficacy and disillusion" (Jurado et

al, 2019, p. 1). Factors contributing to SET burnout include slow student progress, negative

leadership styles, poor relationships and minimal support within the school community,

demanding workload and lack of training (Fore et al., 2002; Bettini et al., 2017). Conversely,

SET job satisfaction is supported by mentorship, supportive relationships with colleagues and

administration, a cooperative school environment, task sharing and autonomy in the classroom

(Koutrouba & Michala, 2017).

Researchers routinely identify relationships among colleagues, administration and

families as a major factor in SET job satisfaction (Bettini et al., 2017; Ingelsby, 2017) though

few resources are found to support school leaders in addressing this need. Bettini and colleagues

(2017) indicate, "Systematically cultivating a high-quality special educator workforce has,

therefore, become a central responsibility of LSEAs though few, if any, resources exist to

support LSEAs in doing so effectively" (p. 113). While the antidote for SET burnout and

attrition seems well-established in literature, no tangible resources exist to meet this identified

need.

This study utilized a qualitative case study design to learn from satisfied SETs with a

demonstrated commitment to the field of special education. SET commitment to the field was

indicated by 10 or more years of experience in the role as well as an intention to remain in the

SET role the following school year. Job satisfaction was measured with an abbreviated version

of the *Thriving at Work Questionnaire* (Appendix B). All participants indicated affirmative

responses to 80% or more of the questionnaire items. Participants engaged in semi-structured

interviews and a follow-up focus group in order to support the researcher in uncovering

responses to the following research questions:

- What can highly satisfied SET's teach us about leadership practices that

    encourage SET retention?

- How might Positive Organizational Leadership practices inform Special

    Education Leadership?

- What leadership practices contribute to SET organizational commitment?

This research project, utilizing a qualitative methodology, sought to learn from seasoned,

satisfied SETs and to utilize their experience and wisdom in understanding leadership practices

that encourage SET job satisfaction and retention. As this research design was a new approach to

an old dilemma, a qualitative design was selected for its applicability when "a problem or issue

needs to be explored" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 45). This methodology was particularly

important as it offers voice and credence to individuals closest to the phenomenon being studied

and, therefore, provides a broad, new lens from which to extend research into a new direction

(Pathek et al., 2013). The researcher sought to secure four to six participants, as is consistent

with best practice for a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Five participants engaged in

the study. Each participant met with the researcher to review the benefits and consequences

prior to a second meeting to obtain informed consent.

Data collection was conducted through virtual interviews with each participant. After data

transcription and analysis, participants engaged in a focus group to provide their reflections of

the themes emerging from the data analysis. This allowed participants to provide their insight

and suggestions related to the researcher's analysis and interpretation of the data. Data from the

focus group was also transcribed and utilized to verify the themes emerging from the participant

interviews. The following section outlines the process for analyzing the data collected through

the participant interviews and focus group as a means to establish findings for this research

study.

Thematic Analysis

This section presents responses to the three research questions based upon themes derived

from the Thematic Analysis of the interview and focus group data. To answer the research

questions, five research participants engaged in individual interviews as well as a focus group.

Participants were asked the following questions in the individual interviews to build an

understanding of Special Education Teacher (SET) job satisfaction and retention from those most

familiar with the phenomena:

- I see that you identified as (highly) satisfied in your role. Tell me about that.

- Tell me about the role of your supervisor or school leader/principal. How does school

  leadership impact your job satisfaction and decision to stay in your role?

- What can school leaders and administrators do in their daily practices to support SETs?

  How can they encourage SETs to stay in their school?

Interview data was then analyzed through the Thematic Analysis (TA) process and

presented to the research participants in a focus group format. The focus group allowed

participants to reflect and comment on the themes derived from the interview questions and to

consider the second research question, "How might Positive Organizational Leadership practices

inform Special Education Leadership?" Data gathered in the focus group was also analyzed

through the TA process to more thoroughly answer the research questions. In this chapter, these

themes will be analyzed and detailed findings from the interviews and focus groups will be

discussed.

Research Question One

The first research question served as an entry into Special Education Teacher (SET) job

satisfaction and retention and asked, broadly, "What can highly satisfied SET's teach us about

leadership practices that encourage SET retention?" Below the themes that emerged from the

interview and focus group data in relation to this research question are presented.

1. Developing and nurturing a positive *school community* that values and supports

   all students, families and staff members.

2. Maintaining *student centeredness* through a mission and practices that value and

   support each student regardless of their unique learning needs, neurotypicality or

   need for an IEP.

Theme one

The first theme identified from participant responses relates to the well-known and often-

cited importance of school community and school culture relative to SET job satisfaction and

retention. All five participants discussed the importance and role of a positive school community

in their job satisfaction and retention. Three participants (participants 1, 3 and 4) discussed the

adverse impact of a negative school culture and cited their decision to leave positions in which

loneliness, competition and/or exclusion dominated their vocational experience.

The theme of nurturing a positive school community emerged in both common and unique

ways. Participants discussed positive relationships with colleagues and students (all participants)

and families (participants 1, 3 and 4). The category of *inclusion* emerged as participants

discussed the importance of relationships among colleagues and students (all participants),

administrators and students (participants 1, 3, 4 and 5) and relationships among the broader

community and students (participants 1, 2, 3 and 4). Here, the participants outlined the

importance of a school community's focus on inclusion and value for students receiving special

education services and the intentional commitment to and relationship building with students

with unique needs. The value of such relationships, as discussed by the participants, resulted in

increased collective efficacy and student performance thereby supporting SET job satisfaction

and retention. The concepts of "we're all in this together" and "every student is crucial to our

community" resonated through each of the five individual interviews.

Theme two

The second theme emerging from Research Question One is the concept of *student*

centeredness and holding all students at the center of a school's mission and success regardless

of their unique needs. Each participant discussed their devotion and connection to each of their

students and the expectation that administration and general education teachers center all

students at the core of their work. Statements such as, "You have to care for each of the students"

(participant 1), "I need the math and English teachers to know how hard these kids are working"

(participant 3) and, "When we all see a kid's potential, and we see what they can do, it's just so

good for the student" (participant 5) exemplify the importance of student-centeredness in SET

job satisfaction and retention.

