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SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER TENACITY:
THE LEADERSHIP AND COMMITMENT OF THOSE WHO STAY IN THE FIELD

MARILYN SHEA

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Ph.D. in Leadership and Change Program

Antioch University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

July, 2010

This is to certify that the dissertation titled: “Special Education Teacher Tenacity: The Leadership and Commitment of Those Who Stay in the Field” prepared by Marilyn Shea is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership and Change.

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Abstract

Those who choose to teach special education have accepted some of the most challenging jobs teaching has to offer. Unfortunately for their students, almost half of special education teachers leave the profession within their first five years (Singer, 1992). Finding and keeping qualified special education teachers in positions working with more challenging students has become a national problem. Through qualitative interviews, this study examines the stories of 14 Colorado special educators. These teachers have demonstrated their commitment to the field by teaching for four or more years. Their stories give valuable insight into the issue of teacher commitment in difficult conditions. The results are presented as a series of thematic reflections, both by the participants and by the author. The electronic version of this dissertation is at OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Most readers will have personal experiences with classrooms, schools and school practices. “We have all played a role opposite teachers for a large part of our lives. It is taken for granted that we all know what a teacher is and does” (Britzman, 1986, p. 443). However, few people know what it means to be a teacher in a special education class.

In this section, I outline some of the ways special education differs from general education. I also discuss my placement in this study. I then provide a brief overview of the history of teaching in America as a context for the current challenges facing special educators. Finally, I examine my research question within the theoretical framework of leadership. In the literature review section, I will discuss the research involving the attrition and retention of special education teachers along with questions of leadership for teachers, both historically and contemporarily. The methodology section describes my selection of participants, methods for conducting the interviews and themes that appeared when I analyzed the data.

A Note About “People First” Language

The field of special education involves working with people who have various disabilities. These conditions are medical diagnoses. People without discernible disabilities may not realize that some language regarding disabilities can be offensive. A school bus driver may say, “I have 28 and two wheelchairs on this route,” meaning that he or she actually has 30 students on the route, but he or she has classified those using wheelchairs as wheelchairs themselves. This is an example of language regarding disabilities eclipsing the very humanity of the people it is supposed to describe. The idea of “people first” language emphasizes that people with and without disabilities are more

alike than they are different and always places the person ahead of any reference to disability. That is, a child has autism, but is not referred to as an “autistic child.” The widely-used term “special needs” is considered by some to be a term that asks for pity. The preferred way to refer to someone who has disabilities is to describe what that person needs or uses, rather than to say the individual has “special needs” (Snow, 2009). Further, the term “regular education,” as opposed to “special education,” suggests that special education must be “irregular” in some way.

It should be noted here that there is a movement away from the term “special education.” Instead, we might write about “teachers of students with disabilities.” However, that phrase may be somewhat confusing, for it could be applied to teachers who mainly teach academic subjects rather than teachers licensed to serve students with disabilities specifically. All teachers will probably encounter students with disabilities in their classrooms. In this study, I use the term “general education” to describe those classrooms in which the teachers do not carry licensure for teaching students with disabilities. “Special education” and “special education teachers” will refer to services and teachers focused primarily on teaching students with disabilities. I have tried to use the term “general education” and people-first language throughout this study.

Special Education’s Unique Challenges

Is teaching in special education any different from teaching French, mathematics or history? Some would argue that special education teachers are, above all, teachers, and any research involving general education teachers would also apply to them.

However, the critical shortages of special education teachers serve as evidence that special education is quite different from general education. Special education teacher

shortages have been reported in 98% of the nation's school districts (Bergert & Burnett, 2001). The American Association for Employment in Education found that the shortage of special education teachers is greater than teacher shortages in any other area, including mathematics and science (AAEE, 2000). The special education areas with the greatest shortages of teachers nationally are teachers of students with emotional or behavioral disorders, followed by those who are licensed to teach students who have multiple disabilities, severe/profound disabilities, learning disabilities, and mild/moderate disabilities (McLesky, Tyler & Flippin, 2004). This can also presume to include those who are ready to teach students with autism, a group of students with disabilities that has grown quickly over the past five years and which might not be accurately captured in earlier research describing the need for special education teachers. Even these dire statistics of special education teacher shortages may not fully reflect the real severity of the problem. "School districts may reduce services to students with disabilities or raise class size limits to cope with the lack of qualified teachers" (Billingsley, 2004b).

These shortages stem in part from the perception that special education jobs are less desirable than jobs in general education, and thus far fewer prospective teachers enter the field of special education compared to general education (Boe, Cook, Paulsen, Barkanic, & Leow, 1999; McLesky et al., 2004). The other issue affecting special education teacher shortages is the high rate of attrition in these jobs. Many studies have been done that focus on attrition rates for special education teachers (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley, & Seo, 2002; Brownell, Smith, McNellis & Miller, 1997), perhaps because special educators are more likely to depart the profession of teaching than any other teaching group (Ingersoll, 2001). Various reasons are given for

this phenomenon, such as stress, dissatisfaction and burnout (Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002, Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982; Nelson, Maculan, Roberts, & Ohlund, 2001).

Some studies (Billingsley, 2004a ; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001) suggest that two important factors may be influencing the exodus of qualified teachers from special education: job design and role dissonance. The concept of job design comes from the field of occupational research and can be used to determine whether or not a job, as designed, makes sense. In special education teaching, teachers who do not feel that they can accomplish what they have been asked to do, given the amount of time and resources they have, are likely to leave the profession due to the poor design of their jobs (Gersten et al., 2001). Data from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Special Education Programs, showed that nearly 30% of the special education teachers surveyed described their jobs as "unmanageable" or "manageable to a small extent" (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). Special education teachers are likely to face large caseloads, onerous paperwork requirements and a lack of resources with no professional recourse due to administrators who are not supportive of them (Marsal, 1998). Poor working conditions for special education teachers have been cited as one of the main contributors to the problem of special education teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004a; Kaufhold, Alvarez, & Arnold, 2006; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Troen & Boles, 2003; Tye & O'Brien, 2002).

Role dissonance is experienced when teachers' expectations of the special education teaching job differs from their daily experiences and from the expectations of others including supervisors, parents and other school personnel (Billingsley, 2004a; Gersten et al., 2001;). When beginning special education teachers accept employment

where they do not get the satisfaction that they had envisioned for themselves while preparing for those jobs, they become disillusioned, burned out and finally, they leave (Gold, 1996). Recent graduates of special education teaching programs find they have been prepared for jobs that no longer exist (Billingsley, 2004a), because the model of service delivery in the public schools now emphasizes more inclusion of our students in general education classrooms without allowing the necessary support, collaboration and planning time that such a model requires (Gersten et al., 2001). In the district where I teach, a new educational system has been introduced which replaces grade-level grouping with ability-level grouping. While we are in the early days of the implementation of this system, in my final analysis, I will make some predictions about the effect this is already having, and will continue to have, on all students but special education students in particular. There will likely also be ramifications on the ability of special educators to exercise leadership.

Special education in American public schools has several recent landmark pieces of legislation that govern how and where we serve students with disabling conditions. I will mention some of the most important laws here and will mention them again in the section devoted to the history of teaching. Our legal mandate in serving these students boils down to providing them a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The most recent laws, No Child Left Behind in 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, reauthorized in 2004, require accountability, both on the part of teachers, who must prove they are highly qualified to teach the subjects they are teaching, and on the part of schools, who must show that students are making progress on their learning goals.

Special education has been in a period of upheaval for at least 35 years, beginning in 1975 with the passage of Public Law 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, (Peterson, 2007) which guaranteed all students with disabilities the right to a free and appropriate public education. It opened the doors of public schools to these students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 included language that required students with disabilities to be educated in the “least restrictive environment,” meaning a classroom filled only with other children with disabilities was no longer considered adequate. Instead, students with disabilities had to have the same access to the general education curriculum as their age-appropriate peers, even if their functioning levels were not the same. It can be challenging to integrate an entire classroom of special education students with their general education peers because our room contains students of many different grade levels. For example, I have students from kindergarten through the fifth grade in my room. The reasons for educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom range from a human rights perspective, where children have a right to learn together and students may not be segregated based on disabilities, to academic and social best practice, where students learn more socially and academically when they are allowed access to the same classroom.

Inclusion requires that the work of special education children, in their general education classes, be adapted to their skill level even though there may not be enough time to consult in advance with the other teachers, nor might there be enough time away from students to make these adaptations. Pupils with disabilities may need staff to accompany them into the general education classroom, which leaves students with widely ranging age and ability levels back in the special education classroom, usually with one

staff person to teach them all. That staff person must also monitor the students, who may have significant medical concerns, such as diabetes, seizure or choking disorders.

Inclusion is not a fad in special education. It is the law and has been for 35 years. Public Law 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, and its subsequent reauthorizations, emphasize the rights of students with disabilities to receive and free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The 2004 reauthorization of PL 94-142 especially called for the general education classroom to be the main venue in which students with disabilities are to receive instruction.

Consider now the changes in special education that came with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its emphasis on accountability (Peterson, 2007). Parents of both special and general education students were to be given more precise information about their childrens' progress. Teachers were even more closely examined to determine the adequacy of their qualifications. Their performance became tied to student scores on standardized tests. For the first time, standardized tests were mandated, even for students with disabilities. In my school district, as the next step in the increasingly regimented path that public education has been traveling, we now have a standards-based system that downplays or even eliminates grade-level groupings but instead groups children by ability level. My students, who used to have a general education classroom with which they identified, in most cases, now find themselves at the very bottom of the ability groupings. They are thus sequestered in a special education classroom without any general education peers. This is within the law, I am told, because they go to general education classes such as art and music, and because they also go to lunch and recess with general education students. But the academic portion of their inclusion opportunities

has been largely eliminated as the general education students charge on toward finishing the next standards of achievement.

There is a certain urgency in having the majority of our students test as being proficient on the standardized exams. Our school has performed marginally on these tests in the past. With a majority of our students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches, meaning their families are at or near the poverty level, and with a majority of our students also coming from homes in which English is not the first language, we have considerable challenges in reaching proficiency. Unfortunately, these problems will probably, within the next few years, be used to judge the performance of teachers and may be a deciding factor in whether or not teachers are retained or fired.

How this will affect special education is uncertain. Depending upon their diagnoses, my students must take either the CSAP-A (Colorado Student Assessment Program-Alternate) or the standard CSAP test. There is usually a lot of frustration from my students when taking these grade-level tests, since they cannot understand why I do not (and cannot) offer additional prompts to help them find the right answer as I would normally do in the classroom. Some of them cry and others throw the test to the ground and try to leave. Even the adapted version of the CSAP test does not seem to be designed in such a way that makes it possible for my students to show what they know.

The National Education Association, which represents teachers, secretaries, and support staff in schools, recently featured an article in their publication, *NEA Today*, which described two special education teachers in Washington state who are being punished for refusing to give the Washington state test to their students. These students, ranging from kindergarten to grade five, have multiple disabilities and are functioning

somewhere between the cognitive ages of six months and two years. “Our goal might be to teach them to hold a spoon or recognize their name in print, and the test covered fractions. In fact, one student would start crying every time we got to the part on fractions,” the teachers wrote (Griffith & Quarto, 2010, p. 56). These teachers discussed the test with the parents of students in their class and the parents were upset. The parents refused to allow the Washington state test to be given to their children because it had no relationship to what these children with disabilities were actually learning. Although parents in Washington are allowed to opt out of high stakes tests for their children, the school district administrators were displeased to find that these tests were even being discussed with parents. However, if the tests are never discussed, parents do not know how unsuitable these testing instruments are for their children and so they do not refuse to have them administered. But since these special education teachers did describe the tests to parents, the district found that the teachers were ignoring the mandate to administer the test. The teachers were suspended without pay for ten days.

However, the decision to suspend these teachers is currently under appeal by the Seattle Education Association and the Washington Education Association. What is at stake is the right of the special educator to make decisions about his or her students based on that teacher’s expertise. Does a special educator have the right to advocate for those students, to make sure that procedures affecting them are fitting and appropriate and do not cause emotional harm to them? The issue here is the use of evidence-based practices even when the laws do not currently align with those practices. At stake is the right of parents to decide if a test is helpful or harmful for their children.

With the changes in special education comes the increased importance of special education teacher identity. “Popular concern about identity is, in large part perhaps, a reflection of the uncertainty produced by rapid change and cultural contact: our social maps no longer fit our social landscapes” (Jenkins, 1996, p.9). This is perhaps more true today than in 1996 when Jenkins wrote that passage. Special educators want to see themselves as important members of the special education process. In our school, since my students cannot benefit the school’s test scores, we find ourselves as an afterthought. Everything is focused on achieving, on winning. There are many students in the general education classroom who are struggling now and I have been told my job will expand to help the many students not labeled “special education” who need help. What will happen to my own students when I do this is uncertain. What is my identity now and what will it become? What part will I be allowed to play in forming my own identity?

What I have been describing from my own experience is hardly exclusive to me. The teachers in Washington state who are taking a stand on what has been an across the board testing requirement are asking administrators, politicians and the public to examine the “one-size-fits-all” mindset of those dedicated to the uniformity of standardized tests. Children are different, they come to us with different challenges and strengths and therefore, they learn at different rates.

The differences in the way special and general education teachers view themselves may be another indicator of the essential differences between the two teaching fields. Though there has been little research to date on the issue of special education teacher identity, one study found that some special educators, especially those who teach students with profound and multiple learning disabilities, see their roles as

essentially different from that of their general education colleagues. They feel they are part of a specialist field of training and that their general education colleagues do not understand the unique challenges of their jobs (Jones, 2004). When special educators do their difficult jobs without collegial respect, it takes a toll on them. As mentioned previously, almost half of special education teachers entering the field leave special education within their first five years. Some do not leave teaching altogether but instead, they accept teaching positions in general education (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, & Weber, 1998). Special education teachers in the field “are 10 times more likely to transfer to general education as are general educators to special education” (McLesky et al., 2004). This is another indicator that special education is essentially different from general education, since there is no equality in the movement of teachers between the two fields.

But what of the special education teachers who do stay? Are they exemplary teachers, demonstrating their expertise in helping students who are extremely challenging? Or could they perhaps be trapped in their current positions, too discouraged by their experiences to leave? Tye and O’Brien (2002) characterize the teachers who stay as unhappy and stressed, for “the longer one stays in the profession, the harder it is to leave” (p. 31). They continue:

Some will simply stay on, doing a poor job and feeling helpless, negative, and overwhelmed. They’re not bad teachers; most do what they can under the circumstances. But they’re not doing the best they can. And in the gap between what they are doing and what they are capable of doing—if the working conditions were less onerous and if they felt valued and respected—lie a huge waste of talent and an even greater loss of possibility for our children. (p. 31)

Let us remember that the goal of any teacher, and especially of a special educator, should be to help children learn skills that will enable them to make their own choices

and be as independent as possible throughout their lives. The goal of independence and self-determination is crucial to students with disabilities who are especially vulnerable to the effects of learned helplessness, a condition that results from others doing things for students that they could be doing for themselves. “Many researchers have hypothesized that teachers who are self-determined individuals are more likely to facilitate self-determination in the students they teach (e.g., Wehmeyer, 1998) because they value those skills” (Thoma, Baker, & Saddler, 2002, p. 86). However, teachers who feel trapped in their jobs and who do not feel they have choices may not be able to foster the climate of self-determination and independence necessary for their students.

Gersten et al. (2001) write that special education teachers, after repeated negative experiences due to job-related stress, may remain on the job but begin holding lower expectations for themselves and their students. Though these authors do not provide empirical evidence to substantiate their assumptions, they do raise important questions: What is the mindset of the teachers who remain in special education, particularly those serving students whose needs are severe? Can their commitment be related to mere vocational survival or are they demonstrating leadership? Do they perceive themselves as leaders? If so, what is the nature of leadership for these individuals? What leadership opportunities and encouragement are they given in their jobs?

My Placement in This Study

I am a special education teacher with many years of experience, currently teaching in an elementary school in a district near Denver, Colorado. According to a table of historical school data published and distributed within our district in 2007, our school

had a total enrollment of 354 students in the 2006-2007 school year. We currently have more than 400 students.

The majority (62%) of our students are of Hispanic background, and 21% of our students are white. We also have a substantial number (12%) of students who are of Asian background, with smaller percentages of students who are Native American (3%) or African-American (3%). Forty-two percent of our students are English language learners, meaning they do not speak English in their homes and have varying degrees of proficiency with the language. Some speak no English. The students in our school are not wealthy and in fact, most cannot even be considered middle-class. A whopping 77% of students in our school qualify for the free and reduced-price lunch program, so most students come from families who are at, or near, the poverty level.

In order to give an idea of the daily life of a special education teacher, I will figuratively open the door to my classroom. Due to confidentiality concerns, I will describe an imagined group of students with disabilities that are similar to students I have worked with throughout my career. Though our district no longer uses grade levels as the sole description of a student's placement, I still find it descriptive to most audiences to say that my ten students are in kindergarten through fifth grade, roughly ages five through 11. Many have multiple disabilities, including mental retardation, mobility issues, autism and impairments in speech and language development. They are all considered to have significant support needs. Some students may need assistance with basic daily living skills such as toileting, and they may need help with diapers, or sometimes, colostomy bags. Some require their nourishment to be delivered through a g-tube, which attaches to a portal in their abdomens. Liquid formula is delivered to them

this way, bypassing their mouths and throats to avoid potential choking dangers when eating. Some children may require oxygen tanks to assist their breathing while they are at school. Several of my students have a limited understanding of English, for their families speak Hmong or Spanish at home. Sometimes, my students are nonverbal and we help them develop communication systems. We also sometimes have students with emotional disabilities. If those students act out their anger and frustration physically, it is very important that we keep all students in the classroom safe, sometimes by removing all students from the room except the student who is acting out.

Beyond the obvious disadvantages some of my students face as non-English speakers, there are cultural disadvantages for them as well. Several years ago, for example, I was in a meeting for one of my students when her father asked me, through an interpreter, “What do you call what my daughter has?” I began describing her mental and physical conditions, which included low muscle tone, delayed language development and Down syndrome. He replied through the interpreter, “You are too kind. In my culture, we call her ‘stupid.’” An important part of my job is to combat prejudice against my students, no matter what the source.

It often happens that I become responsible for other students who are hard for other teachers to serve. I have had students who had emotional disorder (ED) labels and they usually had problems with anger. One of them kicked big holes in the wall in his own classroom and also in the hallway, which is impressive when one considers that he was only in the first grade. Though students with ED are often served by a specialist in emotional disorders in a separate classroom or, depending upon the severity of their behaviors, in a separate facility, our district has no ED specialists in the elementary

school. These students are simply placed in the general classroom and visited periodically by the school social worker. When they are disruptive, they end up in my classroom.

Another student for whom I was responsible has Down syndrome and needed assistance with his colostomy. His teacher said that there was no way she would ever perform assistance for this type of disability, and though he was not a student with significant support needs, I was asked to take over this service for him. There are continual efforts to place additional students with me, whether or not they carry a special education label. My classroom is like Grand Central Station, with students coming and going throughout the day. At times, it feels like I will never finish a sentence, much less a lesson, without someone coming into or going from my classroom.

I am fortunate to have two paraprofessionals working with me. Together, we teach our students and document progress for them. We assist them as needed. At times, we also accompany them into the general education classrooms. My students sometimes go by themselves to special area classes, such as art, physical education and music. My room is a dizzying hub of activity, with ability-level groups working in separate places in the classroom, with students from other classes joining us and with some of our students going out to engage in inclusion opportunities. Despite the opportunity for an occasional inclusive experience, there is no time allotted for me to collaborate with the general education teachers to ensure that my students are having appropriate learning experiences in their classes.

My teaching contract guarantees me 40 minutes of duty-free planning time every day but my schedule does not allow it without leaving students unsupervised or under supervised. General education teachers can send their students to recess and lunch

without supervision. All of the students in their classrooms go to special area classes at the same time, thus giving them duty-free planning time. My staff and I must accompany our students to lunch and recess and our students go to separate special area classes at different times, so duty-free planning time is not easily arranged. At times, I must eat lunch in the classroom while my students are present. If a student is not feeling well or is so fragile medically that he may not be outside in very cold weather, I am responsible for him while I am eating lunch. My paraprofessionals have no time for their guaranteed breaks. However, because I have two paraprofessionals, I am considered by general education teachers to have a position of leisure and luxury.

“Too often, children are placed on special ed. rosters, even though they have not been diagnosed with a disability, because of a teacher’s frustration when a child does not achieve well in a standard classroom” (Troen & Boles, 2003, p. 182). This is the case in my class, when students who are not on my caseload, such as those labeled ED or mental health concerns (MH), or even just those who are disruptive in class, are put in my class for portions of the day as though my students and I are not doing anything in particular and certainly nothing important. Every week or so, I am approached by a teacher who says, “Hey, I gotta find a place for this kid in the afternoon. He’s driving me crazy!” To object to “helping” other teachers with problem students will earn me the dreaded epithet, “not a team player.” This arrangement, of course, is rarely reciprocal. It is, perhaps, a form of compliment that some teachers think me qualified to handle their most disruptive students while feeling themselves inadequate to supervise, even momentarily, one of my students with disabilities. There seems to be no understanding of the fact that each of my students has 10 to 20 goals on his or her Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that I am

responsible for implementing and documenting. An IEP, or Individualized Education Plan, is written for every student receiving special education services. These plans can sometimes be elaborate, with sections for health, vision, communication, hearing, mobility, transportation and mental health, to name a few, as well as specifying goals and objectives for academic subjects. There are triennial IEPs, written every three years, to review the services for the student in order to determine if they are still meeting the student's needs. Various assessments are done to determine the student's current level of functioning. Though the IEP is a group endeavor of the special education team and the parents, a large portion of the plan in both the writing and implementation of it, are the responsibility of the special education teacher if he or she is the main provider of services. Team members who do not complete their portions of the IEP can make a teacher's job difficult because writing and documenting progress on student IEPs is a significant portion of the special educator's job. I further manage each student's Medicaid and nursing procedures.

There is a new emphasis on accountability in our district, due to poor results on standardized tests in the past. Recently, our district has implemented an educational reform movement known as the Standards Based System (SBS). In the SBS, each student is tested with a standardized test, whether or not they can speak or understand English well enough to answer the questions. According to these perceived needs, students are then placed in ability groups. They receive instruction in literacy, mathematics and social studies (science will soon be added) in different classrooms by different teachers. When they have demonstrated mastery of an individual skill strand, such as "can point to the title of a book," and the teacher has gathered three separate "pieces of evidence," such as

worksheets or anecdotal observations, that the child can do indeed so, the teacher enters all of this data into a computer program. The child is tested again and then the student can go up to the next level skill. This system leaves teachers working with large class sizes (30 or more) feeling overwhelmed. When this system was implemented, the morale at our school was at its lowest. Our principal often reminds us that if our students do not improve their test scores on the CSAP, he will be fired, as will half of the teachers in the building. He refers to a recent action at the Central Falls High School in Rhode Island, a school that was struggling to improve their standardized test scores and graduation rates and resorted to this drastic action in order to become eligible for federal School Turnaround Grants. To teachers who are on the receiving end of this pep talk, it sounds very much like a threat and does little to improve teachers' resolve.

