

The Choice to Stay: Special Education Teachers' Perceptions

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THESIS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wonderful husband Daniel Chambers who has always been the rock in life and has always stood by me and loved me. It is because of him that I was able to achieve this goal. To my two precious sons Luke and Michael Chambers who have only been pure joys in my life and who have taught me to value and cherish the small things. Thank you so much to my ever-sacrificing husband and children who have always stood by me and supported my goals even when it meant time away from them. Thanks also to my dogs Charlie and Otis who missed out on many walks they certainly would have enjoyed! I will make it up to all of you!

Lastly, I dedicate this work to my grandparents, Oscar and Rochelle Asher, who have been two of the most influential people in my life. Although they have passed, I know that they are always smiling down upon me.

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SUMMARY

The shortage of fully certified special education teachers is a significant problem in the United States that may jeopardize the quality of education for students with disabilities. This shortage is most evident in areas where children are living in poverty. The goal of this study was to better understand the shortage issue from the perspective of highly qualified special education teachers' regarding why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Specifically, the central question that guided this research was: What are Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools?

Using the qualitative interview process, this study sought knowledge from the extensive experience and viewpoints of Nationally Board Certified special education teachers. The study involved nine Nationally Board Certified special education teachers from Cook County, Illinois, who were teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools in kindergarten through eighth grade and teaching students with various disabilities across multiple settings. All the participants were special education teachers for six or more years and had expressed their intent to remain in the field.

Study participants were selected purposefully based on certain characteristics relevant to the study. Participants were interviewed twice face to face, utilizing a narrative interview, a general interview guide, and follow-up phone interview. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. In order to assist in the coding procedure, I used NVivo, a qualitative analysis computer program, to assist in analyzing, managing, and shaping the interview data.

SUMMARY (Continued)

Particular themes were identified as a result of participants' frequent comments upon a certain topic that became central to understanding why experienced special education teachers remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. The result of this process is represented by seven themes that emerged from the data revealing certain qualities. These qualities include attention to continually improving their practice; the ability to persevere, remain flexible, and embrace change; feelings of success and confidence; enjoying leadership roles and associated professional development opportunities; gaining satisfaction from their work; recognizing the impact of their life experiences on their decision to teach; and recognizing the importance of working in a supportive environment.

Two central categories represent the themes that captured experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. The two central categories that synthesize and explain the research findings are labeled: "Go-Getter" and "Professional Fit." The central category of "go-getter" strongly suggested that experienced special education teachers who remain teaching possess specific characteristics and utilize particular practices that assist them in remaining in their positions despite the many challenges of being a special education teacher. The second central category of "professional fit" described one of the fundamental messages study participants were reporting in their interviews. Participants indicated that they perceive themselves as being professionally suited for their roles. The "go-getter" qualities these participants believed they possess as well as the extent to which teaching is a good "professional fit" appeared

SUMMARY (Continued)

to play a large role in teachers' decisions to remain in the field. These central categories, which explain teachers' perceptions of why they remain, have significant implications for special education teacher attrition and retention.

A better understanding of why good teachers choose to remain has implications for recruitment and retention policies at the school district level, and for the design of professional development activities that may encourage teacher candidates, novice teachers, and experienced teachers to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Chapter I: Rationale and Research

The shortage of fully certified special education teachers is a significant problem in the United States that may jeopardize the quality of education for students with disabilities. This shortage is most evident in areas where children are living in poverty. The goal of this study was to better understand the shortage issue by investigating highly qualified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. A better understanding of why good teachers choose to remain has implications for recruitment and retention policies at the school district level, and for the design of professional development activities that may encourage teacher candidates, novice teachers, and experienced teachers to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

The Shortage Problem

An extensive body of research reveals the shortage of special education teachers in our nation. According to the U.S. Department of Education in 2001 (as cited in McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004), there is a damaging and persistent shortage of teachers who are fully certified in the United States. Ninety-eight percent of school districts have reported teacher shortages, with two hundred of the biggest cities having the greatest shortage of teachers. According to the American Association for Employment in Education, the five areas of special education with the greatest teacher shortages are emotional/behavioral disorders, multi-categorical programs, severe/profound disabilities, learning disabilities, and mild/moderate disabilities (American Association for Employment in Education, 2007; McLeskey et al., 2004). Additionally, special education teachers are more likely to leave teaching than any other group of teachers. Disturbingly,

of these new teachers, four out of every ten will leave the profession before their fifth year of teaching (Billingsley, 2004). It is important to note that this rate of attrition includes private and part-time teachers who are reported to exit the profession at a faster rate than full-time public school teachers who make up a larger part and are more representative of the teaching force (Boe, Cook, & Sutherland, 2008).

Data from the Bureau of National Affairs reported that in 1994-1995, 14% of special education teachers left their teaching jobs as compared to only 9% for general education teachers. It has also been reported that attrition rates for special education teachers are 13% (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003) with 9.3% of teachers leaving at the end of their first year (Thorton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). More current reports estimate that special education attrition rates may be as high as 20% (Thorton et al., 2007). However, about half of the teacher turnover is migration to regular education or other education related jobs. There is a growing concern that an increasing number of teachers who switch from teaching special education to teaching general (Billingsley, 1993; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Additional data indicate the extent to which the demand exceeds the supply. According to the United States Department of Education (2011), the number of students receiving special services ages three through twenty-one in 2008-2009 was 6.5 million which represents 13% of all public school students. This service demand remains great while the number of special education teachers only grew by 8% during this time period (Demik, 2008). According to Ingersoll (1999), teacher shortages are due to a “revolving door- where large numbers of teachers depart their jobs for reasons other than retirement” (p. 4) and the number of teachers leaving the field is greater than the number entering the field. According to the SPeNSE (Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education) report

(2001), 30% to 60% of special education teachers are not planning to remain in teaching for more than five years. Even though the number of special education teachers increased in the 1990s, most recent data state that for every special education teaching position, the United States is producing .86 teachers compared to double as many being prepared for every one general education teaching position (Cooley Nichols, Bicard, Bicard, & Baylot Casey, 2008). Because of the insufficient supply of qualified special education teachers, there are not enough teachers to fill the teaching vacancies (Provost, 2009). Another factor related to the teacher shortage is the number of graduates who are already teachers and thus are not counted as part of the special education pool (Katsiyannis et al., 2003). Moore, Berg, and Donaldson (2005) suggest that the supply of special education teachers in the field may also have to do with the “non-entry of certified teachers” (p. 5) when large numbers of certified teachers never actually end up teaching in the classroom.

Some noteworthy legislative acts have complicated the teacher shortage issue. The passage of the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 increased the number of students eligible to receive special education services as well as the demand for special education services and teachers (Cooley Nichols et al., 2008). According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), there will be a 17 % increase in the number of special education teachers needed between 2008 and 2018. Additionally, teacher attrition appears to occur at higher rates in urban rather than suburban or rural areas. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) projects that the need for special education services will continue to increase.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002 similarly impacted the teacher shortage problem by increasing teaching qualifications and requiring teachers to be certified in special education as well as the subject or areas in which they teach (Cooley Nichols et

al., 2008). This has been especially problematic because prior to NCLB, school districts were already having difficulties employing highly qualified special education teachers. NCLB also requires all students with disabilities to meet state standards as measured by standardized tests. Because of this, many schools are not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) due to their special education subpopulation not meeting standards. This may create additional pressures on schools and special education teachers and may increase the likelihood that a special education teacher will request either a transfer to general education or choose to exit the teaching profession (Thorton et al., 2007).

The shortage of teachers, in and of itself, is critical, but to add to the problem, data suggest that there is also a shortage of qualified teachers (McLeskey et al., 2004). Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, and Terhanian (1998) determined that the shortage of certified special education teachers was about double that of general educators and that this can be attributed to a small supply of certified teachers entering the field and the high turnover rate of special education teachers, a large number of whom are only partly certified. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2003), (as cited in McLeskey et al., 2004.) reported that 11.4% of teachers filling special education positions in 2001 did not have a standard special education certificate. The data show an increase of 23% of uncertified special education personnel from the previous year. According to Billingsley (2004a), “approximately 30% of beginning teachers with three or fewer years of experience are lacking certification for their main assignments” (p. 370). This trend continues as the Data Accountability Center (2006) reported 10% of existing special education teachers do not hold full teacher certification.

In fact, in the 20th annual report to Congress in 2001, the U.S. Department of Education discusses both a quantity (number of teachers available to fill a vacancy) and

quality (fully certified for the job and able to fill the vacancy) shortage of teachers (McLeskey et al., 2004). Similarly, Boe (2006) reports that the demand for certified teachers has remained unmet and that “this represents a failure to satisfy the quality demand for a fully and appropriately certified teacher in every special education classroom” (p. 147). The need for qualified teachers is critical for three reasons. Certified teachers are more likely to remain teaching students with disabilities (Billingsley, 2002; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999); they greatly heighten student achievement (Billingsley, 2004b); and they report a greater sense of preparedness. “Fully certified teachers were much more likely than partly certified teachers to report being better prepared to teach subject matter and better prepared in pedagogical skills” (Boe & Cook, 2006, p. 444).

Poor children as well as many minority children are more at risk for having an uncertified teacher. The inequalities in American schools today is clear where most urban schools have high concentrations of poverty and are comprised largely of minority students. It has been shown that the underinvestment in these schools results in fewer educational opportunities and resources as well as lower quality teachers for these students (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Federal statistics show that “schools serving large numbers of low-income students and students of color have larger class sizes, fewer teachers and counselors, fewer and lower-quality academic courses, extracurricular activities, book, materials, supplies and computers, libraries, and special services” (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 247). Additionally, in some “high-minority schools, more than 50% of teachers were inexperienced and unqualified” (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 12). While taking all measures of teacher qualification (e.g., state certification, content background, professional exam scores) into account, there is a large proportion of less

than qualified teachers teaching in schools that service predominantly low-income minority students. As more unqualified teachers enter the teaching force, it continues to increase the cost to students who are “at risk” (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

According to Darling-Hammond (2005, 2006), there is a strong relationship between the quality of a teacher’s preparation, their certification status, and the achievement of students. The proportion of uncertified teachers has been found to be a strong predictor of poor outcomes on state achievement tests. Additionally, in a recent study measuring math and reading over a period of six years, students who had certified teachers did better than students who had uncertified teachers (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005). In fact, achievement gains were decreased by up to three months for students who had teachers who were uncertified. This could amount to a loss of more than a year of achievement by just having an unqualified teacher three times during the elementary years. Unfortunately, the most unqualified teachers tend to get hired at the schools with the highest needs and tend to leave the profession at higher rates, and this ultimately creates an unstable situation for many of our “at risk” students. The U.S. Department of Education’s definition of “at risk” (2010) refers to “ children who are eligible for services under IDEA, and who may be further disadvantaged and at risk of educational failure because they are: (1) living in poverty, (2) are far below grade level, (3) are at risk of not graduating with a regular high school diploma on time, (4) are homeless, (5) are in foster care, (6) have been incarcerated, or (7) are English Language Learners” (p. A-7). To recruit, retain, and increase access to highly qualified experienced special education teachers, it is imperative to understand certified experienced special education teachers’ reasons for remaining teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Similarly, Hammond and Sclan (as cited in McLeskey et al., 2004) reported that students most likely to attend schools that are staffed by uncertified teachers are minority, low-income students from urban areas. Also, many of the schools experiencing high attrition rates have a high percentage of “low-income, minority, and low-performing students” (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006, p. 191). Having an unqualified special education teacher can be quite costly to students with disabilities because they may lose valuable teaching and learning while the unqualified teacher becomes experienced (Billingsley, 2004a). Although the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs allocates over \$90 million per year to increase the number of qualified teachers to meet the demands in especially critical areas of teacher shortage such as poor urban and rural areas, these efforts have been inadequate thus far (Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2001; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005).

Teacher Attrition: A Snapshot of What We Currently Know

The existing special education teacher attrition research shows that teachers’ reasons for leaving relate to a number of variables and relationships and can be presented as “teacher,” “workplace,” and “personal/affective” variables (Billingsley, 1993). These variables stem from Brownell and Smith’s (1993) conceptual framework providing a vehicle for studying the many factors related to teacher attrition. An extensive literature review on teacher attrition is discussed in Chapter II. A brief summary of the findings follows.

The findings are clear in regards to teacher variables such as the relationship between age patterns and special education teacher attrition. According to Grissmer and Kirby (as cited in Billingsley, 1993, p.152), they are described as a “U- shaped curve”. Attrition rates are particularly high for the beginning teacher and tend to decrease during

the middle years, and increase as retirement approaches. Of demographic variables, age appears to have the most reliable u-shaped relationship with teacher attrition (Brownell & Smith, 1993). There is a substantial loss when the field loses both younger teachers who have the potential to remain in the field and teachers who are nearing the end of their careers who have a great deal of teaching experience (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). The relationship between gender and attrition is unclear despite several studies reporting that male special education teachers are more likely to remain teaching as compared to female teachers. One such study by Luekens, Lyter, Fox, and Chandler (2004) reported that teachers that remain in the field are more likely to be males. Similarly, studies on special education attrition that considered race as a variable have been unclear. Most suggest that there is no connection between race and special education attrition. Overall, these findings have been inconclusive.

On the other hand, there appears to be clear confirmation from the research that links certification status to special education attrition. Most findings reported that uncertified teachers had a higher attrition rate than certified special education teachers (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Miller et al., 1999). Research literature also indicates that the preparation experiences teachers have along with their early teaching experiences can have a strong impact on teacher efficacy and whether a special education teacher remains teaching in the field (Grant, 2006; Westling & Whitten, 1996). Because educational preparation is linked to teacher effectiveness, special education teachers entering the field more prepared are at a distinct advantage. Fisk, Prowda, and Beaudin (2001) investigated the attrition rates of new teachers who were working towards emergency certification through alternative certification programs and found that teachers who were not fully certified were twice as likely to leave the field as

those teachers who were fully certified. Billingsley (1993) found that inexperienced teachers left the field at a higher rate than experienced teachers. In fact, the attrition rates of special education teachers decline rapidly after the first five years of teaching. Overall, the research seems to be clear that the more experienced a special education is and the more time a teacher has invested in the profession, the less likely she is to consider leaving the profession.

It has been suggested that teacher salary is a significant workplace variable that is predictive of teacher attrition in special education teachers. As teacher salary increases so does the likelihood that they will remain in the field (Figlio, 2002; Singer, 1993). Other studies by Metzke (1988) and Yee (1990) (as cited in Brownell & Smith, 1993) have reported that salary only becomes a considerable factor when other workplace conditions are inadequate.

Administrative support has often been linked to special education teacher attrition mostly because administrators have a large impact on the climate of the workplace (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Ingersoll, 2006). Because supportive administrators provide teachers with emotional support and useful feedback, and foster work climates that are comfortable for teachers, administrative support was reported to be an incentive for teacher retention (Otto & Arnold, 2005). Administrative support is an important variable to focus on because it can have strong implications for retention efforts within districts.

Regardless of experience, professional development has been reported to be one type of support that teachers require. Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harness (2001) found that there is a direct relationship between professional development opportunities and commitment to remain in the field. Having opportunities to grow professionally

fosters a more satisfied teacher who will then be more likely to remain in the teaching profession (Boe, 2006).

One of the workplace variables that is most closely linked in the attrition literature has to do with role problems (e.g., role overload, role conflict and ambiguity, and role dissonance) that special education teachers face (Billingsley, 2002). Most special education teachers feel that their jobs and workload are not manageable (Morvant & Gersten, 1995; Quinn & Andrews, 2004) and that role problems generate stress and lower job satisfaction (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Gersten et al., 2001). There are inconsistent data regarding whether student issues play a strong role in teacher attrition. Some teachers report large caseloads and student differences as having an influence on their decision to leave the field while other teachers do not feel as though it has been an influential factor (Boe et al., 2008; Billingsley, 1993).

The literature discusses personal and affective variables such as issues of job satisfaction, job commitment, and stress. These variables could help special education teachers to feel more satisfied in the workplace and thus foster teachers' decisions to remain teaching in the field. It has been shown that special education teachers who are committed are more likely to remain in the teaching field (Billingsley, 2004b; Ingersoll, 2006). In the literature it is also clear that high amounts of stress in the workplace can lead to special education teacher burnout, leading to a lack of commitment and ultimately resulting in teacher attrition (Billingsley, 1993; Lazarus, 2006).

Lastly, external factors surfaced in the review of the literature on teacher attrition. They include special education teachers having better opportunities in other areas, such as general education, as a factor in teacher attrition as well as retirement and family as additional factors (Singer, 1993; Westling & Whitten, 1996). It should be noted,

however, that among the total teaching force, retirement represents a small portion of special education teachers leaving the field (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

The Research Question

Much of the research thus far has focused on either those teachers who have left the field of special education or those who have expressed intent to leave the profession. Of equal importance to understanding why special education teachers leave the profession is the insight gained by conducting research to investigate Nationally Board certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities, and especially why they remain teaching in low-income schools.

The current literature on why experienced special education teachers remain in the field is scant. Moreover, the research on why qualified, special education teachers continue to teach in low-income challenging communities is non-existent. This study adds to the existing literature base on teacher attrition by understanding Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they continue to teach students with disabilities in such communities. In order to fully understand the teacher shortage problem and fully address teacher retention, it is imperative to not only determine why beginning special education teachers are leaving the field, but also to learn from experienced special education teachers as to why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Through interviewing, deep understandings of the reasons why participants remain in teaching were explored. Therefore, the central question that guided this research was: What are Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools?

In the following paragraphs, the definitions of significant terms in the research question are stated. A “Nationally Board Certified” special education teacher has earned the Exceptional Needs Certificate issued by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. For some time scholars and researchers have attempted to explain the correlation between specific teacher characteristics and higher student achievement. Most experts agree “the single most influential school-based factor contributing to school improvement and student achievement is the teacher” (Smith, Gordon, Colby, & Wang, 2005, p. 5; Vandvoort, Amrein-Beardsley, & Berliner, 2004). Out of this acknowledgement that teachers are vital to student achievement developed the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) in 1987. National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is guided by a mission to uphold important and challenging standards that dictate the knowledge and teaching performance exceptional teachers should be able to exhibit (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009a, p. V).