Utilizing a strengths-based perspective and observing student growth emerged as

categories from each participant interview. Observing and participating in student growth (all

participants) and identifying and nurturing student strengths (participants 1, 2, 3 and 5) emerged

consistently in the individual interviews. Focus group data confirms the importance or centering students through identifying strengths and prioritizing their growth and success.

When presented with the concept of student-centeredness as an emerging theme and contributing factor for SET job satisfaction and retention, participants highlighted the value of this theme and, simultaneously, the intersection of Theme 1 and Theme 2. That is, the themes of *positive school community* and *student-centeredness* intersect and complement one another to achieve SET job satisfaction. When asked about this in the focus group, participants discussed the importance of these themes working in tandem as the ideal workplace setting for SETs. While both themes contribute to SET job satisfaction and retention, the presence and interconnectedness of both themes, operating simultaneously, was discussed as quoted below:

- When we're all working towards the same for students, it works out so well. Really, there's nothing better (participant 5).
- The collective work and collaboration is so important. And that's how we support students to succeed, when we all care and when we all work equally for each student (participant 3).

Connection to Research

Theme One, School Community and Culture, aligns with current research and conceptualization of Special Education Teacher job satisfaction and retention. A positive school culture and supportive environment repeatedly emerge as primary factors in SET job satisfaction and the decision to remain in the field (Ramos et al., 2017; Platsidou, 2010; Bettini et al., 2017). Supportive relationships embedded within a positive school culture serve as a protective factor to the demands and challenges of the SET role (Bettini et al., 2017) and are a significant factor in

SET retention. While school culture emerges as a salient area of focus for school leaders seeking to establish consistency and longevity in their faculty, few practical resources exist to meet this end, particularly related to supervising SETs (Dapula & Castono, 2017).

Theme Two, Student-Centeredness, emerged as a new area of focus for researchers to consider in unraveling SET job satisfaction. Relative to this research study, student centeredness emphasizes inclusion, valuing all students and families and explicitly demonstrating an understanding of and appreciation for students receiving special education services. Examples of this include prioritizing student learning spaces ("In special education, sometimes you're providing services in a closet or packed storage room, like that communicates any sort of value for our kids," participant 2) and publicly demonstrating the value of students receiving special education through announcements and physical presence ("I notice administration will pop into a math class or announce what they saw in an art class. But no one is popping in to see how hard our students are working or the work they create. That would go a long way." participant 3). These findings suggest researchers may shift their focus towards equity, diversity and inclusion research related to special education and supporting school leaders in exploring their implicit biases as a means for encouraging SET job satisfaction and inclusion.

Research Question Two

The second research question sought potential alignment with Positive Organizational Scholarship and asked, "How might Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) practices inform Special Education Leadership?" Below the themes that emerged from the focus group data in relation to this research question are presented.

1. Affirmation that POS may be applicable to SET leaders and special education administrators

2. Warning that POS strategies will fail if delivered disingenuously

Theme one

All five participants (100%) confirmed POS as a likely framework for school leaders and

special education administrators. Participants expressed interest in the three presented POS

practices: Building a culture of abundance (participants 2, 3, & 5), energy mapping, (participants

1, 3 and 4) and supportive communication and feedback (participants 1, 3, and 5). The concept of

identifying and bolstering the strengths within a community were described as "natural"

(participant 3) and "our everyday work" (participant 5), thus confirming the applicability of

Positive Organizational Scholarship within schools and special education departments. Related

to the applicability of POS, no participants (0%) expressed concern or disagreement with the

POS framework in schools. However, theme 2 discusses participant caution regarding the way in

which a POS framework and practices may be detrimental to SET job satisfaction and retention.

Theme two

All participants (100%) both supported Positive Organizational Scholarship though,

simultaneously, warned of its potential negative impact if implemented without a genuine,

authentic belief it is tenets. Participant 4 warned that there is "nothing worse" and Participant 3

indicated "it actually makes everything harder" when leaders verbalize a commitment to the

values of POS though act inconsistently with their own statements. That is, participants indicated

POS may be an effective leadership framework only if it is implemented with consistency, an

observed congruence between what SETs hear and experience in their daily work. Participants' 3

and 4 statements suggest that such incongruence may be more harmful than leadership practices

that express and demonstrate a commitment to a more domineering or authoritarian leadership

framework. Participant 5 articulated this need for congruence in stating, "As long as (leaders) are saying what they mean and acting how they say, I can manage that. If they're going to be a bad leader, I appreciate it more if they at least tell me they like to rule from the top."

Connection to Research

Though researchers had not applied Positive Organizational Scholarship to SET job satisfaction and commitment prior to this study, a conceptual link existed between the two philosophies. Spreitzer et al. (2005) proposed the concept of *thriving at work* which measures job satisfaction in three domains: task focus, exploration and heedful relating. Spreitzer and colleagues (2017) define thriving at work as "the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work" (p. 538). The concept of thriving at work, and the three identified contributing factors, align with researchers' conceptualization of SET job satisfaction. Research outlines SET job satisfaction as occurring when SETs feel productive and effective in their role, offered opportunities for learning and growth, and when part of a positive school community and climate. Given the alignment in research and frameworks in the fields of POS and SET job satisfaction, there is little surprise that all participants (100%) affirmed POS's applicability to SET job satisfaction and retention.

Participants expressed unanimous concern regarding the implementation of POS practices as a strategy rather than an innate belief system of the leader. This sentiment aligns with research indicating that workplace commitment is encouraged by consistent, congruent leadership practices (Cansoy, 2018) and that congruence in leadership supports SET job satisfaction (Haque et al., 2019). Cameron and et al. (2003) explore this notion in presenting a *Positive Profile for Authentic Leadership* (p. 248). This developmental process explores the

process for nurturing authentic, positively-oriented leaders as well avenues to achieve this

leadership style.

Regarding the development of authentic leaders, the authors suggest that the learned

skills of self-awareness and self-regulation are likely established prior to the development of an

authentic, positively-oriented leader. The authors state, "One of the core elements of the model is

self-awareness, which we posit is key for change in leadership development" (p. 257). They add,

"Creating a sense of self awareness, that one can be ethical relying upon different core values,

may regulate the target leader's attention to putting energy into operating differently in different,

positively-oriented cultures" (p. 257). This theoretical orientation suggests leaders can, indeed,

learn and adapt into a positively-oriented leader consistent with POS frameworks and practices.