Special education students with certain disability labels will take the CSAP-A, an adapted test that is usually too difficult for the students eligible to take it. Some of my students must take the same CSAP test as the general education population, despite being English language learners and very emergent readers. Either test usually generates less than acceptable scores from my students. Though each student has made progress so far this year, it unfortunately doesn't show up on the standardized tests as they are designed.

However, all of my special education students must now be taught and their progress documented in the SBS model, even though my students have trouble learning in a logical, linear fashion. I have students who will be able to count to five on Friday, yet when we return to school on Monday, they seem to have forgotten numbers beyond two. The plan, to the administrators who chose it, seems so clean, so easy. However, when dealing with students with cognitive challenges, processing difficulties and various health

problems, learning is not always as solid, predictable and step-by-step as the SBS model requires.

This study comes at a critical time for education and especially for special education. Teaching as a career is undergoing many pressures from those who would reform education. Budget cuts for schools are regular. Teachers operate with the barest minimum of supplies, resources, salaries and benefits. Thus, the introduction of punitive measures such as taking away tenure so that a teacher can be fired at any time for any or no reason, the abolition of the salary schedule so that administrators can pay each teacher whatever they choose, a year-round work schedule and a longer school day with no additional pay are things to make even veteran teachers who love their jobs consider going elsewhere to work. The most problematic of the current reforms and school climate is the assumption that teachers must be told exactly what to teach, in what order, to a group of students who supposedly all have exactly the same needs.

Teaching is an art and a privilege and cannot be done well by someone who does not possess flexibility, insight and creativity. Some of the participants in this study talk about the creative aspect of teaching, not only to keep the interest of students high, but also as an integral part of their own identity as teachers. Teachers, especially those in special education, can never be reduced to mere technicians, dishing out factoids so that students can absorb them. General education teachers in my district are now responsible for documenting the many evidences of student progress on the district's standards in math, literacy, science and social studies. I also have these requirements for my students in addition to the goals they have on their IEPs. Though general education teachers are finding this documentation quite challenging, they still do not have the additional

responsibility that I do as a special educator, which is to document the goals on students' IEPs.

Historically, there have been continual attacks on teaching, as shown in the next section. The same reason that women became the majority of teachers in this country during the 19th and 20th centuries, which is that they could be paid far less than men, is the reason that reform movements such as the one in our district are catching on. Education is expensive and ways to get around paying for it are proliferating. As teachers are reduced to technicians, their dignity and satisfaction in their teaching jobs will surely wane. But if technicians, rather than certificated teachers, can be hired in their places, school districts will save money. The effect this system will have on children remains to be seen.

Teaching: A Historical Perspective

The expectation that a teacher must work on her own time and sacrifice so that the students in her charge can thrive is part of the historical feminization of teaching. It is difficult to imagine another unionized job done mainly by men in which the workers would be expected to work after hours and accept assignments beyond the prescribed case load with no limits nor additional pay.

Teaching is not considered professional work by many in America. "Teaching is a job fraught with frustration—a dead-end vocation with no career path, low pay, low status, and poor working conditions" (Troen & Boles, 2003, p. 59). Teaching has not been seen as professional work for most of the past century. Beginning with universal compulsory education in the 19th century and the influx of many immigrants in the early 20th century, education became expensive.

Local governments looked for ways to save money and found that replacing male teachers with females would cut expenses by half or more since female teachers could be paid much less than males. By 1888, women made up the majority of teachers in this country (Grumet, 1988). With the feminization of teaching came a systematic de-professionalizing of the work (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998). Because women became dominant in teaching during a time when women had few rights, teaching took on the culture of the family, and school duplicated the patriarchal structure of home (Grumet, 1988). Most teachers were women and their supervisors were men. At various points in history, there has been some public concern about the feminization of the teaching force and lack of appropriate male role models for children. Though males now make up 1.9% of preschool and kindergarten teachers, 18.7% of elementary and middle school teachers and 44.7% of secondary school teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005), there can be no meaningful discussion of teaching that ignores the gender disparity.

Education in general, and teacher education specifically, has remained patriarchal in nature, a form of cultural inscription in which elite “superior” groups use their power to control others, for example, teacher educators and classroom teachers over those who are learning to teach, adults over children, state departments and principals over female teachers, one socioeconomic group over another (Cannella, 1997).

Teachers are required to undergo extensive teacher education to become “highly qualified” but teaching is still a highly supervised, “lower-paying professional occupation” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005, p. 2). Because women are the majority of teachers, the profession still has the aura of the nurturing role women have traditionally been expected to play in the home.

In many ways, the temporal structures of teaching resemble the routines of domesticity. Fluid and ubiquitous, housework and children have required women to accept patterns of work and time that have no boundaries. Not surprisingly, it is women who compensate for the highly rationalized and fragmented arrangements of school time and space with our own labor and effort. For those who sustain the emotional and physical lives of others, there is no time out, no short week, no sabbatical, no layoff. The incredibly time-consuming work of consulting with students and of responding sensitively and helpfully to their work is too often ignored when the teaching schedule is drawn up, when class size is determined, when salaries are negotiated (Grumet, 1988).

“There is a ‘politics of underskilling’ here—what is important depends upon who is doing the defining” (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, p. 75). Work done by women is routinely devalued and disappeared by those who write the job descriptions. Nancy Jackson, who researched the politics of job definition, wrote:

the denial of skill components (and eventually denial of wages) in female-dominated jobs turned out not to be a product of simple oversight or error of judgment, but rather a systematic property of ‘rational hierarchy’ and a basic feature of the authority structure of work. This form of ‘invisibility’ of women’s work and skill was not seen as a failure in the rational conduct of organisational life, but as an integral feature of its normal and ‘reasonable’ operation. It places the problem of gender inequity not at the periphery of workplace political relations, but at the very centre. (Jackson, 1991, p. 22)

Since women comprise the majority of teachers—a number which grows the further down the educational scale one goes—and the majority of administrators are male—overwhelmingly so, the further up the administrative hierarchy one goes—the gendered composition of teaching is at least one answer to the question of why teachers are subject to such great control and scrutiny and so little respect and trust (Apple & Jungck, 1990). Job descriptions for teachers have deskilled the profession by taking away

teachers' ability to plan and control their own work. "When one considers what is expected of a teacher in terms of end results—the preservation and improvement of our culture and civilization—teaching is perhaps the most important job in a democratic society" (Troen & Boles, 2003, pp. 34-35). However, the professional status of teachers is threatened by those who wish to see teachers as "low paid, temporary, easily replaced workers" (Costigan, Crocco, & Zumwalt, 2004, p. 31).

Special Education: A Mainly Separate History

In 1957, I attended my first day of kindergarten at Glendale Elementary School in Bedford, Ohio. All the kids from the neighborhood were there. We were having fun, singing songs, coloring with crayons and listening to stories, when Robin's mother came in the room. She was crying and she was angry. She grabbed Robin's hand and led her to the door. Our teacher, Mrs. Freeman was saying to Robin's mother, "This is no place for her. I'm sorry." We all ran to the window to see Robin's mother pulling Robin in a red wagon, heading home. Her mother was crying but Robin was singing and clapping her hands, so happy to have been in kindergarten for part of the day. We asked Mrs. Freeman, "What's wrong? Where is Robin going?" Mrs. Freeman said, "She can't stay here. She's blind. She'll go to her own school." Some of us cried. We couldn't understand this. Her own school? She was one of us, at least until this moment. From then on, she became "other." We rarely saw her outside playing after that. A short time later, Robin and her family moved away. This incident is my first memory of school and is still particularly painful to me, even after all these years and with the weight of all the book knowledge I have acquired since. I understand this incident now in terms of its historical significance but thinking of Robin and her mother emotionally turns me back

into the five-year-old child I was then. I have that same sense of injustice, tragedy and incomprehension. It was wrong, and we children knew it. Why couldn't the teacher see this?

At that time, special education was still operating on the medical model of service, which began in the late 19th century when separate programs for those with various conditions were started. Schools for those with blindness, deafness and other mental or health issues began to appear at that time. Because disabilities were considered related to disease, these programs kept students with disabilities separate from so-called "normal" students, even though there was no possibility of contagion. It was not until medicine became more deinstitutionalized, with outpatient services and community-based clinics, that special education programs started to introduce the possibility of mainstreaming and inclusion for students with disabilities (Fagan & Warden, 1996). After World War II, parents of children with disabilities began to bring pressure on school systems to include these children with their public school peers.

In the later 1960s a series of court cases challenged the principle of separate classes for special education students, employing basically the same logic that had informed the Brown decision. The plaintiffs in these instances held that separate education was unequal, and that students in such classes suffered a stigma that was difficult to overcome (Rury, 2005). Because these parents prevailed in their fight for those civil rights, landmark legislation was passed. Public Law 94-142, also known as The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, guaranteed every child the right to a free and appropriate public education, regardless of ability level.

In prior times children who did not “fit” schools were often excluded. The effect of the 94-142 legislation was to turn it around so that schools were mandated to “fit” the needs and abilities of the child. PL 94-142 contained specific language guaranteeing many things that we now take for granted: A free and public education, due process, nondiscriminatory assessment, and a IEP for every child in a special education program. It also stipulated that, as much as possible, educational services should be provided in the least restrictive environment (Keogh, 2007).

The concept of the least restrictive environment places students on a continuum of services according to their needs and goals. The least restrictive site was a general education classroom; the most restrictive was a separate special education facility. In between least and most restrictive were options such as a resource room, where a student could spend part of a day, and a self-contained special education classroom within the general education school building. The reauthorization of PL 94-142 in the 1990’s, named the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), included language that required students with disabilities to have greater access to general education programs. The most recent reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 strengthened that language further, so that service to students should be provided with access to general education classrooms “as the most appropriate method of providing special services within the least restrictive environment” (Jimenez, Graf, & Rose, 2007, p. 43).

However, implementing inclusion for students with disabilities in the general classroom presents a number of problems. General education teachers may not feel they have the training necessary to make appropriate accommodations of their curriculum for these students (Jimenez et al., 2007). Inclusion requires time for collaboration between

general and special education teachers (Richards, Pavri, Golez, Changi, & Murphy, 2007) and often, this time is not built into teachers' schedules (Gersten et al., 2001). The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires all students, even those with disabilities, to demonstrate proficiency in achieving state standards. General education teachers feel considerable pressure to help their students score well on these standardized tests, and so working with those with disabilities, who often take alternate versions of the proficiency tests, may be seen as a second priority.

Since the passage of PL 94-142, serious questions have been raised about the possibility of students in minority ethnic, racial or socioeconomic backgrounds being overrepresented among those receiving special education. Some charge that those who have trouble achieving in the general education classroom or those who do not fit the mold of the "average student" end up in special education unnecessarily (Keogh, 2007). Once in special education, there is no guarantee that the placement of these students in general education classrooms will give them acceptance, participation and academic results comparable to their general education peers (Jimenez et al., 2007).

As the roles of special educators become more complex, and their job design becomes increasingly onerous, many of these teachers feel the stress of isolation, both from their general education colleagues as well as their special education colleagues in other schools (Gersten et al., 2001). Substantive interaction with other professionals is both necessary for the performance of their jobs and for the exercise of leadership in their jobs. Allowing time for this interaction, however, takes away from the coveted "instructional time" school districts keep trying to increase. Rather than make the

changes needed to allow meaningful collaboration among teachers, districts may consider other means to recruit and retain quality special educators.

Teaching: Some Current Challenges

Nearly three years ago, administrators in my school district made the unprecedented move of offering new teachers, straight out of college, the fabulous salary of \$40,000 a year. It was the highest salary offered a beginning teacher in the state of Colorado at the time. When I began teaching more than twenty years ago, I made \$12,000 a year. I reached \$40,000 on the salary schedule after years of teaching and after I earned a Masters degree. What they don't tell beginning teachers, giddy with so much cash in a relatively low-paid occupation, is that going higher than that beginning pay will be an arduous climb requiring much additional schooling with no tuition reimbursement and many years of additional service.

A beginning teacher can look forward to doubling her salary in 30 years. At the same time, it is not unusual for graduates of, say, a business school, to double their salary in just a few years, perhaps quadrupling it in 10 years. Should that business school graduate rise to the level of a CEO, he or she could expect to make 458 times that of the average worker (Troen & Boles, 2003).

Sadly, beginning teachers will soon find that their wages do not seem so large when inflation is taken into account. Teachers earned an average annual salary of \$47,602 in 2004-05—an increase of 2.2% over the previous year, according to an annual survey released by the American Federation of Teachers. But the increase fell short of the rate of inflation, which was 3.4% that year (Honawar, 2007).

Teaching offers no promotions, so teachers who hope to supplement or increase their income must work other jobs while teaching or get out of teaching altogether. Almost 60% of teachers in the public schools work outside of school hours during the year as well as during the summer break (Troen & Boles, 2003). Consider, also, the expectations put upon teachers, despite their small salaries. “The average teacher spends \$408 per year of her or his own money on texts, materials, and classroom supplies.... Teachers work an average of 49 hours per week, and 11 of those hours are uncompensated” (Troen & Boles, 2003, p. 65). But most won’t stay long enough to realize that. Education in this country is challenged by a chronic shortage of qualified teachers.

Colleges provide more than enough graduates in education each year to cover the loss of teachers who are retiring (except for teachers in math, science and bilingual education), and yet “those leaving teaching outnumber those entering the field by a factor of three to one” (Costigan et al., 2004, p. 31). This crisis of teacher supply persists despite an increase in the number of graduates from teacher preparation programs since 1990.

Supply is not the problem. Too few of the teachers we have prepared are choosing to enter the schools, and too many of those who are hired don’t stay long enough. Newly prepared teachers, and those with as many as five or less years of experience, are leaving their schools in growing numbers; they are leaking out of the bucket as fast as we can replace them (NCTAF, 2003).

“Special educators are more likely to depart the profession of teaching than any other teaching group” (York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghore, 2005, p. 194) and

special education jobs are more difficult to fill than any other teaching position (AAEE, 2000). The students are the ones who will ultimately be affected by this professional exodus. Without qualified teachers, special education students cannot receive the quality of services they need in order to be successful. Shortages of special education teachers result in inadequate learning opportunities for students, lower achievement levels and finally, graduates of special education programs who are not competent in the workplace (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996).

I have chosen to research the idea of teacher commitment in special education as it relates to leadership. Though it is well established that nearly half of special educators leave the profession, often during the first five years of teaching (Singer, 1992), and though it has also been shown that many special educators feel that their jobs are challenging and stressful, there exists a core of teachers who choose to stay and teach. These teachers appear to me to be exhibiting a rare kind of leadership within their own classrooms as they continue to serve their students, sometimes without the benefit of administrative understanding or support, without ample supplies or resources, and without appreciation from general education colleagues for their efforts. The kind of leadership they are demonstrating is non-traditional, and does not rely upon administrative, supervisory power over coworkers.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

This study focuses on special education teachers in order to determine why they stay in their teaching jobs. Since very few studies have examined the special educators who stay, I will be reviewing the literature that is available, which mostly deals with why teachers leave special education.

This review of the literature will include issues of attrition and retention for special educators, the concept of teacher self-efficacy and its effect on job performance and satisfaction, barriers to special educators in performing leadership roles, as well as nontraditional forms of leadership.

When the subject of teachers leaving their jobs is discussed, many people assume that the primary reason is burnout. The literature is rife with references to teacher burnout, a condition affecting both general and special education professionals. The first published use of the term, “burnout” appeared in 1974 in an article by J. H. Freudenberger. He coined the term to describe stress among volunteers at a free clinic. The term has since been expanded to describe anyone experiencing the effects of long-term frustration or stress. Much progress has been made by psychotherapists hoping to ameliorate the effects of teacher burnout, for now distinct subgroups of burnout have been identified, with specific treatments prescribed for each (Farber, 2000). Farber, who has written extensively on the subject of teachers and burnout, recommends that the best way to eliminate burnout is to prevent the condition from occurring by making schools places that care not only for children but also for teachers. “Nevertheless, this is unlikely to happen, at least in the foreseeable future” (Farber, 2000, p. 688). What are the

conditions in schools that make teachers want to leave? The problem lies at the center of the teaching job itself.

Three reviews of the research literature surrounding special education teacher attrition and retention have been published. The earliest review (Brownell & Smith, 1992) included recommendations for the retention of special education teachers as well as research on attrition and retention that was current at the time. The authors found that the shortage of special education teachers was a “national emergency” (Brownell & Smith, 1992, p. 231), and that models for improving retention of special education teachers did not exist (Brownell & Smith, 1992). The issues of role conflict and role overload were becoming matters of concern because they were “deterrents to job satisfaction and workplace commitment in teaching.” (Brownell & Smith, 1992, p. 238). For example, special educators may believe their primary function is to assist and collaborate with general educators in successfully mainstreaming students. In contrast, general educators may perceive the special educators as fully responsible for educating students with disabilities. Such role conflict, particularly when administrative support is perceived as minimal, presents a possible source of stress for the special educator (Brownell & Smith, 1992).

However, in the literature regarding special education retention and attrition, stress is not cited as the most common factor, according to reviews of the research literature done in the past two decades. The authors found, in their survey of the literature, that “lack of support from administrators, general education teachers, and parents is the most frequently cited reason for special education teachers’ departure from the classroom” (Brownell & Smith, 1992, p. 239). Other reviews of the research literature

corroborated these findings. Two additional literature reviews were done 11 years apart by Bonnie S. Billingsley (1993, 2004b), one of the leading researchers in the field of special education teaching. The 1993 review covered literature from 1982 to 1993. The first of those studies (Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982) surveyed teachers who left positions with students with emotional disabilities. It found that lack of administrative support was a key factor in teachers' decisions to leave. Administrative support, or the lack thereof, was named in all but two of the remaining studies, by all teachers, and was the single common thread in the studies' findings. In general, the greater the perceived administrative support for special education teachers, the less likely those teachers were to leave (Billingsley & Cross, 1992). Conversely, special education teachers who did not feel supported by their administrators were more likely to leave (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Lauritzen, 1986; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982; McKnab, 1983; Platt & Olsen, 1990).

There have been many studies that found administrative support to be important to special education teachers and that it closely correlated to their desire to stay in or leave their jobs (Billingsley et al., 1992; Boe, Barkanic, & Leow, 1999; Miller et al., 1999; Westling & Whitten, 1996). Dissatisfaction with principals and central administrators was twice as prevalent in special educators than in their general education counterparts, possibly because of the important role administrators play in enforcing legislation, identifying and placing students with disabilities, controlling professional development opportunities and determining local policies.

Administrative support can also influence such factors as role dissonance, job design, school climate and collegial support. One of the main problems special educators

face is job design, with excessive paperwork requirements topping the list for special educators who leave. The largest study to date on special education paperwork (Paperwork in Special Education, 2002) found that “paperwork problems were significantly related to special educators’ intent to leave teaching, after many other work-condition variables were controlled” (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 47-48). The changing nature of the special educator’s job is also contributing to frustration, stress, and in many, a desire to leave the profession.

The model of inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, though idealistic, is not working for special educators in many schools (Embich, 2001; Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, & Blake, 1995). Special educators list many problems with inclusion as it is currently being implemented, such as the loss of paraprofessionals who are being reassigned to the general education classroom, the need for quality collaboration with general education teachers without sufficient time allotted for this, and increasing complexity of scheduling students with disabilities in classrooms at a wide span of grade levels. The school climate also may not be a welcoming one for the special education teacher and her students. “Moreover, special educators who find it difficult to implement an inclusive program because of inadequate support systems or resistance from general educators may also find their work unfulfilling and look elsewhere” (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 49).

Billingsley’s (2004b) review analyzed work published from 1992 to 2004 on the subjects of special education teacher retention and attrition. In these later works, many factors including age, gender, and race, which may influence a teacher’s decision to leave were investigated. The issue of teacher characteristics had, by this time, become an

important factor in special education attrition and retention research. Many authors investigated the links between demographics and attrition (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Morvant et al., 1995; Singer, 1992). Race and gender were found in all of these works to have a negligible effect on teacher attrition. Age alone seemed to make a significant difference in determining the likelihood of a special education teacher leaving. Younger special education teachers were twice as likely to leave than older, more experienced ones (Singer, 1992). In general, commitment to the profession seemed to be linked to the age and experience of the special education teacher, as though commitment could be linked to an investment of time in teaching. Younger teachers may have fewer financial obligations than older teachers, or may be less invested in one particular occupation (Singer, 1992). Younger teachers with less professional experience may encounter frustrations in their job that they feel unable to resolve, while teachers with more experience may have better ways of coping. Further, older, more experienced teachers may be victims of “option cutting” and feel they cannot leave the profession to do anything else (Billingsley & Cross, 1992).

But what of those special educators who stay despite the many problems of their jobs? What is the nature of their commitment to special education? I believe their commitment stems from teacher identity. I would like to quote one of the few studies that presents a detailed, personal perspective on the role and identity of the special education teacher, from a study of how students with profound and multiple disabilities learn (Jones, 2004). “In published research, these (special education) teachers have rarely had a voice. Even more rarely have they been asked their perceptions, feelings and aspirations” (Jones, 2004, p. 160).

The author decided to use a qualitative format to find out more about the ideas of identity these teachers shared. The sample for the study consisted of 14 teachers of various ages, years of experience in teaching, and of both genders, although females outnumbered males in a ratio of 11:3. All were teachers in segregated settings. Because the sample was small, the findings may not be used to generalize to groups beyond this sample, and it might not represent teachers who deliver special education services in integrated, mainstreamed settings. However, since the study was done relatively recently, it may be more pertinent than studies done a decade or so earlier. The author used critical and grounded theory and the principles of social construction to guide her research. That is, she made the subjects of her study partners in the making of meaning in their responses. She used questionnaires, individual and group interviews and group video analyses to gather information. Though questionnaires were used, they were not analyzed using quantitative methods. The study was qualitative and included many excerpts from the interviews of individuals. Themes of teacher identity emerged strongly. First, these teachers seemed to feel they are different from mainstream teachers. Second, they saw themselves as a part of a specialist field of teaching. Third, their separation from mainstream teachers caused them to feel underestimated and unappreciated by their colleagues in general education. They felt that teachers in general education had a negative perception of them and their students. These special education teachers did feel a strong bond with others in their field. This social identity appears to be a defense against what these teachers feel are the negative reactions of society in general against them and their students. The teachers in this study also talked about having, in their professional lives, an identity to a cause. Many spoke of wanting to make a difference,

enjoying a challenge or being committed to their students. This commitment to students and to a cause becomes the ideological bridge between teaching and leadership.