In Illinois, from 1993-2006, 3,382 teachers applied for National Board teacher certification and 1,985 teachers (1.4 % of eligible teachers and 58.7% of those applied) achieved this goal (Hakel, Koenig, & Elliott, 2008). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was designed as a program that “acknowledged the idea of expertise in teaching and certifies teachers who demonstrate that they are accomplished teachers” (Smith et al., 2005, p. 6). Whereas policymakers, teachers, and administrators continue to explore the relationships among Nationally Board Certified teachers’ performance, the quality of their teaching, and the achievement of their students, the NBPTS process continues to be one of the most rigorous, standards-based, and evidence-based procedure for identifying high quality teaching. In fact, school districts across the nation increase

the NBCT's salary in recognition of his or her attainment of this honor. Because the overall research supports the use of NBPTS as a tool for identifying high quality teachers, NBCTs were chosen as participants in this study. Additionally, it is important to note that according to Perda (2007), Nationally Board Certified teachers have a lower attrition rate as compared to non-NBCTs.

“Special education teacher” refers to an individual who is employed on a full-time basis in a public school system to provide a variety of services to elementary-age pupils with disabilities. The services could include teaching in any combination of the following service delivery models: resource settings, self-contained settings, co-teaching arrangements; and/or consulting with general education teachers. “Teachers’ Perceptions” refer to the process by which teachers interpret or become aware of concepts.

“Disabilities” refer to those types of disabilities described in IDEA. According to Billingsley (2010) and Kaff (2004) during a presentation at an OSEP Project Director’s Conference, special education teachers are increasingly responsible for “wearing many hats” which means that they may work with students with varying disabilities in a variety of settings and provide services through a variety of delivery models.

“Remain” refers to the special education teacher who has been teaching students with disabilities for at least six years and who plans to remain a special education teacher.

According to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (Illinois State Board of Education, 2010), “low-income” refers to families living below a certain annual income line (e.g., the poverty line for a family of four is \$28,665 annually). Children who come from families who earn at or below 130% of the poverty level can receive free meals and those whose families earn between 130% and 185% of the poverty level can receive reduced price meals through the National Free Lunch Program. The number of

students who qualify for the National School Lunch Program is an indicator of the income level of a school or district. According to Terpstra, Rynell, & Corrow (2010), during the 2009-2010 school years, 69.4% of school age children qualified for either free or reduced school lunches in Illinois.

Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130% and 185% of the poverty level are eligible for reduced price meals, for which students can be charged no more than \$0.40. For the period July 1, 2010, through June 30, 2011, 130% of the poverty level is \$28,665 for a family of four; 185% is \$40,793 (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Significance of Study

The purpose of this study was to advance the education community's understandings of special education teacher attrition and retention. Attention to the research question accomplished this by extending and/or validating previous studies or strengthening areas that have been either ignored or not fully developed in the current literature. The study looked deeply into why experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers who are working with students with disabilities remain teaching in low-income schools. Because attrition plays a critical part in the teacher shortage problem and ultimately jeopardizes the quality of education for students with disabilities (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004), it is vital to understand perceptions of why experienced special education teachers remain.

Much of the research on teacher attrition is based on data collected from questionnaires and surveys while some utilized individual, phone, and small group interviews as a means of looking at the relationships among variables associated with

teacher attrition. Utilizing interviewing as a qualitative method provided a rich insight into the perceptions of why experienced special education teachers remain in their careers as well as an understanding of aspects of teacher attrition that may not have been realized with less open-ended formats (Billingsley, 2004).

The findings from this study have implications in several domains. School administrators should find the results useful when designing recruitment and retention strategies. Those involved in professional development for novice and experienced special education teachers should glean ideas for growth opportunities from the reasons high quality special education teachers provide for staying in their settings. Lastly, those involved in teacher preparation can garner ideas for program components, assignments, and field experiences that may foster early career retention.

Conclusion

This chapter described the research rationale, offered a snapshot into the current teacher attrition research, discussed the research question, and explained the significance of the study. Chapter II will consist of two parts. The first section presents a review of the existing literature related to teacher attrition. Special education teacher shortage, supply/demand issues, job satisfaction, commitment, burnout, and other relevant factors are reviewed. The second section explores the literature on National Board Teacher Certification. Because I interviewed special education teachers who are Nationally Board Certified, it is important to include research regarding use of Nationally Board Certified teachers as a tool for identifying high quality teachers. The framework/design of the study, the data collection and analysis procedures, the study delimitations/assumptions as well as methodological, researcher, and ethical considerations are all presented in chapter III. Chapter IV presents the results of the study. Chapter V presents the data analysis, an

interpretation and discussion of the results, as well as implications for teacher attrition and retention, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter II: Literature Review

In this chapter, I present a comprehensive review of the literature on teacher attrition and National Board Teacher Certification. An understanding of these extensive bodies of research acts as a critical frame for considering the design of the study, the interpretation of the results, and the contribution the study makes to the special education community's understanding of teacher attrition.

The first section of the chapter focuses on the research pertaining to teacher attrition. This part begins with a description and analysis of the research articles. Billingsley (1993), Brownell and Smith (1993), and Billingsley (2004b) have previously reviewed the research on special education teacher attrition, and because they are seminal works, I refer to these reviews periodically. A synthesis and analysis of studies from 1992-2011 look specifically at what factors strongly contribute to teacher attrition. Table III, Appendix A provides a summary of 19 of the research articles reviewed. Other articles related to teacher shortage, supply/demand, job satisfaction, commitment, burnout, and other relevant factors are reviewed and discussed. Limitations of studies are also highlighted.

Because research shows that teachers' reasons for leaving or staying relate to a number of variables and relationships (Billingsley, 1993), findings are synthesized and organized thematically. Findings are presented according to "teacher," "workplace," and "personal/affective" variables, which stem from Brownell and Smith's (1993) conceptual framework that provides a vehicle for studying the many factors related to teacher attrition. Brownell and Smith's conceptual model integrates Brofenbrenner's (as cited in

Brownell & Smith, 1993) ecological model that is a framework for researching teacher workplace interactions as well as factors that may influence career decisions.

Attrition

Teacher variables.

Age. Grissmer and Kirby (as cited in Billingsley, 1993) reported “attrition patterns...follow a U- shaped curve over the life cycle” (p. 152). This means that during the early years of teaching, attrition rates for teachers are high, decline during the middle years of a teaching career, and increase again as teachers approach retirement. Singer (1993) also reported that younger teachers are “nearly twice as likely as mature teachers to leave” (p. 12). In fact, even when taking into account length of teaching experience, teachers under the age of 35 still are at the largest attrition risk (Brownell & Smith, 1993; Olivarez & Arnold, 2006). Some possible reasons for the higher attrition rates among younger teachers may be due to the frustrations and problems associated with beginning teaching, the smaller amount of time invested in the profession and in their retirement, family responsibilities such as child rearing, as well as perceived opportunities outside of the field (Billingsley, 2004b).

Interestingly, Zabel and Zabel (2001) reported a maturing of the special education teaching profession, as the age of special education teachers has greatly increased to an average age of 40, with a typical teacher having eleven years of experience. Although this is encouraging, results from this study should be interpreted with caution because the study may not be representative of special education teachers across the country. Findings from this study were based on self-report data from Kansas’s teachers, not inclusive of teachers who have already left the field, and not

inclusive of teachers of low incidence disabilities. Of demographic variables, age appears to have the most reliable u-shaped relationship with teacher attrition (Brownell & Smith, 1993).

Gender. There have been inconclusive findings regarding the relationship between gender and attrition. In a more recent study by Greiner and Smith (2009), the authors found no relationship between gender and attrition. However, the results cannot be generalized as they are based on data from a single Texas university. Singer (1993), however, found that females under the age of 35 are more likely than men to leave the special education classroom. Pyecha and Levine (1995) reported in their study of exited special education teachers that a greater proportion of “leavers” were female. They went on to describe that this finding may be due to the fact that the majority of special education teachers are female. Ingersoll (2001) also found that among teachers in general, men were more likely to remain in teaching. However, Morvant and Gersten (1995) revealed in a study of 17 special educators in an urban district that male teachers were actually more likely to express intentions of leaving the field. In a study that looked more closely at the differences and similarities of work variables for different disability populations, Singh and Billingsley (1996) found that female teachers of students with emotional disorders were more likely to remain teaching than males teaching the same population. Similarly and more recently, Gilpin (2011) reported that female teachers are more likely to remain in the field. Inconsistencies in the relationship between gender and attrition may be due to differences in research methodology and the participants involved. It is also important to note that women’s roles in society have changed over time and this may have an effect on the results.

Race. In studies on special education attrition that considered race as a variable, the findings have been unclear. Among the general teaching population, Ingersoll (2001) found lower attrition rates among minority teachers. Singh and Billingsley (1996) found that minority teachers of students with emotional disorders reported a greater intent of leaving the job than white teachers. Additionally, Cross and Billingsley (1994) reported that white teachers were more likely to remain teaching. In a study of urban special education teachers by Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, and Hendricks, (as cited in Billingsley, 2002), a larger number of white teachers left special education than minority teachers.

In contrast to both previously mentioned studies, Singer (1993) suggests that there is no connection between race and special education attrition. However, the rate of black former special education teachers returning to teaching is 50% higher and the retention rate is three times higher once they return. A study of 5,000 teachers utilizing United States Teacher Follow-up Surveys from 2000-2001 and 2004-2005 showed that race has little effect on teacher attrition (Gilpin, 2011). These findings need to be carefully interpreted because several studies on attrition evaluate intentions of leaving rather than the actual act of leaving.

Certification Status. According to Connelly and Graham (2009), 11.4% of the total number of special education teachers is not fully certified. There is clear confirmation in the research linking certification status to special education attrition. In a study by Miller et al. (1999), researchers found that uncertified teachers had a larger attrition rate than certified teachers. Lack of certification was also mentioned as predictor of “exit” rather than “transfer” attrition. In addition, according to Boe et al. (1997),

uncertified teachers had a higher turnover rate and should be regarded to be at a high risk for attrition.

Researchers have also found that teachers who have traditional graduate degrees tend to stay in teaching longer than teachers who have received their degrees through alternative means (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Westling & Whitten, 1996). These findings should remind schools that uncertified or emergency certified teachers may need additional support in order to retain them as teachers. Additionally, some general education teachers with emergency certificates who may be committed and capable of teaching special education students have reported being discouraged by difficult certification requirements (Billingsley, 2002). This may be one explanation as to why emergency-certified teachers have a higher attrition rate than certified teachers. According to Billingsley (2002), it is unclear as to why teachers who are certified are more likely to remain in the field of special education, but it may be due to the “greater initial commitment” (p. 61).

Preparation. Research literature indicates that the preparation experiences teachers have influence whether a special education teacher will continue teaching. The perception of the quality of preparation as well as the type of early teaching experience can be important factors (Westling & Whitten, 1996). Universities and colleges influence career choices by improving teacher’s skills and commitment, resulting in teachers wanting to remain in teaching (Billingsley, 1993). Teachers who “rate the quality of preservice training higher and, therefore, believe themselves to be better prepared for teaching, remain in the field longer than do teachers who view themselves as less prepared” (Westling & Whitten, 1996, p. 320).

Similarly, in a study by Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller (1997), 92 non-returning Florida special education teachers were interviewed to determine their reasons for leaving the classroom. It was reported that many teachers who felt inadequately prepared to teach special education students and who faced a stressful working environment often became frustrated which led to them leaving the field (Brownell et al., 1997; Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Lenk, 1995).

Sweeney, Warren, and Kemis, (as cited in Brownell and Smith, 1993) found the quality of the student teaching experience to be a strong predictor of whether a teacher would remain in teaching. Similarly, Connelly & Graham (2009) suggested that teacher candidates having less than a ten-week student teaching experience are more likely to leave the field. According to Brownell et al. (1995), both “stayers” and “leavers” felt that their teacher preparation programs left them unprepared for the demands of teaching. However, “stayers” reported that their field experiences were helpful, while “leavers” felt their field experiences were too limited and came too late in their preparation programs. Because educational preparation is linked to teacher effectiveness, special education teachers entering the field better prepared are at a distinct advantage.

In a study by Edgar and Pair (2005), the authors interviewed 140 graduates from the University of Washington special education program to document their employment history and mobility within the field. Surprisingly, 78% of their graduates remained special education teachers and another 7% were in other education related jobs. The authors felt this low attrition rate among their graduates may be due to the fact that their program was a five-year program. It has been reported in the research that teachers who attend five-year teacher preparation programs have higher retention rates.

Finally, the perceptions teachers have about their preparedness to teach students with disabilities affects their teaching confidence, job satisfaction, and ultimately their choice to stay in or leave teaching. However, the actual correlation between perceptions of preparedness and attrition rates among special education teachers remains unclear (Miller et al., 1999). Similarly, Swicegood (2005) explained that a sense of teaching efficacy, or belief in the ability to affect a desired outcome in the classroom and/or school, is an internal factor related to preparedness, which can contribute to teacher attrition or retention. Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (1998) note that especially when things are not going smoothly in the classroom, a sense of efficacy influences a teacher's persistence and resilience to overcome difficulties.

Experience. According to Billingsley (1993), inexperienced teachers leave the field more than experienced teachers. After the first five years, the attrition rates of special education teachers decline rapidly and the longer they teach, the more likely it is that they will return to teaching after having left. In another study, teachers with more teaching experience were more likely to intend to remain in teaching (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gilpin, 2011). Similarly, Singh and Billingsley (1996) reported that teachers who “had been in the profession longer were more likely to have stronger dispositions to remain” (p. 42).

Based on surveys and interviews from 40 school districts in Utah, Menlove, Garnes, and Salzberg (2004) indicate that experienced special education teachers (stayed in field for more than 5 years) reported leaving the field due to retirement, changing to a general education position, moving, or changing schools/district. In contrast, special education teachers with less than 5 years of experience reported leaving due to moving,

changing districts, having/staying with children, or left the field completely. Overall, the research seems to be clear that the more experienced a special education teacher is and the more time a teacher has invested in the profession, they are less likely to consider leaving the profession.

Workplace variables.

Salary. Teacher salary has been suggested as a factor in teacher attrition. Singer (1993) found that special education teachers were more likely to remain in systems with higher pay. Moreover, it has been reported that teacher salary is such a significant factor that it is predictive of teacher attrition in special education teachers. Similarly, in research studies of the general teaching population, higher teaching salaries appear to have a positive relationship with the retention of teachers (Guarino et al., 2006). However, according to Metzke (as cited in Brownell and Smith, 1993), salary only becomes significant when other workplace conditions are inadequate. In a study by Kaff (2004), 34% of participants articulated personal concerns over monetary issues, such as being responsible for additional duties without being compensated properly. Not surprisingly, only 17 out of 93 non-returning special education teachers from Florida responded that an increase in salary would increase the likelihood that they would return to teaching. Still others mentioned that a special education teacher's salary is not commensurate with the stress involved with teaching students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 1997).

Support. Administrative support has been regularly linked to special education teacher attrition primarily due to the strong influence administrators have on the climate of the workplace (Cross and Billingsley, 1994). According to Otto & Arnold (2005), administrative support was seen as an incentive for retention of special education

teachers. Based on a questionnaire designed to understand the factors that relate to administrative support, 228 special education teachers from South Texas reported that some areas where administrative support was needed were in “time to complete special education paperwork, scheduled time for collaboration and planning with general education teachers, providing meaningful in-service opportunities, lowering the size of caseloads and classes, and providing adequate technology and materials for special education students” (p. 5). Supportive administrators provide teachers with emotional support and useful feedback, and foster work climates that are comfortable for teachers.

Based on a survey of 385 special education teachers and 313 general education teachers in Virginia, Littrell, Billingsley, and Cross (1994) determined that emotional support (e.g., demonstrating teacher appreciation, communicating openly, and getting to know the teacher) was the most important kind of support special education teachers felt they needed. Participants in a study by Brownell et al. (1995) criticized the low levels of support they had received from district and building level management. Their complaints included “principals who were insensitive to student and teacher needs, distributed resources inequitably, and lacked knowledge about special education” (p. 96). Westling and Whitten (1996) cited that 24% of teachers leaving the field of special education stated administrative variables as grounds for leaving.

Another finding suggests that principal support greatly impacts stress levels, role issues, job satisfaction, and commitment, all of which have an impact on teacher attrition (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Leko & Smith, 2010). In addition, support from administration appears to be a major player in teacher commitment (Singh & Billingsley, 1996). When teachers feel supported in doing their job, they may feel less overwhelmed

by the trials faced in the special education classroom (Miller et al., 1999). Administrative support is an important variable to focus on because it is amenable to change if districts are interested in retaining their special education teachers.

According to Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harness (2001), it is not just the support of the administration that is important, but rather the combination of principal, staff, and overall school climate that strongly influences whether special education teachers feel supported or not. Similarly, Miller et al. (1999) reported that less collegial support from colleagues was linked to teachers' leaving and more support with special education teachers remaining in the field. In addition, according to Kaff (2004), teachers' feelings of support from students, parents, and general education teachers would encourage special education teachers to remain in the field.

Professional growth/development. Professional development is one form of support that teachers need regardless of how many years they have been teaching. Gersten et al. (2001) found that there is a direct relationship between professional development opportunities and commitment to remain teaching special education students. The data suggested that special education teachers need to be provided with relevant professional development opportunities as well as opportunities to learn from one another. According to Leko and Smith (2010), professional development opportunities allow special education teachers to “network with other teachers, engage in joint problem solving, and reduce their feelings of isolation (p. 323). Unfortunately, according to Morvant et al. (1995), over half of the teachers who participated in the survey reported not feeling that they have had many chances to learn new strategies and methods in their schools.

Likewise, based on research findings from 24 special education teachers from an urban district, one third of those interviewed stated disappointment with professional development opportunities in their district. Some teachers were dissatisfied with the quality and some with the lack of convenience and logistics of the professional development opportunity (Brownell et al., 1995). Brownell and Smith (1993) stated that the absence of professional development opportunities is a factor in a special education teacher's choice to leave the profession. Having opportunities to grow professionally fosters a more satisfied teacher who will then be more likely to remain teaching students with disabilities.

Based on Gersten et al. (2001), professional growth opportunities have a direct relationship to teacher commitment as well as an indirect relationship to leaving. However, Brownell et al. (1995) proposes that not all professional development opportunities are alike and that the degree of teacher satisfaction is based on the "content, timing, and quality of the opportunities, as well as incentives for participating" (p. 47). In Gehrke and McCoy's study (2007), 12 special education teachers completed questionnaires and individual interviews, and commented on the value of "relevant or valuable professional development opportunities" as a "component of teacher socialization...relating to individuals having opportunities to improve their professional practice" (p. 37).