Research Question Three

The third and final research question aligned with Interview Question Three in asking,

"What leadership practices contribute to SET organizational commitment?" More broadly,

participants were asked "What can school leaders do to promote SET job satisfaction and

commitment?" Themes emerging from these interviews and member reflections emerging from

the focus group are presented below.

1. Prioritizing Special Education
2. Developing and nurturing a *positive school community* that that values and
   supports all students, families and staff members.

Theme one

The theme of prioritizing special education emerged as the primary theme from all

participants (100%). Categories contributing to this theme include *task-based support* and

special education knowledge and advocacy. Requests for task-based support were shared by all participants (100%) and varied relative to the participant's unique role. Task-based support, as indicated by participants, included scheduling meetings (100%), time to complete paperwork (participants 1, 2, 4, and 5), communication with colleagues (100%), parents and external organizations (participants 1, 3, 4 and 5) and allotted time for lesson planning (participants 2, 3, and 4). Participants indicated the importance of understanding "all that special educators are doing" (participant 5) as a foundation to task-based support. Participant 3 echoed this in stating, "Sometimes I think (school leaders) want to help but they don't because they don't even know what our role is. To help and provide this support, the first thing you have to do it care: care about what we're doing and care about the kids we're serving."

Knowledge of and advocacy for special education emerged from all (100%) participants as well. This category related to leaders' understanding of special education rules and laws as well as a demonstrated interest in and prioritization of students receiving special education services.

When reflecting on the theme of Prioritizing Special Education in the focus group, all (100%) participants affirmed this theme. The importance of prioritizing special education was echoed throughout the focus group. Participants 2, 3, 4 and 5 spoke to underlying support for special education as a foundational concept for SET job satisfaction. Participant 4 illustrated this theme in stating, "I know principals that know all the laws in and out except special education, that's all on us. And guess what? Their general education teachers stay and their special education teacher go." As emerged in the themes related to Research Question One, the initial theme emerging from Research Question Three suggests an exploration of implicit biases related

to people with disabilities and ableism is central in developing school leaders and special

education leaders.

Theme two

Also consistent with the findings for Research Question One, the second theme of

developing and nurturing a positive school community that values and supports all students,

families and staff members emerged for Research Question Three. Participants spoke of their

reliance on a positive school community relative to their position. Participant 3 discussed the

importance of establishing "protected time to connect and talk with my colleagues" and

referenced the "human nature" of seeking support and connection with others. When asked about

practices that encourage SET job satisfaction, participant 1 discussed the value of healthy

relationships with families and colleagues. Participants 2, 4 and 5, when asked about practices to

encourage SET job satisfaction, first referenced Theme 1 (prioritizing special education) through

task support or special education knowledge and/or advocacy and, secondarily, emphasized the

importance of positive relationships and school community as a means for ensuring SET job

satisfaction and retention.

Connection to research.

Little research is found related to the central theme of Research Question Three which

indicates school leaders are well-served to prioritize special education in their daily work. This

includes demonstrations of value for students receiving special education services, providing

physical space and adequate resources for special education teachers and departments and being

physically present in the day-to-day lives and practices of SETs and students receiving

individualized supports. Some research points to the value of administrative and task support in

sustaining a strong SET workforce (Hagaman & Casey, 2017). Billingsley et al.'s (2020) recent research emphasizes the importance of prioritizing special education laws, roles and responsibilities into school leadership programs and professional development opportunities. The authors state, "Repeatedly, research findings and professional reports have identified working conditions that have interfered with SETs main goal-improving student outcomes." (p. 22). To extend this suggestion, school leaders would be well-served to also explore personal biases that may unintentionally communicate a lack of value or prioritizing of special education within a school.

As discussed in relation to Research Question One, the second theme, *developing and nurturing a positive school community that values and supports all students, families and staff members*, also emerged from the Thematic Analysis of interviews and focus group member reflection. Here, McLesky et al.'s (2004) research is of particular import. The researchers indicate that shared responsibility for all students, a positive and growth-oriented culture and opportunities for co-teaching and collaboration among special and general education teachers lead to increased SET job satisfaction and retention. Billingsley et al. (2020) emphasis the crucial elements of a positive school culture such as trust, respect and positive communication in their more recent research providing advice to school leaders seeking to maintain a satisfied SET workforce.

Summary

The Special Education Teacher (SET) role is well-known for its unique demands and challenges and also for the persistent lack of SETs across US schools. Researchers have long studied both SET burnout and attrition as well as SET job satisfaction and retention. However, the shortage continues to loom over educational systems, leading to a lack of services for over

one million students each year. Furthermore, an estimated five million students receive services

from novice, potentially ineffective SETs as a result of a shortage of seasoned, highly skilled

SETs (Samuels, 2018). Despite ample research efforts aimed at understanding and preventing

SET burnout and attrition, thereby solidifying a strong SET workforce for our most vulnerable

learners, a dearth of skilled, satisfied SETs endures across the US (Billingsley et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic and its negative impact on schools is expected to only

exacerbate the SET shortage as teachers leave the field of education, including special education,

at alarming rates (Walker, 2021).

To address the SET shortage and in an attempt to provide tangible, discrete practices for

school leaders and special education administrators, this qualitative study surveyed satisfied,

committed special educators. Participant interviews and a focus group were utilized as data

collection methods to uncover the factors supportive of SET retention. The study utilized a

positive deviance framework in which uniquely positive outliers are studied in order to identify

and illuminate the factors leading to positive outcomes (Marsh et al., 2004). Study participants

met criteria of serving ten or more years in the role of SET, indicating an expectation to remain

in the role for the following school year and affirming 80% of items on the abbreviated *Thriving

at Work Questionnaire* (Appendix B). Finally, the hypothesis of Positive Organization

Scholarship's (POS) potential utility in the field of Special Education leadership was explored

with research participants.