The idea of teachers as leaders was of interest to me. I wondered if those special educators who stayed found ways of leading in their schools. The literature regarding leadership for special educators or for women in general revealed that while teachers may want to be involved in leadership roles, they may encounter significant barriers to finding such roles.

Since the majority (84.9%) of special education teachers are female (Westat, 2002), a note concerning the way leadership is often taught may shed some light on the dearth of special educators performing leadership roles or who consider themselves as being leaders. Amanda Sinclair, a leadership scholar, once described a leadership seminar she attended, given by a “master leadership teacher, from a prestigious business school” (Sinclair, 2007, p.13). While a third of the audience was composed of women, the presenter gave no examples of women who were excellent leaders. “The model of leadership with which the group was presented was both masculine and firmly heroic,” she went on (Sinclair, 2007, p.13). This model of the leader as the male hero is perpetuated in many leadership texts, but it doesn’t fit the reality of a special education teacher who happens to be female. Special educators can be extraordinary as teachers, advocates and leaders but the old strong man image that has been with us since the time of prehistoric cave dwellers does not begin to describe what they are and do.

Special education is overwhelmingly a job done by females. Barbara Kellerman refers to the professions of teaching and nursing as “pink collar ghettos” that, because of their high percentage of female employees, have very little to offer their workers as far as

money or prestige (Kellerman, 2003). She cautions that if women become the majority in other, currently highly-paid and respected professions, such as the law, there could be “unintended consequences” (Kellerman, 2003), such as, presumably, the loss of money and prestige in those fields. Certainly, this outlook is discouraging to anyone interested in the future of women in leadership. To be used as a cautionary tale to women in other fields must make teachers and nurses, struggling for respect, feel that they are fighting a losing battle. Kellerman seems to be saying that simply by being female, these teachers and nurses are doomed to be treated with disrespect and will never be allowed adequate compensation for their work.

This is not the end of the gender difficulties associated with women and leadership. Deborah L. Rhode says that “the characteristics traditionally associated with women are at odds with the characteristics traditionally associated with leadership... Most qualities traditionally linked with leaders have been masculine: forceful, assertive, authoritative, and so forth” (Rhode, 2003, p. 8). This means that when women try to lead, they are often perceived in terms of gender stereotypes. Although recent theories of leadership have stressed the need for interpersonal qualities more commonly associated with women, such as cooperation and collaboration, women aspiring to leadership still face double standards and double binds. They risk appearing too soft or too strident, too aggressive or not aggressive enough. And what is perceived as assertive in a man can seem abrasive in a woman. An overview of more than 100 studies involving evaluations of leaders indicates that women are rated lower when they adopt “masculine,” authoritative styles, particularly when the evaluators are men or the role is one typically occupied by men. Since other research suggests that individuals with masculine styles are

more likely to emerge as leaders than those with feminine styles, women face tradeoffs that men do not (Rhode, 2003). There is yet another obstacle to women practicing leadership, and it is perhaps the toughest to combat. Women are seen as less competent than men when rated by males. Despite experience and credentials, women have trouble establishing credibility. “Even in cases where male and female performance is objectively equal, women are held to higher standards, and their competence is rated lower” (Rhode, 2003, p. 8).

The perceived gaps between women and men are already bad. However, when the women are of ethnic and racial groups other than white, the gaps are even greater (Kellerman, 2003). In order to equalize leadership opportunities for women, Rhode recommends starting with the field of education. Children should grow up seeing women in leadership roles. Rhode says, “Educators at all levels should make greater efforts to inspire and equip women to assume leadership positions” (Rhode, 2003, p. 31). This could be an encouraging call to special educators to perform leadership roles in their classrooms and beyond. Randy Hodson, who has researched the theme of dignity in the workplace, wrote of the importance of workers having an increased voice and power in the workplace in order to increase productive capacity (Hodson, 2001).

In this process, management’s unilateral rule must be curtailed to allow room for a greater voice for the knowledge, insights and concerns of workers. In essence, workers are ready to take their place as full cocontributors to production. The impediment at this point is the reluctance to relinquish its historical power to rule the industrial enterprise by unilateral fiat. (Hodson, 2001, p. 257)

Samuel A. Culbert seems to also see leadership as a shared role between employers and employees. But special educators do not seem to be experiencing any opportunities to share leadership with their administrators. I refer here to the previously

mentioned lack of support and engagement from the side of their administrators. Many special educators are facing a crisis of leadership, and feel that their administrators, who are making decisions about teachers' workloads, schedules, and working conditions, are not inviting input from teachers regarding their own work situations. Sometimes they are making decisions that do not support their work (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray & Hendricks, 1995; Boe et al., 1999; Miller et al., 1999; Westling & Whitten, 1996). In the face of such challenges, some special educators may be participating in a kind of leadership that involves their input and expertise in decisions about the way they accomplish their work. Rather than relying upon the traditional hierarchical forms of leadership, these special educators may be exercising leadership that is participative, distributed and parallel (York-Barr, et al., 2004). Though this kind of leadership for general education teachers has been described for more than a decade by many authors in the literature (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Duke, 1994; Little, 1995, 2003; Murphy, 2005), only a few recent studies have discussed the leadership roles of special educators (Billingsley, 2007; York-Barr et al., 2005).

Discussions of leadership in special education to date have mainly focused upon administrators, directors, supervisors and principals in special education programs. Very little has been written about the role of leadership for special educators. While researching her article on teacher leadership in special education, Billingsley wrote that "no studies were found that specifically investigated the work of special education teacher leaders" (Billingsley, 2007, p. 163). However, York-Barr et al. discuss the informal leadership roles of special educators and state that teaching special education in an inclusive setting is, by its very nature, a leadership role: "It is posited that the work of

special educators in inclusive education settings is appropriately viewed as teacher leadership” (York-Barr et al., 2005, p. 193).

The recent work of York-Barr et al. owes much to the work of Astin and Leland (1991), where they examined the positional role of leadership for women who held formal positions of authority as well as the leadership of women who were outside of formal leadership structures. Women, they found, often developed networks or support systems that brought about opportunities for shared leadership. The conceptual framework of women’s leadership includes empowerment, and a sense of power as energy, not control (Astin & Leland, 1991).

That model rests on the assumption that leadership manifests itself when there is an action to bring about change in an organization, an institution, or the social system—in other words, an action to make a positive difference in people’s lives. Leadership, then, is conceived as a creative process that results in change. (p. 116)

The emphasis on leadership outside of traditional leadership structures has become a feminist issue. Astin and Leland (1991) noted that “feminist scholars have been critical of past studies on leadership because of their male bias, reflected in their exclusion of women as the subject of study and their conception of power as domination and control” (Astin & Leland, 1991, p. 2).

If one defines leadership solely in terms of positional power, there are few women in leadership roles. A truer picture of women and leadership is gained when leadership is not defined by formal power structures. Billingsley (2007) discusses the many barriers to special education teacher leadership. Chief among them is the heavy emphasis on compliance with legal regulations in special education. Special educators are often assigned compliance tasks such as paperwork and documentation that general educators are not required to do. These extra, time-consuming tasks can contribute to role

dissonance and stress for special education teachers. Also, special education and general education have been separated for so long that each group of teachers has developed separate cultures. While collaboration is deemed necessary for a successful inclusion program for students with disabilities, Billingsley (2007) has found that general educators often do not welcome opportunities to collaborate with special educators, and administrators often do not allow time in schedules for collaboration. Without a collaborative environment, special educators may have difficulty initiating leadership roles for themselves.

Ideas about informal, or nontraditional, leadership seem to coincide with the work of Heifitz, who asserted that leadership is not a position but an activity in which people “generate useful outcomes” (Heifitz, 1994, p. 20). Informal leaders do wield considerable influence, in part because they are not occupying positions of traditional power. Their informal leadership stance has distinct advantages. They can “raise questions that disturb” (Heifitz, 1994, p. 188). They can narrow their focus to a single issue and present detailed information about the stakeholders within a situation (Heifitz, 1994). As informal leaders, without formal authority, they have the capacity to “influence attitude and behavior beyond compliance” (Heifitz, 1994, p. 101).

Heifitz also makes the point that leadership has an important teaching function. Leadership, as used here, means engaging people to make progress on the adaptive problems they face. Because making progress on adaptive problems requires learning, the task of leadership consists of choreographing and directing learning processes in an organization or community. Progress often demands new ideas and innovation. As well, it often demands changes in people’s attitudes and behaviors. Adaptive work consists of

the process of discovering and making those changes. Leadership, with or without authority, requires an educative strategy (Heifitz, 1994).

When special educators encounter physical or attitudinal barriers for their students, they demonstrate leadership when they confront problems and educate those around them according to their vision of what could and should be for all students. Billingsley writes that special educators are leaders when they collaborate with other professionals and help brainstorm solutions to teaching problems. “Special educators are also leaders when they adeptly confront barriers to the education of students who have disabilities, rather than accepting the norms and values of the status quo” (Billingsley, 2007, p. 166). In doing so, special educators “produce a radical form of social justice: equality of educational opportunity for students who are sometimes characterized by extreme individual differences” (Gerber, 1996, p. 156). This view, that a leader can be a practicing teacher, comes at a time when the existing power structures in schools are often failing to meet the needs of today’s diverse student population as well as the needs of the teachers who serve them.

Wergin (2007) writes of “leadership in place” in which practicing teachers (in his case, university professors) come together to solve problems and frame questions, even though they do not possess formal positions of authority. He draws upon the writings of Heifitz (1994) to make the point that problems can provide opportunities for what Heifitz calls adaptive work. In adaptive work, people must work together to solve problems rather than allowing someone in authority to solve problems for them. Because the idea of facing problems can place people in discomfort, adaptive work can be difficult. However, working through discomfort is part of the adaptive work process. Wergin’s

idea of a professional seeing a need for leadership and, without formal authority, stepping up to begin that leadership process, is one that is applicable to special educators. In many cases, they are the experts in the school in helping students who have needs greater than the general education teacher may feel equipped to handle. Special educators who choose to lead from where they are can frame the issues clearly for colleagues without prescribing a solution, and invite dialog and debate among stakeholders. In this way, special educators can escape the restrictive pigeonhole in which special education is placed in some schools and can become involved in leadership throughout the school. Why is this important? York-Barr et al. (2005) write that “the degree to which they (special educators) are connected in a school influences the degree to which students with disabilities are connected, supported and have opportunities within the school. If the teachers are isolated and marginalized their students are likely to be as well.” (p. 211)

Leadership in place (Wergin, 2007) or any informal form of leadership must begin somewhere. For teachers, it can start with a feeling of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). It appears that viewing one’s self in a leadership role must start with some degree of autonomy and decision-making power, as well as being in a situation that feels comfortable and in which one feels some level of control over that situation. The concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995), which involves a person feeling empowered to do difficult work, has been refined to focus on the concept of teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy deals with teachers’ instructional efforts but a teacher who has a sense of self-efficacy becomes involved with much more than instruction. For example, if teachers are self-efficacious, they will be more likely to plan appropriate activities, persist with students who are having difficulties, and expend considerable effort to find appropriate

teaching materials. In turn, the teachers are likely to exhibit good job performance and will probably remain committed to their work. In addition, teachers who report high self-efficacy are more likely to overcome situations that challenge their capability to teach. They tend to be more optimistic than their peers and contribute a greater effort to their jobs, while taking more personal responsibility for their successes and failures. Conversely, teachers who report low self-efficacy are more likely to attribute their successes or failures to outside factors, such as lack of resources (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007).

People who choose special education as a career may have some powerful motivators that keep them involved in children's lives, even when aspects of their jobs become difficult or even overwhelming. I see in their work a philosophy about caring and helping that is unusual in the contemporary workplace, for they do not view leadership as a job for a lone hero. Amanda Sinclair (2007), mentioned earlier, criticized the strong man form of leadership image that has been part of the human psyche for centuries. James O'Toole (1996), too, has a critical take on heroism leadership. He describes some haunting images of a kind of leadership quite different from the heroic, masculine model to which Sinclair referred. Using James Ensor's "Christ Comes to Brussels" painting from 1889 to illustrate his points, O'Toole asks, as we gaze at the painting's kaleidoscopic chaos of colors and shapes, "Where is the leader? Where is Christ?" Christ appears in this painting, not in the forefront, but deeply imbedded in the action (O'Toole, 1996). O'Toole also writes that a leader must be moral and have a respect for followers. A special education teacher may be able to recognize this "behind the scenes" kind of leadership as akin to the job she does daily. Without any of the pomp of the formal

leader, the special educator is deeply involved in providing leadership to her students and colleagues through serving in whatever way is needed. This kind of leadership requires a quiet strength and a deep understanding of and concern for her students. Robert Greenleaf, whose work introduced the idea of the servant-leader, writes that the servant-leader is one who comes to leadership through the initial desire to serve. "It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 27). To measure the efficacy of the servant-leader, Greenleaf advises one to examine those served. "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 27). These words may resonate with special educators who pose the same questions to themselves about their students. Are my students growing and learning? Are they learning things beyond academic skills, such as how to be a friend or how to do things for themselves? Is the overall effect I am having upon them good and healthy, empowering and joyous? Am I seeing the potential in them and building upon it? I think many special educators will feel these passages in a very personal way.

If servant leadership is a component of special educator commitment, is it sufficient to keep them in their jobs year after year? The words of the participants will answer this question in the course of my study.

Chapter III: Methodology

“Qualitative studies are needed to develop richer and more detailed descriptions of special educators’ lives at school” (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008, p. 301).

I began this study with hopes of getting large numbers of special education teachers to talk to me about their careers. As a special education teacher myself, I knew how rare it was to have anyone ask to hear any personal observations about the work we do, so I thought that teachers would be glad to be asked and that finding participants would be easy. I started by contacting many teachers whose names were online on their school districts’ websites. Very few teachers contacted in this way were interested in talking to me, perhaps because they did not know me. The few who did call me would talk to me for a few minutes and then decline the opportunity. I am not sure why they did this. I offered a very flexible plan for the interviews which assured them that whatever time or place worked for them, I would accommodate their schedules and choice of venue. I reflected on this situation as though I were the one who was contacted with a request for an interview and concluded I would perhaps not be likely to speak to someone who was a stranger to me about something as personal as how I felt about my job, no matter how many verbal and written guarantees I received regarding how the information would or would not be used. I felt I would need to have some introduction to special education teachers from people they knew, possibly people they worked with at school, in order to be successful in building trust with these possible participants in my study. Some school websites did not include information on teachers but listed the administrators of the special education departments instead. My next step was to contact the school districts’ administrators, introduce myself and ask them to pass my contact

information along to their special education teachers who might be interested in participating in my study. This proved to be an even bigger problem. School districts, I found, often had policies in place to handle research requests. I looked at one such policy and was surprised to see that all of the research in that district must advance the goals of the district, meaning it had to improve the students' scores on standardized tests. Further, since research was always centered on students, the anonymity of the students was protected but not the anonymity of the teachers. Central office personnel told me that in order to conduct my study as I had designed it, I would have to disclose the names of my participants, the entire transcripts of their interviews and the final dissertation report. I knew I could not follow the prescribed IRB process, protecting the anonymity of my participants as well as anything they might tell me, and still follow the school district's guidelines, so I abandoned that method of seeking participants.

Even the guarantees of anonymity that I provided in the consent forms for my participants were not enough to reassure some special education teachers. One teacher, referred to me by a friend of a friend, showed up for the interview, read the form, signed the form and then, when I turned on my digital recorder to record the interview, she rose from the table, ripped up the form and walked away. I had told her during our initial contact that I would be using a digital recorder to record our interview. The use of a recording device was also described in the consent form that she read and signed. Still, seeing the actual recording device was enough to cause her to rethink her involvement in something she no doubt felt could be incriminating. I began to wonder why some teachers seemed so wary about talking. Did they fear I would give their interviews to their supervisors? Were they really so short on time, due to the pressures of their jobs,

perhaps? Had they had bad experiences with researchers in the past? I suspected that district policies, which allow no anonymity for participants may have been to blame for some of these reactions. I finally had success by contacting teachers and therapists I knew and asking them for referrals to their friends who were special education teachers. This so-called “snowball method” of obtaining participants gave me the personal link I needed and helped me enter several districts with ease, on the basis of mutual friendships, though the resulting “snowballs” were rather small. Each of the friends I contacted generated only one or two participant teachers. I still had many false starts, as prospective participants seemed excited about the research and then either put off setting a firm date and time to meet, or promised to be somewhere at a certain date and time and then did not appear. Through all of this, I was patient and it paid off for me. One teacher, who lives quite a distance from me, arranged three different meeting times and missed each one. However, I did show up for that fourth interview and so did the teacher. That interview with her was insightful and worth the wait. Though I had been seeking participants with five or more years of service, since that is the statistical cutoff period after which special education teachers begin to stay in greater numbers rather than leave the profession, I began an interview with one teacher and found that she had only four years of service. I continued with this interview because I thought it could be valuable to hear from a teacher who may not have made up her mind about staying or leaving. Did she feel that she had more options than someone with more years of service? Was she approaching some sort of universal deadline in which she would decide to commit to special education as a profession, or would she see her job as a stepping stone to something else? I address these questions in a discussion of the participants’ stories.

In all, I contacted and got responses from about 80 teachers. Fourteen of them agreed to participate. I attribute this small number of participants to the consistent message I got during the interviews—that special education teachers rarely have time during the day to complete their work and must either arrive at school early, stay late at school or take work home to finish. If these teachers had any free time, they were understandably cautious about making commitments. Some already had sizable commitments to second jobs, family members and continuing education. However, the participants who did agree to participate in this study were very generous with their time and answered questions openly. I have enormous gratitude for these teachers who were willing to tell me their stories. The participants in this study were drawn from four public school districts in the Denver, Colorado area. As part of the agreement to protect their privacy, I assured them that I would not reveal the names of the districts where they are teaching. Participants had between four and 31 years of experience in special education teaching, with the majority having 10 or more years of service. Five of the 14 participants teach in restricted settings such as day treatment centers in which there are no general education students. The remainder teach in integrated settings with both special education and general education students attending. I was particularly interested in interviewing those special education teachers who work with students with severe needs or emotional disabilities, for they are traditionally the teachers who report the least job satisfaction levels of all special education teachers (Stempien & Loeb, 2002). While all students present challenges, the nature of those from students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and those with severe needs can be very draining, physically and emotionally.

Presumably, the special educators who teach these very challenging students may have much to say about commitment and leadership.

The demographics of my participant group do not mirror exactly those of special education teachers nationwide. I have interviewed only one male, which is 7% of my participant group, and the national statistics from The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education show that male special education teachers at all grade levels make up roughly 15% of the teaching workforce. The percentage of male special education teachers varies by age level of the student, however, and in the age level 3-5, only 1.4% of special educators are male (Westat, 2002). The older the special education student, the more likely that student is to have a male special education teacher. There was only one teacher in the participant group who considered herself to be Hispanic. This represents 7% of the participants interviewed. Nationally, only 3.6% of special education teachers consider themselves to be Hispanic (Weston, 2002). However, in Colorado, where this study was conducted, 36.7% of school-aged children are Hispanic (Larsen, 2004). Sixty-two percent of the students in the elementary school where I teach consider themselves to be Hispanic, according to the 2007 October count. The remaining 13 participants were white or Caucasian and I am white, as well.

Interviews were conducted individually and each lasted about one hour. Follow-up questions were asked by telephone or email. The interviews were qualitative, consisting of questions that invited the sharing of the participants' personal stories. I chose qualitative methods in order to get the most complete and nuanced responses from these teachers. To date, the methodology used to research issues of commitment and retention in special education teachers has overwhelmingly been quantitative. Though

quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, surveys and Likert scales, are excellent for handling large numbers of respondents and focusing on specific empirical issues, they are less efficient in exploring complex themes of human emotions and perceptions. Brownell and Smith, in their 1992 review of the research literature on attrition and retention concluded that “attrition researchers have relied primarily on survey research to delineate a list of variables associated with teachers’ decisions to leave the classroom. “Such findings do not explain the complex and dynamic interaction of variables that affect career decisions” (Brownell & Smith., 1992, p. 242). Quantitative methods are not flexible enough to follow up on emerging themes or to allow respondents to answer freely outside the given responses. Brownell and Smith (1992) recommended qualitative research methods in order to get more detail and relevant data about these questions.

Life histories and in-depth interviews provide current and former special educators the opportunity to discuss decisions in light of their experiences. Thus, factors that were constrained originally by forced-item responses in survey research may emerge through the use of qualitative methodologies (Brownell & Smith, 1992). “Qualitative interviewers explore new areas and discover and unravel intriguing puzzles” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4) the same way that special education teachers must observe their students for clues to find methods and materials which will help them learn. The fit between special education and qualitative interviewing is therefore a good one. Though each interview was guided by the personal story of the participants, I did try to touch upon a few main points with each one:

- How many years have you been teaching special education?
- How did you start out in the field?

- Have you always wanted to be a special education teacher or did you come to this profession by chance?
- Did you have any early influences that helped you decide on a career in special education?
- Have you ever thought about trying a different career?
- What do you like about your job?
- What are the challenges you face in your job?
- What do you see in your future?
- Will you still be here in ten years? If not, where will you be?
- If a young person who was considering a career in special education came to you, asking for advice, what would you tell that person?

The questions were designed to address issues of motivation and commitment, as well as to try to answer the question, “Why do you stay in this profession?” Though each conversation took a slightly different turn, many participants seemed to be telling stories with remarkably similar themes. Most of our conversations turned naturally to supervisors and administrators and their impact upon teaching.

Out of that usually came a discussion about leadership. Many participants did not seem to ascribe the term “leader” to themselves but assumed I meant a principal, supervisor or someone else with formal authority within the school hierarchy. This was another of the surprises I found when conducting these interviews—a professional identity that did not include leadership.

Naturally, every participant had something to say about the challenges in the job, such as supervisors who wanted to control everything or supervisors who were never

available. I found that it is perhaps normal to consider, at some point in one's teaching career, other professions that might be less stressful, more fulfilling or professions that allow more personal choice and control. Often, these teachers would acknowledge having gone through a rough period while teaching, but now describe the satisfaction of having resolved the problems so that they can continue to teach.

The issue of satisfaction is complex. Studies I have reviewed on special education teachers' attrition and retention have given many reasons why teachers leave the profession, including poor working conditions, poor job design, burdensome paperwork and documentation, large caseloads of students and lack of support from administrators. What cannot be concluded, by studying why so many special education teachers leave, are the reasons why the others stay in the profession. That is, if many special educators leave their jobs because of dissatisfaction with poor working conditions and inadequate administrative support, it cannot be assumed that those who stay do so because they like these things. It might be the case that dissatisfaction is more easily described than satisfaction, in the same way that the symptoms of sickness can be defined more readily than evidences of health. Perhaps the complexity of satisfaction comes from the fact that it takes place along with, and in spite, of the many issues that cause so many special educators to leave. I wanted to know if there is something different about these teachers that cannot simply be explained by years of experience.