Role Issues. Role problems (e.g., role overload, role conflict and ambiguity, and role dissonance) have been clearly associated with special education teacher attrition, maybe more so than any other factor (Billingsley, 2002). "Role conflict results when inconsistent behaviors are expected from an individual and role ambiguity refers to the

lack of necessary information available to a given position” (Billingsley, 1993, p. 155). Educators have the challenging job of balancing role demands from different sources (e.g., parent, students, principal) and when role expectations become too great, the consequence is role overload (Billingsley, 1993).

In a survey of 887 special education teachers in three large western urban school districts, Gersten et al. (2001) explored alterable factors of the workplace that improve the teaching environment and ultimately improve teacher retention. The study measured teachers’ intent to leave the field and followed teachers over a twelve to fifteen month period to determine whether they did leave. Sixty-nine percent of the special education teachers left the field within fifteen months. This study shows a direct relationship for role dissonance, “the degree to which special educators experience dissonance between their own beliefs about the role of a special education teacher and their actual day-to-day experiences” (p. 556), and is a considerable predictor of stress and job dissatisfaction. Stress due to the design of the special education teacher’s job is critical in addressing teacher attrition and retention (Gersten et al., 2001).

Cross and Billingsley (1994) propose that teachers with more supportive principals identify less role problems. Additional role requirements linked to job responsibilities and special education teachers’ intent to remain teaching include enough time to complete paperwork, plan, and prepare materials (Westling & Whitten, 1996). Large amounts of paperwork have been reported as a main reason for special education attrition as well as a key disincentive to teachers returning to the profession, according to Billingsley and Cross, (as cited in Billingsley, 1993). Additionally, Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray & Hendricks (as cited in Brownell & Smith, 1993), reported that

60 % of the special education teachers in the sample intending to leave, mentioned excessive paperwork as a significant contributor to their decision. Similarly, in a narrative inquiry study of five special education teachers with varying experience in the classroom, DeMik (2008) reported that her participants found the paperwork such as writing IEP's, behavior plans, transition plans, and all additional documentation required of special educators to be overwhelming. The problem of excessive paperwork is a large issue for teachers because it does not allow them enough time to plan for important tasks such as delivering instruction (Billingsley, 1993; Leko & Smith, 2010).

The final role concern worthy of mentioning is the difficulties special education teachers experience when they are expected to deliver services that include several models (inclusion, resource, and consultative). According to 47% of the 341 Kansas special education teachers, educators are expected to wear many hats, often without the needed resources (Kaff, 2004). Additionally, some special education teachers report having concerns with collaborating effectively with general educators as it relates to role conflict (DeMik, 2008). In order to retain certified special education teachers, it is particularly important for administrators to be aware of the unique support needs of teachers as their roles evolve. Billingsley (2004a) concluded:

Educational opportunities for students with disabilities will be reduced if teachers are confused about their roles, if teachers' roles are structured in ways that do not allow them to use their expertise, and if substantial teaching time is lost because of nonteaching tasks. (p. 373)

In the current teaching environment, the role of special education teacher has changed dramatically and now requires the special education teacher to perform several

duties such as work with small groups of students, collaborate with general education teachers, and teach subject matter in self-contained settings. The expansion of teacher's roles can lead to a special education teacher feeling tired, overwhelmed, and depleted and eventually contribute to teacher burnout (Embich, 2001).

Students. Even though there are no data directly linking student caseloads to attrition rates, teachers continue to report large student caseloads as a reason for leaving (Morvant & Gersten, 1995; Brownell et al., 1995). Billingsley and Cross (1992) researched the variables that are predictors of job satisfaction or commitment and how these variables could predict how long one remains in the field. Four hundred sixty three special education teachers and 493 general education teachers completed questionnaires and reported that work related variables were important predictors of job satisfaction and commitment. Because teachers derive rewards from their experiences/ relationships with students, job satisfaction is influenced by student variables. Student problems such as discipline, lack of student progress, large differences in student needs, and student attitudes influence teacher attrition, according to Billingsley and Cross (as cited in Billingsley, 1993).

In contrast, Miller et al. (1999) found no link between teacher attrition and student relationships. Billingsley et al. (1993) cited student issues as not being very important. These conflicting results may be due to identifying different variables as predictors and measuring teachers' propensity to leave or stay in the field (Miller et al., 1999) versus measuring intent to leave (Billingsley & Cross, 1992).

Personal/affective variables.

Job satisfaction. Changing some of the workplace variables discussed previously could help teachers obtain more satisfaction from their work and reduce special education attrition (Billingsley, 2004b). Also, stress and role issues negatively affect job satisfaction and commitment to the teaching profession (Cross & Billingsley, 1994). In a study of 8 beginning special education teachers, teachers described several factors that positively affected their job satisfaction: role design, relationships in their school buildings, and professional development opportunities (Gehrke & Murri, 2006).

One would think that years of stress would be cumulative and cause teachers who have been teaching longer to be less satisfied with the field. However, Stempien & Loeb (2002) reported that less experienced special education teachers were those reporting dissatisfaction with the teaching profession. Overall, job satisfaction was affected by “greater leadership support, work involvement, lower levels of role conflict...lower levels of stress and role ambiguity” (Billingsley & Cross, 1992, p. 465).

In a study of 412 special education teachers from Virginia, Singh & Billingsley (1996) used teacher questionnaires to examine work variables and determine how they influence job satisfaction, commitment to teaching, and the intent to stay in the field of special education. The study suggested that job satisfaction was a strong influence on special education teacher’s intention to remain in teaching.

Job commitment. Human capital theory tells us that a professional decides whether to remain in or leave a job after determining how much he or she has invested, basically examining the benefits versus the costs (Tye & O’Brien, 2002). Therefore one

could assume that the longer a teacher is part of the profession, the larger the commitment, and the less likely he or she is to leave teaching.

Billingsley (2004b) describes commitment as “(a) a strong belief in and acceptance of an organization’s/profession’s goals and values, (b) willingness to exert significant effort on behalf of the organization/profession, and (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization/profession” (p. 50). According to Miller et al. (1999) and Billingsley and Cross (1992), it is more probable that special education teachers who possess higher degrees of commitment will remain in teaching.

It has been suggested that special education teachers may be less committed to their schools because there are many job opportunities for special education teachers due to the teacher shortage. The commitment of teachers is important to study because it is more probable that a committed teacher will stay in the teaching profession. The results of teacher commitment are apparent, but what research has not told us yet is what factors increase commitment (Billingsley, 2004a).

Litrell et al. (1994) contributes to the literature on factors related to increasing teacher commitment by suggesting that support from principals can have a positive effect on teaching commitment and satisfaction and ultimately increase teacher retention. Teachers become more committed when their principals “offer feedback, encouragement, acknowledgement, collective decision making, and collaboration” (p. 300). Ndoye, Imig, and Parker, in an analysis of the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, found that providing a support system and empowering teachers to be part of the decision making process can effect teachers commitment to the field. The existing literature supports the idea that teacher commitment has more to do with the structure of

the workplace and less to do with personal characteristics a teacher might possess (Billingsley, 1993; Cross & Billingsley, 1994).

Stress. Stress is a contributing factor to teacher attrition and has been well documented over the past 20 years. Special education teachers may be more prone to stress and burnout due to “role conflict, role ambiguity, perceived workload, and perceived principal support” (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006, p. 125). In support of the idea that stress negatively affects teacher attrition and retention, Gersten et al. (2001) also reported that stress is created due to the special education teachers’ actual job design. Lauritzen (as cited in Singh & Billingsley, 1996) stated that 40% of special education teachers see stress as the main reason for high attrition rates in their profession. Additionally, Morvant et al. (1995) reported that almost 80% of the leavers within a sample of 17 special education teachers described being under significant amounts of stress quite often.

There are several variables that special education teachers have reported as contributing to their stress levels and they include “lack of supplies and materials, difficulty meeting student needs and instructional objectives, excessive paperwork, low salaries, few opportunities for professional growth, loss of teacher control, lack of recognition, and stressful interpersonal interactions” (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997, p. 327). Leko and Smith (2010) also suggested that large amounts of paperwork are related to teachers feeling overwhelmed and stressed, especially for beginning teachers. In addition, Singer (1993) reported that teaching practices such as “legal mandates, assessment, and diagnostic responsibilities for inclusion, transition, and other curricular innovations” (p. 267) cause stress for special education teachers.

Miller et al. (1999) suggest that providing teacher training and education on how to cope with stress can minimize teacher stress. Some coping strategies that help with stress are being able to work on “adapting to situations, working to change situations, and talking to other people” (Brownell et al., 1995, p. 92). However, in the same study just mentioned, “stayers” were significantly more likely than “leavers” to actively use coping strategies and make changes by “seeking more information, fighting for change, and making other professionals aware of their needs” (p. 93). In contrast, “leavers” were more likely to take stress home with them, try and ignore the problem, and cry.

Interestingly, Zabel & Zabel (2001) suggest that special education teachers experience less stress than they did 20 years ago because of the increased age, experience, and preparation of special education teachers today. In a literature review by Billingsley (1993), the author recognized stress and burnout as factors in teacher attrition in five out of nine studies reviewed. High levels of stress can lead to teacher burnout, which ultimately can affect a teacher’s commitment to remaining in the field.

Job Opportunities. Attrition rates are higher for teachers of certain disability populations, such as for teachers of students with emotional disorders (Westling & Whitten, 1996). Singer (1993) proposes that this is due to teachers having opportunities for better work environments, such as working in a hospital or a clinic. Additionally, special education teachers are ten times more likely to move from special education to general education than the reverse (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011). Singer also suggests that teachers with better NTE scores are more likely to leave due to better job opportunities in other fields. Also, lack of job opportunities may cause some teachers to remain in the profession in spite of their dissatisfaction (Brownell & Smith, 1993).

Family. Family, birth of a child, health issues, relocation, and marriage are mentioned as the main reasons why both satisfied and dissatisfied teachers leave the classroom (Brownell & Smith, 1993). Additionally, Westling and Whitten (1996) stated that women who have children are more likely to stay in teaching or return to teaching after having left for a time period.

Retirement. The claim that most teachers who are leaving the field of special education are doing so because of retirement has not been supported (Cochran-Smith, 2004). According to Ingersoll (as cited in Cochran-Smith, 2004), retirees represent only about one-eighth of the special education teachers leaving the field.

Methodological limitations.

A variety of methodologies have been employed in the existing special education attrition research. Limitations to these research methodologies will be discussed in terms of research sample, definitions, conceptual models, and methods and measures.

Research samples. Although many of the studies on special education attrition have utilized large samples of participants (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Boe et al, 1997; Cross and Billingsley, 1994; Edgar & Pair, 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; Gilpin, 2011; Kaff, 2004; Littrell et al., 1994; Miller et al., 1999; Singh & Billingsley, 1996) some of the research is based on relatively smaller samples (fewer than 150 teachers) (Brownell et al., 1995; Brownell et al., 1997; DeMik, 2008; Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Lee et al., 2011); Morvant & Gersten, 1995; Pyecha & Levine, 1995; Stempien & Loeb, 2002; Westling & Whitten, 1996). These studies were based on data from special educators in several areas of the United States (e.g. southeast, southwest, west, and specifically, California, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington) including some

urban (Brownell et al., 1995; Gersten et al., 2001; Morvant & Gersten, 1995; Pyecha & Levine, 1995), suburban (Stempien & Loeb, 2002), and rural (Westling & Whitten, 1996) school districts. They were limited to data collected in certain areas of the United States. Boe, Bobbitt and Cook (1997) used a national sample from Kaufman's Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). SASS collects data through the Public School Teachers Questionnaire and offers nationally representative assessments of teacher characteristics, qualifications, teaching assignments, etc. Larger samples that represent different states and settings are needed to provide a clear picture of the factors that influence attrition in special education. Additionally, because the research findings are based on varied samples, it makes it difficult to compare them and make generalizations.

Definitions. Table III (see Appendix A) describes each study and compares the different definitions each study uses to describe teacher attrition. It is important to consider the many definitions used in the research because the variations may affect inadequate reporting of results as well as the ability to understand and compare the research findings. For example, some researchers studied teachers' intent to leave the field (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001; Kaff, 2004; Singh and Billingsley, 1996; Westling & Whitten, 1996) or intent to stay in the field (Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Littrell et al. (1994), while others were more interested in looking at teachers who are still teaching ("stayers"), versus those who have left the field ("leavers"), (Brownell et al., 1995; Brownell, Smith, McNellis et al., 1997; Demik, 2008; Edgar and Pair, 2005; Miller et al., 1999; Morvant & Gersten, 1995; Pyecha & Levine, 1995; Zabel & Zabel, 2001). The comparisons between those who stay and those who leave give us an indication of what variables contribute to each situation.

Conceptual Models. Most researchers do not report a framework for their studies (Billingsley, 1993). I could find only two studies on teacher attrition that discussed the need to have conceptual models to guide research on the attrition of special education teachers. Brownell and Smith (1993) felt their “conceptual framework provides a foundation for synthesizing current research and designing future teacher attrition studies in special education” (p. 280). Their model incorporated Brofenbrenner’s model (as cited in Brownell & Smith, 1993), which assists researchers in analyzing the relationship between the teacher and the workplace. Gersten et al. (2001) uses the idea of job design, borrowed from the field of occupational research, to design and understand the research on special education teacher attrition. Additional conceptual models are needed to guide our thinking regarding this research domain.

Method and Measures. Most studies on teacher attrition are based on data collected from questionnaires and surveys (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Boe et al., 1997; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Gersten et al., 2001; Gilpin, 2011; Kaff, 2004; Littrell et al., 1994; Miller et al., 1999; Ndoye et al., 2010; Singh & Billingsley, 1996; Stempien & Loeb, 2002; Westling & Whitten, 1996). A few studies (Brownell et al., 1995, 1997; Edgar & Pair, 2005; Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Morvant & Gersten, 1995) utilized individual, phone, and small group interviews as a means of looking at the relationships among variables associated with teacher attrition. The information gathered was examined using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, regression analysis, path analysis, and bivariate analysis. One study (DeMik, 2008) used narrative inquiry to determine the issues that impact special education teachers’ decisions to stay or leave the field. Conducting research through interviewing as a qualitative

method gives researchers a richer insight into the experiences of a special education teacher.

The qualitative methods used included surveys, some with open-ended questions, and interviews that provide researchers an understanding of aspects of teacher attrition that may not have been realized with less open-ended formats. This format certainly added to the survey studies that thus far have been used most often in attrition research (Billingsley, 2004b). Cross and Billingsley (1994) and Gersten et al. (2001) used path analysis models which looked at relationships among work variables that impact job satisfaction, commitment, and retention of teachers. This model allows researchers to explore the connections among variables while controlling variables that might affect their career choices.

In using bivariate and multivariate approaches, some researchers focused on a particular variable, specific group of variables, or a large number of work related and demographic variables. Morvant and Gersten (1995) focused on factors such as job design, relations with the central office, and the proper fit for the teaching assignment. Westling and Whitten (1996) looked at factors such as lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork, and attitude towards teaching as reasons why special education teachers leave the field.

There is a clear need for data provided by longitudinal studies. One of the few longitudinal studies (Singer, 1993) followed teachers over a long period of time (13 years) to track their paths and determine how many teachers who left the field eventually returned. Collecting data over time allows researchers to identify factors that lead to decisions and to understand the development of teachers' job paths and attitudes.

Summary of Findings

Most of the literature pertaining to the teacher shortage issue and teacher attrition focuses on why teachers leave the profession. This portion of the literature review presented the existing special education teacher attrition research demonstrating that teachers' reasons for leaving relate to a number of variables and relationships and can be presented as "teacher," "workplace," and "personal/affective" variables (Billingsley, 1993). Teacher variables described in the literature include age, gender, race, certification status, experience, preparation, and years teaching experience. Workplace variables discussed are salary level, lack of administrative support, lack of professional growth/development opportunities, role issues, and students. Personal/affective variables reported are job satisfaction, job commitment, and stress. Factors discussed that are external to the teaching position relate to other job opportunities, family, and retirement.

National Board Teacher Certification

The second section of this literature review provides an overview of the research on National Board Teacher Certification. It explains the history and mission of the National Board Teacher Certification process, describes application and certification requirements, discusses issues/concerns related to the process, paints a picture of Nationally Board Certified teachers, and provides a local context for National Board Teacher Certification. Additionally, 13 research articles regarding the relationship between National Board Teacher Certification and teacher quality are reviewed.

What is National Board Certification?.

Two critical documents took our nation from being concerned with the lack of student achievement America's students were demonstrating (*A Nation at Risk*, United States Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) to understanding the need to improve the educational system by concentrating on improving the quality of our teachers (*A Nation Prepared*, Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986). Almost 20 years later in 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act* mandated a "highly qualified teacher" in every classroom by the year 2006 (Vandevoort et al., 2004).

For some time scholars and researchers have attempted to explain the correlation between specific teacher characteristics and higher student achievement. What they determined is that "the single most important factor in student achievement is the teacher" (Vandevoort et al., 2004, p. 2). Based on this acknowledgement that teachers are vital to student achievement, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was developed in 1987. Its creation came out of a recommendation from the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession that it is necessary to be able to

distinguish and compensate teachers who excel in the classroom and improve student academic outcomes (Vandevoort et al., 2004). NBPTS is an “independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan, and nongovernmental organization” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009a, p. v) that is run by a board of directors made up mostly of teachers.

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is guided by a mission to: (a) uphold important and challenging standards dictating the knowledge and teaching performance exceptional teachers should be able to exhibit, (b) offer a way to certify those teachers across the country who meet the rigorous standards set by the NBPTS and desire to be certified nationally, and (c) be able to “advocate related education reforms to integrate National Board Certification in American education and to capitalize on the expertise of NBCTs” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009a, p. v). National board certification is voluntary and was developed and supported by teachers and school counselors, who not only developed the National Board Standards, comprise two-thirds of NBPTS board of directors, but who also assess teachers aiming to become Nationally Board Certified (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009a).