Two themes emerged from RQ1 that provide particular insight for school leaders and special

education administrators. The establishment of a positive, inclusive school community is a well-

known contributor to SET job satisfaction (Billingsley et al., 2020). The second theme of

student-centeredness was not readily available in current research and suggests that school

leaders may prioritize strengths-based and inclusivity practices as a means of maintaining a strong, effective SET workforce. Participants indicated these practices are more than signaling or verbalizing an interest in all students. Rather, demonstrating student-centeredness includes understanding, empathizing with and advocating for students receiving individualized supports. It is important to note that the two themes emerging in RQ1, when integrated, appeared to serve as an ideal working environment, as posited by study participants. The concepts of collective efficacy and inclusivity interlace to create a learning environment in which all school staff are expected to and capable of achieving positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

In considering RQ2, and the possible intersection between Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) and SET job satisfaction and retention, tangible practices to promote SET job satisfaction were uncovered. Participants unanimously affirmed the likelihood of POS practices and strategies as resources for school leaders to support their SET workforce. Examples of POS practices include positive communication and feedback, positive energy mapping and building a culture of abundance. Conceptually, SET job satisfaction and POS strategies complement one another; participants affirmed this hypothesis in the focus group. Additionally, themes emerging from RQ1 and RQ3 related to developing a positive school community and identifying amplifying strengths and accomplishments of all students serve as the foundational tenets of POS. In summary, it is most likely that POS has ample insight and practices to offer to the field of special education leadership.

Lastly, themes emerging from RQ3 remain consistent with those emerging from RQ1 and RQ2. The prioritization of special education departments as well as the development of a positive school community emerged as the most prominent themes in data collection. The data suggests that taking specific steps towards increasing inclusivity, valuing all members of a

school community and amplifying the work and individuals within a special education

department will serve to increase SET job satisfaction and retention. Both themes implore

school leaders to deeply explore their implicit biases and any unintentional invisible barriers they

may impose that communicate exclusion, a preference for neurotypical students and/or a lack of

value for students receiving special education services and the educators who support them in

doing so.

Implications

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn from satisfied, committed special

education teachers (SETs) in order to inform practical solutions to offer school leaders and

special education administrators. Providing opportunities for satisfied, seasoned SETs to share

their wisdom and experience with the researcher allowed for an authentic understanding of the

factors that contribute to SET job satisfaction and retention. Data collection took place via

virtual, semi-structured interviews followed by a focus group that enabled participants to reflect

on and fine tune the study's conclusions. The findings of this study will support school leaders

seeking to maintain a strong, effective SET workforce and may steer researchers into a new

direction of viewing SET job satisfaction and retention as an extension of diversity, equity and

inclusion practices. The implications of this study are summarized in the chart below followed

by a more detailed exploration of the conceptual, practical and future implications.

Table 6.

Summary of Study Implications

General Implications	• Positive Organizational Scholarship as an effective tool for school leaders in supporting SET retention • Intersection of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) practices and SET job satisfaction and retention
Conceptual Implications	• The integration of and emphasis on DEI frameworks into the conceptualization of SET job satisfaction

	• The increased emphasis of DEI practices as a crucial component of effective SET leadership
Practical Implications	• Positive Organizational Scholarship practices to encourage SET job satisfaction • Positive leadership styles as developmental, as opposed to static, abilities and skills • Discrete practices to explore personal biases regarding ableism and neurotypicality
Future Implications	• Increase generalizability of the study in different geographic areas and with larger sample sizes • Increase generalizability with more heterogeneous sample • Consider the intersection(s) of cultural, ethnic, gender, age and other areas of bias with disability/neurodiversity bias within a school system

Since the 1990's, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, as a broad framework, has influenced educational research and practices internationally and in the US (Ngcobo & Mutherukrishna, 2011). However, without a unified definition or meaning-making of DEI in the educational context, experts and practitioners offer individual interpretations and suggestions for increasing equity and inclusion through various practices (Graham & Slee, 2008). Consistent with the findings of this study, these DEI efforts continue the application of normative, neurotypical DEI efforts related to Special Education Services. This inconsistency fails to integrate the neurodiversity and celebration of differences essential in implementing true DEI practices in a school (Ngcobo & Mutherukrishna, 2011). Rayner (2009) emphasizes the challenges on DEI efforts in schools in stating, "This present situation points to a growing need to identify, emphasize and integrate an awareness of diversity with its value as a potential resource within the practice of educational management" (p. 440). He posits, school leaders must genuinely engage in self-reflection and examination of their personal biases to authentically lead a school community in DEI efforts. It is this self-awareness and uncovering of implicit biases the study participants requested of their school leaders.

Conceptual Implications

The conceptual framework for this study integrated the disciplines of Positive Deviance, Positive Organizational Scholarship and Workplace Commitment in order to understand and support Special Education Teacher (SET) job satisfaction and retention. Positive Deviance serves as a research practice that identifies and accesses strategies that lead to uncommonly positive results (Marsh et al., 2004). Positive Organizational Scholarship, similarly, presents a framework for organizational structures that "seeks to identify and highlight factors which contribute to human wellness and thriving rather than disorder and illness" (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 5). Finally, the field of workplace commitment identifies and strengthens the traits of those who are "psychologically attached to the organization" (Jordan et al., 2017, p. 19) and notes such individuals will be "more productive and satisfied" (p. 19).

The three disciplines providing the conceptual framework for this study aligned with research on SET job satisfaction as each focused on the strengths of an organization, individual or experience. Furthermore, these three disciplines also seek to amplify and learn from that which is thriving in the subject under study. This focus on the positive attributes and presuming a strengths-based perspective parallels research on SET job satisfaction in which positive school culture, positive regard for community members and virtuous leadership practices promote SET job satisfaction and retention (Billingsley et al., 2020).

Designed from a conceptual foundation of positive organizational scholarship, positive deviance and workplace commitment, this study contributes additional frameworks or theories for considering and increasing SET job satisfaction. The first critical area for consideration is the addition of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) into the current conceptualization leadership practice that contribute to SET job satisfaction.