This particular area of research, involving the commitment of special education teachers and their ideas and practice of leadership, is relatively new to the research literature on special education. As such, this research can be thought of as exploratory. As I will discuss later, the participants sometimes had trouble pinpointing why exactly it

was that they stayed. I would then ask what it was that they liked about the job and what was important about it. From that, I was able to find, from their words, a reason why they stayed. It was a question that I don't think many of them ever asked themselves. As I had anticipated when planning this study, there were some issues I encountered in participant input with which I was not wholly in agreement. However, one of my challenges in this research was to allow the voices of the participants to speak even if I did not agree with them. Rubin and Rubin state the obvious. "Interviewers should not impose their views on interviewees" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 36). I have very strong views about my profession but the voice in a research study must be a blend of the interviewer and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). I have tried to acknowledge my opinions and biases in order to allow others to express theirs. Since "cultural interviewing involves more active listening than aggressive questioning" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 10), I found that many interviews were unstructured as far as chronology and subject. One moment we could be talking about the coming school year and the next moment, the participant may want to tell me a story from childhood. At the end of interviews, I usually asked, "Is there anything you would like to talk about that I haven't asked you?" This sometimes rejuvenated the participant whose interview was winding down, and I heard almost again as much from that person as I had heard in the initial interview. I chanced to ask that question once, overestimating my interviewing abilities and figuring I had gotten the whole story. Thereafter, I asked the question of the next participants. Of course, they had more to say! How could I even know that there might be more if I had not asked them? This was an important lesson for me to learn. Somehow, I had assumed that I would

naturally know when it was about to end. The story belongs to the participant, I learned, and all of it could never be completely told in answer to my questions.

In writing the analysis of the interviews with the participant, I have tried to be cognizant of my status as a teacher in the world of special education. This world of ours has its own language and its own culture. Rubin and Rubin (2005) write about the difficulty participants have in explaining things that are taken for granted as part of the culture. This was especially true of the interviews I conducted because the participants all knew that I was also a special educator, so they used acronyms and language common to all of us without feeling they must explain. Sometimes, I would ask for a definition for the non-special education audience. At other times, it seemed a disruption of the flow of the participant's story. And certainly, there were times when I did not even realize that something we were talking about might not be understood by outsiders. There is a certain invisibility to cultural issues for the members of that culture and it is up to me, the researcher, to reveal those issues. Also, I have written a section about special education's abbreviations and a short discussion of some terms, which appear in the appendix.

I assigned each participant an alias first name that is in no way connected to the actual name. I have not used the names of individual schools or school districts so that participants would feel free to talk about their careers without fear of any consequences from their supervisors. Their stories, despite the small scale, hopefully point out elements of a larger picture for other special educators. There is much advice available to the researcher on how to deal with transcripts once the interviews have been completed. Kvale warns the researcher against putting too much faith in the interview transcripts. "The transcript is a bastard," he writes, "It is a hybrid between an oral discourse

unfolding over time, face to face, in a lived situation—where what is said is addressed to a specific listener present—and a written text created for a general, distant public” (Kvale, 1996, p. 182). Kvale recommends “entering into a dialogue with the text, going into an imagined conversation with the ‘author’ about the meaning of the text.” In this way, the researcher, who was present during the original conversation, can “expand what is expressed in the text” (Kvale, 1996, p. 182).

I hope that I have succeeded in bringing these participants to life through my analysis of their words. Some of them shared very similar problems but I hope I have revealed the different ways each found to deal with them. The worlds in which these teachers work can be quite different from the general education classrooms we attended as children. The extent of the disabilities and challenges their students may present can be difficult to even imagine if one is not part of this endeavor called special education. My goal has been to bring these individuals to a wider audience so they may be heard and respected for the difficult work they do.

I am a special education teacher and have my own experiences and opinions. In order to make sure I was interpreting the transcripts from the interviews with objectivity and fairness, I asked a colleague who has a doctorate in psychology to look at two randomly selected transcripts. She gave her observations of these, which are included in Chapter Five. The purpose of triangulation was to make sure that the resulting conclusions can be viewed, not as my personal conclusions, but as something that the participants described as being a part of their daily experiences.

In asking the first questions in the interview, which were usually “what group of students are you teaching?” and “how long have you been a special educator?” I often

had the feeling I was opening a door and the participant, whom I did not know, would emerge tentatively at first. Then, it sometimes seemed that the person I was interviewing would take off running in some direction he or she had longed to go. I tried to follow as best I could, resisting the temptation to lead them because I knew I would learn so much more if the participant spoke about what was important to him or her. Even so, with all participants bringing up different subjects, I felt as though certain themes emerged. I divided my analysis into areas where I had questions, adding things that arose with the participants. My interviews began to change over time, as I would follow up on themes as they arose. One such theme was that of resilience. Two participants mentioned it, so I went back and contacted a few already-interviewed teachers to get their ideas on the subject.

These participants seemed to need to tell their stories before they could come to any conclusions about what was really important about their jobs or indeed, why they stayed. Perhaps they reflect very little upon their situations and did not have a ready answer because they do not think about the issue very much. Some seemed to hesitate when I asked them why they stayed, almost as though they felt it might be a trick question of some kind. Perhaps they felt the question meant I doubted their commitment to their professions. I found I had to sense when each participant was ready to answer that question before I asked it. Once I had completed the interviews, I sent each participant a transcript of their exact words, inviting each to respond with points they wanted to emphasize, clarify or even delete. I got only cursory feedback when I sent the entire transcripts. My response rate was much better when asking participants about specific issues. I emailed some of them to check issues that felt common to more than one

participant, and I did receive feedback which corroborated my summaries. In this way, I tried to check on the reliability of my conclusions and the credibility of my research.

There were some striking similarities among teachers in their opinions about leadership. Many also mentioned a preference for a certain population of students and surprisingly, the populations they described were precisely the ones that statistics have shown were students with whom most teachers did not want to work. As information like this began emerging, I became very excited. I pored over the transcripts, connecting themes from each and as needed, returning to the participants to make sure I had understood them. These special educators are complex individuals, of course, so I had to accept, at some points, contradictory evidence: that they loved their jobs but that some things caused them to consider the idea of leaving teaching.

I also took into consideration the nuances of what they were saying while reviewing their interviews. It was a long and reflective process, for as a researcher, and as a teacher, I have an empathy for their experiences and yet, their experiences are unique to them. I had to make sure to listen without inserting my own opinions, and allow their individual stories to shine.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

I would like to introduce the group of participants based upon their circumstances when they entered the field of special education teaching. They were evenly divided on the matter of how their careers in special education began. Half entered the field by chance, while the other half entered the field intentionally. I will consider both groups, starting with the ones who, as one participant put it, “kind of fell into it.” Later, I will examine what affect the circumstances of beginning their careers might have upon their intentions of continuing or ending them.

Entering the Field of Special Education by Chance

The common thread in the stories of those who entered special education by chance appears to be necessity. These teachers needed a job so badly they could not afford to turn a job down, even if it wasn’t their first choice of teaching positions.

I met one participant, Michael, the only male in my group of participants, at a Starbucks on a Saturday morning. The place was packed with many customers so we began talking as we stood in the long line, waiting to order. There were interruptions. A couple of young girls brayed with laughter. Someone spilled a drink on the floor. I turned the digital recorder off and on a couple of times as we ordered, picked up our drinks and navigated our way through the crowd to a table that was miraculously empty. Still, the people around us seemed to be screaming over each other to be heard. Michael asked me how I could possibly record an interview in this place. I told him I had noise reduction software and we discussed how this works. I asked if he would be more comfortable if we went somewhere else to talk, but he seemed ready to give it a try here. We started our interview and despite the distractions, we both became absorbed in it.

Michael has been a special education teacher for 16 years. In his words, he “kind of fell into it,” after accepting a job teaching GED classes, and then another job, teaching incarcerated youth, after he had graduated from college. Finally, while working in a residential treatment center, he decided to go back and get a Masters degree in severe and affective needs. He got that degree, not so much because he wanted it but more because he was told he needed the degree if he wanted to keep his job. At this point, he could have gone back to school and gotten a Masters in something else instead. But he didn’t. Why not? He told me that he had changed since taking the job. These students, so challenging at first, had become very important to him. They perhaps had become part of what I would call his identity as a teacher. To continue working with this population of students, he had to be, and wanted to be, certified in teaching students with their particular disabilities. Michael said, “Yeah, I mean, I had already been working there (in the residential treatment center) a few months. I had gotten to know the kids and had really gotten very, very close to many of them. And had a blast doing what I was doing. Um and we had kids from the ages of six to 15 but I was able to bond with any age group, help them academically. We would—I was young at the time so I would go outside on the playground with them and run around playing—play tag, play hide and seek, and just experience the kids in the most open setting that there is.”

Lissa is another participant who entered special education by chance, and when she describes her entry into the special education field, it sounds like she might be talking about winning the lottery. She was undoubtedly the participant who seemed the most excited and happy about her job. She had a degree in elementary general education when she started out in Wisconsin. She had trouble finding a job teaching in general education

so she came to Colorado. Unfortunately, the job situation for someone seeking a general education job was the same in Colorado as it was in Wisconsin. Since she had taught regular education kindergarten at one point, she was offered a job in a special education early childhood program, working with students who are younger than five years of age. She was delighted at the offer, which she accepted, as she says, “to get my foot in the door.” When she began teaching, she decided that she loved it.

Brooke met with me after school in her classroom. Since her classroom was in a day treatment center, I found myself noticing the silence—no doubt a stark contrast to the noise level during the day. Brooke told me she started out with a degree in elementary education and tried unsuccessfully for two years to get a job. She said, “I was told by an administrator at (a nearby school district) that for every elementary position they have open, they had over 350 applicants. Yes, so that made me realize ‘well I’m good. I’m just not sure I’m that good.’ So I decided to go into special ed. because I knew there was a need there and it would be a field where I could get hired and that was basically my initial inspiration. But since I’ve been working with this population, I’ve found many other great things that I like about teaching special ed.” I asked her about the population of students she was teaching and how she came to choose them. She said she felt that her students deserved highly qualified teachers, but the thing that made her really good with these students was her experiences with her ex-husband. “I do think that in a weird way, he had a lot to do with me going into this population,” Brooke said, “because I work with kids with significant, identifiable, emotional disabilities and my daughter’s father has a lot of those, so...(laughs)...when I started to learn about compliance issues and anger

management issues and the things that our kids deal with on a daily basis that are their disabilities, it just kind of clicked with me. ‘Oh, wait, this is just like my ex!’”

Other participants also shared stories of being influenced by family members or friends in such a way that they ended up considering special education teaching as an option in their job searches, as we will find when we examine each of their stories later.

Raven was a participant that I nearly missed interviewing, ironically because we both were unaware of how many Starbucks coffee shops there were in the vicinity of where we planned to meet. We had arranged to meet at a certain time in the Starbucks on the intersection of X and Y Streets—a rather straightforward plan. I sat in the coffee shop there for about 15 minutes and asked every woman who walked in if she were Raven. No one was. I finally asked a staff person if there might be another Starbucks nearby. She pointed directly across the street! I left this shop and ran across many lanes of traffic to the other Starbucks. There was no one there, so I asked the barista if anyone female had just been there, waiting. I had never met Raven and knew nothing else to describe her besides her gender. Yes, I was told that someone had been there for a while but had recently left. I became very anxious, hoping I had not ruined my chance for an interview. I ran back across the street and there she was, sitting at a table and looking around nervously, no doubt wondering where I was. When we got through the explanations and apologies, we had a good laugh about it. Then we began to talk about her life as a special education teacher. Raven, like several other participants, had not originally been interested in teaching in special education. She went through nine interviews, trying to get a job in general education but there were many others trying for the same positions. She was offered a special education job with an emergency certification, meaning that

she could begin teaching in special education without the proper certification, but in order to keep her job, she would be required to complete special education coursework within a certain period of time. She took the offer because she needed a job but unlike Lissa and Michael, Raven did not have that instant epiphany that she had found her perfect job. I asked her, “So, ah, was your heart in it, at that point? She said, “Um, I just needed a job, quite honestly. And after the first semester, I thought, there’s no way I can do this after this year. At all. There’s just no way.”

However, what she said next seems to help explain the tenacity of special education teachers, who, like her, have been overwhelmed and yet have found a way to stay in the profession. There was something about her attitude toward difficulty that made her stop and look at her situation in a different way. She said, “But by the end of the year, I’m kind of one of those personalities like that, I did it, and there’s just so many things that I wanted to do better the next year so I was like, well, I’m going to stay and do it again. I want to fix these things that I did wrong and I wanted to do better.” Raven went on to teach that second year and by the end of that year, she said, “I didn’t want to do anything else.” Why the change of heart? This was a person convinced during her first year of teaching that she just couldn’t handle it. However, she found that special education is a job that is never the same. She liked the variety of the job, and learning about the many different kinds of students, each with their own unique challenges. She didn’t feel that a job teaching in general education would require as much from her and she found she really enjoyed confronting a difficult task.

The final three teachers in this group, Chris, Lily and Phoebe, also arrived in special education careers through mere happenstance. The afternoon I went to see Chris

at the day treatment center where she worked, her classroom was filled with that after-school quiet that is so appropriate for reflecting upon the day. Chris told her story as if becoming a special education teacher were total serendipity. She chanced to see a sign for a teaching job fair while on a visit to Colorado from another state. She filled out some applications and was hired. But this decision began much earlier. Having grown up in a family in which several family members had mental health concerns, she went into the mental health field after college. She loved her first job, working in an alternative school in another state with children who needed mental health support. In describing these students, Chris said “I kind of was able to empathize and sympathize at the same time.” She worked at a number of jobs in related fields, such as social work, before coming to Colorado for a visit. She saw that job fair sign and as she describes it, “I thought, ‘I might as well go, you know. Just check it out’.” She sees special education as an amazing direction for her life to take.

When I interviewed Lily, I already knew that she put in a lot of hours at school. I had been to her school earlier, on a Saturday, to interview her colleague, Connie, and both Lily and Connie were there working. It was their usual routine, they told me. The problem so many participants had described to me, that feeling of never having enough time to complete their work during the school day, made them decide to come in and work on Saturdays for as long as necessary to get their work done. Their attitude was that the administrative duties required of them, such as paperwork, documentation and planning for instructional time, could not be done when the students were there because it would decrease the amount of direct service with students that they could provide. Because the students were their first priority, they were willing to use personal time to do

non-teaching duties. Lily's career began when her mother found an advertisement in the newspaper about a job at a school for the deaf. Lily, who needed a job while going to school, accepted the position, became fluent in sign language and later got her Masters degree in special education. "I moved to Colorado to go into deaf education and got a little sidetracked, ended up getting interpreter training and I was an interpreter for the deaf in this district for fourteen years," Lily said. "And in the meantime, I started working more and more with children who had, in addition to a hearing impairment, other disabilities." Finally, she ended up as a special education teacher and decided that she liked it. So though it wasn't a conscious decision of hers from the very beginning to enter the field of special education teaching, she became a teacher as a result of her cumulative experiences in education and her experience working with people with a need.

Phoebe's interview was memorable for two reasons. First, the woman herself was such a dynamo. She had achieved so much and had such interesting plans for the future. Second, it was the interview at which I was at my technological worst. My digital recorder malfunctioned three times during our talk, but because Phoebe had so much to say, the conversation charged ahead. We doubled back to pick up material that had not been recorded and I relied upon notes to fill in any blank spots. I was embarrassed to have technical glitches during a story that deserved unbroken attention. Phoebe entered special education teaching after she had been traveling in Asia. She returned to the U.S. in October, and the only teaching jobs still open then were in special education. "I was living in Asia for a while. I spent like a few years after college traveling because I didn't feel I had anything to offer my kids. I had no life experience so I volunteered for a year, moved to the west coast. I moved to Asia," she said. And from there, she came back to

the U.S. to work, as it happened, in special education. I was struck by the idea that she needed to have life experience in order to work with her students. She wanted to have the experience of a “big world out there.” This is especially relevant to her students who are in a day treatment center—a very restricted setting on the continuum of special education service settings.

Intentionally Entering the Field of Special Education

There are seven teachers in this group of participants. They all decided from the start that special education was the right career for them.

Hannah, for instance, knew since she was in the second grade that she wanted to be a teacher. “Well, I, when I first started my degree in Iowa, I thought it would be fun to be a teacher,” she told me. “I remember sitting in second grade and my second grade teacher, I really bonded with her and had a special relationship with her and I thought ‘she’s such a great person and it looks like she’s having fun doing her job.’ And so that’s kind of how I started it.”

Hannah began teaching in another state, working with children who have learning and emotional disabilities, a job she always wanted and felt very comfortable in. When she came to Colorado, she applied for a job that was similar and was promised she would be working with that population. However, once she had accepted the job, she found she had been placed in a position as a reading teacher. She is working with children with mild disabilities. Many demands have been placed upon her time, such as attending committee meetings four days a week after school. She loves special education but does not feel she can fulfill her potential, working with children whose needs are so different from the children she has worked with in the past.

I met Connie on a Saturday at her school. As I mentioned earlier, she and her colleague Lily came to school on weekends to finish work they had no time to do during the school day. Connie taught general education for a couple of years before the birth of her daughter. Her daughter was born with disabilities and became a special education student when the family moved to Colorado. Connie and her daughter's teacher became friends and it was that teacher who convinced Connie to return to teaching and to seek her special education certification. She said she had been considering such a direction even before her daughter was born. "I have always had a tolerance for people that try their best even though they have a hard time getting there. I've got a real compassion for people—for the underdog, I guess is what it is," she told me. Connie attributed this tendency to her father's influence. "When we'd be watching football games together, he'd always be rooting for the losing team...Whenever we'd do anything, he was always rooting for the underdog! It didn't matter what it was. It was always the one behind who needed to be encouraged," Connie said.

Kayla knew she would be a teacher from an early age. But after volunteering at Children's Hospital in Boston and working at a facility for adults with multiple handicaps, she felt there was a real need for people willing to work with people with disabilities and thus she went into special education. When she went back to school to complete her studies, a director of special education told her that when she returned, they would need someone with her abilities. She found it comforting to know a job would be waiting for her, though her mind was already made up about becoming a special education teacher.

Once she got into her first teaching job, she said, “I loved it from the get-go. One of the reasons I thought it so fabulous was there was very little restriction put on special ed. teachers. And we had the opportunity to develop programs that really met the needs of the kids. And that was way cool because kids in the other part of the school system didn’t have that opportunity. The teachers didn’t have that opportunity to work with kids like that.”

Grace started working in the field of hospitality but didn’t feel it was a good fit for her. She says, “So when I went back to graduate school, I went with the intention of becoming a teacher, knowing that I enjoyed working with kids with significant support needs. And specifically sought my Masters program and teaching education around working with students with significant support needs in the classroom.”

Ellen had a sister who had mild learning disabilities but didn’t really consider becoming a special educator until she was in the military after high school. One of the pharmacists she worked with there asked her to babysit for his daughter, who had a disability. She did so well with this child that he advised her to look into teaching special education. She did and has “no regrets,” she says.

Aida graduated from college in another state with degrees in general and special education. She moved to Colorado, then had to go back to school because her license had expired. She applied for jobs at many different school districts. At her first interview, she was offered a job working with students with significant limited intellectual capacity (SLIC), a term exclusive to Colorado. That was 10 years ago.

Hallie is the sole participant who entered special education with something between chance and intent. She was getting her undergraduate degree in elementary

education and could not think of a minor, so she ended up getting a double major in elementary education and special education. Because she accepted a job in special education first, she says she was thereafter stuck in special education. No one who knew she had experience and credentials in special education would consider her for a general education job.

Most of the participants in this study started in special education with a strong desire to have a job in teaching mixed with a teacher's desire to help people. They describe, in general, positive memories of those beginning moments of their careers. Were these initial impulses sufficient to keep them in their special education jobs?

My objective in this study is to find out why these participants stayed in their special education teaching jobs. However, the research literature seems so skewed toward the special educators who leave their jobs, and the many conditions and requirements of the job that make it difficult for some teachers to stay. I will first review those negative aspects: Too much paperwork, expectations of instruction without resources or supplies, unwritten rules requiring a teacher to donate unpaid work hours in order to get the job done. Do any of these affect any of these participants? More importantly, how many of the participants, employed as teachers at the moment, have ever felt the urge to leave special education teaching? Are these participants any different from the ones who leave, and if so, what is it about them that is different? What lessons do they have to impart to new and prospective teachers to the special education field? They came to special education by chance or by intent. Does the manner of their entering the field, either through chance or intent, make any difference in their career longevity? Though I will

deal with their reasons for staying later, I will start with the challenges to them and how they deal with these challenges.

The Teacher Who Has Never Wanted to Leave

When it comes to determining who now wants to leave this career, is a difference between the teacher who entered special education by chance and the one who entered the field intentionally? With this participant group, there is apparently no correlation. My conversations with special education teachers showed that all but one of them, at some point, had thoughts of leaving the profession or of leaving their current teaching position. As yet, none of these participants have acted upon these impulses to leave.

The 13 participants who considered leaving at some point in their careers gave us a wide range of reasons for why they felt it might be time for them to go. However, the one participant who never felt the urge to leave makes an interesting backdrop for the stories of others who are not always so satisfied.

Lissa really likes her job. To hear her talk about her students, the youngest children in the special education spectrum, is to hear many anecdotes and much laughter. She happens to be the only participant in the study who serves the early childhood special education population. She entered special education by chance and originally thought she would be teaching science in the general education high school setting. Like so many others, she could not find a job in general education, so when she was offered a job in special education teaching early childhood, she accepted it. Once into the job, she seemed to become fascinated with her students. "I always loved science. I always thought I wanted to be a physics teacher. I love it! And it isn't as interesting as these kids. Each kid is a puzzle. I think, 'Hmm, I wonder what's happening.'" This puzzle she speaks of

makes every day with her students intriguing. The more puzzles her students present, the more she learns about them and how to help them. Lissa likes seeing the progress her students make, which she humbly attributes to the age that they are when they enter the program, rather than to anything she is doing in class. She says that most will make progress just by virtue of the natural process of maturing from one year to the next. She adds, “They’re pretty sweet. They’re pretty wonderful. It’s hard to find fault with them...And I really like what I’m doing! (laughs) I wouldn’t switch it.”

Lissa is fortunate to be working with her favorite student population, something mentioned by several participants as being quite important to job satisfaction. She also has the professional motivator of seeing student progress. Depending upon the students and their challenges, student progress is something that looks different at various ability levels. Lissa speaks of student progress as something almost automatic with her group. For other teachers, the pace of progress can be slower.

Teachers Who Have Considered Leaving Their Jobs

Surely no teacher enters teaching expecting to lose dignity; rather, teaching is thought to be a venue for fully expressing or for claiming it and for expressing oneself. Yet, increasingly the demands of teaching call forth contrary acts that bruise the teacher’s soul; teaching contrary to beliefs and commitments and suffering as a result. (Bullough, Bullough, & Mayes, 2006, p. 194)

There was evidence of many stressful issues in the stories of the participants. All but one of the participants have considered leaving teaching at some point.