In 1991, the National Board provided a policy statement, *Toward high and rigorous standards for the teaching profession: Initial policies and perspectives of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards*. It acknowledged five core principles that guide and explain the principles and ideas in teaching and school counseling that should be respected. These core propositions maintain that NBPTs: 1) are committed to their students and their learning, (2) know the subject areas that they teach and have the skills to teach those areas, (3) understand that they have a responsibility to

manage and monitor their students' learning gains, (4) think and reflect on their teaching practices and learn from their reflections, and (5) are participants in learning communities. These propositions are the basis of the groundwork for the design of the structure of certificates as well as standards for the specific certification areas (McColskey, Stronge, Ward, Tucker, Howard, Lewis, & Hindman, 2005).

Within the National Board framework, there are 25 areas in which teachers can obtain National Board Certification. The areas include various subject matter specialties and developmental levels. Some of the certificates available include: Early Childhood Generalist (ages 3-8), Early and Middle Childhood (ages 3-12; Art, ESL, Literacy: Reading-Language Arts, Music, and Physical Education), Middle Childhood Generalist (ages 7-12), Early Adolescence Generalist (ages 11-15; English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies/History), Early Childhood through young Adulthood Exceptional Needs Specialist, School Counseling, and Library/Media (ages 3-18+), Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood (ages 11-18+); Art, World Languages other than English, Music, Physical Education, English as a New Language, and Career and Technical Education, and Adolescence and Young Adulthood Certificate (Ages 14-18+; English, Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies/History (McColsky et al., 2005). The development of these certificates were all part of a push to develop “professional norms, standards and career stages and to professionalize teaching” (Harris & Sass, 2007, p. 4).

In addition to developing prerequisites to apply for National Board Certification, deciding on what certificates could be granted, developing an assessment system, the National Board needed to develop performance and subject matter standards. The Board

worked for seven years to develop standards in 25 different teaching areas within 16 subject areas by determining the important characteristics of experienced and effective teachers and deciding how best to recognize teachers who display these characteristics. Assessments corresponding to each teaching area were then developed to assess teacher proficiency in the standards (Hakel et al., 2008). In 1994, a committee was formed to take the Five Core Propositions of the National Board for Professional Teaching mentioned above and transform its value into standards that are meaningful and outline remarkable teaching in the field of special education.

Charged with the task to develop standards which “describe in observable form what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2001, p. 3), the Exceptional Needs Standards Committee made sure to be well informed of national and state projects that were taking place in addition to building on the work of the Council for Exceptional Children. Knowing that the field of education is always evolving, the National Board understands that the standards will be continuously reviewed and updated as needed. The current standards are based on the premise that there are certain characteristics that “characterize the accomplished practice of teachers” and the 14 standards are “designed to capture the craft, artistry, proficiency, and understandings-both deep and broad-that contribute to the complex work that is accomplished teaching” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2001, p. 3).

Because my research interests are in the area of special education, the NBPTS Exceptional Needs Standards will briefly be described. The Exceptional Needs Specialist/Early Childhood through Young adulthood standards are organized into four

parts: preparation for student learning, the behaviors that directly increase student learning outcomes, behaviors that support learning, and teacher behaviors which implicitly support student outcomes through professional development activities. The first five standards under the category of Preparing for Student Learning includes standards that address Knowledge of Students, Knowledge of Special Education, Communications, Diversity, and Knowledge of Subject Matter. The second category of Advancing Student learning includes standards that address Meaningful Learning, Multiple Paths to Knowledge, and Social Development. The third category, which focuses on standards addressing Supporting Student Learning, includes Assessment, Learning Environment, Instructional Resources, and Family Partnerships. The final category of the standards for expert teachers of students with special needs is Professional Development and Outreach, which addresses Reflective Teacher Practice, and Contributing to the Profession and to Education. Elaborations and examples of each standard are found on the NBPTS website (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2001).

Description of National Board Certification process.

Nationally Board Certified teachers must meet certain requirements in order to apply for certification. They must have a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution, have a current teaching license, and have taught for three years. The certification process is quite a lengthy and labor intensive, and involves a preliminary screening, the development of a portfolio, and the completion of several written assessments. Those teachers who become certified are required to renew their certificates every ten years (Harris & Sass, 2007).

There are four parts to the portfolio. At least three of the four are classroom based and require student work samples, two that require video recordings of teaching episodes, and all parts require a detailed reflection “describing, analyzing, and reflecting” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2001, p. 1) on the teacher’s direct confirmation of teaching. Overall, National Board candidates have reported spending anywhere from 200-400 hours putting together the portfolio portion (Harris & Sass, 2007). Candidates generally take between 12 and 18 months to go through the process, but a candidate can take up to 3 years without being required to begin the process all over (Hakel et al., 2008).

The second portion of the assessment process includes the “assessment center portion” where teacher candidates show evidence of their content knowledge via six, 30-minute written exercises that have been developed by teaching professionals in that particular area of expertise (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009a). The activities in the assessment center portion were developed to supplement the portfolio portion by giving candidates an opportunity to show the content knowledge they possess. The candidate’s portfolio submissions must present confirmation they have mastered the five core propositions mentioned previously as well as the specific standards for their certification area (Hakel et al., 2008).

There is a \$2,300 cost to take the examination and the candidate needs to obtain a minimum score on all of the portions combined (Vandevoort et al., 2004). The portfolio entries and assessment center activities are evaluated on a score from 1 to 4. The raw values for each assessment are weighted and a scaled score is then determined (Cantrell, Fullerton, Kane, & Staiger, 2007). A final “Total Weighted Scaled Score” of 275 is

required to earn a passing status. Over a two-year period following the initial submission, a candidate may retake any portion of the exam where they earned a score of 2.75 or less and the retake score will replace the previous score earned (Vandevoort et al., 2004).

Almost half of the National Board teacher applicants fail in their first attempt to become certified, but about two-thirds who retake portions of their submission ultimately pass.

Because National Board Certification is based on specific standards, the score a candidate receives demonstrates the ability to which the candidate provided evidence of meeting specific standards. By the end of the assessment process, at least twelve independent teachers have assessed each candidate's submission. Assessors make no references as to how a candidate can improve their submission, but rather focus on the assessment piece entirely. The scoring process is standardized and is under direction of directors and trainers who are seasoned teachers in the field (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009a). The assessors have been trained using previous sample submissions, on how to use the rubric, and are made aware of potential bias which may affect their scoring, all to ensure the reliability of the National Board Certification process (Hakel et al., 2008).

Issues/concerns with the National Board assessment process.

Over the years since the inception of National Board Certification, and especially in reaction to the *No Child Left Behind Act*, there has been a shift in the focus on test results as a means of determining teacher quality and student progress. However, when National Board Certification was developed, its main purpose was not to increase student achievement as determined by test scores. According to the National Board, "teaching was broad, seeking to develop teachers who, rather than drilling their students until they

learned specific bodies of factual knowledge, would use their skills to challenge their students and enable them to achieve high standards considered more broadly” (Hakel et al., 2008, p. 57). I think the differences in philosophies regarding how to measure teacher quality and student success is something that should be considered more closely as we look at the National Board Certification process.

It is also interesting to note that in the current literature, there is little reported on the examination of the National Board Certification process itself. The research mostly focuses on whether the process identifies quality teachers or whether the quality of the teacher is improved as a result of going through the process. What is puzzling is that there is so little research on the examination of the individual pieces of the evaluation process to become Nationally Board Certified and whether it is a good way to identify quality teachers.

Hakel et al. (2008), in their comprehensive report, discussed the specific characteristics and procedures of the assessments involved in the process. They looked at the scoring procedures, reliability and validity of the candidates’ scores, and the ability of the assessments to impartially evaluate the performance of the National Board teacher candidates. Their findings are that the National Board “has taken appropriate steps to ensure that the assessments meet professional standards and results from validity studies document that the assessments are effective in identifying teachers who demonstrate accomplished teaching practices” (Hakel et al., 2008, p. 5).

Cantrell et al. (2007) discuss the uniqueness of National Board Certification in that “it combines high stakes (i.e., significant pay differentials) with an evaluation process that is carried out by a neutral third party” (p. 10). It is believed that when “high

stakes” are involved, it can be problematic for a supervisor such as a principal to evaluate teacher effectiveness due to possible favoritism and discrimination. Despite the issues related to principal evaluation, an evaluation from a third party such as by the National Board can be problematic as well. For instance, when a videotape is submitted as part of a portfolio, there is no way to know how much assistance was obtained from others, how many recordings took place prior to the video submission, as well as how many times a particular lesson was rehearsed prior to taping. Additionally, National Board does not have access to the teacher candidate performance at the school level. The evaluators have no knowledge of the teacher in regards to their daily teaching performance and interactions among staff, parents, and principal. Not having access to this piece of information regarding teacher’s performance can be considered a disadvantage to the National Board assessment process.

Darling-Hammond (as cited in Smith et al., 2005) outlines some important features of the NBPTS assessment process that allows it to offer valid information that can be used for policy-making determinations. The features include standardized evaluations by expert educators, assessments based on “on-demand performance tasks” (p. 17) and teacher work samples, assessment systems which are “highly developed” (p. 17) and deemed as reliable and valid measures, as well as the fact that the standards from which the assessments are based have also been deemed as reliable and valid. In addition, assessment of teacher work samples as a way to offer evidence of the relationship between teaching and student achievement is supported in the research.

Van Driel, Beijjaard, & Verloop (as cited in Vandervoort et al. 2004) looked at the issue of whether some teachers may have a harder time verbalizing what it is they

know and can do, and whether some teachers who are less articulate could fail the National Board while those teachers who are more articulate might be granted certification even if he or she is not necessarily a more exemplar teacher. This may be due to “their ease or difficulty in translating personal, practical, knowledge in action into a form of knowledge-about-action that is amenable to assessment in conventional ways” (p. 9). Cantrell et al. (2007) suggest combining the types of assessments used by the NBPTS along with prior value-added estimates from standardized testing to help identify the most exemplary and effective teachers.

Similarly, Vandervoort et al. (2004) comments on the possibility that the assessment process of the National Board may produce “more than usual false positives and false negatives” (p. 9) and should be researched more in detail. This can be due to the type of measurements used in the National Board Certification process as the current methods may only offer a snapshot of how a teacher performs (Shutz & Moss, 2004). Similarly, Pool, Ellet, Schiavone, & Carey-Lewis (2001) interviewed NBCTs to explore the validity of the National Board assessment process. Through observations and interviews the authors determined that there was great variability among Nationally Board Certified teachers and that they “ranged from novice to expert in skill level” (p. 9). This study supports the study by Vandervoort et al. (2004) that there may be many false positives of teachers receiving NBC due to the assessment design.

Out of concern that special education teachers make up 12% of the teaching workforce, but only make up 7% of the number of teachers that are Board certified, Benson, Agran, and Yocum (2010) surveyed 20 Nationally Board Certified Exceptional Needs Specialists. The researchers investigated whether certain questions as part of the

portfolio portion of the National Board Certification process were problematic and thus may prevent special education teachers from performing well on these select questions. According to the respondents in the study, the phrasing of three of the items in entry one of the portfolio portion may have been unclear. Benson et al. (2010) believe that based on these findings, NBPTS should revisit those specific questions to increase the validity of the questions within that entry.

The study by Benson et al. (2010) aimed to determine whether problematic questions within the assessment of NBCTs could partially account for the low percentage of special education teachers who have obtained National Board Certification. Although the respondents found three questions in one of the entries to be problematic in its phrasing, there are some limitations to this study. For example, it was based on a small number of teachers, all of whom had successfully become NBCTs and had been chosen by convenience sampling. To enhance the validity of this study, the authors could increase the sample size, use random sampling, use interviewing techniques, and include teachers who were not successful in attaining National Board Certification. In addition, it is important to consider other possible reasons that a less than expected number of special education teachers are becoming Nationally Board Certified. As the authors recognize, it may be due to special education burnout and attrition, the fact that 50% of special education teachers are leaving the profession before their fifth year of teaching, and the stress created due to a job design which may leave little “time or energy left for planning or pursuit of optional professional development opportunities” (p. 157). Although the evidence present in this study is weak, there is nonetheless a concern about the small

percentage of special education teachers benefiting from the National Board Certification process.

Who are National Board Certified teachers?.

Since 1993, when the National Board began assessing teachers and granting certificates, more than 82, 000 teachers (as of December 2009) have become Nationally Board Certified across the country. In 2009, there were nearly 8,900 new teachers certified. The number of current NBCTs represents nearly 2% of the teachers eligible to apply for certification. Participation rates differ a great deal between states due in part to the differences in the incentives each state provides. In Illinois, from 1993-2006, 3,382 teachers applied for teacher certification and 1,985 teachers (1.4 % of eligible teachers and 58.7 % of those applied) achieved this goal (Hakel et al., 2008).

Perda (2007) reported several interesting statistics regarding the characteristics of teachers who apply for and obtain National Board Certification. He reported that 64.1% of female candidates were successful as opposed to 59.1% for male candidates. Additionally, white candidates succeeded 67.9 % of the time, Asian candidates 61.3% of the time, Pacific Islanders 57% of the time, American Indian or Alaskan natives 54.9% of the time, Hispanic candidates 54.4% of the time, and African American candidates only 31.4% of the time. Currently, there is little research as to why there are low numbers of minority teachers pursuing and obtaining National Board Certification. More research is needed in this area.

Teacher candidates working in suburban schools were more successful (75.6% of the time), while teachers working in urban and rural communities were successful 65.6% and 68.2% of the time. Those teachers who were teaching in a high school were more

successful (87.1% of the time) as opposed to elementary (62.7% of the time) and middle school (60.6% of the time) teachers. The mean age and years of experience for the NBCT is 40.3 years old with 12.6 years of teaching experience. There is a tendency for the NBCT to have a higher education level than those teachers without National Board Certification. According to Perda (2007) an important finding was that Nationally Board Certified teachers have a lower attrition rate as compared to non-NBCTs. Another finding reported by Hakel et al. (2008) is that teachers who hold National Board Certification may be less likely to work in “high poverty, high-minority, and low-performing schools,” which is where they are needed the most. This may be due to the increased job opportunities created by having National Board Certification.

Striving to earn National Board Certification is a major commitment. There is a monetary investment of generally \$2,500 and entails many hours of preparation, receiving parental permission to videotape teaching lessons, and the support of a fellow colleague to assist in the videotaping. It must also create some pressure for the teacher candidate because it would become public knowledge that they are attempting National Board Certification. Nationally Board Certified teachers have cited reasons for completing National Board and they include the feeling of personal accomplishment, recognition of their teaching by others, and encouragement from colleagues and/or principals (Hakel et al., 2008). According to Belden (as cited in Hakel et al., 2008) NBCT's worked towards National Board Certification for the personal challenge (84%), a chance to improve their teaching skills (79%), a possibility of career improvement (53%), and because of the monetary gain (54% to 59%). Similarly, in a study surveying teachers across six states that made up 65% of the NBCTs, Koppich (as cited in Hakel et

al., 2008), reported that teachers who became Nationally Board Certified had three main reasons: “to improve student learning (95%), to achieve the potential for increased financial compensation (90%), and to obtain external validation for the quality of one’s teaching (88%)” (p. 148).

States offer different incentives based on the value they place on their teachers becoming Nationally Board Certified. Most of the incentives are financial and vary per state a great deal. As stated earlier, these incentives seem to affect the participation of teachers within a state. As of 2006, Illinois covers the fees associated with National Board up to \$2,000 and offers a \$3,000 per year salary bonus in addition to a stipend of \$1,000 for mentoring. As another example, North Carolina and South Carolina make up about 37% of Nationally Board Certified teachers and this may largely have to do with the generous incentive plan they offer. In North Carolina, a loan is given to cover the \$2,500 fee and then paid for when the teacher candidate becomes a NBCT. If a teacher is unsuccessful, half of the \$2,500 is paid for them. In addition, North Carolina pays \$7,500 additional to each NBCT for every year they are certified and releases their teachers for three days to work on their portfolios. Similarly, South Carolina provides a 12% pay increase every year a teacher is certified. In contrast, a state such as Alaska offers no incentives and does not pay for the fees, and its participation rate is 2%. This shows a probable correlation between incentives offered and teacher participation in National Board Certification (Hakel et al., 2008).

Although Nationally Board Certified teachers only make up around 3% of the 3.1 million teachers who might be eligible to apply for certification, numbers are on the rise. The numbers of National Board teachers vary across the country and seem to be clustered

in certain states, as 64% of school districts across the country have no teachers who have applied for National Board Certification. There seems to be a strong link between the number of National Board Certified teachers in a state and the incentives a state offers to achieve certification. However, NBCTs have reported other reasons for completing National Board aside from the monetary motivation. Overall, teachers report their experience with the National Board Certification process to be a positive one and a “worthwhile professional development activity that improved their teaching practices and stimulated them to become more reflective” (Hakel et al., 2008, p. 192).

National Board certification in a local context.

As of the 2008-2009 school year, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) enrolled about 408,600 students within elementary, secondary, and charter schools. Of the students in CPS, 82.7% are low-income, and 14.8% are limited in their English proficiency. The district employed 23,727 teachers in 627 schools throughout Chicago. Among those teachers there are about 1,200 Nationally Board Certified teachers; there is at least one Nationally Board Certified teacher in more than half of the schools in the district. Additionally more than 50 schools have a teaching staff that consists of 15% Nationally Board Certified teachers (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009b).

CPS is the third largest school district in the country and the amount of teachers earning the distinction of NBCT has risen to 1,200 (2008) in less than 10 years. Most notably, according to CPS, 90% of those teachers have remained within the CPS system, which is “far above typical teacher retention rates in urban school systems” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009b, p. 1). Additionally, statistics show

that NBCTs are working in high need schools with students from low-income families (60% of Chicago NBCTs), and 85 % of Chicago's NBCTs are working in schools that are made up of at least 85% minority students.

CPS administrators see this as a positive trend towards hiring and training experienced and effective teachers, knowing that it is vital to improving student achievement. They see this as a direct result of a positive relationship between CPS, the Chicago Teachers Union, the Mayor's office, and the Chicago Public Education Fund, which is a "nonprofit organization that raises venture capital for the district" (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009b, p. 1). Together these groups set out to encourage participation in National Board Certification. The Chicago Education Fund has "invested more than \$6 million" in encouraging National Board Certification. The state of Illinois subsidizes \$1,000 of the National Board fees and another \$1,000 is matched from federal monies. In addition, NBCTs receive a \$3,000 annual stipend for a period of ten years and supplementary stipends if they provide mentoring or professional development in high need schools. In addition, on a more local level, the Chicago Teachers Union was able to negotiate an additional \$1,750 salary increase for teachers with National Board Certification. Altogether, a teacher can increase their salary about \$4,000 a year on top of their base salary as a result of having National Board Certification (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009b).