The concept and practices of DEI may be a new avenue for school leaders to consider in their efforts to increase SET job satisfaction and retention in their school communities (Rayner, 2009). Satisfied, committed SETs in this study routinely expressed a preference for leadership practices that demonstrate a value for and prioritization of students with unique learning needs whose learning and performance differ from their neurotypical peers. Previous research highlights the importance of task-based support to encourage SET job satisfaction (Billingsley, 2020). Findings from this research study highlight the value of task-based support and, additionally, positions it as a school leader's statement of value for special education teachers and students. That is to say, participants indicated they do not request support to make their job easier rather, they request task-based support as an indication to and testament of the value of their work and, most importantly, their students.

The integration of diversity, equity and inclusion frameworks into the conceptualization of SET job satisfaction and retention suggests school leaders should examine their own personal beliefs and biases related to ableism and nuerotypicality. Implicit biases may hinder the ways in which school leaders communicate to their school community that special education matters. The ideas of "second best" and "not good enough" resonated from all study participants, suggesting SET job satisfaction and workplace commitment rely on leaders' shared value in all students, regardless of their learning, social, emotional or behavioral needs.

Practical Implications

The results of this study confirm the importance of a positive school culture, collective efficacy and positive, virtuous leadership practices as primary contributing factors to Special Education Teacher job satisfaction and retention (Jones et al., 2013). A salient practical implication of this research study is participants' affirmation that Positive Organizational

Scholarship can inform school leaders' skillset with strategies and practices to encourage SET

job satisfaction. This finding provides tangible solutions and resources for school leaders and

special education administrators to hone their leadership skills specific to the needs of SETs.

Examples of POS practices outlined in this research study include positive energy mapping,

positive communication and feedback and building a culture of abundance (Cameron, 2013).

A second practical implication of this study is the notion that positive leadership skills can

be developed, as opposed to a pre-determined, essential characteristic of school leaders.

Participants articulated a theme of genuine, authentic positive leadership and noted "there's

nothing worse" than incongruent leadership that touts a preference for positive, people-centered

leadership though, in action, demonstrates an authoritarian or distrustful leadership style.

Cameron et al. (2003) present a theory for *Authentic Leadership Development* that cultivates

authenticity and virtuousness in leaders. The authors state, "Most recently, attention has been

devoted to the lack of authentic self-behavior. As a positive construct, descriptive words include

genuine, *reliable*, *trustworthy*, *real* and *veritable*. Positive psychologists conceive this

authenticity as both owning one's personal experience and acting in accord with the true self" (p.

242). The authors provide a model for developing authentic leadership through the lenses of life

experiences and organizational context (internal or external factors). Utilizing the individual's

sense of self or the virtues of the organization, self-awareness and self-regulation behaviors are

taught in order to achieve an authentic leadership style. This leadership style is marked by the

virtues of confidence, hope, optimism, resilience, transparency, ethics, future-orientation and

relationship building (Cameron et al., 2013), all of which are leadership traits important to SET

job satisfaction and retention (Billingsley et al., 2020; Jones at al., 2013 & Bettini et al., 2017).

In addition to the contributions and practices offered from the field of Positive

Organizational Scholarship, concepts from the field of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion likely

provide practical resources for school leaders and those supervising SETs. Study participants

routinely identified a need for their colleagues to appreciate the skills and outcomes of "all

students, even the ones with IEPs" (participant 2). The categories of inclusion, special education

knowledge, advocacy and support for special education, and task-based support emerged

throughout the interviews and were confirmed by all participants in the focus group. While these

categories, on the surface, represent a need to be familiar with special education laws,

regulations, best practices and the staff and students within a special education department, a

broader theme suggests a prioritization and valuing of special education to the same degree

leaders prioritize and value traditional, neuro-typical students. Participants discussed a sense of

"always being second best" (participant 4) and convincing classroom teachers that work

produced by a student on an IEP is "just as good as everyone else's" (participant 5). All

participants (100%) confirmed this observation and noted its detrimental impact on student

success and, therefore, SET job satisfaction. With this in mind, school leaders and SET

administrators may consider the practical implication of these findings, as well as the theme of

authentic leadership, to uncover and address any implicit biases towards neurotypical,

traditionally performing students.

Future Implications

This study addresses the problem statement that little is known about the experiences and

perceptions of seasoned, satisfied special education teachers (SETs) and few resources exist to

offer school leaders to encourage SET job satisfaction and retention. This qualitative study

utilized semi-structured interviews and a focus group to unearth the experiences of satisfied

SETs who have remained in the field of special education for ten or more years. This allowed for those most intimately aware of the problems and challenges inherent in the SET role to offer their wisdom and expertise to inform the long-standing problem of SET attrition. The study accessed five participants from Washington and Caledonia counties in central and northeastern Vermont. All study participants worked in rural school districts in a particularly homogenous state, potentially limiting the generalizability of these study results. The generalizability of this study is also limited by the small sample size. Therefore, future studies may utilize a larger sample size and, most importantly, recruit participants from more heterogeneous backgrounds and geographic regions.

Strengths of The Study

Consistent with best-practices in conducting research, this research project underwent significant planning followed by scrutiny from the researcher's dissertation committee. Participant protections and the achievement of all ethical guidelines were ensured from the researcher's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher obtained consent through a three-stage informative process in which participants received information related to the study, reviewed the information with the researcher and, again, reviewed the information prior to providing their informed consent. Similarly, confidentially was safeguarded throughout the research process as participants' names were substituted for their participant number (ie, P1, P2, P3, ect.) in the transcription of interview and focus group data. Interviews and focus groups were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and in her password-protected email. Steps were also taken to ensure confidentiality in the review of findings section of this dissertation in which all identifying information, such as length of years in special education or current school of employment, were removed from the transcribed interview or focus group data.

A relevant strength of this study is the use of member checking during the focus group to engage participants in the study's findings and, importantly, to survey participants for their perspectives and interpretations of the data. The researcher asked participants to share their interpretation of the data and provided encouragement to do so even if, especially if, their interpretation differed from the researcher's findings. This process of member checking ensured the validity of the researcher's findings and allowed for edits and added perspectives to include in data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The participants in this study served as the third strength of this research study. SETs with significant tenure in the field of special education, totally 132 years among all participants, volunteered to engage in this study. The minimum years of experience was 15 years as a SET. Additionally, the participants represented the gender distribution among SETs with one of five SETs identifying as male (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). It should also be noted that participants emerged from some of the more rural and impoverished school districts within the study's geographic catchment area. According to research, participants from these towns and schools may experience the most burnout and attrition (Samuels, 2018) though, fortunately, the study accessed participants who identified as satisfied and intended to remain in the field despite their challenging workplace factors.