Interviewer: “So are you saying that this job may infringe upon your personal life?” Hannah: “It does, completely does. And I’m pretty certain that I will stay here this year unless something happens and administration is not happy with my performance. But I don’t know that I can work here another year.”

Hannah is perhaps at the opposite end of the spectrum of job satisfaction from Lissa. Hannah stills wants to work in special education. Unfortunately, she does not like the situation she currently finds herself in. We met in her classroom after school but there were still a few people around and when she got up to close the door as we began talking, I had the feeling that she was not just shutting out distractions. Before we actually started the interview, an announcement came over the public address system and in about a two second interval, we exchanged glances and I wondered if she thought, as I did, that someone in the office might be listening in.

This teacher had been teaching special education for 25 years and yet had just recently moved to Colorado, so she was essentially trying to reestablish the seniority she must have enjoyed in her previous school. Beginning teachers, as well as teachers relocating in Colorado from other states are often made to go through a probationary period, no matter how many years of experience they may have. During this time, which may be one or more years (three is common), these teachers can be dismissed for any reason, or for no reason, at any time. This insecurity about having continuous employment can be quite stressful for these teachers and certainly is not a time when probationary teachers feel they can “rock the boat” by complaining about any part of their jobs. As we started to talk, I could sense that she had some tension or perhaps some negative feelings regarding her job, so I decided to tap into that. I asked if she were aware of the statistic that showed that almost half of special education teachers quit within the first five years of teaching. She said she wasn’t surprised and then she gave a list of reasons why special education teachers might want to quit their jobs

Hannah said, “And I know it’s a highly stressful job and it’s a very difficult job. Not only do you have to do the academic portion. You also have the paperwork to do, parent meetings after school. A lot of times, the meetings are before school, so there’s a lot of extra components to your job besides the teaching component.” These reasons, however, were only incidental to her dissatisfaction with her position. I asked her to name the most stressful part of her job was and she had an answer ready. “The most stressful part of my job is dealing with other adults that don’t necessarily follow through with their portion of the IEP, getting it completed on time, and then it puts myself or another team member in a bind because we’re to present our IEPs to parents and then it’s not completed. And we’re essentially responsible for getting it all compiled and together in time for the meetings. So, that’s probably the biggest frustration of my job, is other parts of the special ed. team.” I heard this opinion often. Many participants said that having a good special education team was invaluable in performing the job. No matter how difficult the challenges were that the students presented to a teacher, it was usually other adults who could make or break a program.

Hannah sat very straight in her chair, tensing her shoulders. She had papers in a folder in front of her that she tapped on the table. Her desk was neat and orderly. She explained that she had many years of experience working with students who had some very severe disabilities. Though other teachers might find such a job stressful, this participant felt she was most comfortable with that population. She was upset in her current job because she had been told she would be working with these students and was instead being used as a reading specialist, which involves working with students with relatively mild learning disabilities. As a teacher on probation, she could not voice any

objection to her current placement. Besides not being placed in a teaching job she had experience with and training in, Hannah was having trouble fulfilling the many other related duties required of her. She was in meetings every night but Mondays after school and general education teachers were not. She found that many committees needed, or wanted, a special educator on their roster, so she was called upon repeatedly to fill this role. However, this left her very little time to work on and complete the IEPs, paperwork and so on required of her. Often, there were additional meetings held before school, as well. Hannah really wanted to leave this particular job and teach in a different school where she could work with students with severe disabilities. When I asked her how long she thought she could keep up the kind of pace that this school was asking of her, she said, without hesitation, "May 25th," the last day of the school year. She would leave earlier if it wouldn't mean breaking her contract. Hannah is part of a group of teachers who find themselves as the saying goes, between a rock and a hard place, wanting perhaps not to quit but to be able to have some kind of change in their special education assignments. Others have wanted to try teaching the general education population but were not allowed to do so. There are teachers who like their jobs but need additional challenges to make their work more interesting. Still others are reaching a crisis point with their very stressful and demanding assignments and do not feel they can last in these jobs much longer.

Michael: "I was thinking I've just got to do something else." Michael really loved his job, working with students with affective needs in a self-contained classroom in an elementary school. He had to take some time off for health reasons and the school district hired someone else to take his place. He eventually found a job in a program that is

similar to a day treatment center, working with students with extremely challenging behaviors. This is a very stressful environment for a teacher. Though he has become more or less adjusted to his new situation, he sometimes feels that since it is so difficult to find male teachers to work with students with ED, he is perhaps trapped in this job unless he decides to leave the district. He insists he is not the victim of option cutting, but in order to leave, he would give up his seniority, the amount of money he is making, and leave the district that his son attends in order to start over somewhere else. At this point, it is not a move he is willing to make. Like Hannah, Michael has considered leaving his current position, teaching students who are very different from the ones he really enjoyed teaching.

Aida had a similar story about being reassigned to a different school and age group of students at the beginning of the last school year. Aida: “There was never a time when I wanted to stop teaching because that is all that I have ever wanted to do. There was a time where I wondered if this district was the correct place for me.” Aida was happy with her job, teaching special education in the elementary school. She had a principal who was very supportive, which, as she puts it, is “Not. Very. Common.” Unfortunately, another principal was in charge the following year and he was not as responsive to her and to the needs of her students. She had a large caseload and not enough help and so she began asking for support, perhaps in the form of an additional paraprofessional to work in her room. She asked because her students, their needs, and the requirements written on their IEPs were very important to her. She said, “I went to the principal, I went to the (teachers’ union), I went to the school board president until I got help and it came down the horn eventually. But people above me didn’t feel like I went

about it the right way.” The following year, she found she had been moved from the school and classroom she loved to a position in middle school. She didn’t feel comfortable teaching middle school students, but her district is not known for being responsive to a teacher’s preferences when making teaching assignments. In fact, she feels the change may have been a form of retribution. Aida said, “We call it, several of us who were displaced this year, we call it the (district name) Claw—it will pick you up and drop you elsewhere, should you feel comfortable or if you stand up for yourself and don’t go about it the ‘right way.’”

For those unfamiliar with special education teachers’ placements within public schools, these teachers come to the job with various kinds of teaching licenses, which dictate what age child the teacher can serve along with what types of disabilities their students will have. Each area of teacher expertise carries its own certification. These certification areas can be quite broad, such as allowing a teacher to serve students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Others are more focused on particular disabilities or student ages. Some school districts keep special education teachers in schools working with the same student population year after year. Others, such as the one that Aida describes, can place a teacher in a different school, working with a different age group, every year, without seeking any input from the teacher about the move. This can be quite an adjustment for a special education teacher. When a teacher is comfortable and doing well with one group of students, and then is suddenly assigned to another group of students of a different age group or ability level, it can seem to the teacher that he or she is being punished. In some districts, there sometimes is a perfunctory survey at the end of each school year, asking teachers to choose where they would like to be teaching during

the coming school year, but it is unclear if the opinions sought are ever acted upon. This fear of retribution for speaking up and advocating for the needs of one's students is another problem participants mentioned as a factor in their desires to leave their positions. Bad supervisors, sometimes described as unresponsive or unsupportive, are also at times described as almost predatory to the special education teacher.

Ellen had such a principal and when dealing with this principal's unreasonable demands, she says she considered leaving teaching for the first and only time in her life. Interviewer: "Or would you consider doing something different at this point?" Ellen: "You know, when things kind of got tough with my principal last year...I just went there for a little while...."

It would be difficult to imagine a teacher more dedicated to her students than Ellen. She even adopted one of her students as her own child. However, Ellen, like Aida, has gone through considerable problems with her principal. It began during a field trip three years ago. In a nightmare scenario, one of Ellen's students went missing. For four days and three nights, there was an organized search for the student. Ellen's union and the incident commander had urged her to speak to no one about what had happened while the investigation was taking place. Her principal, who knew that she had been forbidden to speak, kept calling her and insisting on details, which Ellen could not provide. Ellen said, "But I got the sense that, yes, she was trying to either cover herself or... I found that she always...seemed like she always wanted to be the center of everything. She felt like she either had to solve the problem or...for whatever reason, that is just my interpretation of what she was doing. But it just didn't stop."

The child was found unharmed and the search was over. Unfortunately, her principal kept making lists of matters that they needed to talk about and treating her in an adversarial way. Two years went by and Ellen was finally able to tell her that her methods were not helpful. She had to have the teachers' union representative present, to get things ironed out, but was ultimately successful. Now that she and her principal have a better working relationship, she says she would never leave.

Connie: "I hated the thought of coming in every day and having to deal with those kids." Connie loved her job and, like Ellen, thought she would never leave. However, in the past couple of years, she got some students who were quite different from the ones she was used to working with. "You know what?" she said. "I can tell you this. The first five or six years, I was excited every day. I loved coming and doing my job. The last two or three years, I have a few very difficult students. Very, very difficult. They're higher functioning. They come from very poor home lives which when you're thinking rationally, you know that this is where this is coming from...but when you're being hit in the face with it every day, I seriously thought that I was going to move on a couple of years ago." Connie is lucky to have a great team that can support her with these students and provide her a break when she needs one. The presence of a team of caring and responsive professionals is, as mentioned before, a necessary ingredient in a successful teacher's career.

Grace, however, who has been teaching for only four years, is fighting the cumulative effect of an extremely stressful job with challenging students, coupled with a supervisor who is not helpful and a team that is not supportive. The students, she says, are not the problem. Grace: "In terms of longevity, I don't think I would have the

emotional wherewithal to keep this up for that long.” Grace’s job is stressful, working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a day treatment center. She thinks she may have reached a point in her career in which she feels her emotional reserves are depleted. She told me that she did not see herself continuing in this teaching position for any length of time. When I asked her if she had other ambitions or aspirations, she replied, “At this point, I think I may continue in public schools for another couple of years, whether that’s here or somewhere else. In terms of longevity, I don’t think I would have the emotional wherewithal to keep this up for that long. Um, and again, it’s not because of the students. It’s really because of the stresses of the job around the administrative expectations. There’s the paperwork that needs to be done or the evaluations that need to be done or um an uninvested, disinterested supervisor, um the lack of a supervisor’s ability to provide support in the classroom or interoffice relationships, you know, coworker relationships—whatever it is—that has a much bigger impact on me than my kids in the classroom do.” Grace is considering continuing her education and teaching at the university level, but is not really interested in teaching in the field of education. Excessive administrative expectations have caused her to consider going into some other field for her advanced degree. Grace mentioned paperwork as being part of the onerous burden of the job and several others, such as Hannah, mention this too. The paperwork requirements of the job do not seem to match the time available for its completion, and trying to keep up with paperwork demands is another stressor in an already stressful job.

Brooke: “This is just not a job I will be able to do until I retire.” The word “stressful” seems to keep appearing in many of these teachers’ stories. Brooke, for

example, calls her job both stressful and depleting. She has a good team but there are still personality issues between her and her coworkers. She doesn't feel the job pays her enough to support her family as a single mother. Brooke finds working with her students emotionally draining. She explains that she has to "dodge furniture" when her students have behavioral outbursts and she wears out of hearing her students call her bad names all day. She is proud to say that she has never cried in front of a student, but this comes at a price. She must keep her feelings hidden and always maintain a strong and capable demeanor in front of the class. This year, she realized that it was not a job she could continue to do until retirement, so she enrolled in a program to get her special education director's license. Why did her administrators allow this teacher to get so discouraged and feel so abused? Were they aware that she was unhappy? Did they try to make her teaching life better? Actually, about half of the paraprofessionals and teachers at this particular facility leave each year. Brooke's supervisor, who has no background in special education, is not at all knowledgeable about the population of students with significant identifiable emotional disabilities (SIED) and will criticize Brooke's treatment of her students without understanding her students' behavior. Brooke must explain what she is doing and why. Trying to teach one's students and also to give one's supervisor a crash course in special education is quite a challenge, and Brooke has wearied of this situation.

Chris: "But I'm not sure that emotionally I can endure this for too much longer... I'm just not in a place in my life where I can be the rock for the kids, you know." Chris shares with Grace and Brooke the opinion that her job is one in which she must be strong even though the job is wearing down her physical and emotional reserves. She feels

exhausted by it. Because of her near certainty that she will have to leave her job, I discuss her story in depth in a following section.

Unfortunately for Hallie, she was very good at what she did. She has felt some burnout and tried to leave special education for general education but, as so many before her have found, school districts do not like to have good special educators leave to do general education teaching. She interviewed for five years, trying to get a job in general education as a kindergarten teacher. She said, “This particular district really kept their thumb on you and because I was really good at what I did, so they said, um, they kept me in special ed. and I really never had the opportunity to try.”

We have heard from a special education teacher who is very happy, several special educators who have at one time considered leaving the profession, and one teacher who is very certain she will leave her current job. Raven is part of a third category of teachers who like their jobs but still want something different. These teachers need new challenges and room to grow professionally.

Raven: “I see things how I would want them to be different.” Raven likes her job and thinks she would not want to leave special education for a job in general education. However, she also doesn’t see herself staying in her current job for an extended period of time. She says, “Um, no, I wouldn’t say that I would stay the entire next 20 years of whatever I have left. (laughs) But I, I would like the idea of knowing I could change when I wanted to. So I like the flexibility of that.” Unfortunately, the stories told by other participants seem to indicate that the ability to choose a new population or a new school is not usually available to teachers who are good at what they do. In the past, Raven wanted to be a special education administrator but is not entirely sure now. However, she

has many ideas about what she would change if she were in administration. Watching administrators who were not good communicators, were not knowledgeable about special education or who could not sustain a working relationship with staff members makes her sure she could take on a supervisory position and do well by keeping in mind a teacher's perspective. So for Raven, it is not a matter of criticizing her current bosses, but instead, seeing how she would want to improve things.

Phoebe has been battling bad supervisors for several years now. She was very frank in her answers. When I asked her if she would ever leave the profession, she thought not, then added, "But the thing that will take me out of education is the bullshit." I laughed. She went on, "Basically. To put it bluntly. That is what will make me leave. Or I'm at like a crossroads so I could go for leadership and try to make change that way or...because my original vision in life was—this is crazy—well, it's not crazy but I don't know if I still want to do it—was to open a charter school. Because for a year, I taught outdoor ed. on the beach in Oregon—it was awesome." I was impressed. She went on to describe the experiential learning model she hoped to base her school upon. It was an ambitious plan and she was proud of it.

The "bullshit" she spoke of was something she had experienced in this job quite a lot already. When she came to the school, she started the program for students with severe behavior problems, only to find, six months later, that the funding for the program had been cut. Phoebe did her best to work with the administration to restore these services, but as a result, she is now running two separate programs whose staff, except for her, has been eliminated. She is receiving only one paycheck for doing two separate jobs. She has no paraprofessionals to assist her. I asked how much support she was receiving

from her principal as she performed this strenuous work schedule. Not much, she told me. Her principal's first priority was not the students and certainly not the staff. This principal was only interested in the scores students earned on standardized tests. Phoebe had one student who was suicidal and in crisis, and the only comment the principal made was asking how she could pressure this student into doing better on his test scores. To Phoebe, this comment was absurd and revealed how little her principal cares for children with disabilities. Phoebe works three additional jobs beyond this dual day job because she doesn't make much money. She coaches two sports and teaches in a community college. Somehow, amazingly, she found the time to work on getting her national board certification. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards offers a rigorous and selective certification program for teachers. Those who earn national board certification represent the best of the best. When I last spoke to her, she had not yet heard if she had made it.

Kayla: "And that's where I realized I wasn't growing enough as an educator." Kayla loves her job but, at times, has considered leaving it because she feels she wasn't being challenged enough professionally. I asked her, "Okay, so ah, was there ever a time in your very long career that you thought, for one reason or another, 'You know, this is okay but I really would like to try something different.' Did that ever happen to you?" She replied, "It did. Ah, I did think of other types of careers outside of education but I don't think I ever strayed too far from education." I asked when she had felt these urges to leave. She said, "Well, I flirted with the idea, oh several times. And you think to yourself, 'well, why? What is it that makes you want to change?' And that's where I

realized I wasn't growing enough as an educator. So I took some classes or I was encouraged to look into another branch of education, and it was very exciting."

Now she is certain leaving teaching is not even a possibility. Kayla expressed that she valued the option to change assignments, student populations, ages and ability levels. She found her district willing to allow her to move from a reading specialist to working with a more challenging population.

Lily: "I never really felt like leaving. Um, I feel like I've grown to a point that right now in my personal life, I'm ready to take on something new." Lily enjoys her job and working with her students, but her program is set up with paraprofessionals who do the actual teaching while Lily has the duty of designing the learning tasks that the paras work on with the students. She is required mainly to supervise the paras and their work with students. Lily says this job design is not what she envisioned for herself when she became a special educator. She would rather work face to face with her students, which she calls "the fun part" of the job. She is thinking of leaving this job within the next couple of years for a job in which she could do the actual teaching.

All of these participants admit that the job takes huge reserves of emotional and mental stability, in order to deal with students whose needs are so great. Consider now Chris's story. I examine it in depth to show the way a career in special education can sometimes be so affirming to the students and yet so debilitating to the teacher.

The Story of One Woman's Career

Though I have been plucking single issues from each interview and putting them alongside each other to make points, I find that the individual interview is best in describing situations fully. To dissect and compare the stories seems to make each one an

interesting collection of facts. But to consider an individual story in its entirety reveals the events and emotions as a complete creation in which every previous action has affected the final outcome. A case study can be a powerful tool to illuminate how an individual special education teacher deals with challenging experiences over time. It also highlights the connection between agency and cultural context.

Chris has taught special education for five years. She is at the pivotal five-year point at which about half of special educators leave the field. This fact alone makes her story worth a close look. How does her view of the future compare to those who want to leave the field as well as those who have decided to stay? This kind of decision is not made with the flip of a coin. Whatever she ultimately decides to do, her decision is inexorably tied to her identity as a teacher. She grew up with her grandparents and said she had several family members with mental health issues. Because of her family experiences, she found herself interested in the field of mental health, “because when you’re young or a child, it’s, you want to help these people that you’re around every day or that you’re connected to but you don’t have the skill set to do that.” She said she had both empathy and sympathy for those with mental health issues.

After college, she got a job as a case manager in an alternative elementary school for children of lower socioeconomic status who had mental health issues. She loved her job. She was in the classroom with the special education teacher and the educational assistant, acting as a liaison between the school and the families. Unofficially, she wanted to expose these children to, in her words, “greater things.” Because,” she said, “again, like I grew up really poor. You know, grew up without and was exposed to a lot of things too early in my life and I wanted them to experience good things too and know that life is

not all about bad things and negative things...that there are good people out there.” She moved to another state and got a job working with geriatric patients with schizophrenia. She describes this work as being “a little too intense.” She moved to another state and, for seven years, did social work and taught at a private school for students with various disabilities such as learning disabilities, autism, ADHD and dyslexia. She also worked as a case manager at a domestic violence center, but when telling me about her jobs, she described herself at that time as “just a case manager.” “Don’t say ‘just a case manager,’” I said. “That’s a very tough job.” She said, “Yeah. But it’s so funny that you say that because I said something today, like I said, ‘I’m just a teacher. Let me get that’, and she said, ‘No, you’re not just a teacher.’ It’s so funny because you’re the second person that’s said that to me today so perhaps I should heed that comment.” Teachers do sometimes describe themselves in this very humble way, as “only a teacher.” Is it humility that makes them describe themselves this way? Or are they perhaps conscious that teaching is a profession that is not always well respected and so they are revealing a sense of apology rather than pride about the work they do?

At the domestic violence shelter, she worked to keep women out of abusive relationships, made sure they had food, clothing and shelter for themselves and their children and found them medical care. Unfortunately, many of the women would return to their abusers. Chris became discouraged. She looked back on all the work she had done so far with children, adults and the elderly, and began to wonder what, if anything, she had accomplished. She had worked so hard for these women, only to see them return to their abusers again and again. She began to feel she was working harder for them than they were working for themselves.

By this point, Chris had completed her Masters degree in special education. Her grandparents were gone. A six-year relationship had ended. She decided to visit a friend who had moved to Colorado even though she had no real life direction in mind. She said, “I wanted to come here and really soul search and kind of just be one with nature (laughs) as silly as that sounds...and feel the Earth’s vibrations. So that’s what I did, as scary as it was.” She saw a sign for a teaching job fair and decided to go, though she had no clothing with her that was suitable for a job interview. She filled out applications. One district looked at her credentials and experiences and pursued her, which she found very motivating. Since she was now quite alone in the world, she found the transition to Colorado frightening and exciting at the same time. That was five years ago. She now teaches in a day treatment center, which is a place for students with severe behavior problems. It is considered very restrictive on the continuum of a free and appropriate public education. Day treatment centers are usually housed in buildings separate from the general education public schools, and there are no opportunities for the students there to interact with general education peers. Physical restraint methods are used when students have behavioral outbursts. The doors to the classrooms and the building itself can be locked to prevent students leaving. Teaching in these facilities is considered to be extremely challenging. Chris works with high-school-aged males. She describes the work as very intense. “But I just work,” Chris said, “because this is such a difficult job and there are days that you leave and you cry and there’s days that you come in and before you get in the building, you cry because it’s so intense.” She goes on to describe her students: “These are kids that are like in gangs, that have actually killed people and never gotten caught, these are kids that, you know, beat people with guns. These are very

dangerous kids, you know?” She said that her students may have been sexually abused and all have mental health problems. She adds, “You know, like yesterday I was told that ‘I’m not going to hit you because I don’t hit women, but I’m going to choke your ass out.’ You know?”

In the midst of these very difficult daily scenarios, she has been expected to teach subjects even though she has no materials or books. Her supervisor expects her to teach as well, as devise the curriculum under which she will teach. Curriculum design and writing, in most districts, is a highly paid administrative job and sets out the subjects, scope and sequence of instruction, goals, objectives, and specified materials to be used. This is not something that teachers, especially those in challenging jobs like Chris has, are ever called upon to do. Chris objects strenuously to what she considers to be an outrageous demand. “And you want me to write curriculum?” she says. “Like you—I mean, really? But, you need some—like, there are people out there, they are paid to sit down and write curriculum. This is what they do. This can’t be my—this can’t be what I do when I’m trying to dodge desks and flying objects! I don’t have time to sit down and write curriculum.” She is in a doctoral program in education, an indication that she may be thinking of a career beyond the classroom, and confided her problem to her professor.

She reports that her professor was as outraged as she was. Chris said, “And I was telling my professor this and she said, ‘I really can’t—’ ...I mean, in one of my chats because I was in the blended hybrid class, she said, ‘I really have to be blatantly honest with you. I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.’ That you are writing curriculum and your administrator...at some point didn’t have a class that says, ‘This doesn’t work.’ But, you’re also dealing with an administrator that is approaching things from a power

and control perspective. And if you were to have this conversation with every single person in this building, without a shadow of a doubt, they would all say that she functions from a power and control perspective. And it's very unfortunate."