Chicago is hoping to "improve student outcomes in the city's most troubled schools by creating a critical mass of high-performing teachers and administrators in leadership roles" (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009b, p. 3). As

an example, Talcott Fine Arts and Museum Academy, which had been below the district-wide average in test scores, now has almost 25% of their staff Nationally Board Certified, and since then the standardized test scores have doubled. In addition, reports show that NBCTs have become an important part in mentoring and supporting new teachers as well as in holding other leadership roles. According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research, 50% of NBCTs in Chicago have taken on some sort of leadership role in the schools. In sum, district administrators claim that the increasing numbers of Nationally Board Certified teachers is “one of the factors driving student achievement trends” in Chicago (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009b, p. 14).

National Board Teacher Certification and teacher quality.

Following is a synthesis and analysis of studies from 2000-2010 that examine specifically the relationship between National Board Certification and teacher quality. Table IV, Appendix B provides a summary of the 13 research articles reviewed. This table describes the (a) participants of the study, (b) purpose of the study, and (c) the results of the study. Other articles related to teacher quality are reviewed and discussed. Limitations of studies are also highlighted.

Most experts agree, “the single most influential school-based factor contributing to school improvement and student achievement is the teacher” (Smith et al., 2005, p. 5). Additionally, the *No Child Left Behind Act* stresses that the quality of a teacher is vital to the academic achievement of students. Especially during this time of increasing focus on accountability and standards, what still remains unclear is how to measure teacher quality. The National Boards for Professional Teaching Standards was designed as a program that “acknowledged the idea of expertise in teaching and certifies teachers who

demonstrate that they are accomplished teachers” (Smith et al., 2005, p. 6). For policymakers, teachers, and administrators, there are large questions surrounding whether there is a positive relationship between NBCTs, the quality of their teaching and the achievement of their students. As the number of NBCTs increases, there is a demand for clear evidence that the National Board process is able to differentiate teachers who are more adept at increasing student achievement (Smith et al., 2005).

There has been much research comparing non-NBCTs to NBCTs and most of those studies have been positive and based on self-reports from NBCTs. Many of these reports were research conducted by the National Board itself and did not focus on student outcomes. Sato, Hyler, and Monte-Sano (as cited in Vandervoort et al., 2004) looked at the process of becoming Board certified and how that might enhance a teacher’s motivation to become a leader. Whitman (as cited in Vandervoort et al., 2004) surveyed 2000 teachers and explored the attitudes non-NBCTs and NBCTs have towards teaching. Ralph (as cited in Vandervoort et al., 2004) surveyed 239 NBCTs in order to understand their perspectives on the National Board process and its influence on the climate of the schools. In a survey by the Indiana Professional Standards Board (as cited in Vandervoort et al., 2004), NBCTs indicated that they felt going through the National Board Certification process made them more successful educators. This is just a short description of many of the studies related to National Board and its efficacy. Other researchers have used case studies, interviews, and observations as methods to gain further insight into Board Certified teachers. The remainder of this chapter deals with research that explores National Board Certification and student outcomes (Vandervoort et al., 2004).

One of the studies that has drawn much attention due to its comprehensiveness and creativity, is that of Bond, Jaeger, Smith & Hattie (2000), which looked at National Board Certification in connection with teacher expertise. Based on the literature on “expertise and on teachers’ content and pedagogical content knowledge” (p. 10), Bond and his colleagues developed 13 characteristics of expert teachers that were compared to characteristics of NBCTs. When compared using a writing sample, students of NBCTs performed better than students of non-NBCTs. Overall, the findings from this study suggest that assessments developed by NBPTS are able to determine teachers who are “experts” based on the characteristics of expert teachers. The limitations of this study include a small sample size in only two certificate areas, as well as the fact that it was funded by NBPTS. A conflict may exist as one of its main researchers, Bond, worked with the National Board for several years.

Cavalluzzo (2004) was one of the earliest researchers to explore the student achievement outcomes of students of NBCTs and non-NBCTs in a comprehensive way (107,997 students and 2,137 teachers over a two year period). The study utilized data for ninth and tenth grade math students in the Florida area as well as the two standardized achievement tests administered at the end of each year. Cavalluzzo (2004) adjusted for student and teacher variables and found that the achievement outcomes of students who had NBCTs were a great deal higher than those students who did not have a teacher who participated in National Board Certification. Interestingly, the students who had teachers who attempted to obtain NBC and failed did worse on achievement tests as compared to teachers who never attempted National Board Certification. The study’s large sample size and effective measures to collect data enhance the reliability of these findings and

show a positive relationship between NBCTs and higher student outcomes as well as supports the idea that NBPTS can reliably identify teachers who are effective in the field.

Another study by Vandervoort et al. (2004) used less advanced analytical methods and a smaller sample size, but reported similar results to that of Cavalluzzo (2004). The authors investigated the differences between students of 35 NBCTs and their non-NBCTs colleagues across 14 school districts in Arizona to compare achievement outcomes. Using four years of data from the Stanford Achievement tests in three subjects (math, reading, and Language Arts) for students in third through sixth grades, the authors found that students of NBCTs outperformed their peers in three fourths of the assessments. Vandervoort et al. (2004) concluded that NBCTs are more effective teachers and that their students made “over one month greater gains” (p. 2) than students of non-NBCTs. This gain equaled the benefits students would have from spending an additional month each year in school. A second part to this study involved surveying principals and teachers about their opinions on the National Board Certification process. Most principals (90%) felt that the National Board process was adding to teacher quality and student success. Most NBCTs reported feeling like the process was an important “professional growth experience” (Vandervoort et al., 2004, p. 25).

Similarly, Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2007) aimed to explore the connection between student outcomes and teacher credentials. Their information came from longitudinal data of students in North Carolina who are in grades 3 through 5 from 1995-2004. The authors found that “teacher’s experience, test scores and regular licensure all have positive effects on student achievement with larger effects for math and reading” (p. 26). In addition, Clotfelter et al. (2007) support the finding that teachers with licensure,

including NBCTs, are more effective teachers than non-NBCTs. However, they note that it is unclear whether the NBCT is actually more effective prior to receiving National Board Certification or if the process fosters this effectiveness.

In a similar yet more thorough study, Goldhaber and Anthony (2004) utilized student achievement data to compare NBCTs and student outcomes. They looked at standardized test data from 1996-1998 of students from North Carolina who were in the third through fifth grades. This comprehensive study revealed that students who had teachers who had earned National Board Certification status did from 7% to 15% better on their achievement test scores. They concluded that NBPTS could offer “information about teacher quality above and beyond what can be learned from performance on teacher licensure tests alone” (p. 12). The authors also found that a teacher’s specific teaching position does matter and that students who are younger and low-income seem to benefit to a larger degree from having a Nationally Board Certified teacher.

Interestingly, Goldhaber and Anthony (2005) also found that teachers who applied for National Board were more effective prior to receiving National Board Certification, possibly due to the amount of work and commitment needed to go through the certification process. In addition, those same teachers seem to be less effective even after the process is over. The authors feel that the reader should be cautious with these results due to the small sample size of teachers. They also found it important to compare only NBCTs to those who have applied to National Board but have been unsuccessful because comparing NBCTS to non-NBCTs does not take into account the fact that the pool applying for National Board Certification may be significantly different than a group

of teachers who have not applied. Their research showed that NBPTS is able to, from their pool of applicants, effectively distinguish those teachers who are remarkable.

Contributing to evidence of a positive relationship between NBCTs and student outcomes, Smith et al. (2005) investigate and compare “depth of student learning” and NBCTs. The sample is derived from 64 teachers from 17 states, 55% of who are NBCTs and 45% of who applied for National Board Certification and failed. A major issue in determining the relationship the authors aimed to investigate is deciding on how to best measure teacher effectiveness. Often used in education, the standardized assessment scores is seen as problematic in evaluating teacher effectiveness. Because of this, Smith et al. (2005) choose a different model to investigate the question of teacher quality. They used the Oregon Teacher Work Sample Methodology (TWSM) to evaluate teacher artifacts to assess teacher effectiveness. Smith et al. found that there was a high correlation between student outcomes and NBCTs in six out of seven of the outcomes measured. In addition, they indicate that NBCTs create lessons and assignments designed to advance deeper knowledge.

In contrast to the studies discussed above, Sanders, Ashton, and Wright (2005) compare data from students in third through eighth grades to compare NBCTs with their peers. They used math and reading scores collected over two years that offered data of over 130,000 student assessment outcomes for both subjects. The authors differentiated between NBCTs, possible future NBCTs, teachers who attempted National Board Certification without earning it, and those with no NBPTS connection. Sanders et al. (2005) report little differences between the groups in their teaching effectiveness. However, they did mention that the differences vary across grade levels.

The authors note one of the limitations of this study has to do with the use of achievement outcomes as a determinant of teacher effectiveness. Despite this, Sanders et al. (2005) conclude “the NBPTS certification process does a relatively poor job of distinguishing effective from ineffective teachers” (p. 11).

McColskey et al. (2005) reported mixed findings in their study of NBCTs and non-NBCTs. Their first priority entailed investigating the student outcome scores of 5th graders who had Nationally Board Certified teachers in three North Carolina school districts as compared to those students in the districts that had teachers who were not NBCTs. The second priority in the study was to look at NBCTs teaching practices through observations, artifacts, interviews, and surveys and compare the data to other teachers based on student achievement data based on standardized test. The authors found no differences between NBCTs and non-NBCTS effect on student achievement. However, there were some interesting findings presented: (a) NBCTs scored the highest out of the four subgroups in terms of instructional planning, (b) NBCTs seem to earn higher scores on ratings related to developing assignments of a higher intellectual challenge, (c) NBCTs earned lower scores on “teacher effectiveness dimensions” (p. 74) when observed by researchers as opposed to their non-NBCTs peers.

One study that opposes NBPTS and its assertions of being able to identify quality teachers is a study carried out by Stone (2002). Stone investigated teacher performance scores to standard values in order to determine the effect a teacher might have on the growth in student outcomes. Based on 16 NBCTs in Tennessee, Stone reported that only 15 of the teacher scores could be considered “exemplary” while 11% of the teachers’ scores would be considered “deficient”. In sum, Stone (2002) “indicates that the NBPTS

standards and certification process—at least as presently constituted—are not serving the teacher quality aims of public policy” (p. 4).

Harris and Sass (2007), attempted to improve on limitations cited in previous studies by using the Florida Department of Education’s K-20 Data Warehouse (1 million students and 30,000 math teachers and 33,000 reading/language arts teachers) which covers all schools in the state of Florida, including middle, elementary and high schools for a period of four years. They set out to explore the effects National Board Certification has on teachers and students based on information from both high and low stakes assessments. Although they found that for some subgroups NBPTS does offer a promising indicator of teacher productivity, the ability of NBPTS to determine high quality teachers is weak and can be different among subjects and grades taught. In addition, Harris and Sass found no solid confirmation that the National Board certification itself positively affects teachers or that having a Nationally Board certified teacher in a given school would have a positive impact on teacher colleagues. The findings should be considered with caution as they were mixed partially due to test characteristics of the two types of assessments (Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test or the SAT-9) used. This study’s data set is much larger than most and in fact involves “three times the number of NBCTS analyzed by Goldhaber and Anthony and about twenty times the number included in Cavaluzzo’s analysis” (p. 14).

Cantrell et al. (2007) used a “random assignment” to look at how National Board Certification applicants (certified and uncertified) affect student academic outcomes. They utilized longitudinal data from 2003-2005 of 99 pairs of NBCTs and non-NBCTs that taught in the same school, grade, and year. The authors found that NBPTS has the

ability to gather valuable information in recognizing effective teachers. Because of this finding, Cantrell et al. suggest using the information in recognizing effective teachers earlier in a teacher's career in order to increase retention of the most superior teachers prior to any occurrence of attrition.

Hakel et al. (2008) has been mentioned throughout this response because it is the most inclusive study and synthesis to date on the relationship between NBCTs and student learning outcomes. Although there has been much research done on the subject, Hakel et al. (2008) concludes:

There is evidence from both a psychometric review of the assessment process and analysis of student achievement test results that Board certification identifies highly qualified teachers. There is no conclusive evidence that teachers improve their practices by going through the certification process, and there is essentially no evidence that certification of the existing recognition and financial incentives awarded to Board-Certified teachers in some states are sufficient to substantially increase their tenure as teachers. (p. 229)

Summary of Findings

This section of the chapter reviewed 13 research articles along with additional articles related to the topic. Many of the studies report differing opinions of National Board Certification. Some of the studies find significant correlations between NBCTs and student achievement and some find no distinctions between the student outcomes of NBCT's and non-NBCTs. The studies vary according to sample size and variability among methods (MCCaffrey & Rivkin, 2007).

Criticisms of the current literature include small sample sizes which “lack statistical power” (McColskey et al., 2005, p. 9), large sample sizes which could decrease significant variation, not carefully examining the effects of student differences within a classroom that may relate with how students are assigned to a Nationally Board Certified teacher, and the possibility of inaccuracies when connecting student assessment data to teacher assignments (McColskey et al., 2005). In addition, Hakel et al. (2008) recognize the need for more mixed methods research, making use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Other suggestions include exploring a larger range of subject areas, grade levels, and certificate areas focused on within each study (Smith et al., 2005). More research in this area is needed.

Although findings remain somewhat inconsistent as to whether NBCTs are more likely to positively affect the achievement of their students, I believe the data that currently supports the use of NBPTS as a tool for identifying high quality teachers are substantial enough to validate efforts to encourage and compensate teachers for seeking National Board Certification. Also, the data are extensive enough to support the use of National Board Teacher Certification as a means of identifying high quality teachers for this study.

Chapter III: Methodology

This study was designed to explore Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Moreover, the study contributes to practical knowledge regarding attrition and retention efforts of special education teachers as well as possible implications for teacher preparation. This chapter includes: (a) descriptions of the framework/design of the study including sampling, participant recruitment, and setting of interviews, (b) data collection, (c) data analysis procedures, (d) methodological, researcher, and ethical considerations, (e) study delimitations/assumptions, and (f) a brief conclusion.

Framework/Design

This qualitative study aimed to address the following question: What are Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools? Currently there is limited research on Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Although there are many approaches to qualitative analysis, specific research questions and academic research areas propose certain methods for developing systems of analysis. The theoretical approach to the research question determines how a researcher processes, reflects on, and takes meaning from the data. Theory can assist the researcher in working out challenges that appear in research, and these challenges require going deeper into the main components of the data to extend theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The theoretical model of this study was based on grounded theory, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and became easily accepted as a qualitative approach due to its “element of scientific rigor and intellectual rationale” (Lichtman, 2006, p. 66). Interviewing was chosen as the research methodology for this study because interviewing is seen as an influential way to understand educational and social concerns and topics by looking through the perspective of those whose experiences expose those concerns/issues (Seidman, 2006). Interviewing is a documented method to learn about a participant’s individual experiences directly from his or her perspective. The purpose of this study was to determine and describe collective themes related to experienced special education teachers’ perceptions of why they remain teaching and aligns with the design and purpose of a qualitative study.

Data analysis when using grounded theory includes open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and a development of provisional patterns which complemented well the purpose of this study. Categories emerge by continuously comparing cases with other cases (Huberman & Miles, 1994). As part of the grounded theory approach, coding, developing ideas and themes, and the expansion of theory are all interwoven together as part of the process. Grounded theory does not have distinct phases, but rather “concept recognition, coding, and theory development that are part of a continuous and seamless package” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 222). Grounded theory allowed the data analysis process to develop without predetermined categories, strict guidelines, or previous theories which could lead the interview data to be interpreted a certain way. Also, allowing the data to emerge in open-ended interviews promoted the surfacing of issues that may not have surfaced using another less open-ended method. The research design

of this study allowed the data to drive the interview questions and ultimately resulted in rich information that may not have otherwise surfaced.

In Grounded theory, theory emerges from the data and the importance is on constructing the theory rather than testing it. Because grounded theory is less about the testing of a particular theory, this research study concentrated less on limitations and generalizations of findings and more on developing a narrative that describes this particular groups' perceptions. Grounded theory was chosen as the approach to analyzing and interpreting data in this study because it is specific and analytic in its method (Lichtman, 2006). This approach allowed the data to emerge throughout the interviewing process rather than testing a theory that had already been proposed. Its flexible design allowed the questions to be refined throughout the process, move between fluid steps in analyzing and collecting data, as well as determine when enough data had been collected. For instance, during this study I continuously assessed the themes that emerged and was able to return to participants in subsequent interviews to fill in gaps in the data through further inquiry. Tentative codes and themes were constructed and refined throughout the process. While it offered flexibility in its design, this grounded theory study followed specific steps in the data analysis process.

Sampling.

When thinking about the “how” of a study involving interviewing, the researcher must think of those who are going to be interviewed, how to identify and have access to the participants, and what characteristics to look for in a participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In choosing participants and providing credibility to this study, special education teachers who are both experienced and knowledgeable were chosen.

To attain a rich understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, qualitative researchers often select participants “purposefully” (Patton, 1990). In this study, purposeful criterion sampling was employed in order to discriminate participants based on certain characteristics relevant to the study. This assured that all study participants collectively shared specific criteria vital to this study. The sampling criteria for this study included: (a) teachers who hold National Board Teacher Certification (Exceptional Needs Certificate), (b) teach students with disabilities in low-income schools in the elementary grades (kindergarten through eighth) in Cook County, Illinois, (c) have taught special education for a minimum of six years, (d) work with students with varying disabilities and provide services through a variety of delivery models, and (e) have no current plans of leaving teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Nationally Board Certified special education teachers were chosen for this study because the National Board Teacher Certification process is deemed to be one of the most rigorous, standards-based, and evidence-based procedures for identifying high quality teaching. Because these teachers are deemed to be high quality teachers, have been teaching for three or more years, and generally have a lower attrition rate than other teachers (Perda, 2007), they were considered ideal candidates to participate in this study.