Finally, conducting this research at the end of the Covid-19 pandemic allowed the researcher to access and engage participants from various portions of central and northeastern Vermont. Without the current fluency and comfort with virtual platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom, participant engagement may have been lower. Additionally, participants may have been reticent to engage in virtual interviews and in-person interviews may have hampered the

researcher's ability to access participants from across the region. The increased comfort with and knowledge of virtual platforms assisted in the data collection for this research project.

Weaknesses of the Study

A weakness of this study is the small sample size. Creswell and Poth (2017) suggest a sample of 4-6 participants for qualitative research that serves as an initial exploration into a topic. That said, the sample size was appropriate for the study though, going forward, researchers may consider a larger sample size to increase generalizability of the findings. Researchers may also explore the connections between Positive Organizational Scholarship and SET job satisfaction and retention in larger, more urban school districts as well as in school districts with increased ethnic, socio-economic and cultural diversity.

A second weakness of this study is the assumption that the SETs who report high job satisfaction and demonstrate workplace commitment are also effective in their role. The study did not also measure vocational effectiveness of the five participants. This study assumed SETs demonstrating longevity in the field were also effective in their teaching abilities and compliant with their case management responsibilities. Future studies may address this assumption by maintaining participant requirement and also surveying participant supervisors for an understanding of the participants' effectiveness in their role.

Considerations for Replicating the Study

Despite the small sample size and homogenous setting of the research, the findings of this qualitative research design remain relevant, valid and trustworthy. The individual interviews and focus group enabled the researcher to learn from seasoned, satisfied Special Education Teachers (SETs) in order to understand their perceptions of SET job satisfaction and retention and to establish practical solutions for SET burnout and attrition to offer school leaders. The individual

interviews enabled the researcher to survey participants for their understanding of and factors contributing to SET job satisfaction and retention. Furthermore, the focus group again engaged participants' voice and perspectives in reviewing the study's findings and offering additional insight and perspectives on the themes emerging from the interview data. Therefore, the findings of this study extend beyond those established by the researcher. Rather, the findings of this study were co-created by the researcher and the participants to ensure the applicability and accuracy of the data interpretation and study's findings.

Recommendations

This research served to unravel special education teacher (SET) job satisfaction and retention and to understand the leadership practices that contribute to a SETs decision to remain in the field of special education. This study contributed to the current understanding of SET job satisfaction and retention by endorsing Positive Organizational Scholarship as an effective leadership framework to support a strong, satisfied and committed SET workforce. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that school leaders and special education administrators are well suited to engage in learning and professional development regarding their own implicit biases related to neurotypicality, ableism and a preference for traditional learners. The following recommendations are offered to further the findings of this study, extrapolate the findings to other geographic areas and to corroborate the findings with other seasoned, satisfied SETs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study expanded the theory of SET job satisfaction to include a more robust conceptualization of inclusion and diversity in our schools. To that end, the study moves from a suggestion of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives in schools to a plea for the careful analysis of personal biases and preferences by school leaders, particularly related to

neurodiversity and ableism. The study also affirmed the hypothesis that Positive Organizational Scholarship may serve as a fruitful and productive framework for school leaders interested in supporting and sustaining a strong SET workforce. A future study may consider a larger, more diverse sample size and also consider the intersection of cultural and nuero-diversity within a school community. For example, research may take place in large, urban school with a more diverse faculty and staff. The researchers of this study may seek to understand if and how schools with more cultural and ethnic diversity, if at all, demonstrate an increased appreciation for neurodiversity and an awareness of ableism's impact on students with disabilities.

While this research unearthed a need for an examination of implicit biases related to disability and ableism, future research may consider the broader examination of implicit biases related to culture, gender, sexual orientation and religion as it relates to SET job satisfaction and retention. Such research would seek to uncover the presence of ableism

Future research may also consider lowering the threshold for participation to six years of employment as a SET, as SETs who achieve six years of tenure in the field tend to remain in the field for longer than those who exit the field at years four or five (Samuels, 2018). Additionally, researchers may consider accessing a more culturally and ethnically diverse participant pool. Though cultural identity was not surveyed in this study, it is the researcher's assumption that all five participants identify as Caucasian or White.

Finally, future research may consider examining SET job satisfaction and retention in school systems with a different leadership structure than those found in this study. All participants in this study identified the school principal or, in the larger school, a school-based special education director as their direct supervisor. Therefore, participants all reported to and were supervised by a school leader in their immediate vicinity. Leadership and supervision

structures vary depending on the size, culture and region of a school (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011). Future research may replicate this study among participants with a more diverse leadership and supervisory structure.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study engaged five seasoned, satisfied special education teachers (SETs) in semi-structured interviews as well as a focus group to gain their perspectives and wisdom related to SET job satisfaction and retention. In short, the research asked participants, "What keeps SETs in their role and how can school leaders support SET job satisfaction and retention?" Through data collection and analysis, the themes of prioritizing special education, inclusion, positive leadership practices and cultivating a positive school community emerged as the prominent means for supporting SETs in achieving job satisfaction. Additionally, Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) was presented as a useful framework for school leaders seeking to improve SET job satisfaction and retention. Participants affirmed the utility of a POS framework in schools, though cautioned such practices would require genuine implementation and buy-in from the school leader or principal.