It is an exhausting job, and she is becoming very, very tired. Her early family experiences seem to return with the deep, wordless effect they had on her as a child. Chris said, "I wouldn't say that I have ever been desensitized. But...and I use that word very lightly...um...and I don't think that I will ever be desensitized. But I think that you, you have to separate. There has to be a healthy balance and in the beginning, although I worked in mental health, working in a day treatment setting was very...um...was very different because it really, it really aggravated my trauma so the shock value for me had gone up, you know, the slamming the doors and the jumpiness and the—my reaction, my you know fight-flight...And I, when I first started here, I became very depressed. Very, very, very severe because I was just like, this is the job I'm in and I have no one to depend on and I can't just leave, you know." She has found several ways to achieve balance in her life, such as therapy, yoga and running marathons. But even with these positive strategies in place, is it any wonder that sometimes, she allows herself to consider the possibility of working somewhere else, doing something that pays more and garners more respect? She is very aware of being on her own, with no family to turn to for help. She feels that the job she has now does not pay well enough for the danger she is in every day. And she is in debt. She says, "I think about it. I dream about like, you know, sometimes it would be really great, I think, working in corporate America, you know?... (laughs) Well, you know, it's...I have these little thoughts in my head—'Maybe if I interviewed for pharmaceutical sales,' because this job, for what you put up with on a

daily basis... I do think about like, 'Man, if I interviewed for a pharmaceutical sales job where I'd really be making a lot of money, paying back my student loans,' which would really be great, you know?... That in itself is pretty stressful, coming from a lower socioeconomical status, you don't have Mommy and Daddy to pay the bills—who say, "Hey, honey, let me pay for all those grad loans for you." The whole time we talked, Chris was never ready or able to tell me outright if she intended to stay in special education or go on to that dream job in corporate America. Perhaps when she completes her doctorate, she will consider a move. But she did spend a long time talking about her students and the progress they have made. "I've had a lot of success," Chris told me. "I've seen a lot of students succeed. And you know, and I always take a professional stance but so many of my students still stay in contact with me. You know? They want to check in, they want to come back, they want to see, you know, 'How are you doing, Miss (E)? How are you, Miss (P)?' They want you to know that they have succeeded and are doing well. And, you know, what keeps me coming back is when I have a parent that—I mean, this family is so traumatized or has been so traumatized—alcoholism and everything—you know, and a mother that's you know sitting there, it's like, 'My kid didn't do anything for 10 years. And then YOU became involved in his life and he suddenly started doing all of his work and he wanted to do better and he, you know, successfully transitioned back into a general setting...'. Her experiences with students have been gratifying. However, she adds, "But I'm not sure that emotionally I can endure this for too much longer." I asked if she could talk about that for a minute. She replied, "Um, I just think that when you as a...I'm just not in a place in my life where I can be the

rock for the kids, you know. Um...” I asked her, “And you feel you need to be?” She replied simply, “Yes.” How can anyone “be the rock” for these students, year after year?

Chris acknowledges that the job is rewarding, and she loves seeing her students progress and grow. Monetary rewards, she feels, are not sufficient for the job she is asked to do, with the danger she sometimes must face. This job exacts a terrible price, using up her emotional and physical reserves. Chris tells us of her early life in which she had traumatic experiences with family members who had mental health issues. These experiences became a factor that motivated her to take her current special education job, working with high school boys who have behavioral and emotional challenges. Why does the administrator seem oblivious to the obvious stressors this teacher endures? And what are Chris’s options, now that she is nearing the end of her ability to cope in this high stress environment? We heard from other participants in a previous section who felt they had reached a point at which they needed a change. Certainly, Chris finds herself at such a point. However, these teachers were not allowed to switch to teaching different, possibly less stressful student populations because of their expertise in handling special education students that others would not or could not serve. Chris, with only five years of service, is now at a dead end in her career, with no possibilities for more money in her paycheck or for less challenging students in her classroom. Will she stay? She does have one asset in her teaching career. She has powerful allies in the members of her team. She describes them as “just phenomenal” and as “living angels.” The turnover in her school is low so people have worked together for a long time and know each other well. But will her loyalty to the students and to her team be enough to keep her coming to work in this setting every day? She herself isn’t sure. I include Chris’s story in such detail to show

how difficult the jobs of these participants can be. It reminds us that statistics, such as how many teachers stay in special education, may not tell the whole story. Chris is, at least for the present, staying in teaching but is struggling with some of the physical, mental and emotional demands of the job.

What It Takes to Be a Special Education Teacher

Since half of my participants entered the field by chance, they may not have known much about the job when they began teaching. Those who entered the field intentionally also may have learned a lot since beginning their careers. Now that they are experienced and much more knowledgeable about the profession, I wanted to know from them what it takes to be a special education teacher. I did not ask this question directly, but asked instead what they would say to a young person seeking information about special education as a possible career choice.

If you listen to their answers closely, you will hear some very personal insights into how each participant approaches the job and what each considers essential qualities, competencies or skills to be able to do the job. Every participant mentioned the students. A love and respect for children seems to be a universal quality of the participants in this study and the most often mentioned quality needed for any prospective special education teacher.

I would have thought that a sense of humor would be a close second to a love and respect for children among these participants. But in fact, very few teachers mentioned it. This group of participants seemed to have rather serious advice for newcomers, having to do with classroom management skills, physical stamina or mental health of the teacher. A few, however, did mention humor as a necessary quality for a special education teacher

who hopes to stay a while in this career. Lissa, who seemed so delighted with her job that she laughed easily throughout the interview, said that in considering the state of mind of a new special education teacher, “humor is a really good thing.” Kayla, in talking about her students, said “So I guess I look at them and I consider myself to have a pretty good sense of humor. And that goes a very long way with these kids. To be able to laugh with them, and enjoy them. And they know if you like them or not. There’s no question about that.” Lily didn’t mention humor but showed that she has that quality when describing her silly attempts to get her students’ attention. Along with humor, Grace suggested that the new special education teacher must possess another important quality. She said “I think you have to have a great deal of empathy. You need to be able to show the students that you don’t just care about them but you understand them. And you understand their feelings, even when they’re difficult. Um, because that’s what helps them bridge the gap between a very extreme feeling which may be very inappropriate to learning a more appropriate alternative in their particular interactions.”

I asked Chris what qualities prospective special education teachers should have. She said she might ask them to look in the mirror because the job forces one to be very reflective and introspective. She urged them to be emotionally ready for the job and to be actively involved in taking care of themselves emotionally. The job, in Chris’s case, with students with emotional and behavioral problems, could bring out unresolved emotional issues from the teacher’s own past, so she urged new teachers to find someone they really trust so they could discuss these things. Grace also advised that new teachers must be emotionally healthy in order to work with kids who have needs in that area. “I would definitely let them know that it’s important for them to be emotionally ready and...I

would also encourage them to be proactive...because most of the children in here (a day treatment center) have been traumatized, as I was as a kid, and it's really, really important that you take care of yourself," Grace told me. Kayla also recommends that a person considering special education as a career do some deep soul-searching and research before committing to this difficult and demanding profession. She recommended that new teachers really ask themselves why they are choosing special education rather than teaching students without discernible disabilities. She thinks that trying to help "poor, unfortunate children" is a reason that won't stay with new teachers long. Special education students are not quite like the usual general education student, so the teacher must be able to "think outside the box," be independent and able to accept changes. Grace said that new teachers should not assume the job will be easy or that their rewards will come from their paychecks. She said the job does offer rewards, however. If you decide to become a special education teacher, she said, "you have to do it because you want to work with the kids. Ah, because, really, they are the only reward every day. Um, and there are rewards every day, even on the hard days, even on the hardest days. The rewards that you get are in the eyes of the kids. They're in the smiles of the kids. They're in those successes you see in the lives of the kids, whether those successes are in your classroom or you hear about them or you hear about them happening at home. That has to be your motivation. It's clearly not the money!" She laughed at that.

Lily had an answer ready when I asked her, "What does a special education teacher need?" She said, "Patience. You have to be able to repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat without getting crazy about, well, "I've repeated this 25 times already! You might have to repeat it 125 more. And you'd better be figuring out a different way to say

it. It's not easier than general education. I think some people might think it's easier because of the kids, you know, aren't smart but you have to be pretty creative to come up with ways to teach kids that don't get it the typical way. You have to be really creative."

It also doesn't hurt to be uninhibited enough to be a bit of a performer. Lily showed her sense of humor when she said, "I try anything to get a kid engaged." She sings and dances and acts very silly, all in an attempt to get kids to laugh and pay attention. Connie agreed that a special educator should have the traits of patience, flexibility and creativity. If a teaching strategy is not working with a student, the special education teacher must come up with alternative ways of teaching so that the student can learn. "Gosh... if this is not working, like you've got this program and if this is not working for this student, you've got to figure out how can I change this, how can I make this different, how can I make this more applicable to what this child needs and their way of learning?" Connie said. She added "Move on and figure out the way that it's going to work the best. I'm doing that constantly. Rethinking what I've done and how I've done it and what might be a better way." Raven also cites creativity as an important attribute of the prospective special educator, but she mentions another very important quality—the love of a challenge. She said "Well, I think that you kind of have to be able to kind of break the mold. There's no right way. There's no wrong way. I think that you have to know that at least in working with the kids." She said, since her students are so different, they each present her with different challenges, and enjoying a challenge is one of the important attributes a new special education teacher should bring to the job. Kayla and Raven both enjoy a challenge. The participants who spoke of challenge as a part of the job seemed to look at challenging situations in a different light than most people. For

instance, I asked Kayla, “And so, I guess I’m interested in people who enjoy difficult situations. Can you talk about that at all?”

Kayla replied, “Well, let’s not say ‘difficult situations.’ Let’s just say ‘situations that require a different kind of problem solving.’” The way she frames a problem as an opportunity for a solution keeps her perspective positive. Michael thinks a new teacher should know what can and cannot be controlled. He is slow to accept credit for his students’ progress, but does think anything that goes wrong is probably his fault. However, he reserves this particular advice for the teacher who has survived those critical first days of teaching and is ready to become reflective in his or her practice. He said, “You have to know what you can control and really, the only thing you can control is yourself. Modify the environment so you can have some influence but you cannot control the kids, you can’t control the parents. You can influence them but that is it. And don’t take any of it personally.” A brand-new teacher, Michael added, shouldn’t worry about anything except establishing some classroom management techniques in the new classroom. Though this subject is supposed to be covered while the new teacher is in college, it is rare to see a new teacher with a good grasp on how to control the class. Phoebe echoes Michael’s call for more training of prospective teachers in classroom management techniques. Sadly, some colleges do not require teachers to take a class in classroom management, and this often is the downfall of the new teacher. “It’s appalling to me,” Phoebe said, “that there’s no consistency that there are classroom management classes. It is appalling because I think that is the number one reason teachers leave. They do. They don’t have any classroom management skills, kids run all over them.” Note that the above list of important attributes of the prospective special education teacher does not

make mention of any of the more technical parts of the job, with the possible exception of classroom management techniques. These very focused concerns might include knowing the laws and regulations regarding the public education of students with disabilities, knowing how to write and follow an IEP, understanding the many disabling conditions one's students may have as well as how best to work with these students and so forth. Compared to the everyday mental, emotional and physical demands on the teacher, these technical aspects seem to be the relatively easy part of the job. The commodities of energy, imagination, enthusiasm, and the willingness to keep trying cannot be learned. These must come from a deeper place within the teacher than the rules and regulations are stored.

Keeping Special Education Teachers in their Jobs

“We bring people in, burn them out early, then bemoan the fact that we have this high turnover rate.” (Richard Mainzer from the Council for Exceptional Children quoted in Gersten et al., 2001, p. 563). “How can educational institutions support the teacher's inner life, and should they be expected to do so?” (Palmer, 1998, p. 6).

We have heard many stories from this group of participants, detailing things about their jobs that they find challenging, as well as things they feel would be helpful to them. Many issues that came up in the interviews were framed negatively—things they did not want to do but were required to do, or things that they needed to perform their jobs that they did not have, such as time and materials. From the phenomenological accounts of their problems, I have extrapolated the positive side—some things that most participants say would make their jobs less stressful, and would cause them to feel more effective, more fulfilled and more energized if they had them.

The four main factors that can be helpful in keeping special educators in their jobs include teaching one's preferred student population, supportive, invested and knowledgeable supervisors, adequate plan time and good teams.

Teaching One's Preferred Student Population

This is the one factor mentioned by all participants—the relationship they have with the particular group of students they serve. Teaching is, at its heart, a relationship between teacher and student, and it follows that when teachers are working with students with whom they feel capable and comfortable, the teaching and learning experience will be rewarding and positive. Conversely, when teachers are placed, without their consent, with students they have not been trained to work with, the job of teaching becomes more difficult and frustrating. Working with that favorite population, or being denied the opportunity to do so, may be the greatest deciding factor when special education teachers consider staying in or leaving the profession. It is interesting to note that this topic does not appear in the research literature regarding special education teacher attrition and retention. It may be a topic worthy of further inquiry. We have already heard from two teachers on this topic: Michael, who left a job he loved only to return to a placement with students who were much more challenging to work with, and Hannah, who came from another state with a lot of experience in working with students with severe needs, and yet was placed in a job teaching reading to students with mild disabilities. For Michael, the change worked out and he eventually became comfortable with his new students. He said “I like the upper middle/high school. It just kind of fits my style better. I remember when I did elementary and I'd see a little first grader. I'd just kind of, ‘Hi!’ They're looking up at me and I'm six and a half feet tall. ‘Mwah!’ (imitation of a kid crying). Not exactly the

image I want to portray.” He told me that even though the test scores may not prove it, he believes he is doing a good job and helping his students. For that reason, he can see himself continuing in his present job for at least the next 10 years. He said, “I do believe that I am good at what I do. And honestly, the test scores, the CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program) scores won’t prove it to you but the reduction in referrals, less days of suspension, the ability to bond with the kids so they can share with you things that are happening to them and you can process it and help them out, yeah, I see that I do better work there with them than I would with a class of 30 tenth graders.” Hannah had not made the adjustment to her new placement when I spoke with her. She came to Colorado from out of state and accepted a job like the one she was used to doing, teaching students with severe disabilities. However, she was surprised to find that the job she accepted was not the same as the job she was assigned. She was placed with students with mild disabilities as a reading teacher. She longs to return to teaching the students she feels she was meant to serve. She said “I’ve had years of training, working with an emotionally disabled population, from birth, actually, through adult. And because I feel, psychologically, maybe, that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing, I just feel more confident. I feel I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing.” She had decided to quit her current position as a reading instructor to find a job working with students with significant support needs. Phoebe discovered her favorite population at the same time as her first job. Phoebe had been traveling outside of the country after college in order to give herself some life experience that she could share with students someday. The only place hiring when she returned in October was a day treatment center. Phoebe knew it was the place for her when she walked in the door. “And so,” she said, “I’ll never forget,

there was this girl getting restrained because that's what happens on a minute-to-minute basis at these schools and she was spitting and swearing on the floor and I thought, yeah, I want to work here! (laughs) And that's how I got into special ed. and I have never left since." Phoebe's strength seems to be in dealing with students in very stressful situations. Kayla also seems to find that population of special education students stimulating. She originally worked as a reading teacher, which is considered a special education teaching job, but was unhappy in that role. Kayla told me, "I'm presently involved with a program that deals with significantly, emotionally disturbed children who are en route to day treatment facilities, hospitals, or maybe they're coming out, or, in the best of circumstances, we're the top intervention before being considered for these places. The ages are 11 to 17—or grades six through twelve." She was offered this job and she accepted the offer without knowing much about the population of students she would be serving. "It was, um, I had absolutely no training with this population," she said. "I had all, I had training, a lot of training in reading. And I was incredibly bored at this school I'd been at. And one of the directors at the program where I am said, 'Well, I happen to have an opportunity to teach reading but it's in a very difficult situation with difficult kids.' I said, 'Well, I can handle difficult kids. I can't handle boredom.' And it was great. And I've been here, what, seven years now?" Lissa also knew little about them when she accepted her job. However, she now feels as though she has been placed with her ideal student population—the very youngest of special education students. I asked her how she deals with the slow and incremental levels of progress common in many special education students and she corrected me right away. "It's not that way with the young ones," she said. "They're just, you know, they're just going to grow anyway. And you—

it's surprising, the kind of progress—! You just go, 'Oh, my gosh, I can't believe I'm seeing this kid who couldn't speak at all at the beginning of the year and now is speaking in three and four word utterances!'" This satisfaction of seeing student progress is one of the great motivators for special education teachers. Yet there appears to be a "right" group of students for each teacher's temperament and skills. Some, like Aida and Lissa, seemed to be matched from the beginning with the students they feel they were born to serve. However, the ones who were not so lucky do seem to feel that they need to make a change.

So it would appear that these participants indicate a desire to stay in their jobs when allowed to work with students with whom they feel most comfortable. The inability to work with the students that the teacher feels most suited to serve is, among these participants, associated with a strong urge to leave.

Supportive, Invested and Knowledgeable Supervisors

"A good boss can make a difficult job bearable and a bad one can make otherwise good work a nightmare" (Hodson, 2001, p. 83).

The majority of participants in this study mentioned problems with supervisors. Judging from the amount of and variety in comments regarding bad supervisors, the lack of supportive, invested and knowledgeable supervisors is undoubtedly an issue of very high priority. Lily and Aida mentioned that they had good supervisors, but in Aida's case, that person left and was replaced by a principal who was not so responsive, would not offer help and was angry when she asked others in the district for the help he would not provide. Other participants mention many supervisors who are less than helpful. Though

they wanted responsive and knowledgeable supervisors in order to perform their jobs optimally, the supervisors they were currently dealing with had many flaws.

Supervisors had poor communication skills, or did not communicate with teachers at all (Raven). They were unresponsive and unhelpful (Aida). They were “limited in their scope”—good at some things yet only offering help erratically, or they lacked the big picture when offering solutions (Raven). They often came from a power and control perspective, instead of working with the teacher to achieve common goals (Raven, Aida, Ellen, Hallie). Supervisors had no real understanding of the special educator’s job or had no background in special education (Chris, Michael). Some supervisors required the teacher to perform duties outside the teacher’s normal job description, i.e., writing curriculum or requiring attendance at excessive numbers of meetings (Chris, Hannah). They expected instruction for students and held teachers accountable for this instruction despite a lack of the necessary books and supplies (Grace, Chris). Grace, describing the day treatment center where she works, says, “I think for us, because the nature of our program is kind of an extension of the schools but not actually being a school by itself, we have very limited materials and resources for teaching, so within our building, that does create quite a bit of stress when we’re held accountable for science and social studies teaching but we have no materials.” She adds, “As a teacher, as a professional, I do the best with what I have. My obligation is to my students and doing the best for them. They are served as well as I could possibly provide. That being said, when my hands are tied by the resources available to me, I feel like I can only do my job so well. And that creates a lot of stress in me, especially when I am held accountable by my administrator or my supervisor for providing instruction or content for which I have no materials and

no materials have been ordered or received.” Grace said the effect of this situation is an erosion of her own self-confidence. “Sometimes,” Grace said, “it comes out very much in my own personal emotion with my, ah, worries about my ability to feel able to do my job, my ability to feel like I could be evaluated as proficient at my job when I’m being evaluated on contact or delivery which I have no ability to present to my students.” Even though these things are beyond her control, Grace feels she will be blamed for instruction that is not happening due to supervisor decisions.

And there were still more supervisory issues that participants cited as things that made their jobs more challenging or distracted them from performing their jobs. They were concerned about supervisors who focused their highest priorities on standardized test scores rather than on the more urgent needs of the students (Michael, Phoebe) or who were unable to provide common sense, down to earth solutions (Lily). Several complained of supervisors who did not allow sufficient time to get paperwork completed (Michael, Grace, Hannah). Those who assigned teachers to jobs with groups of students with whom the teachers are not experienced or students the teachers would prefer not to work with, without seeking any input from the teachers first were not viewed as good leaders (Hannah, Aida). Some complained of supervisors who did not spend any time in the classroom with the students—preferring to rule from “on high” (Aida, Grace). One participant said she did not appreciate supervisors who demonstrated a lack of trust in the teacher and were not able to inspire trust from the teacher (Grace).

Grace spoke of a mistrust of her supervisor and gave the following example. “We were told this year that we received finances for curriculum,” she told me. “We had been told that curriculum would be ordered. Here it is, what? February? February, six months into

the school year, and nothing has been received. So it seems like a lot of empty promises which kind of exacerbates the problem.”

At times, a supervisor’s decision can have unintended consequences. Placing a student with low cognitive abilities into a program housing students with challenging emotional and behavioral disabilities, as happened in Grace’s classroom, did not cause the students with challenging behaviors to model the behavior of the student who had no such problems. Instead, the student with low cognitive abilities and appropriate social skills began to copy the behaviors of those in the class who acted out. Now, the student has picked up another disabling condition, that of poor social skills and coping strategies, rather than being helped. Unfortunately, the administrator who made this decision does not seem to see a problem with this situation, perhaps because he rarely visits the classroom. In each case, the lack of help or the interference a bad supervisor provides increased the stress and frustration level for the teacher—some to the point that they considered leaving the field or at least the district. However, one commonly-listed characteristic of a bad supervisor, not spending any time in the classroom, was also mentioned as a possibly good thing. A supervisor who has no background in special education and yet enjoys micromanaging the teacher is less able to cause harm from a distance.

To summarize, the participants all spoke of wanting good supervisors, but unfortunately, most experienced first-hand supervisors who caused more problems than they had solved. Still, in spite of these barriers to performing the special education teaching job, these participants were still in their jobs, doing the best that they could for their students.

Plan Time and “Other Related Duties”

There is a long tradition in teaching that unofficially requires teachers to work off the clock in order to complete all of their assigned duties. This situation is particularly onerous among special education teachers as they struggle to keep the documentation of each student’s progress up to date, write IEPs for each student, serve as the voice of special education on various committees and still make themselves available for crisis intervention during their allotted plan time. The participants who mentioned this recounted situations that were burdensome, not the sufficient time and realistic paperwork requirements that would prefer if they were to stay in their jobs.