Additionally, participants had to be teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools located in Cook County, Illinois. According to the U.S. Census (2005), Cook County is an urban county in Illinois that is the second most populous county in the United States and contains 785 public school districts. While the study was open to all Nationally Board Certified special education teachers in this area, all participants who qualified for this study taught in the Chicago Public School District. Although there are a

large number of public schools within Cook County, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the third largest school district in the country (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2009b). Because the Chicago Public Schools services a large diverse urban area, there was a strong likelihood that the Nationally Board Certified teachers who qualified for this study would be teaching in this school district.

Another requirement to participate in this study was for the teacher to be currently teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. This criterion was chosen due to the fact that 12.2% of students in Illinois are living in poverty (Terpstra et al., 2010) and it has been shown that a student with a disability living in poverty is at greater risk for school failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Also, many of the schools experiencing high teacher attrition rates have a high percentage of “low-income, minority, and low-performing students” (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006, p. 191).

I limited the study to participants teaching students in kindergarten through eighth grade. This decision was based on the relatively low number of study participants as well as a recognition that a high school teacher’s role is quite different from that of an elementary school teacher. Also, keeping the grade level range within elementary school kept the variables within the study to a minimum.

Finally, in order to meet study criteria, teachers were required to teach students with various disabilities across multiple settings. This criterion was chosen primarily due to my extensive experience working with special education teachers in the public schools. Through this experience I noted that special education teachers were increasingly providing services to students with varying disabilities in a variety of settings through a variety of delivery models. This idea was confirmed during a presentation at an OSEP

Project Director's Conference (2010), where Billingsley discussed special education teachers increasing responsibility of "wearing many hats". Because of this trend (Kaff, 2004), the study criteria included participants who are working with students who collectively represented two or more disability categories and who are being educated in two or more service delivery models.

Existing research shows that four out of every ten special education teachers will leave the profession before their fifth year of teaching (Billingsley, 2004), and due to this finding I chose to interview special education teachers who have taught for six or more years and have expressed their intent to remain in the field.

Participant recruitment.

According to the National Board for Professional Teaching standards (2009a), there are 3,923 Nationally Board Certified teachers in the state of Illinois and 381 of those teachers hold Exceptional Needs Certification. Of the 381 special education teachers within the state, there are 171 Nationally Board Certified teachers who hold the Exceptional Needs Certificate in Cook County. Letters were sent electronically (see E-mail Appendix F) to all of these 171 special education teachers describing the intent of the study, describing criteria for participation, and inviting the teacher to participate. Those interested in participating in the study were asked to provide demographic information (see Demographic Information Survey in Appendix C) via *Survey Monkey* (presented in Tables I and II in chapter IV).

Despite having only nine qualify for the study, 67 of the 171 Nationally Board Certified special education teachers who were contacted to participate in the study responded to my request to some degree. Some responded with questions, others

regretfully declined due to various job circumstances, several mentioned wanting to participate if study criteria were to change, and 23 possible participants completed the demographic survey (Demographic Survey see Appendix C) on *Survey Monkey* whether they met the criteria or not.

Once *Survey Monkey* responses were collected and matched with study criteria, nine study participants qualified and were selected from the pool of 23 interested special education teachers. To allow the study to include some variability among participants, it had initially been determined that this study would have ten participants in its sample. Unfortunately, due to very specific study criteria, I was unable to obtain ten research participants. After having exhausted all possible avenues to obtain participants who qualified for the study, the dissertation committee members supported the inclusion of nine study participants. The initial intent of the study was to include female and male participants, participants who collectively represented various racial/ethnic groups, and participants who represented several grade levels and work with students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Setting of Interviews.

Interviews took place during the spring of 2011 at a location and time that was convenient for the participant. Settings for the interviews included several participants' schools, a participant's home, and a local library. Interviews were face to face with the exception of two follow-up phone interviews and three e-mail correspondences for clarification purposes. No other persons were present during the interviews except for an individual who shared a participant's classroom. During the interview, every attempt was made to make the participant feel comfortable with the process. Interview guide

questions were sent to the participants ahead of time to assist with any anxiety regarding the questions being asked (see Appendix D). Also, I allowed for time to explain the study process and subsequent steps prior to each interview. All of the participants appeared to be very welcoming, open, and willing to share their stories. They expressed a high interest in being part of the research effort to understand special education teacher retention and attrition.

Data Collection

The goal of qualitative interviewing is for the researcher to understand the participants' perspectives from their own words, in order to understand the intricacies of their viewpoints and experiences (Patton, 1990). This study combined different interviewing approaches in order to allow flexibility in probing and deciding which issues to explore in greater depth.

Interview format and approach.

Three types of interview approaches used in this study were the semi-structured narrative interview, structured interview, and phone interview. The advantage of the semi-structured narrative interview is that it “allows the interviewer/evaluator to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes. Questions can be individualized to establish in-depth communication with the person being interviewed” (Patton, 1990, p. 282). This type of interview takes advantage of the unprompted and natural interactions that take place during the course of a conversation. This high level of flexibility in the interviewing process was necessary in this study to allow the data to naturally emerge from the voices of the study participants without being driven by preconceived ideas and theories or the current literature. After initial prompting by one

of the guiding narrative questions, subsequent queries and probes emerged throughout the interview, taking advantage of flexibility and allowing the interviews to go in directions determined by the participants.

The structured interview approach entailed determining, prior to the interview, the ideas or issues that would be explored (see Interview Guide in Appendix D). In other words, the particular wording and ordering of the interview questions were not predetermined and the interview guide served as a checklist to help the participants' narrative remain focused and ensure that all the significant issues were covered. Whereas a deep conversation was fostered, the interview guide offered parameters to remain on track. The use of an interview guide included common information that needed to be gathered from each interview, but without a set of very specific questions written ahead of time to guide this process (Patton, 1990). As a novice interviewer, the use of an interview guide was preferred alongside the informal conversational interview in order to address predetermined issues. It should be noted that in order to keep the interview conversational and allow for attentive listening to the participant while exploring new issues that emerged, the interview guide was not overly detailed.

The third interview approach used in this study was the telephone interview. In some cases it was necessary to conduct follow-up phone interviews to clarify the meaning of a response in an interview, to ask follow-up questions that may have emerged during data analysis, or as a member check (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). For example, after one of the final interviews, I needed further clarification from a participant regarding her education history, so a brief phone interview was scheduled. Additionally, a participant who preferred to communicate via e-mail made several comments and changes to her

interview transcript during the member check process. The changes to her transcript prompted further clarification and questioning, and as a result required a phone interview.

Interview procedures.

While qualitative interviews generally last from one to two hours long, Weiss (1994) states that an interview can continue as long as it produces valuable information. The first interviews in this study averaged about 70 minutes allowing time for rapport development and to verify demographic information. Subsequent interviews lasted from 35 minutes to 1 hour.

In this study, the participants were interviewed twice, face-to-face. Seidman (2006) discusses an interview model where each interview builds on the other and has a specific purpose. The first interview focused on the participants sharing as much as they could about themselves in relation to the topic. The second interview focused more on reconstructing “the myriad details of the participants’ experiences” (p. 18) regarding the topic being studied. Because the participants were interviewed twice in this study, each interview informed and expanded the next because as I transcribed the first set of transcripts new questions emerged as a result. Additionally, based on working notes and memos, additional questions were constructed during and after the first interview.

During each interview, the participants were asked a variety of questions (main, follow-up, and probes) in order to elicit rich and valuable responses. The main questions were based on the interview guide (see Interview Guide Appendix D) and are the questions that became the framework for the study by ensuring that the research question was examined in both breadth and depth. Using the questions on the interview guide, I began each interview by asking the first question. Each participant talked between five

and 20 minutes discussing each question. When there was a lull in the interview I went on to the next question if it had not already been alluded to in a previous response. The interview guide questions were used to make sure all topics were covered. Some main questions included: (a) Are there other factors that are not related to the profession that affect your decision to remain in the field?, (b) Tell me about your future plans, (c) What sets you apart from the teachers who have left the field?, and (d) Are there any other factors that you have not yet mentioned that affect your decision to remain teaching in the special education field?.

Follow-up questions were asked as a direct result of previous discussions that took place during the previous interview. For example, one follow-up question may have asked a participant to recall a particular event and describe an event further. Another follow-up question may have related to a theme that surfaced across other interviews, but had not yet been explored in all interviews. As part of this study, follow-up questions were asked in the same interview, during the second interview, or in a follow-up phone interview. Transcribing and analyzing the data after each interview was required in order to develop follow-up questions prior to a subsequent interview. Additionally, working notes assisted in determining follow-up questions without largely interrupting the flow of the interview. It was apparent when follow-up questions were needed as I was actively listening and making sure the participant's response was detailed and completely understood.

Probes served to provide clarification, more details, or complete an omitted data piece (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In order to keep the conversation moving, I asked probing questions such as: (a) Can you tell me more about...? , (b) Can you give me a more

detailed description?, (c) Any other examples of this?, (d) Can you tell me again what happened?, or (e) You mentioned ...could you expand on that? (see Interview Guide Appendix D).

An audio recorder was utilized in the interview process in order to ensure the correctness of the data collected and allowed the interview to be more focused without my having to be concerned with taking copious notes. Audio recording was an appropriate tool to record direct quotations that were later used to describe and verify findings. While recording the interview, working notes were taken to assist with framing new questions throughout the interview, data analysis, and the pacing of the interview (Patton, 1990). These notes were brief and written during the interview itself. These notes included statements that were particularly interesting, notations of codes or themes that seemed to be emerging from the interview, brief memos of my thoughts, or notations of questions that needed to be explored further. Despite it being a challenge to take notes while interviewing, these working notes later facilitated the development of themes, location of quotations, or in the discovery of gaps in the interviewing process.

To assist in the data collection process, memoranda were recorded after each interview. A memorandum “refers to very specialized types of written records- those that contain the products of analysis or directions for the analyst” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 217) and served as a type of study journal. The memorandum assisted in recording the development of the interviews as well as my thoughts and feelings. It required that I move further away from the data and instead begin to conceptualize as the interviews progressed. By looking at the interview data conceptually and making early comparisons, the written memoranda moved the process beyond simple descriptions of

data and facilitated in recording the process of data analysis. Memoranda provided direction for coding and theory development and were helpful in the analytic process. The memorandum included highlights of the interview, descriptions of theoretical ideas that emerged during the interview, methodological notations regarding things that affected the interview itself, and personal notes (see Interview Memo Appendix E) (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The memorandum served as a journal to note key ideas or situations such as when a teacher discussed the awareness of “good fit,” or when the time of day and setting of an interview might influence interview responses.

After each interview took place and was recorded, I wrote memoranda to assist in capturing the essence of each interview. Next the interviews were transcribed. I used a speech-to-text computer recognition program called Dragon Naturally Speaking to assist in the transcription process. I utilized a computer program called Express Scribe to slow down the playback of the interview recordings while I echo-dictated each audio-recorded interview. Finally, in order to address issues of precision and reliability, I spot-checked and replayed the interview recordings to recheck each transcription for accuracy (Gibbs, 2007).

Data Analysis

Coding is the procedure of understanding what the data are about and labeling, categorizing, and summarizing teachers’ responses (Charmaz, 2006). It is a step that allowed the data to move from statements made by participants to becoming analytic understandings. According to the grounded theory model to data analysis, coding is the backbone of the process; it is a vital link between data collection and the evolving model to clarify the data. The grounded theory coding process in this study was made up of

three major stages. The first stage is what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call open coding and what Charmaz (2006) refers to as Initial Coding. The second stage is Axial Coding and the final stage of coding is selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) or Theoretical Coding (Charmaz, 2006). Through the coding process, I was able to make sense of the data and find meanings within them (Charmaz, 2006). During data analysis, the process described above was utilized in order to discover unexpected ideas and redefine interview questions.

The process of coding required the creation of codes in order to capture what the study participants were saying. Doing this assured that the responses were accurately understood from the participants' perspective as codes were clarified and refined (Charmaz, 2006). First, I thoroughly read the transcripts after each interview. As I read them, I noted initial codes in the margins of the transcripts. These initial codes were meant to be temporary, relative, and based on the data and changed as other ideas emerged from the interviews. For instance, an initial code such as "goal oriented" later changed and was combined with other codes to become "perseverance". This process of initial or open coding provided me with information regarding where the gaps were in the data as some codes were emerging often while others were not. This prompted me to ask follow-up questions to determine if different themes were actually emerging, or whether a topic just needed to be discussed further in order for that same theme to develop. The advantage to the grounded theory approach is that I was able to see where the gaps lie early in the process which allowed additional data to be gathered. Collecting and analyzing data together instead of waiting to analyze at the end of the process assisted me

in knowing whether an interview or theme needed to be further developed (Charmaz, 2006).

Axial coding is the process where the data that were sifted through during the open coding process are put back together (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this phase, categories became related to subcategories and together shaped a detailed account regarding teachers' perceptions of why they remain and what contributes to this decision. Many codes had emerged during initial coding, but during the axial coding, many were changed, merged with one another, and became subcategories of one another. In other words, I began to make associations between the initial codes to develop axial codes. For instance, initially I developed many codes, but during axial coding, the codes merged when relationships between them became apparent.

Once axial codes were developed, I began to organize selective codes, making it possible to tell the participants' story with some consistency. Selective coding is "integrative" and uses significant codes that are developed in axial coding to examine potential relationships among categories. One way I attempted to do this was to draw a visual map of the relationships among the categories. The use of selective coding allowed me to "not only conceptualize how the substantive codes are related, but also move the analytic story in a theoretical direction" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe several practices that foster integration. Determining a "central category" is a product of the analysis and tells essentially what the "research is all about" (p. 146). The central category needs to be able to justify substantial differences among categories and "pull the other categories together to form an explanatory whole" (p. 146). After significant themes were determined and solidified,

I explored a number of central categories to envelope and explain the seven themes that emerged. The literature indicates that integration requires determining one central category that organizes and explains all of the themes. However, it was determined that two central categories were needed in order to represent the themes that capture experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

I used a popular qualitative computer program called NVivo to assist in the coding process. Researchers in the field have closely examined the use of NVivo as a qualitative tool (Creswell, 2007). It assisted in analyzing and shaping the interview data by supporting the management of the data and locating interview text that corresponded with a particular code or theme. I had access to this computer program through a university where training was also provided prior to beginning the research study.

While the use of a qualitative computer program helped manipulate the data, the same coding and categorizing procedures mentioned previously were used (Creswell, 2007). Codes based on the data from the interviews were introduced prior to uploading the transcribed interviews into NVivo, so much of the coding had taken place prior to introducing the computer program as a tool. The process was as follows: I read the transcripts, working notes, and memos and identified possible codes. The transcribed interviews were then introduced into the computer program, and the software was used to manipulate the data by assisting in creating, changing, and merging codes, as well as searching for coded text within the interview documents in order to identify passages associated with a particular text. In other words, the computer program was not involved

with interpreting the data, but rather helped in manipulating the data so that it was more manageable (Gibbs, 2007).

Methodology Considerations

By looking at how people perceive and interpret events, we make meaning about the relationships that affect their lives. Through interviewing, we learn about the human social condition and learn about issues/environments to which a researcher may not otherwise have access (Weiss, 1994). As a function of the interview process, participants' thoughts and feelings were filtered through my eyes and point of view. I did not attempt to be objective, but instead was "the filter through which information is gathered, processed, and organized" (Lichtman, 2006, p. 117). Because of the nature of interviewing, I recognized the need to be aware of my potential biases that could affect the interview process.

Sample Size.

In discussing methodological considerations one such consideration relates to the sample size of the study. There were nine teachers who participated in this study and it is important to note that interviewing nine individuals is a relatively small number and this affects the generalizability of findings. However, Patton (1990) states that the number of participants in a qualitative study should be more dependent on the research questions being asked, the purpose of the study, what type of information will be valuable and plausible, and how much time and available resources a researcher has. The number of participants and interviews conducted in this study were influenced by all of the above.

Trustworthiness.

Several ways to increase the trustworthiness of this study were also considered. Trustworthiness was examined through member checks during transcript analysis, draft member checks during data analysis, the utilization of three educational professionals who provided feedback on the coding system, and acknowledgement of my potential personal bias.

Member checks were used to check for accuracy and ensure a clear understanding of the participants' statements. They occurred in the following manner: a transcript of the interview was sent to each individual participant and a follow-up phone call/e-mail followed to check the accuracy of the transcription. Additionally, after data analysis and upon request, the participants were sent copies of a draft summary of the analysis to ensure that the "account is acceptable, convincing, and credible" (Gibbs, 2007). All participants requested draft summaries and had one week to respond. If a participant disagreed with the draft summary analysis, she was asked to contact me in order to follow-up and discuss why she disagreed with the analysis. Any disagreement or change would have been treated as additional data. None of the participants expressed disagreement with the analysis. Member checks and offering participants the opportunity to be part of examining the interpretation of the data was vital to increasing trustworthiness and making sure I was in fact examining perceptions that teachers reported. Additionally, three educational professionals read randomly selected portions of the interview transcripts, and provided feedback regarding the extent to which my coding system accurately reflected the teachers' thoughts and ideas. This feedback validated the coding system.

I am a veteran special education teacher who has remained in the classroom for 14 years. This experience proved to be useful in this study in a variety of ways. Study participants expressed that they were comfortable sharing their perceptions and experiences knowing that we shared a common background. Because of my many varied teaching experiences, including preparing teacher candidates at the university level, it was easy to bypass the need to first have a basic understanding of issues regarding the participants' teaching roles during the interview. On the other hand, it was challenging being an experienced special education teacher and researcher. At times it was difficult not to read into participants' responses based on my personal experiences. I also recognized that I could have an effect on the interview process through verbal or nonverbal reactions such as unknowingly smiling or nodding my head following certain responses. In addition, even though sharing an experience with the participant could break the ice and make the participant feel more at ease, I was careful not to affect what the participant may or may not have discussed in the interview (Seidman, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

There is no single opinion on how to deal with the issue of reliability and validity in qualitative research. The grounded theory approach to coding is more than a way of organizing and merging data; it helps tie together ideas and develop potential theoretical interpretations. A real advantage of the grounded theory approach to data analysis in this study was that it was fluid, so I had the ability to go back and change and redefine codes as new data emerged (Charmaz, 2006). This was valuable as codes that emerged at the beginning of the data analysis process evolved as themes developed. This approach to data analysis was needed in order to fully explore perceptions experienced Nationally

Board Certified special education teachers' reported as to why they stay committed to teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Although coding has many advantages as it helps to develop patterns and themes, I made every attempt to maintain the integrity of the voice of the study participants. This took place by remaining committed to accurately understanding the participants' story by inviting them to take part in the data analysis process through member checking and encouraging participants to be part of examining conclusions as they materialized. In terms of the integrity of the data analysis and enhancing the credibility of this study, every attempt was made to challenge themes and explanations by investigating other possible ways in which the data could be explained (Patton, 1990).