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Appendix A

Thriving at Work Questionnaire: Item Dimensions & List

Dimension	Item
Psychological Well-being from Work	My work gives me a sense of purpose. My work adds meaning to my life. My work makes a meaningful contribution to society. My work allows me to develop new knowledge and skills. My job allows me to achieve my full potential. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day. The things I am asked to do at work are consistent with my personal values. I get asked to do things at work that I don't feel comfortable doing.
Emotional Well-being from Work	I feel engaged by my work. At work, my mind is focused on my job. I am satisfied with my job. I am satisfied with the kind of work I do. The kind of work I do makes me happy. My job makes me happy. My work adds to my overall life satisfaction. I love my job. I am enthusiastic about my work. My job is pointless (has no useful purpose). My job is boring.
Social Well-being from Work	I receive recognition at work for my accomplishments I feel supported by the people I work with. I feel supported by my coworkers. I feel supported by my managers/supervisors. I receive useful and timely feedback at work from my managers/supervisors. I feel valued by the people I work with. I feel valued by my coworkers. I feel valued by my managers/supervisors. I feel valued by other people I interact with at work, such as customers, clients, students, patients (any other people who are NOT your supervisors or coworkers). My work is valued by others. My work is valued by my coworkers. My work is valued by my managers/supervisors. My work is valued by other people I interact with at work, such as customers, clients, students, patients (any other people who are NOT your supervisors or coworkers). At work, I feel like I belong. I am comfortable being myself at work. I am treated with respect at work. I am treated with respect by my coworkers. I am treated with respect by my managers/supervisors I am treated with respect by other people I interact with at work, such as customers, clients, students, patients (any other people who are NOT your supervisors or coworkers). I am treated fairly at work. I am treated fairly by my coworkers. I am treated fairly by my managers/supervisors. I am treated fairly by other people I interact with at work, such as customers, clients, students, patients (any other people who are NOT your supervisors or coworkers). I am bullied, harassed, or humiliated at work. My work allows me to contribute to the happiness and well-being of others. I can voice concerns or make suggestions at work without getting into trouble. At work, my opinions matter. No one cares about my opinions at work.

Work–life Integration	I can easily manage my job as well as attend to my needs and the needs of my family.
	I can achieve a healthy balance between my work and my life outside of work.
	I worry about things at work when I am not working.
	My family and friends value the work I do.
	Travelling to and from work is stressful for me.
	Travelling to and from work is easy and stress-free.
	I feel safe getting to and from work.
Basic Needs for Thriving from Work	I feel my job is secure.
	I am grateful for my job.
	I am paid fairly for the job I do.
	My pay meets my needs and the needs of my family.
	I am not paid enough money to make ends meet.
	I am satisfied with the employee benefits provided through my work, such as access to health insurance, life insurance, a pension or retirement savings plan.
	I am satisfied with the amount of paid vacation days I get.
	I am satisfied with the amount of paid leave I can take to care for myself or family members.
	I have good opportunities for promotion.
Job Design and Experience of Work	I can easily manage the demands of my job.
	I have more work to do than I can complete during paid work hours.
	I am happy with how much input I have in decisions that affect my work.
	I have control over how my daily work is done.
	I can solve problems at work without having to ask for permission.
	I am happy with how much control I have over my work schedule.
	I can schedule a day off or take vacation when I want or need to.
	I can take unpaid leave if I need to.
	I have enough time, within my normal working hours, to get my job done.
	I have adequate control over the pace of my work.
	My physical work environment (workspace, light, temperature) is set up in a way that helps me do my job well.
	Noise at work interferes with my ability to get the job done.
	I have the skills and knowledge I need to do my job well.
	I have access to the resources I need to do my job well.
	I know enough about what is going on in my company/organization to do my job well.
Health, and Physical and Mental Well-being from Work	I feel physically safe at work.
	I feel psychologically safe at work.
	After I leave work, I have enough energy to do the things I want or need to do.
	I am too tired after work to enjoy things.
	I feel excessive levels of stress at work.
	I worry that I will get hurt at work.
	I find work emotionally exhausting.
	I find work physically exhausting.
	My work contributes in a positive way to my well-being.

Appendix B

Questions Adapted from the *Thriving at Work Questionnaire* for This Study

1. My work gives me a sense of purpose.
2. My work allows me to develop new knowledge and skills.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. The things I am asked to do at work are consistent with my personal values.
5. At work, my mind if focused on my job.
6. My job makes me happy.
7. I am enthusiastic about my work.
8. I feel supported by the people I work with.
9. My work is valued by my coworkers *and* my supervisors.
10. I am treated with respect by those I work with.
11. I am paid fairly for the job I do.
12. I can easily manage the requirements of my job.
13. I have input into how the requirements of my job get done.
14. I feel physically and psychologically safe at work.
15. After I leave work, I have energy to do the things I love.
16. My physical work environment is set up in a way that helps me to do my job well.

Appendix C

Superintendent Site Permission

Research Project: *Special Education Teacher Job Satisfaction: What Can We Learn from Positive Organizational Scholarship and Satisfied Special Educators?*

This document serves to obtain permission from school district and supervisory union superintendents related to the dissertation project presented by Kerra Holden. By signing this document, superintendents agree to the following:

☐ Read the *Research Project Summary* and *Consent to Participate in Research* forms (attached) to become familiar with the recruitment and participation process
☐ Share the *Research Recruitment Email* (below) with special education teachers, possibly through the Special Education Director, for recruitment
☐ Support special educators in accessing and considering necessary information regarding their participation in this study
☐ Directing potential participants to Kerra with questions or concerns
☐ Maintain communication with Kerra related to any concerns, suggestions or questions that may come up during the research project

Please reach out to Kerra with any questions or concerns. She can be reached via email at kholden@u32.org or by phone at (603) 728-8136.

_____

Superintendent Printed Name

_____

Superintendent Signature

_____

Supervisory Union or School District

_____

Date

An important role of the superintendent is to share the *Research Recruitment Email* with special educators in your district. You may choose to do this through the Special Education Director or another employee of your district or you may choose to send the email yourself. Below is a template you may use to share information about this study and special educators' opportunity to participate.

Template Research Recruitment Email:

Hello Special Educators,

I am writing to inform you of an opportunity to participate in a research project related to special education teacher job satisfaction and workplace commitment here in Vermont.

You are likely aware of the shortage of special educators in Vermont; This research project will contribute to efforts to address this shortage. The goal is to learn from special educators who a) demonstrate longevity in the field and b) report high job satisfaction. Interviewing those most satisfied in their work will inform strategies to contribute to special educator job satisfaction and retention in our schools.