Grace officially gets 35 minutes a day of plan time, but if, during that time, a student is in crisis, she must go support that student and other staff members instead. It is rare, she says, for a teacher to get the full allotment of plan time or even time away from students when the teacher can eat lunch. There is no provision for making up any lost plan or lunch time. Once it is over, it’s gone. But Grace is still responsible for coming up with curricular materials since none have been provided to her. It bothers her that she must spend her own time devising learning activities without books or materials, and is doubly worried that her teaching will be evaluated by supervisors who require her to teach subjects for which they have provided no materials. Hannah says her job is “highly stressful” and “very difficult” due to the many requirements of her job that go beyond teaching. “Not only do you have the academic portion,” she says. “You also have the paperwork to do, parent meetings after school.” There are many roles a special educator must accept beyond being the one who teaches the child to read. Hannah says she is a teacher but also a mother, a health professional, a counselor and a therapist, to name a

few. It is the special education teacher who must monitor whether a child comes to school wearing appropriate clothing or whether a student has been fed and bathed. Without basics like food and clothing and being healthy, students have trouble learning or attending to lessons. Hannah must be sure her students have what they need so that she can teach them effectively. She has no paraprofessionals to help her, so she often eats lunch while working on her paperwork. She finds herself giving up plan time and lunchtime quite often. Her team is currently made up of a person on maternity leave and several part-time people, who are filling in. This often results in things not getting done on time. Not having enough time was one of her main frustrations because Hannah is a person who takes deadlines very seriously. She doesn't do well when things cannot be accomplished in a timely fashion. She is required to serve on several committees because each committee needs a special education member. She attends four committee meetings a week after school, and sometimes, before school, while her general education colleagues attend only one. That leaves her with only her personal, unpaid time in which to complete her voluminous paperwork requirements. Connie hates paperwork because it takes away the time she has for working with her students. She struggles to get it done on time. Though she has never said, "That's it! It's too much! I'm leaving!" she has thought that if she had even one more thing to do, she would leave. Lily agrees and said she has considered leaving within the next few years because her job has become more involved with paperwork and supervising her paras and less about teaching. "There's a lot of frustrations and, and things with the rule changes and the laws over the past few years that makes sometimes you want to pull your hair out because you're not teaching as much as you'd like to teach. You're spending more time doing paperwork," she said.

Phoebe volunteered to take on another full time teaching assignment in addition to her full time job of teaching, since that program had lost its funding. However, Phoebe felt it was important to extend the program for the students even if it meant she would need to work at least one extra hour a day to complete it. Since she is volunteering her services, it seems unlikely that her district will see the need to fund it in the future. Phoebe is extraordinary in her willingness to accept so much extra work for the sake of her students, especially when one considers that she also works two other jobs, and somehow found time to complete her National Board Certification. Such is the depth of commitment of this participant. Can some of the paperwork burden be removed from her plate, since she is going above and beyond the call of duty of the special education teacher and doing so much on behalf of her students? Unfortunately, her school system seems to have no vehicle for rewarding her, supporting her and making her job(s) a little more possible.

Good Teams

The theme of good teams needs some explanation before I discuss the experiences of the participants in this regard. Special education teams are made up of various individuals, depending upon the program, but generally, the term “special education team” is understood to mean those individuals available to help on a day-to-day or minute-to-minute basis in the classroom, rather than referring to the special education administration staff. Members of the team may include paraprofessionals who work with students directly, speech and language pathologists, the school psychologist, the special education teacher, the school nurse, and other special education teachers, if any happen to teach in the same building. In a facility such as a day treatment center, all staff in the

building except for clerical and custodial staff members are considered to be special education staff. There may be itinerant music or art teachers that visit a restrictive facility in order to conduct classes, but these would typically be the only general education teachers on the premises.

A public school, depending upon its size, has one or more special education classrooms, usually designed to serve students with severe and profound disabilities. In that classroom is usually one special education teacher and, depending upon the needs of the students, there are one or more paraprofessional staff persons assigned there. Not all special education students are served in a self-contained classroom. Some are scheduled to work with special education teachers in small groups once or more a week, or the special education teacher may assist them in their general education classrooms. The special education teachers serving students with mild, rather than severe, disabilities may also be required to travel to several schools each week, serving those on their caseloads. Though these students, such as those with learning disabilities, are referred to as students with mild disabling conditions, they usually have a great deal of difficulty learning to read, for example. “Empirical evidence accumulated over the past two decades indicates that many students with LD experience academic difficulty, even in general education classrooms fortified responsibly to support their success” (Crockett, 2004, p. 193).

Paraprofessionals, or paras or parapros, as they are sometimes called, can do a wide range of duties and are tremendously helpful in creating a quality program for the students. A para’s duties can include performing nursing procedures such as giving tube feedings to students who cannot eat by mouth, supervising students as they go from class to class each day and giving students help with their lessons. The teacher’s relationship to

team members in general is as an equal member of the team. However, there is sometimes a blurry line between teachers and the paraprofessionals. In some schools, the paras work under the unofficial supervision of the special education teacher in the classroom, though the teacher is not technically the supervisor of the paras. In the school in which I work, I am the teacher but I am never asked for input when the paras who work in my room are evaluated at the end of the year. This seems to me to be a problem since my supervisor rarely visits my classroom or seeks my input on any decisions. In other schools, like Connie's, the paras are treated as equal members of the team and they interact socially with members of the team outside of work. However, this sometimes can lead to a situation in which paras do not feel they need to take direction from the special education teacher and, as Connie says, "advantages are taken." They feel they can slack off a little bit because you do have that other relationship. So that makes it difficult," she said. "It makes it hard when you have to say, "This is what I see happening and this is what I need to happen."” Despite these occasional difficulties, most participants acknowledge that they rely heavily on the members of their teams to provide physical and sometimes emotional support. Ellen says she holds members of her team “in the highest regard” because of the work they do to help her educate her students. Brooke says her team allows her to provide a therapeutic approach toward the whole child—the kind of help that isn't available to students in the general education system. She admits that her team sometimes has personality issues between the members, but even so, she thinks her team is a good one. Chris had the very highest praise for the members of her team. No participant, whether they had good team support or not, said that special education teaching was something that the teacher could do all alone. Those who did not have good

team support wished that they had and those who did were very thankful for it. Looking back over the words of these participants, it becomes obvious that they are extremely dedicated to their students, have many obstacles in their attempts to serve these students well and have strong opinions about what would make their jobs less stressful. These participants have so far found ways to deal with the many demands upon them and have continued doing excellent work with their students.

However, the problems confronting them are real. A piecemeal attack on one or two aspects of the problem will be unlikely to fix special education. In order to keep teachers in these jobs, school districts and governments will need to take a hard look at the myriad of problems special educators are reporting. “A holistic view of special educators’ work conditions is needed to sustain special educators’ commitment to their work and to make it possible for teachers to use their expertise” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 371).

Why Do They Stay? Revealing Hidden Leadership

This final question of why these teachers stay brings us to the heart of what it means to be a special educator. As we have heard in a previous section in which participants talk about their students, these participants stay in their jobs in part because they have chosen to take responsibility for the growth and wellbeing of their students, something I would call leadership. It is only occasionally that they describe what they are doing as leadership. More often than not, they are leaders without knowing that they are.

For example, Connie was nonplussed by the question, “How would you describe good leadership?” She confessed that she really didn’t spend much time thinking about her role that way. However, she was able to describe a fairly delicate balancing act of

leadership she was performing with her paraprofessionals, in which she treated them as equal members of the team but still needed to direct their activities as a boss would do. It was not the leadership role but the term leadership that made her uncomfortable. She had never been encouraged to think of herself in that way.

Several participants had trouble with the question, “What is leadership?” When Ellen was asked, “What does leadership mean to you?” she answered, “It means... showing us how to do... showing us how to be able to complete our responsibilities in the most effective way.” In other words, leadership was something that other people with formal leadership titles did. She, as a recipient of leadership, was told what to do. I asked Ellen, “Do you consider yourself to be a leader?” “I think I see myself as a leader of my paraeducators,” she replied. “I mean, their hearts, they’re just the biggest hearted ladies you could ever meet. And they’re very effective at what they do. And I see myself as providing them with the updated information they need to do the best job they can. I’m a sounding board for them.” Ellen and many others echoed the same idea when the question of leadership was first posed to them—leadership was not something that they were involved with doing. When asked about how they demonstrated leadership, several offered the example of being a leader of the people who worked under their supervision, the paraprofessionals. For several participants, the concept of leadership involved someone with power over others giving direction to underlings. Some participants, like Aida, really didn’t find the subject of leadership at all relevant to their situations. She admitted, “I am really not one to want to be a leader....I—you know, if there’s a group of people that are asked to volunteer for a certain board or committee, I’m pretty much going to say, ‘okay, let ‘em do it or whatever. Whatever they decide, I’ll do it.’” Aida had

trouble with one principal who would not respond to her requests for additional help with her large caseload. She developed the idea that she was pretty much on her own when trying to meet the needs of her students. “Well, all I know is, when I go into my classroom, nothing outside those doors matters. What matters is me with my students, giving them what they need,” she said. Leadership to her meant someone outside those doors, possibly someone with a formal title of leadership, who unfortunately could not be counted upon to help her achieve what she needed to achieve with her students.

Sometimes, a teacher is in a position in which the idea of demonstrating leadership is overshadowed by the decisions that administrators have made regarding the teacher’s job. Hannah, who was hired for one job but placed into another job, is such a teacher. When asked about leadership, her mind turned to her supervisors who made decisions about her employment without consulting her. She saw this as an ethical issue and did not feel she could work for leaders she could not trust. Hannah was obviously quite unhappy with her teaching situation and did not feel she could perform leadership activities when she was forced into a situation she did not choose for herself. But what of teachers who are happy with their teaching assignments? Raven, who likes her job, feels she has much to offer students and teachers in her building, and she also serves as a leader outside of school. Since most general education teachers take very little, if any, coursework in special education, Raven feels she can help them adapt work for students that are having a difficult time. She does this casually, helping fellow teachers brainstorm and suggesting things they might try. Raven thinks her knowledge base from her training and her experience can help build the skills of her colleagues. Outside of school, she takes on the role of advocate for former students and their families. Because of her

students' disabilities, she finds she forms very close bonds with the families and those close associations don't have to end when the children move on to other schools. And even further from school, Raven has gone to the Dominican Republic and worked in schools and orphanages there. "I think, ultimately, I get more from doing some of those outside things almost more than I do from being a teacher," she said. "So, I love being able to apply my skills more outside than just for a paycheck." Raven also talked about leadership when teachers deal with supervisors or administrators. She said the administrators are busy and always looking for solutions to their problems, rather than trying to solve a teacher's problems. An administrator with a problem is an excellent leadership opportunity for a teacher. "You make your job easier if you're good at seizing those opportunities and working with those people," Raven said. The way to do that? "Communication," she said. "Absolutely. Being able to listen, address the problem and do it in a timely fashion because if you can't do any of those things, they're going to shut their door on you...and be done with you. They need a solution. They need it quickly. They need it easily, you know, and you need to be able to not only address that but do it in a way that's going to help the child and you know, go on. They need something easy, something that's not going to stress them out so badly. But something that's going to, that's proven to work. And again, it's figuring out the problem. I love to figure out the problem," she adds. Raven's take on leadership appears not to be bound by issues of formal or even informal power. Her leadership role appears to be in finding solutions, filling a need and going outside of her job description to accomplish her goals.

Another participant, Michael, described experiences from his childhood in which he had a leadership role in scouting. He was told by some of the adults involved with his

Boy Scout troop that he was a natural leader. He thinks that may have had something to do with his choice of teaching as a career and says he is a leader of the kids in his class. “I think teachers in general have a leadership role, moralistically,” he said. He used as an example the fact that he smokes but said he would never allow his students to know that he does. He also demonstrates for his students a love of learning and devises his own curriculum to teach new subjects such as history and journalism. Michael was critical of administrators who, he said, tend to think of special education students as an afterthought, after other students have been provided for. Administrative leaders seem to understand nothing of his students and their needs, not even the fact that students with disabilities are governed by a series of federal laws. As it stands, many schools are so intent on raising the CSAP scores that students with disabilities, who sometimes cannot take that test, or who sometimes do poorly on the test, are thought to be peripheral to the main action of the school, namely, raising test scores. Michael thought that if he were in charge, he would prove that his students could possibly benefit the school with their CSAP scores. “Are they really going to help out your CSAP scores?” he asked. “You know what? If you program for it, yeah, they can.” However, that would require his students to have texts and other curricular materials that are not always available to them. But Michael is designing curriculum for subjects he will teach. His advocacy for his students is certainly an example of leadership.

You may remember the part of Hallie’s story in which she wanted very much to leave special education in order to be a general education kindergarten teacher. She had experience with general education kindergarten teaching and she interviewed for five years, unsuccessfully, before she realized her administrators were not about to let her

leave her special education teaching job. She was too good at it and she surmised that administrators were not anxious to try to replace her with someone new and inexperienced. Instead of becoming disinterested in doing anything beyond the basic requirements of her job, Hallie became interested in teaching adults about her work. She has lately been given opportunities to talk to college students who are studying special education. With 31 years of service, Hallie has a wide range of knowledge and experience. She described how good it felt to be asked to do the presentation and to be treated as an expert in her field. She said it was “one of the first times I’ve been, I feel, really honored for being in this profession as long as I have.” She will certainly accept any future opportunities to do further presentations. Hallie conducted trainings for paraprofessionals and has done presentations as part of Special Olympics, but she never had such an opportunity in this school district before. Looking forward to retirement, Hallie is also interested in writing books about her experiences—books for parents, other special educators and for children with disabilities. “You know, for a student to understand his disability so he could succeed, or the parents, how to handle having these students at home with a school perspective, and how to help educators to help these kids. That’s what I have my eye on,” she said. Leadership from Hallie’s point of view appears to be one of sharing her knowledge with others, inside and outside of school. However, I must add that the term leadership in this context is one that I have imposed on Hallie’s story and not one that she would use.

We have heard some of the ways these participants use the word “leadership” and we have discussed their attitudes toward the concept of leading. What is much more telling is an examination of their descriptions of their jobs and their feelings about them.

Here, leadership speaks through their actions though they never describe what they're doing as leadership. For example, Lily, who works with students with severe physical and cognitive disabilities, came to her current job 11 years ago. At that time, her classroom would have a new teacher every three or four years.

“It was like a revolving door and they never really had anything in place here,” she said. “So when I got here, I got to build it up...” Lily built the program, stayed with it, and lets her students know how much she enjoys being their teacher. There have been tough times. Once, she was confronted and threatened by a parent who was having trouble grasping the implications of her son's disability. “You know,” Lily said, “by this time, by middle school, most of the parents are coming to grips with figuring out how disabled their kids are. There are still some of them who hold out very high hopes about that—they'll—We still get asked the question, ‘Are they going to grow out of it?’ ‘Are they going to get better?’ ‘When will they start to read?’—and you really have to give it to them straight without being brutal.” When it becomes apparent that the child's disabilities are permanent, teachers can bear the brunt of the anger, denial and sorrow those parents feel. But dealing with parents' fears is an important part of her job. She assures parents that their child will still learn, will still progress and will lead a productive adult life, even though the child may always require some assistance. Lily says her job has her spending lots of time in the bathroom, assisting students with diapering and toileting—the part of the job that many outside the world of special education seem to find most abhorrent. It's a very physically demanding job, lifting and assisting students of middle school age, so Lily goes home feeling pretty tired every day. Some of her students are nonverbal and most are not reading or writing, so she cannot use traditional methods

to teach them or to document progress. Her paperwork burden is so great, she must delegate most of her teaching activities to her paraprofessionals. However, in this job that few new teaching job applicants would find desirable, Lily has found a true vocation. She says of her work, “Yes, it’s been fun. It’s been really fun. I laugh every day. Now I laugh every day. The kids are great. The people I work with are great. I have a lot of support here.” Lily demonstrates leadership here on many levels, serving as a leader for her students and instilling in them a sense of pride and self-worth, no matter their challenging conditions. She shows parents how to work with their children and how to accept their differences. Laughter is a source of energy to her as she works with her staff and her students. It is a kind of very basic language that tells everyone, “We’re doing good work here and we’re having fun.” She demonstrates to others that no task involving these kids is too menial.

As a leader, she never asks staff to do tasks that she herself won’t do. Though she doesn’t think of herself as a leader, she is leading by setting the example of how students with disabilities should be respected and served. Ellen, whom we discussed earlier, considered herself a leader only when it came to the paraprofessional staff members who worked in her classroom. Though she did not use the term, “leadership,” to describe the job that she and her colleagues were doing, she did describe a certain outlook she and her team have together. “What do we have in common?” she said. “We want kids to... We don’t give up on kids. We want them to do their best. We see something in each of the kids and try to convince them that yes, they have what it takes to be who they want to be.” “So you feel that there is no student who is unreachable,” I said.” No. I do not,” she told me. Ellen’s attitude toward her students shows an admirable level of teacher

efficacy. Research shows that “teachers’ beliefs concerning their instructional efficacy predicts students’ levels of academic achievement over the course of the academic year, regardless of their entering ability” (Bandura, 1995, p. 20). Ellen’s conviction that there is no unreachable student bodes very well for her students. Ellen, like Lily, is demonstrating leadership to her team, to her school, her administrators and to the families of the children by her conviction that she can help each and every student. However, like Lily, she attributes real leadership to her superiors and describes for herself a limited leadership role with her paraprofessional staff. Her unofficial leadership role extends to that staff and empowers them to lead as well, in their attitudes and their advocacy for the students with disabilities that they are serving. These educators perform their teaching jobs guided by a vision of success. They take into account the whole child at whatever level that child is functioning, and they help that child achieve. This idea that progress is possible, no matter how challenging the child’s disabilities may be, makes a great impact on the life of that child and his family. This certainty of success is important to the special educator as well, and no doubt contributes to the teacher’s tenacity in the job. The delicate balance that Lily has described, in treating her paraprofessional staff as equal to herself and yet directing their activities is one of *primus*, a first among equals (Greenleaf, 1997). They are all equal members of the team, with Lily serving as the leader among them. She makes decisions about staffing and scheduling and monitors the work her paraprofessionals do with the students. She builds morale, listens to concerns and basically performs a leadership role while continuing to do the work with the other members of her staff. She describes how difficult this role can be but has not yet come to label it a leadership role.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

In this chapter, I discuss the findings, reflect upon the implications, review the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for practice.

In Chapter 4, we have seen that all but one of the participants has considered, or is considering, leaving special education. As the job is currently designed, it seems that considering leaving is more than just the result of a single bad day. They may not act upon the urge to leave, but the many stressors of their jobs certainly seem to cause them to consider leaving. Based on the group of participants I interviewed, I now believe that the thought of leaving special education seems to be part of the job as it is currently configured. I did not expect to find that this ambivalence about their work might be systemic. Quite the contrary, I was searching for reasons that they stay.

The focus of this research began with the question, “Why do some special educators stay beyond the five year mark when about half of them leave?” At the end of the study, the question revealed as much about staying in the job as it did about leadership, as these two issues are inextricably linked.

What does this say about their commitment and about leadership?

Meyer and Allen (1984) initially proposed that a distinction be made between *affective* and *continuance* commitment, with affective commitment denoting an emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization and continuance commitment denoting the perceived costs associated with leaving the organization. Allen and Meyer (1990) later suggested a third distinguishable component of commitment, *normative* commitment, which reflects a perceived obligation to remain in the organization (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002).

The work on commitment theory done over several decades by Meyer and Allen (1984) and others has always included the anchor of the *organization* to represent that to which an employee is committed. For various reasons, a person is committed, or not committed, to the organization. In this study, I did not find that the participants were loyal or committed to a particular school or school district. They were, instead, dedicated and committed to students in their classes. There was a personal bond between these teachers and their students that transcended the loyalty to the organization printed on their paychecks. Where once, teachers could be more or less guaranteed to work in a particular school, teaching a specific group of students for their entire careers, now, special educators find themselves being placed, without any discussion, in different schools, working with any number of groups of students. Rather than seeing themselves as interchangeable, as generalists, the teachers in this study appear to view themselves as specialists, dedicated to working with a certain group of students with whom they have experience and with whom they feel capable and comfortable. This seems to me to be a new facet of commitment theory that might be further researched profitably.

My participants unanimously described their relationship to their students as their primary reason for staying in their jobs. I didn't have to talk to any one of them for long to realize that most of the participants were not very happy with all aspects of their jobs. But they stay because of their extraordinary attachment to their students. Even if they are serving students who have behavioral or emotional challenges, or students who are affected by severe physical or mental problems, these teachers have found fulfillment in getting to know their students and taking steps to help them. It seems to me that the very essence of their dedication is about leadership. In my review of the literature, I have

found references to teacher leadership but have never encountered the word “leadership” to describe the special bond between special education teachers and their students with very challenging conditions.

What is this leadership about? It is partly about empathy with the students and giving under trying circumstances. In examining the stories the participants have told me, I have found themes emerging from their words, such as putting in one’s own time and money to accomplish the job, but having no opportunity to give input on decisions and receiving no respect nor understanding of what they did daily. Some of these experiences are quite familiar to me, as a special educator. I find myself returning to the time before I began this study, when the idea came to me to do research about the work I was doing. I taught in Ohio then, and my colleagues and I would sit together, eating lunch while monitoring our high school students who sat across the cafeteria from us. Our school was located within an office building and we ate lunch in the public cafeteria there. Naturally, we were on duty, watching students, during our off duty time. We joked about leaving the building and having lunch together at a restaurant one day. After all, don’t many working professionals do this? I suppose we could have done that for we officially weren’t being paid and so were not on duty during our lunch time, but there was not a single one of us who would dream of risking students’ safety to make a point. The unwritten expectation was that we would work during lunch, before and after school and at home to make sure the students were safe and their educational program was appropriate and ready every day. We were working but we did not feel we were being treated as professionals. Like my fellow special education teachers, I wondered why I had worked so hard to earn a Masters degree and yet I earned less money than people I knew who had entered other

professional fields with less education than I. Why were we asked to do things we felt other professionals in other fields would never be asked to do? Why was it expected of us that we would donate time, materials—anything it took to make sure our students had the best education we could give them? Often, we would give our students winter coats or shoes or clothes they could wear to job interviews. Whatever they needed, we made sure they had. Unfortunately, we were experiencing a paradox noted in research in which teachers' commitment and investment leads to ever-greater demands for commitment and investment (Day, Kington, Stobart, Sammons, 2006). Increasing responsibilities were put upon us as soon as we found a way to cope with the existing demands, and this perpetual struggle left us dissatisfied with our jobs as designed.

What I am describing is so much more than the right of colleagues to have lunch together. We were trying, in every aspect of our jobs, to perform not just well, but excellently. Our supervisors may not have understood the job we were trying to do. However, they seemed to know very well the kind of people we were. Our priorities were centered on our students and the good we might accomplish in working with them. Though material rewards were also important to us and we might have welcomed some personal recognition for the work we were doing, we never made our needs our first priority. I know I speak for the majority of my Ohio coworkers when I say that our first priority was always the needs of our students.

Though my fellow teachers and I had not heard of Robert Greenleaf at the time, nor did we know the term “servant leadership” (Greenleaf, 1977), we were practicing servant leadership every day. School districts may not imagine special educators in leadership roles, and this is reflected well in the self-perceptions of special education

teachers. As the findings show, most of the participants in this study have no idea that the many sacrifices they make, the many new ideas that they generate, and the many hours they put in that they are not paid for, all qualify them as leaders. Such a realization could lead to teachers demanding a voice in the way their jobs are designed or the way their students are served.