In order to enhance credibility, measures were taken to keep the identity of the interview participants private. Raw data were protected and reported in the aggregate form, with the exception of specific teacher comments that are reported as examples of major themes or results. These specific teacher comments are reported anonymously, that is, without any identifying information.

The three main ethical issues surrounding interviewing deal with informed consent, respecting the researcher/participant relationship, and maintaining anonymity. Although the study's main objective is to gather rich information, it was carried out in a way that did not cause any harm to the interview participants (Weiss, 1994). Once participants qualified and agreed to participate in the study, they were assigned a number so that their identity would remain confidential.

Prior to beginning the research study, approval was obtained by the University of Illinois Internal Review Board. Informed consent forms (see Informed Consent

Appendix G) were collected from the study participants prior to beginning the study. The consent form described the purpose of the study, indicated any potential risks involved, clarified a participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, and described the steps that would be taken to ensure confidentiality. Once a participant agreed to participate in the study and signed the consent form, numbers were assigned to each participant and used as identification for the remainder of the study. This safeguarded confidentiality.

Study Delimitations/Assumptions

Delimitations are conscious decisions I made in order to narrow the scope of the study. For instance, in order to address the issue of teacher quality and feel comfortable in assuming the participants would be knowledgeable enough to offer expert viewpoints on the subject, only Nationally Board Certified special education teachers were chosen to participate in this study. This represents an assumption that teachers are experienced quality special education teachers. Additionally, I made the assumption that the participants were open and honest in their responses in order to accurately reflect their experiences and perceptions.

There are some limitations to having chosen to interview only Nationally Board Certified special education teachers in this study. The data may not reflect the opinions of other experienced high quality special education teachers who may not have obtained National Board Teacher Certification. Additionally, another delimitation involves the sample of study participants, which only included experienced special education teachers who have been teaching for six or more years. Although this criterion is based on the current literature on teacher attrition and the large number of special education teachers

leaving the field within six years, it does omit possible valuable information that can be gained from teachers who have taught less than six years. Fortunately, others are studying the career decisions and retention of new teachers extensively. Lastly, this study involved opinions of special education teachers from an urban area in a Midwestern state and may not reflect the same beliefs and experience of special education teachers in other areas of the country or those who teach in rural areas. All of the boundaries set by this study should be considered when interpreting the findings presented in Chapter IV.

Conclusion

This chapter started with discussing the goal of the research study as well as the theoretical approach to qualitative analysis that drove the study's procedures. The chapter provided details regarding the study's design such as sampling methods, recruitment of participants, and setting of the interviews. Next the data collection and interview procedures were discussed. Following a description of the data collection process, this chapter explained steps taken during data analysis and presented methodological, researcher, and ethical considerations as well as the study's delimitations/assumptions. Chapter IV discusses the findings of the research study.

Chapter IV: Results

In this study Nationally Board Certified special education teachers reported their perceptions of why they choose to stay in teaching. A better understanding of why good teachers choose to remain has implications for recruitment and retention policies at the school district level, and for the design of professional development activities that may encourage teacher candidates, novice teachers, and experienced teachers to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. This chapter presents findings collected from interviews with nine experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers from Cook County, Illinois who plan to remain teaching students with various disabilities in kindergarten through eighth grade across multiple settings.

The findings are presented thematically as a result of combining the interview data and identifying themes across interview responses. I present the findings thematically rather than doing a question-by-question analysis due to the nature of the conversational interview process. Although the interviews were guided by specific questions to ensure all topics were addressed, the interview guide questions were open-ended. This interview format rendered a question-by-question analysis difficult and inappropriate in reporting study findings. However, finding themes across questions allowed for an understanding of the participants' stories while shaping a detailed account about teachers' perceptions of why they remain. As each theme is presented in the chapter, direct participant quotations are provided to substantiate data interpretation and findings as well as offer background information to assist the reader with interview context. Prior to the presentation of findings, this chapter provides participant demographic information (e.g., age, gender, highest degree earned), school demographic

information (e.g., school type, grades taught, number of students on caseload. Having this information will assist in understanding the make-up of the participant sample and provide context for the findings.

Demographic Background

Out of 171 Nationally Board Certified special education teachers who were initially contacted to participate in the study, 67 replied with interest. However, most who replied did not meet the study criteria. All of the potential participants meeting the study criteria were selected to participate in the study. Nine experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers who teach in Cook County, Illinois participated in the study. They all teach in low-income Chicago Public Schools and have been teaching for at least six years. Prior to interviewing, participants completed a demographic information survey; their survey responses were verified at the beginning of each first interview. Questions such as, “What was your path to certification?” and “What type of setting/model do you presently teach in?” were asked. (See Appendix C). Additional demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, number of years teaching, and highest degree earned was obtained. Table I presents participant demographics and Table II reveals the demographics of the participants’ school/position. While there are nine participants in this study, some of the categories presented in the Tables do not total to nine because more than one category may apply to an individual participant. For instance, for the category of “certificates/endorsements” in Table I, most participants hold two or more certificates/endorsements. Similarly, in Table II, because the special education teachers in this study teach in multiple grades, the category of “grades taught” also does not equal to nine.

TABLE I
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Variables		Total
Age	26-30	2
	36-40	1
	41-45	2
	51-55	1
	56-60	3
Gender	M	1
	F	8
Ethnicity/Race	Asian	1
	Caucasian	5
	Hispanic	2
	Native American/White	1
Highest Degree	Bachelor's Degree	1
	Master's Degree Plus	8
Years Teaching Special Education	6-10	5
	11-15	1
	16-20	2
	21-25	1
Years Teaching Total	6-10	4
	11-15	1
	16-20	2
	21-25	1
	26-30	0
	31-35	1
Certificates/ Endorsements	National Board Special	9
	Special Education	8
	Early Childhood	2
	Secondary Education	2
	Elementary Education	2
	Bilingual Endorsement	1
	Special Education Endorsement	1
Path to Special Education	Traditional	4
	Alternative Route	1
	Endorsement only	1
	Traditional plus Endorsement	3
Years Teaching Special Education	1-5	3
	6-10	2
	11-15	2
	15-20	1
	20-25	0
	25-30	1

TABLE II
SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Variables		Total Teachers
School Type	Charter Public	2
	Public	7
Students on caseload	0-10	3
	11-15	1
	16-20	5
Settings/Models	Consultative	5
	Inclusive Supports	8
	Co-teaching	4
	Resource	5
	Self-Contained	4
	Case Manage	1
Grades Taught	K-3	3
	4-6	7
	7-8	7
Disability Categories Taught	Emotional/Behavioral	4
	Specific Learning Disability	8
	Autism	5
	Cognitive Disability	6
	Multiple Disabilities	5
	Speech/Language	4
	Orthopedic Impairment	1
	Traumatic Brain Injury	2
	Attention Deficit Disorder/Other Health Impaired	5
	Occupational Therapy Needs	1
	Hearing Impairment	1

The participants included eight females and one male. Their mean age was 45.4 with an average of 11.6 years special education teaching experience and 15.3 years of total teaching experience. The race/ethnicity make-up of the study participants was one Asian, two Hispanics, one Caucasian/Native American, and five Caucasians. The majority (n=8) of the participants hold a master's degree plus additional graduate hours and many (n=5) hold two or more teaching certificates. One participant earned her teaching certificate and degree through an alternative certification program while eight earned degrees and teaching certificates via traditional certification programs. One of the eight participants has an elementary education degree and certificate from a traditional program and teaches special education students under her special education endorsement which she earned through a Chicago Public School endorsement program. This program was designed to encourage general education teachers to become special education teachers. Two other participants, who also earned an endorsement through a CPS endorsement program, earned a Master's Degree in special education and certificate through a traditional program after obtaining the endorsement. There is great variation in the number of years participants expressed they believe they will remain teaching students with special needs: 3-5 years (n=3), 5-10 years (n=2), 10-15 years (n=2), and 15-20 years (n=2). This variation is reflective of the mean age and years of experience of the study participants.

All of the participants teach in schools where 50% or more of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Seven of the nine teachers' roles include teaching in at least three settings/models while all participants teach in at least two or more settings/delivery models. The majority of the participants teach in an inclusion setting

(n=8), provide consultation services (n=5), and have some students who receive services in a resource setting (n=5) as part of the service delivery models in which they teach.

Within these models, all participants teach students eligible for services under at least two disability categories as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Many students taught by the participants receive services under the Specific Learning Disability (n=8) and Cognitive Disability (n=6) categories. Two of the participants teach in Chicago Public Charter Schools and seven teach in Chicago Public Schools. Although it is difficult to report the grade levels teachers instruct due to the large variation in grade levels, all study participants (n=9) teach some students in grades 4-8, while three participants teach some students at the primary level (K-3). Most participants' caseloads include 16-20 students (n=5), one participant's caseload includes 11-15 students, and some include 10 students or less (n=3).

Findings

The process that led to reporting the study findings included interviewing nine participants, transcribing two face-to-face interviews for each participant, and analyzing the data using line-by-line coding and thematic categorizing. First, I analyzed each interview as a whole in order to understand the voice of the participant and then coded each line of the transcription to address all key themes that emerged. The process of coding remained fluid as I continuously clustered and separated the codes until clear themes developed. Particular themes were identified as a result of participants' frequent comments upon a certain topic that became central to understanding why experienced special education teachers remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. The result of this process is represented by the seven central themes that

emerged. Some of the themes are divided into sub-themes to provide clarity. Each theme is given a label that is expressed as if the participant were speaking. Because only one participant was male and for the purpose of maintaining anonymity, I will refer to all participants as “she”.

I strive to continually improve my practice.

More so than any other topic, the teachers spoke about their efforts to continually improve their teaching practice. They indicated the importance of advancing their knowledge and skills to better serve their students and to better share ideas with their colleagues. They mentioned several ways in which they learn, such as from a mentor; from other colleagues; through professional development activities; through analysis of, and reflection upon, their own teaching performance; and from participating in the National Board process.

Collectively, the comments pertaining to this theme revealed the high value they place on this aspect of their professional lives as well as its significance to their belief in the importance of being a lifelong learner. The theme is labeled, “I strive to continually improve my practice” and is presented by subcategories for clarity: (a) I place a high value on learning; and (b) Reflection is important.

I place a high value on learning. Participant One discussed how the population of students changes from year to year, and discussed the importance of being able to alter teaching methods to meet those changes. She stressed it is her responsibility to continue learning and to remain open-minded to new teaching methods. She does this through finding her own professional development and resources:

Our population changes, and we need to go with that change, we need to change what we do continuously. It's unacceptable for anyone not to continue their own education. I've always continued my education, I've always taken classes. I've also repeated hearing things over and over again because sometimes I think it hits you later. You just need to hear things again and be open to it. So I feel a lot of it was just through my own practice in my own desire to make sure I'm reaching my kids. I learned through the Internet and research, and spending a lot of my own money taking classes as well.

Participant Two stated the need for a special education teacher to be a lifelong learner. She stressed that in order to advocate for students, a special education teacher needs to remain current and knowledgeable about the field. Moreover, she stated that continued learning is especially vital to her role as a leader in her school:

I think I am still being trained. I need to know my field well and I feel like I still want to get more professional development if I'm going to tell others how things should be done. Special education is a field where you're constantly learning and growing, so if you are one who is always looking to meet goals and to grow, there's always something to learn, to improve on, and to grow upon. You are just always learning, so if you love learning things, there's always an opportunity to do that.

For Participant Three, she mentioned that learning new things about technology motivated her to remain in the field. She indicated the importance of keeping up with technological advancements in order to help her students have access to the general education classroom:

I like to be a techie and I learned that here. You get all of that, especially with kids with disabilities, you get all the bells and whistles, or you at least find out about them. I really enjoy that aspect and I learn so much. Technology really changes the way students are integrated into the classrooms, and teachers need to be aware of technology and how it impacts students. Keeping abreast of everything that's going on in terms of education and in terms of technology motivates me to stay in the field.

Participant Five expressed spending much time outside of school learning new methods and new approaches to teaching. She indicated she would never stop learning because of the endless amount to learn:

It's reaching out; it's going on the Internet, its reading. I'll spend years learning because it's an experience that I'll never know. I always thought to myself if there was one day when I could just see the world through each of their eyes, I could just have a better understanding. You're going to be learning your whole life. You are going to be adapting your technique your whole life, your whole career.

She added that teachers coming into the field needed to be comfortable with knowing they are going to have to continue learning even after earning their teaching degree:

You're always a learner and you have to be comfortable with that. When you leave grad school, it is not over with, reading and studying and doing stuff.

Participant Six also stressed the importance of improving her practice through continued learning. She indicated that having this value might be what makes her a good teacher:

As a person I think you need to keep learning, so as a teacher, even though I don't need to take classes, I'm always looking for things to help me. So I think that's part of me though, maybe that's why I'm good at teaching. I'm always trying to figure it out.

Participant Seven expressed that having a general joy of learning may be a reason why she is a successful teacher of students with disabilities in low-income schools:

The three characteristics that make me successful as a teacher are flexibility, a general joy of learning, and the joy of being with children at the age that I teach.

Participant Eight mentioned that she continues to gain an education while teaching. She also indicated that getting her National Board teaching certificate was an important part of her continued learning:

I feel like I'm still doing different things, and I'm still getting an education. With National Board certification, it was a big deal to do it. I felt better about doing that than when I finished my program to get my teaching certificate. I felt really proud of myself and it was a lot of work.

Participant Nine discussed her understanding that she still had much to learn when she first started teaching. Because of wanting to learn more from others, she mentioned her decision to go to another school in a different district to observe and learn from other colleagues in the field:

During my first and second years of teaching, I knew I didn't have all that I needed yet in my toolbox of resources. And so, I went to another school and I think learning from other colleagues that are special education teachers is so important.

Additionally, she mentioned that her need to want to learn more about special education prompted her to get her National Board certification. She indicated that wanting to continue learning is what makes her a good teacher:

A good teacher is a good learner. I have this constant need to learn more about special education and all the areas of it. And that's what really drove me to get my National Board certification and to work with other special education teachers.

The interview participants clearly demonstrated they viewed themselves as lifelong learners. They mentioned the value of learning, the importance of imparting this view on their students, and used this value to guide them in overcoming obstacles they face while teaching. They expressed having the realization that teacher preparation programs are unable to prepare teacher candidates for everything, thus the need to continue learning on their own. They reported that continuous learning often requires the use of their own resources in order to be successful in teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Many of them seek out professional development opportunities to add to their educational knowledge and pedagogy. They suggested that this need to continue to grow and seek knowledge may be one of the reasons they are successful in overcoming the challenges of teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools and, perhaps, why they continue to remain teaching.

Reflection is important. Participant One spoke of a time when she considered leaving the field. She was working with a particular group of students who lacked motivational skills. As much as she tried, her students were not making the growth she expected. She mentioned that still today she continues to reflect on what went wrong during those few years and what she could have done differently:

After you've been doing what you're doing for a while, you start to wonder and start to question whether it is working or not. It just so happened that was the same year that I had these kids and when the test scores were not showing anything, I just started to think it was me. I started to question all that. I do blame myself if things don't work because I am with the kids, six hours a day. That's a long time and to be together for a year and not see a lot of growth to me is a long time. It made me question all those years with other students. Was I really effective or not? I'm the one that needed to change, I wasn't confident.

Participant One continued by expressing that she is always thinking about how she is teaching and about ways to improve her craft. She also stressed that it is not enough to just reflect on your teaching; a teacher needs to be ready to act on the changes that need to be made:

National Board process improves what you're doing, your craft. You're always trying to improve your craft and this is a formal way to continue to improve it. I've always been the kind of person who thinks about my craft, but now I'm more direct. I no longer think well maybe this, maybe that, no. This is what I'm going to work on and I'm going to stay focused on this strategy so I could see the improvement. I don't necessarily think reflection makes you become a better teacher all of the time because it's up to the individual person as to whether or not they're going to take it and improve upon it. I mean, we all analyze our craft, but if you're not going to do anything about it to change it, it defeats the purpose. I think there will always be areas that I need to improve.

In discussing the National Board Certification process, Participant Three indicated that reflection is part of who she is and indicated that the National Board Certification process strengthened her commitment to reflect upon her practice. She stressed that stopping and thinking about what you are doing is not only helpful in teaching, but can make life easier to handle too:

The minute I started the process and started reading the information, my teaching changed. For some reason, I became more introspective in terms of evaluating what I did. That changed the way I teach, and I think I've become a lot more mellow and calmer by being able to reflect a lot more on what I do. I think that's part of the reason I still love what I do. I think we always reflect as teachers, but we don't realize we're reflecting. It's like once you realize what it is that you're doing, when a student is doing something and you're evaluating right then and there, you're able to provide feedback and that's what improves your teaching. You can say that about a lot of things in life, instead of rushing, if you stop and think about what you're doing, why you're doing it, I think it probably helps you get through life a little bit easier too.

Participant Four agreed with Participant Three and expressed how the National Board Certification process helped her validate her teaching methods. She discussed the role reflection played in her feeling confident as a teacher:

Doing all the research and analyzing what I was doing, I really saw that I was good. I wanted to prove I was a good teacher, but by doing all that stuff I saw that I was. I did a lot of reflection intuitively, but it showed me that my behavior

analysis, which I've been doing for 10 years, works. It's not that I'm the best teacher, but I can see what I'm doing and say whether I'm good at.

Participant Five echoed what previous participants have emphasized. She stated that the biggest mistake a teacher can make is not actually making the initial mistake, but making that same mistake a second time instead of learning from it the first time:

The biggest mistake that people make is not that they've made a mistake, but they made a mistake again. I think that's important, that sense of reflection as a teacher.