This doctoral research will take place in Washington and Caledonia Counties. Participant volunteers will meet the following criteria:

- ✓ *10 years in the role of licensed special education teacher*
- ✓ *Report high job satisfaction on the Thriving at Work Abbreviated Questionnaire (TaW Questionnaire)*
- ✓ *Indicate intention to remain in the special education teacher role for the 2022-2023 school year (with the exception of retirement)*

*If you meet the initial participation requirements (10 years as a special education teacher & planning to return in the role next year), please reach out to Kerra to review the pros and cons of participating in this study. Kerra will review the details of study participation and answer any questions you may have. **Participation includes one 30-45 minute interview followed by a 60 minute focus group a month or so after the initial interviews.***

Here is some information about Kerra's [doctoral program](#) and the [underlying issues the research will](#) address.

If you are interested in participating in this research project, please reach out to Kerra Holden at kholden@u32.org or via phone at (603) 728-8136.

Thank you,

Appendix D

_____

CONSENT TO PARTICPATE IN RESEARCH

Special Education Teacher Job Satisfaction: What Can We Learn from Positive Organizational Scholarship and Satisfied Special Educators?

Dr. Rineer-Hershey (724) 738-2460: a.rineer-hershey@sru.edu

Kerra Holden (603) 728-8136 kholden@u32.org

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a special educator with at least ten years of experience teaching in the field of special education. You must also indicate a high level of job satisfaction on the abbreviated _Thriving at Work Questionnaire_.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to understand special education teacher job satisfaction and retention. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview and focus group. This will take approximately 2 hours of your time.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include confidentiality and identifiable information.
- The study will support you in further understanding your job satisfaction and employment decisions.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the Study About and Why are We Doing it?

The purpose of the study is to understand why some special education teachers choose to remain in the role of special educator despite the challenges inherent in the role. Furthermore, the study will seek to uncover the impact special education administrators and school leadership may have on special education teacher job satisfaction.

What Will Happen if You Take Part in This Study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to engage in a semi-structured interview related to your job satisfaction, decision to remain in the field of special education and the impact of your supervisor(s) on your employment choices. We expect this to take about 45 minutes. A focus group will be held after culminating data from the initial interviews and will take about 45 minutes.

How Could You Benefit From This Study?

 You might benefit from being in this study because you will discuss your job satisfaction and employment decisions which may lead to increased self-awareness. Others might benefit because the findings of this study will be shared with other individuals and organizations interested and invested in special education teacher job satisfaction and retention. Your participation in this study will contribute to a broader research effort to understand and encourage special education teacher retention.

What Risks Might Result From Being in This Study?

You might experience some risks from being in this study. They are noted below:

1). *Confidentiality*. The co-investigator, Kerra Holden, is employed as the Director of Student Services at Washington Central Unified Union School District. She may serve as your supervisor or may interact, frequently or infrequently, with your supervisor. Concerns related to Kerra's position may limit your sense of safety and perception of confidentiality. Please know, all information will remain confidential; Details and information regarding your relationship with your supervisor will remain private throughout the research process.

2). *Identifiable Information*. The information gathered in the interviews, including a verbatim transcription of the interview, will be included in Kerra's final dissertation and will be available to the public. With this in mind, it is possible you may be identifiable through details shared in the interview. For example, the statement, "I've worked at Berlin Elementary School for 17 years" can reveal a participant's identity. To the extent possible, identifiable details and characteristics will be removed from the transcribed interviews.

How Will We Protect Your Information?

We plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, we will not include information that could directly identify you. For example, the sentence above would be edited to state, "I've worked at XXX Elementary School for XXX years."

The results of this study may be published or presented at a conference. The researchers will ask for separate written permission to include your name or other information that could identify you.

 We will protect the confidentiality of your research records by maintaining all written and audio information/data on a password-protected computer and a within password-protected program. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the project.

What Will Happen to the Information We Collect About You After the Study is Over?

We will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the project.

What Other Choices do I Have if I Don't Take Part in this Study?

If you choose not to participate, there are no alternatives.

Your Participation in this Research is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, please do make the researchers aware of your decision. Your participation in this study may be terminated if you do not respond to attempts at scheduling the interview or are unable to schedule an interview within a reasonable time frame.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey by phone (724.738.2460) or email (a.rineer-hershey@sru.edu).

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Institutional Review Board
Slippery Rock University
104 Maltby, Suite 008
Slippery Rock, PA 16057
Phone: (724)738-4846
Email: irb@sru.edu

Your Consent: Study Participation & Audiotape/Videotape Recordings

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Consent Form has been given to me.

_____   _____   _____
Printed Participant Name   Signature of Participant   Date

By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and to the best of my knowledge understands the details contained in this document and have been given a copy.

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Investigator   Signature of Investigator   Date

Consent to Audiotape/Videotape Interviews & Focus Group for Data Collection

Audiotape/Videotape Release Form:

We request the use of audiotape/videotape material of you as part of our study. We specifically ask your consent to use this material, as we deem proper, specifically, for creating verbatim transcriptions for data collection and analysis. Audiotape/videotape recordings will be deleted permanently after the completion of this study. Regarding recording of audiotape/videotape to collect and transcribe data, please check one of the following boxes below:

☐ **I do…**

☐ **I do not…**

Give unconditional permission for the investigators to utilize audiotapes/videotapes of me.

_____   _____   _____
Print Name   Participant Signature   Date

Appendix E

Good Morning, Research Participants-

I hope you all had a lovely, restful weekend and found time to enjoy the fall weather (before all the rain :)).

Firstly, thank you for sharing your experiences and wisdom with me during the individual interviews. It has been such a blast to comb through the data for themes and to better understand strategies for supporting and retaining skilled, enthusiastic special education teachers like yourselves. Thank you!

Secondly, our next and final step is to hold a focus group to look at and reflect on the themes of the interviews. I will share this with you prior to the focus group. While I work on finalizing data analysis, I'd like to schedule the focus group. **How does Thursday, Oct 6 at 4:00 work for you all?**

I'm taking a bit of a leap by suggesting one time- here's hoping it works! If not, I can send out a doodle poll to find a time that works for everyone.

Please let me know if this time works for you.

Many thanks and enjoy your week,

Kerra