Although the findings do not suggest this directly, it seems likely that the system of special education in many districts has come to rely upon this selflessness in special education teachers. If that is the case, it means that special education programs rely on the assumption that special education teachers make sure that these programs work. Though these jobs are designed without enough time or resources to complete the required tasks, special education teachers, because they are the kind of people that they are, and because they feel responsible in the way they want to serve and lead their students, will make sure everything is finished to the best of their abilities.

Another way of interpreting their commitment to the students is as a form of relational leadership. Relational leadership, discussed by Uhl-Bien (2006) and others, is a relatively new area of leadership theory based on the idea that leadership is a social process. “Relationships—rather than authority, superiority, or dominance—appear to be key to new forms of leadership” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 672) and much work in this area of leadership remains to be done. Especially in a profession that offers special educators little in the way of authority, superiority and dominance, it seems likely that research in the area of the relational aspects of leadership will reveal much about how these participants accomplish their work in challenging conditions.

Are special educators victims of a poorly designed system? Are they at the mercy of administrators with little understanding or empathy concerning the work these teachers are doing? It all depends upon their self-images and their identities as professionals. They may adopt the mindset of victims, or they could consider themselves to be leaders. As victims, they can only complain, if they can find someone to listen, and suffer the effects of stress and burnout if they cannot. Ultimately, the teacher that feels victimized will probably leave teaching. As leaders, they can take their situations into their own hands and work for change in their districts' policies and advocate for change in the way their students are served. This very fact makes change essential to the retention of special educators. Without the realization that the jobs they are performing are leadership roles, special educators are more likely to remain in jobs that are wearing them down, emotionally and physically, and the ones who will feel the loss of their energy and creativity will be the students. These teachers' main motivation to stay is their extraordinary commitment to their students. But at the end of the day, this very commitment might undermine their ability to lead themselves toward more healthy working conditions.

These participants could ask to be recognized for their leadership, but not because they want personal recognition or power. Special education teacher leadership is a selfless role, one that is used for the benefit of students. When special educators feel overburdened by paperwork, they are saying that the paperwork impinges on their abilities to prepare lessons, and work directly with students. When these teachers have no plan time because they are attending committee meetings, sometimes outside of their specified work hours, they are saying that their jobs have not been designed so that a

human being could actually accomplish all that is asked without using their personal time. Other jobs may pay workers for time they spend working beyond the clock hours of the position. In teaching, no such overtime pay exists. Special educators are expected to make up for inadequacies in the system with their own personal sacrifice.

Even without the support and understanding of administrators, these participants overwhelmingly described the feeling of affective commitment—“commitment characterized by positive feelings of identification with, attachment to, and involvement in, the work organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1984, p. 375), although the commitment is demonstrated to their students rather than to the work organization. The data show that special education teachers act as leaders when they take responsibility to make sure necessary tasks are done whatever it takes. This commitment and leadership deserves to be acknowledged both formally and by the teachers themselves.

How can special educators become more aware of the fact that they actually lead their students towards growth with all the patience and sacrifice it takes? How can they use that awareness to become more assertive about their own working conditions? The creation of contexts in which special educators can become better leaders in improving teaching conditions will require additional research, including how the culture of the school and the district influences special educators’ leadership roles. There must be a more comprehensive examination of how special education teacher leaders perceive their roles. This view is echoed in the literature as well. Billingsley recommends that future research provide “in-depth descriptions of teacher leaders’ work...” (Billingsley, 2007, p. 173) to help administrators understand the role of special education teacher leaders and to encourage special education teachers to explore the possibilities of leadership roles in

their schools. The identity of leadership would give these teachers a sense of self, of power and of agency, and reinforce their feelings of self-efficacy (Billingsley, 2007; York-Bar et al., 2005).

I found references in the literature about people like special education teachers, who work in jobs that are very demanding, physically and emotionally, and who seem to garner little respect from either the public or from their own employers. I wanted to know the source of their commitment to these difficult jobs. One article describing the challenges of those who are involved in long-term care for patients with dementia (Coogle, Head, & Parham, 2006) outlined a situation for these workers similar to the situations in which special education teachers find themselves. There is a great need for personnel who are capable of handling the many demands of the job, a great need for workers who will stay and provide continuity of service for the patients and yet, a great rate of attrition and turnover in the field. Many workers feel their pay is not sufficient for the amount of work required of them, especially when high turnover rates leave shortages of trained staff to do the work. There was little or no opportunity for career advancement or growth. These workers and special educators have many of the same professional concerns.

More than a third of the workers in the article currently had significant involvement (35.3%) with a friend or relative with dementia outside of work, and 16.1% said they were not currently caring for a friend or relative with dementia outside of work but had done so in the past (Coogle et al., 2006). About half of these direct care workers had a strong connection to the field through a friend or relative who required long-term care. This is similar, but not identical, to the participants in this study who felt their main

motivation and commitment to the students they serve. Though some of the participants in this research could recall someone in their past who had a disability, none of them named *a specific person* who inspired them to enter a career in special education. It was after they became teachers that their loyalty and commitment to the profession became strong. Further research into service fields like education might yield similar personal reasons for attachment to these professions.

The observation may be made that this group of participants seemed to have many criticisms of their current working conditions. One might wonder if these participants are in some way predisposed to complaining about their jobs. I would point out that the literature concerning attrition of special education teachers corroborated their observations about their working conditions (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Lauritzen, 1986; Lawrenson et al., 1982; McKnab, 1983; Paperwork in Special Education, 2002; Platt & Olsen, 1990). So the important thing to remember is that, although these participants were working under conditions that caused so many special educators to leave the profession, they found the connection that they needed to stay in their jobs. That connection appeared to be their bond with the students they serve.

One reading the work I have compiled here may wonder if I have in some way manipulated the responses of the participants to reveal support for my own agenda. In relating the stories of these participants and their work, I have included some of my own experiences from my career in special education. I cannot deny that I feel strongly about my profession and have had many of the problems with the work that the participants have described. When I started the research, I really did not know what I would find. I soon learned that my prepared list of questions was not always helpful in getting the

participants to share their personal stories. I changed my interviewing tactic to allow participants to steer some of the conversation to those topics they wished to address. Now that I have talked to each participant and gone over the transcripts, drawing out common themes, it seems that what these teachers are experiencing is quite similar, despite being in different schools in different districts.

I conclude this chapter with some words on how triangulation impacted my understanding of the motivation of special education teachers. As mentioned previously, to ensure that I was being fair and objective in interpreting the transcripts, I asked a colleague from my district to examine two of the transcripts that of course had been purged of any identifying marks. I wanted her candid reactions to the participants' words and valued her perspective as a method of triangulating the conclusions I had drawn. She has a doctorate in psychology, does testing for students to determine their eligibility for special education programs and so has vast experience with special education students and teachers. She agreed to do review some of my work. Her observations are certainly germane to this discussion of special education teachers and their motivations, as well as to the motivations of administrators, whose objectives may be different from those of the teachers. I discuss some of her observations and how they impacted my own understanding of the data.

The outside reader made some insightful points about the nature of the connection between these participants and their students. The teachers have a sense of self-efficacy so important to dealing with situations that are challenging, a sense of an internal locus of control as well as their belief in the ability of the students to grow and change. Probably the most important belief a special education teacher can have is the belief that all

children can learn. This is the jumping off point for all progress with students with disabilities—emphasizing their strengths and building upon them.

The participants did not use this term, “internal locus of control,” nor did I when describing the leadership demonstrated by the participants, however, the concept is important to the idea of personal leadership in the job. Without a sense of having control from within one’s self rather than imposed from without, these participants may have trouble imagining the concept of acting as leaders in their jobs. Some of the participants discussed previously really demonstrated internal loci of control and even expanded their leadership roles to things outside the classroom, acting as advocates for students and their families and even volunteering in schools in other countries. Others, unhappy in their work and without the ability to give input to administrators about their challenges, tend to think of leadership as something of which they are not a part. Leadership, they may think, is something they are receiving from administrators who won’t listen and don’t care. One participant, Aida, said she was happy to close the door of her classroom against the leaders and teach her students without interference from them.

The transcripts that the outside reader reviewed were the interviews of two participants who were not at the moment interested in leaving their teaching jobs. However, the participants did speak of things that made their jobs challenging and from this information, the outside reader surmised that these issues might become reasons for some teachers to leave. She writes, “It seems the support, or lack thereof, of the building principal is a key factor. It seems that principals are focused on test scores as a priority for their buildings (likely an important criterion in their own evaluations). It is unclear if there are district level motivators for principals to fully support the strengths and needs of

the severe-profound population. The result can be the teachers feeling that they, and their students, are more a burden than an asset in the school.”

Her comments point up the motivations of principals, an area my research has not included. It seems that principals indeed may value the test scores of the general education population over the progress of special education students whose progress may not easily be measured with standardized testing. These test scores are also likely to be seen as a measure of the principal’s own job performance. The pressure on principals from their administrators may focus mainly on these test scores, leaving special education programs, as one participant called them, “an afterthought” in the minds of building principals.

Recommendations for Educational Practice

The participants in this study were nearly unanimous in what kept them in and what might force them out of their special education teaching jobs. If the students were the main motivators to these teachers, then their lack of good administrative support seemed to be the single most important factor in making these teachers consider leaving their jobs. The stories of these participants corroborate the many studies done on teacher attrition (Billingsley, 1993, 2004b; Billingsley & Cross, 1991, 1992; Billingsley et al., 1995; Brownell & Smith, 1992; Farber, 2000; Lauritzen, 1986; Lawrenson et al., 1982; McKnab, 1983; Platt & Olsen, 1990).

Considering the many studies done, all reaching the same conclusion over a long period of time, it seems likely that this crisis of formal leadership has not been addressed but has become an integral part of the field of special education. The emphasis has never been on administrators and their job performance. The attention has always been on the

special education teachers and why they cannot do their jobs or endure the stress of the job. Because special educators put students as their first priority, serving others with little complaint about their situations, there has never been a call for reform in their jobs, no matter how unreasonable the demands put upon them. In Chapter Four, we have seen that the participants could make an extensive list of what administrators might do to make their job requirements more attainable. Basic things, like listening, being responsive when help is sought, caring enough to be knowledgeable about the needs of the students, would all help special education teachers immensely. The participants also mentioned many other facets of their jobs that they would like to have a voice in changing, such as issues of sufficient pay and emotional support. However, the new atmosphere of educational reform seems to make any changes in the administrator-teacher relationship unlikely.

Currently, the climate of American education is heating up over questions of accountability and progress, and teachers are once again bearing the brunt of the blame for the state of education today. Teacher tenure in the state of Colorado where I teach, and where all of the participants live, is being considered and may possibly be eliminated, allowing districts to fire teachers for any or no reason at any time. Ostensibly, the firings would be tied to lack of student progress. But are teachers solely responsible for student progress? What I have not seen in this equation is any kind of acknowledgement on the part of administrators that they, too, are responsible for student outcomes through the support that they provide (or fail to provide) to teachers doing their teaching jobs. This unilateral, top-down model of power is contrary to the collaborative model needed to involve all parties, from parents to teachers, administrators to community members, in

solution generation and problem solving for the whole educational service delivery system. Culbert, in his recent book about performance reviews, suggests that companies and managers who resort to intimidation when reviewing employee performance are not showing that they understand their roles (Culbert & Rout, 2010). He points out that a poor performance evaluation is also a reflection upon the supervisor who did not know that there was a problem or did not help the employee devise a solution. The participants I interviewed had many ideas on what would make their teaching roles better and more effective. The opportunity to discuss the things of which they are proud, as well as the things with which they are frustrated, could possibly result in productive change.

Administrators will need to change, too. Teachers already have a perception of themselves as servants for their students. Administrators have identities that include leadership. As teachers become cognizant of their leadership potential, could not administrators become aware of their role as servants to those whom they supervise and then, ultimately, the students? How can administrators and supervisors come to a point in which they see the benefit of a shared power model? How can teachers and administrators work together to make decisions about the district and the students receiving special education?

There is still the issue of teachers who want opportunities for growth and change, as mentioned previously. We have discussed the need of the teacher to work with a student population with whom she or he feels capable, but there may be a point in the teacher's career when it's time for a break, for different students and different challenges. We have also heard, time and again, how rare it is for a teacher to be allowed that kind of choice by their administrators who are focused on keeping these difficult to fill teaching

slots staffed with the teachers who already occupy them. Especially difficult is finding an administrator who will allow the special educator a chance to teach in the general education classroom. Allowing special educators to teach from time to time in the general education classroom might reduce the urge some special educators have to move permanently to general education.

Nationally, the greatest percentage of special educators leaving their jobs go to general education positions, rather than to other special education positions or rather than leaving teaching altogether (McLesky & Billingsley, 2008). If the difficulty of changing to general education jobs is as great as these participants have said, the percentage of special educators migrating to general education would presumably be much higher if districts did not oppose the changes. However, in my study of these participants, I never encountered a special education teacher who was allowed to switch from special education to general education teaching, though several expressed the desire to do so. The only example of a teacher switching from special education to general education I can personally vouch for is my colleague in the school where I currently teach. She taught special education for years in Utah and then, when she moved to Colorado, she was hired in our district as a general education kindergarten teacher. I cannot say why that happened. Other teachers who teach special education here in our district have never, to my knowledge, been allowed to switch to general education.

We have mentioned earlier that Hallie tried for years to get a job teaching in general education kindergarten but was too good at her special education job to be allowed to make the move. She described her mental state at the time as one of burnout.

Special educators who are beginning to feel the effects of burnout certainly develop more stress and more frustration, knowing that their very expertise has become a trap, keeping them in jobs for which they no longer have the energy or the heart. Unable to get other teaching jobs besides the ones they are currently doing, some leave teaching altogether for the attractions of more money, more freedom and more respect in any of a number of fields. Basically, the current system of making staffing decisions without input from the teachers seems to force some teachers into the only choice they are allowed—leaving the profession altogether. The concept of exiting the profession can be viewed as an economic transaction, in which the special education teacher has the choice between exit, voice and loyalty when deciding how to proceed in a career that has become stressful (Hirschman, 1970). Loyalty to the organization may have become diminished by the daily challenges in working conditions and may perhaps have been transferred in the teacher's mind from the organization to the students the teacher serves. Exit (leaving the organization) and voice (making the areas of concern known to administrators) are the exigent options and each carries a cost. There may be problems of victimization. As we have heard from Aida, trying to make one's needs known to an administrator can result in various forms of retribution, such as being moved to another school and group of students the following year. In Hannah's case, following the direction of the police to say nothing about a rescue situation even though her principal was badgering her for information resulted in two years of adversarial supervision from that principal. "If voice requires an expenditure of time and money, then resort to it will not take place unless it produces a quality improvement over and above that available through exit" (Hirschman, 1970,

p. 136). In public school systems, teachers seem to have very little input on their own working conditions, despite the existence of labor unions, and so voice is often an option that carries too high a cost. Exit, to another school system, another career or to another teaching field, may be the less costly option.

The problems confronting special educators are real. A piecemeal attack on one or two aspects of the problem will be unlikely to fix special education. In order to keep teachers in these jobs, school districts and governments will need to take a hard look at the myriad of problems special educators are reporting. "A holistic view of special educators' work conditions is needed to sustain special educators' commitment to their work and to make it possible for teachers to use their expertise" (Billingsley, 2004b, p. 371).

The importance of a new leadership model in special education, in which teachers can share their expertise with administrators who are trying to make decisions, cannot be overstated. In preparing for this research, I promised myself that as I asked the participants about the reasons why they stay in their jobs, I would also be asking the question of myself.

"The easy and obvious answer I usually give is that of advocacy," I wrote at the time of my dissertation proposal. "Who would fight for the rights of my students if I were not here? Then I must ask myself if teaching is the best place from which to accomplish effective advocacy. I find myself in a conundrum. In order to help my students, must I leave them for some official position of leadership or can leadership be effectively demonstrated from my position as a special education teacher?" In a new leadership model, teachers would not have to make such choices because opportunities for special

educators to advocate for students would be built into the system. As it stands, a couple of participants told me they were thinking of going into administration in order to have more of a voice for their students. Though this may be appropriate for these teachers, their moving to the administration building still takes capable, insightful and experienced teachers out of the classroom.

School district administrators do not seem to realize the stressors they are asking special education teachers to endure. Without some way of dealing with the emotional corrosion these highly challenging jobs can cause for those who dare to teach, new teachers will come to fill these jobs, unaware of the price they will pay to succeed.

It is noteworthy that the attrition rate of special education teachers is especially high among new teachers (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). For example, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) reported the odds that beginning special educators would leave teaching were about 2.5 times higher than for other beginning teachers (as cited in McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

While it is true that this group of participants have stayed beyond their very first years in the field, perhaps the next group of special education teachers would not have that same energy and commitment. This study can help to make potential new special educators more aware of the challenges they may be facing. Perhaps this can motivate other special educators to speak up, for more stories from more teachers can start a change in special education. Changes that enrich special education teachers will ultimately be felt as a benefit to their students.

Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations, but the subject of the study is limitless at this point. This study centered around special educators who worked with students who were considered to be among the most challenging to teach—those with emotional or behavioral disabilities or those with significant support needs. I presumed that special educators who choose to teach students who require high levels of support may have extraordinary levels of commitment. I think this study has shown this to be true. However, the participant group is small and no broad generalizations can credibly be drawn from so small a sample.

A future study might be done with a larger pool of participants, more special educators who are male, or more participants who consider themselves to be members of minority populations. If special educators who work with students with disabilities that are less severe were to be asked about their experiences, perhaps that study would yield different results.

The hierarchical nature of administration in the school districts the participants have described invites intriguing questions about the nature of power in schools. A future study might involve interviewing building administrators (principals) to hear their views on the special education department, special education law and procedure, and budget concerns regarding special education. It would be pertinent to have them describe their own administrators and the culture of power they are experiencing. There may be a correlation between the kind of leadership a principal receives from superiors and the leadership style he or she adopts with special educators. The knowledge base a principal

has about matters regarding special education may correlate to the level of commitment the special educator feels about his or her teaching job.

My Own Reasons for Staying

I have written many words here to describe the challenges and rewards of the special education teacher's job as seen through the eyes of these participants. Now that I have come to some conclusions and have generated so many more questions, I would like to talk about my own commitment to this profession through a job I took because it was offered to me at a time when I really needed a job, any job. There have been so many times since then when I wondered, "Why am I here?" and "Why am I being shown this?" I have been shown so many things, being involved with children and families in the very unique way that a special educator is.

Children with disabilities, especially those who are nonverbal, are very vulnerable to abuse. I have worked with students who were abused as toddlers, and had one student who was being photographed for a child pornography ring. His behavior was very disruptive at school, but sending him home as a punishment was not the answer. His mother would take him to the bar with her to spend the day and sometimes "lend" him to one of the men at the bar. Through a bit of detective work, my colleagues and I figured out what was going on and the child was ultimately placed with an uncle and aunt. Because we had been a part of this child's life at a time when he was enduring so much trauma, he did not seem to recognize us when he saw us after that, and of course, we received no thanks for something that was, after all, a part of our jobs. There are many stories of a similarly horrendous nature I could recount, but suffice it to say that a special educator is sometimes taken to the limit of what the mind can imagine and endure, and

yet, that teacher must go on. I have so many words, but when it comes to talking about that moment when something awful has happened to a child, I find myself without a way to describe how a teacher goes on, except to say that special education is a path and all I can do when I want to just stop and give up is to turn my heart back to that path and keep walking.

I see my profession as a path made just for me. The people, the children, I encounter as I travel this path are placed there for our mutual growth as human beings. I am being taught as I teach. Every time I perform an act of service for my students, I can feel the healing in my own life.

Human beings usually do not stop to help each other. Competition reigns supreme, even in the elementary school. It sometimes feels as though everyone is looking for someone less able, less fortunate, not as “cool,” that they can point to and label a “loser.” In my class, we have established a “loser-free” zone. Every student here cares for every other student, no matter what their level of functioning. We are a caring community and we support each other and celebrate each other’s accomplishments.

I sincerely hope that it does not sound too grandiose to claim that, like Horace Mann, I am trying to win a victory for humanity sometime before I die. Any victory for humanity I may win accrues to all of us, those with disabilities and those without, and certainly to the special educators who have chosen to spend their lives doing this important work.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Terms and Abbreviations in Special Education

Accommodations: Changes made to provide a student equal access to learning and equal opportunity to demonstrate what has been learned. Accommodations do not substantially change the instructional level, content or criteria, but are adjustments to instruction and/or assessment that may be made for any student. It changes how a student receives information or performs a task, but it does not change the content in any way.

BD: Behavior disorder.

CSAP: Colorado Student Assessment Program, and the name of the standardized test that Colorado public school students are required to take annually, beginning in the third grade.

CSAPA: Colorado Student Assessment Program Alternate, the name of the standardized test some Colorado special education students are required to take annually, beginning in the third grade.

Emotional Disability (ED), now sometimes called EBD (Emotional Behavioral Disability): This term refers to students who have emotional or emotional and behavioral issues that impact their learning. See SIED.

English Language Learners (ELL): formerly English as a Second Language (ESL):

Students who are not proficient in English are eligible for English Language instruction in their buildings.

FAPE: Free appropriate public education. This wording comes from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that guarantees that every student will receive an education in the least restrictive environment possible.

Gifted/Talented (G/T or TAG): Those persons whose abilities, talents, and potential for accomplishments are so exceptional or developmentally advanced that they require special provisions to meet their education needs.

Inclusion: Inclusion, a component of IDEA, provides students in special education access to the general curriculum. Decisions to include students with disabilities in the general education curriculum are based on individual needs in order to benefit the student. Other terms include integration or mainstreaming.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): Individualized Education Program. Students with disabilities that negatively impact their learning in the general education classroom receive a plan designed for them, describing the supports they need to be successful in school. This plan includes special education support, and other related services such as speech therapy, physical therapy or other help the child may need.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): IDEA is the federal special education law (formerly Public Law 94-142). The basic purpose of this law is to ensure that every child with a disability receives a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (FAPE).

LD or SLD: Learning disabilities or specific learning disabilities. A child with a learning disability is usually of normal intelligence but may have difficulty seeing numbers and text as others might, forming letters and numbers when writing, and usually has difficulty reading or computing math problems as typically developing peers might. The disabilities may involve perceptual skills, motor skills or involve skills of cognitive processing of information. In short, the child with learning disabilities learns differently.

Least restrictive environment (LRE): Children with disabilities should be educated in an environment that is as close as possible to that of their non-disabled peers, as long as that environment allows them to achieve their optimum level of progress.

NCLB: No Child Left Behind

Significant Identifiable Emotional Disability (SIED): This label refers to a child whose social and emotional functioning is impaired to the point that he or she cannot function in the general education classroom.

SLIC—Significant Limited Intellectual Capacity (SLIC): A term, unique to Colorado, that refers to students who have low cognitive functioning.

SPED: Special Education Resources for this list

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/Acronyms.asp> The Colorado Department of Education's website's acronym list.

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