Similarly, Participant Six revealed that the National Board process helped her to reflect on and improve her teaching. She also acknowledged that the process helped her to be more effective and focus on individual student needs:

It just made me see how I was doing. So it showed me what I was missing and what I wasn't. It helped me to sit back and think when I'm having a problem. It helps me think about how I'm doing it and what I can do to improve it. It helps me focus more on the individual than trying to accomplish X, Y, and Z.

Participant Eight discussed how she brings what she learned from the videotaping portion of the National Board assessment process into her classroom. She stated that she continues to videotape and assess her teaching, but instead of only reflecting on her teaching, she has students reflect on their behavior and their motivation during a lesson as well:

I think a lot more about what I'm doing. Each time I think about how I can change this, so they'll still be interested in doing it, but still have the same objectives. I spend a lot more time thinking about how to assess students. I also reflect on

myself as a leader and learner. I think it had me focus on what I do and why I do it. I do occasionally videotape the kids. I think the idea of seeing themselves made a big impact, and so I do that now and we videotape and talk.

Participant Nine reiterated the importance of reflection in her teaching and commented on the videotaping portion of the National Board assessment process. She stated that videotaping herself was humbling because it required learning how you are perceived from a student's viewpoint. She indicated this type of reflection has improved her teaching:

Seeing myself through videotaping has improved instruction, and reflecting on it, watching it again and again, and then seeing how the students finally got that "ah ha" moment. I felt like I kind of cracked the code.

Participant Seven referred to the reflection piece as exciting and stated that looking for methods to improve her teaching keeps her motivated. She described how reflecting on what she can improve on the following year keeps her wanting to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

May and June are usually pretty hard. But after a week or so, you're thinking about what you can bring to the table next year that will excite the group. So it's just this constant search for knowledge and ways to improve that keeps you here, that keeps you wanting to stay, that keeps you from going "I think I'll go work at Kohl's or something."

Participant Two also spoke directly about the importance of a teacher's ability to be reflective. She expressed that this reflective process effected her decision to remain in the field:

I think every year you come back because you always think about what you can do better or you think next year, I can do this. I think if you start to lose that, then maybe it's an indicator that you shouldn't be in this job anymore.

Many participants stressed the importance of being reflective as a means to improve their teaching practices. For many of them, continuing to look for ways to improve their teaching was fostered through the National Board Certification process. Participants shared that being reflective helps them to improve their practice and the process of improving their practice is associated with their decision to remain in the field.

In sum, participants clearly presented that they perceive themselves as teachers who value learning. They also consistently indicated the importance of reflection in their teaching and revealed that the reflection process affects their feelings of confidence and efficacy as a teacher. In order to continue to improve their teaching practice, teachers in this study value learning and take time to reflect on their teaching.

I possess some useful qualities when the “going gets tough.”

In theme two titled “I possess some useful qualities when the going gets tough,” the teachers described qualities that they possess and that they consider critical to remaining in the field. To endure, to carry on, to live to tell the tale, to prosper as well as to never give up, to persist, to keep at it, even when the landscape keeps shifting and even knowing that change (the pendulum) is inevitable was a frequent element in these teachers’ comments as they responded to interview questions about their decision to remain in teaching. For clarity, this theme is presented in three subcategories: (a) I persevere; (b) I flourish within a shifting context; and (c) I am flexible and embrace change.

I persevere. Participant One dealt with her own struggles while in school. It is the reminder of these struggles that keeps her committed to teach students with special needs, especially in low-income schools. In her comments she discussed how she refuses to give up on students, and instead will try different methods with different groups of students. She referred to initiating her own professional development in order to continue to learn new teaching strategies to reach her students:

Honestly, it is just a reminder of my own struggles that keeps me teaching students with special needs, especially in low-income areas. When I had my seven-year itch I had the toughest group I've ever had. They mostly had motivational issues and I worked with them for four years in a row, seeing little growth. I was stressed and it just took over and made me lose my confidence as a teacher. I felt so frustrated with myself for feeling stuck. I kept plugging away. I kept trying different things with this group. I feel a lot of it was just through my own practice and my own desire to make sure I'm reaching my kids and that whatever I'm doing with them is practical, beneficial, and relevant. I spent a lot of my own money taking classes. I do come in with "I'm going to try again. I'm not going to give up". "I'm going to give it another year; I'm going to do this." A lot of it is self-talking, that's positive self-talk that I have to give myself to push me through it.

Additionally, she indicated that willingness and perseverance are important traits for a teacher to possess in order to assist them in pushing forward during challenging situations. She also mentioned the importance of modeling these characteristics for her students:

I think it's that drive to never give up and keep trying. I try to instill that in my kids because you actually go further in life because of your personality. Your willingness and your perseverance to overcome issues that you have are going to get you through life.

Participant Two referred to her ability to understand the politics of schools as a strength that helps her to persevere in teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

So there are a lot of politics you don't realize as a student. You have to learn tact and even conversation ethics, because knowing how to think and talk about a student is something that is not automatic. I think it needs to be trained and taught.

Also, Participant Two stated that one of the skills she possesses is understanding the need to be resourceful and making use of other professionals she works with:

It's not actually about what I can do for the student right now. It's what I need to do to find the resources that can help him. It is educating yourself well, knowing special education as a field, knowing law and procedures, and resources. It's being creative and thinking of creative solutions.

Participant Three indicated that the school system itself creates challenges for her. She stated that her ability to prioritize and decide what needs to get done and when, allowed her to be an efficient and successful teacher. Having the ability to prioritize and focus allows her to persevere in working towards attainment of her goals:

To be a successful special education teacher, you need to be able to prioritize and be able to put students' needs first. Being able to say, the papers on the desk are

just going to stay there because I'm going to actually teach today. I have the ability to sift through information at this point and figure out what needs to be done, what's the fastest and best way to do it. It's about knowing how to cut corners. We need to cut corners and knowing when you can't cut corners.

In addition, Participant Three reported that one of the most challenging aspects of teaching is the lack of time. One of the ways she perseveres and manages the lack of planning and collaboration time is by being creative and resourceful:

One of the most challenging things is time. There is never enough time to do everything you need to do with everybody. There is never enough time to plan, time to collaborate. We call it bathroom stall planning where we do a lot of sitting around the lunch table or pass each other in the hall and finding out what we're going to do today. We try to find time to sit together to plan every week, but it doesn't always happen.

Participant Four is a career switcher and her perspectives on education reflect her previous experiences in the business world. It is because of these experiences that she has an appreciation for the field and for the challenges she faces as a teacher. She indicated that she likes being able to solve challenging issues with her students:

If I see a problem, I can solve it, without going through layers to get there. With my kids, I'm constantly looking for ways to get them beyond. I work with the real low functioning kids right now, so getting them more independent, getting them more thinking, getting them more rational, more aware of what's going on. So I'm finding the buttons that work to make them better.

Participant Five discussed the importance of being resourceful as a teacher and not giving up on students. Despite not being given the adequate resources, Participant Fives stated she is not content to wait for services to be rendered to her students; instead she indicated she meets students' needs within the classroom. Acknowledging that the profession can be challenging at times, Participant Five reported that she perseveres by keeping the goals of her students in mind:

My job is reaching out, it's going on the Internet, it's reading, it's not giving up. It's not accepting that this is it. I don't believe that there is ever that's all the child is capable of. So that's what I feel like my role is. Some days I feel like a sucker, but it's about the kids. I know that I can help them. I can find what I need. I will persevere. I will do it; I will buy whatever I need to because it's about the kids. I am not going to get caught up in saying "well, this is all I have been given, so that's all that I can work with them on." You have to become a speech person; you have to become an OT person because these kids need more related service minutes. I have to pick up the ball. I am not going to let politics beat me or affect what I can do for these kids on my own.

She also mentioned that teachers who have left the field most likely refrained from seeking resources to assist in helping them become successful teachers:

They're not being resourceful enough to find out how to make things better for themselves. The school didn't make it better for them; the Board did not make it better for them, so therefore they leave. You're never going to get the recognition, never going to get the materials you need, it's up to you to accept the fact that it's not perfect. It's not about you, it's not about me, it's about the service that you're

giving the kids. I can't give up on students because, that for me, means I gave up on myself.

Participant Seven reiterated the need to be resourceful as a special education teacher, and stressed that it is particularly important when you don't have the resources you need. She mentioned that she perseveres by obtaining the resources she needs through successful grant writing:

We got this enormous grant. We got to go to all these conferences. Somebody had to write the grant, plan the conferences, and find out about them.

Participant Six discussed the reasons why she perseveres with students despite the many challenges. She stated that although it may take some time to see a student's growth, she keeps reaching for that "lightbulb" moment:

We're going to figure it out, even if it takes until eighth grade, we will figure it out. Why do I beat my head against the wall? It is because I love working with these guys. It's the twinkle in their eye. You keep working for it, because you know you can get it. Once you get it the first time, it's like I want it all the time, so you keep working hard.

When Participant Nine was thinking of changing schools and possibly accepting a new position as a special education teacher, she mentioned her need for challenge in her teaching career:

I love it here at my school. I think I just wanted to challenge myself, in different ways.

She also stated that while she encounters challenging situations as a teacher, she does not let situations bother her and suggested not getting upset:

There are some things you just have to let the water under the bridge. You need to pick and choose your battles.

Participant Nine also discussed the need for special education teachers to use creativity, tact, and perseverance in order to collaborate and work closely with other teachers:

What I've learned is that part of this job is being a salesperson and so you really need to tap into whatever it takes to convince that teacher that this child is just as intelligent as the next person. So whether it's bringing in something like snacks or coffee in the morning or whatever, that's just as important as you being flexible with them and saying, "when do you want to meet, what's good for you?" It's tough to have this kind of marriage, in a sense, with someone you don't know who you're married to.

Participant Six adds to the comments of Participant Nine by mentioning the importance of collaboration in advocating for students. She indicated that this can be difficult at times, but stated that persevering towards collaboration is necessary:

There are people who agree with you out there. It is just finding which ones and how to go about approaching the others. It's taken us all year, but we're getting there. You can't go in like a bull in the china cabinet and start screaming and yelling. It doesn't work that way, you have to learn to manipulate them.

Based on participant responses, it is clear the teachers in this study perceive themselves as possessing the ability to persevere in challenging situations and find resources to help them accomplish this. Many of them seek out their own professional development, never give up on students, are resourceful in their use of time, solicit outside resources for assistance, and collaborate with other teachers to attain a common

goal. Additionally, the participants' responses indicated that being challenged is an aspect of their professional role that is valued.

I flourish within a shifting context. Despite it being a challenge, Participant One mentioned that being part of an inclusion and co-teaching model at her school motivates her. Although this model is new to her, she indicated that working with students in a general education classroom is beneficial for both her and her students. Additionally, she mentioned she likes how the role requires doing something different every day in the classroom:

We just started inclusion two years ago, so I finally get to do inclusion. I work with the language arts teacher and we actually co-teach. It's been fun for me to finally be out of my little resource room because I was frustrated with that. Now that I'm back in the general education classroom, it's great because it motivates the kids. I like what I do; every day is a challenge. It's not always the same things. One day, something works and the next day it doesn't. So it's always a new story.

Participant Four described liking the variety within her job and expressed that this helps to make teaching students with special needs a suitable profession for her:

In teaching I liked the idea of this huge diversity I could do. I'm working on the yearbook, working records, I'm taking care of something else for social activities. I have the option in this particular building of doing a lot of different things because they know I will get them done. So it's a good fit for me, it gives me creative outlet and gives me challenges.

In addition to having qualities critical to remaining in the field such as being able to persist despite the many challenges and changes within special education, several of the study participants emphasized that having some variety and challenge in their teaching positions actually helped them to flourish as a special education teacher.

I am flexible and embrace change. Participant Five viewed flexibility as an important part of the process of becoming a teacher as well as surviving in the field. She taught in four different schools during her alternative certification program and realized that if she just persisted, she would find the position that fit her best. She stated that she was flexible enough to try different positions within the school system to find out what suited her best:

I'm not going to give up. I'm going to find something that fits. Things take time; you're going to be learning your whole life. You need to allow yourself that time to make mistakes and to feel uncomfortable.

She also explained that she understands the job and knows the profession is not going to be perfect. She expressed that she selects her stressors and tries to remain flexible, knowing that teaching is an ever-changing field:

Teachers who stay, they know things aren't going to be perfect. You need to be able to pick and choose what you're going to stress over and realize that there are changes all the time.

Participant Six mentioned that she is always open to trying new things in order to reach her students. She views flexibility as one of the most valuable skills new teachers need to learn prior to starting out in the field:

I'll try new things. I'm always looking for a new way to reach them. You have to be flexible because you may have all the plans set, and you may only get one thing done.

She added that it may be necessary for new teachers to be flexible enough to try and teach in different settings or schools in order to find a position that is suitable to them:

Waiting for the right time, you might need to move to different places to find your niche. You have to feel comfortable when you walk into the building, if people are friendly. You'll know what you're looking for as a person, as a teacher. What support do you want? Do you want to be left alone? Would you want a team to work with? I guess you have to try it out for a while and see.

Participant Seven reiterated the idea that flexibility is needed as a special education teacher. She stressed that you not only have to be prepared for anything, but you have to be flexible enough to work with the parents and to understand individual needs that families have:

You have to be prepared to do the unexpected. You have to be prepared to think outside the box. I always try to be flexible enough so that when someone gives me an idea, I say, "Why not?" instead of "No, that won't possibly work."

Participant Eight discussed instances when she was responsible for students on her caseload that general education teachers found to be very difficult. She made direct comments indicating that she reaches these students through flexibility:

I'm getting my room ready and teachers start walking in the room and saying, "I saw who was on your class list". Then they shook their heads and walked out. The teacher that had this boy last year said he was always up. So I put him in the back

and he would stand. I would say, “sit down” and then finally it was like, what do I care if he stands? He's not blocking anyone's view. I stopped saying anything.

Participant Nine shared that a large part of her role as a special education teacher requires her to be flexible in order to flourish in her job. She stated that in order to be an advocate for students, a teacher needs to be flexible with other teachers in ways that require a special education teacher to be somewhat of a sales person and wear many hats:

I definitely think flexibility, with a capital F, is definitely a huge part of my role. To be an advocate you need flexibility because teaching is such a personal thing. Can you work with a lot of teachers when you're a special education teacher? In a sense I am a sales woman. Some days you have to really sell to the teachers, parents, or to the child. You have to sell a lesson to the child if he doesn't want to do it. I have to be a salesperson to the teachers, the teachers who don't believe in this kid that never gets his homework done and is always late. I have to help them to look at the child through a different angle.

Participant One directly stated that she embraces change in order to be successful in teaching:

That's why I advocate for changes in our system. I know some people are afraid of it, but we need to shake it up. We can't become complacent where we're at. Our population changes, and we need to go with that change, we need to change what we do continuously.

Participant Two mentioned the importance of being able to accept decisions that cannot be changed and being able to shift gears when situations do not unfold as originally planned:

You'll always have those specific stories, those specific kids and incidents that will stick with you. You'll think back and say, "If I'd only done this differently it would've turned out like that or if I could've done this differently, if only this..." But I don't have control or power over it anymore. So you are going to come across difficult situations and it might not have gone perfectly as you liked, but I guess it's moving on.

Participant Three discussed her ability to remain flexible and embrace change in the field and stated that although change is good, it can also be difficult. She started teaching in a learning disabilities program where the main service delivery model was pullout and she is now teaching in a model that is primarily inclusion:

It became more of an inclusion model where I worked more in the classroom. It extended into me going into the classroom and modifying the work there. I like the way the field has changed. I like the fact that they're going into the general education classroom. I think the field changes, just like anything else in life, things change. Most of the changes are good; sometimes they're not. It's a pendulum, I think we older teachers always say that when they throw things our way. Whatever the changes are, change is good. Sometimes is very difficult, but good.

Most participants in the study indicated that flexibility is an important characteristic required to be successful as a special education teacher. Especially when teachers were asked to offer advice to special education teachers new to the field, the idea of embracing change and flexibility was mentioned repeatedly. Participants described instances where flexibility was useful and often used flexibility as a term to describe what

sets them apart from other teachers. Additionally, some participants indicated that they perceive the teaching profession itself to be flexible. They stated that teaching is suitable for a person who enjoys a sense of flexibility in the workplace. In addition to persevering in the face of challenges, and even embracing challenge as a positive aspect of their job, participants reported ways in which they flourish and embrace change within a shifting context.

In sum, being able to persevere when situations are challenging, and survive and flourish even knowing that changes within the field are frequent and inevitable, are qualities special education teachers in this study report are critical to remaining teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Participants in this study commented on the ways in which they persist through being resourceful and flexible, and embracing change and variety.

I am successful and confident as a teacher.

The fourth theme labeled “successful and confident,” captures the teachers’ frequent comments about their evaluations of their own professional practice. All of the teachers referred to, or commented upon, their success and confidence as a teacher. Through brief descriptions of episodes that ended positively and mentions of awards, to comments about the need to be successful and confident to be satisfied with the teaching profession, these teachers frequently conveyed the importance of their feelings of self-assurance, certainty, and at times, victory in their role. Collectively, these types of comments revealed their perceptions of success and confidence about their own performance and linked these perceptions to their decisions to remain a special education teacher.

Participant One commented that documented student progress offers an indication of success as a teacher. She stated that having this sense of confidence encouraged her to continue persevering in teaching students with special needs in low-income schools:

I watched a student grow from being a non-reader and a non-writer to being a reader and writer. To me those are successes. With my toughest group, I felt this small because their growth was this small every year and I worked with them for four years in a row, and it made me feel awful. It just took over and made me lose my confidence as a teacher. You need to have progress; you need to show progress. So I started to question all that.

When asked how she got past this loss of confidence, she stated:

I started having kids that were responding. I think it makes a difference when you know students are responding to your interventions, that it is working, and that you are not so awful.

Participant Two also addressed the need to have confidence as a teacher and a professional. She stated that she believes special education teachers leave the field because they do not feel successful in the classroom:

I really think special education teachers leave because they don't feel successful. Sometimes they don't like the kids anymore or don't like their day-to-day tasks anymore. They may just have a lot of negativity and lost any kind of hope that their presence matters.

She mentioned that her advice to new teachers or teachers who might be losing their confidence is to have confidence in their abilities:

Have the confidence that you can change things if that's what you seek. Give yourself a break every once in a while, don't be so hard on yourself if you don't see the progress that you would like right away, have confidence that you've been well trained and this is what you want to do.

Participant Three commented on how the National Board Certification process has helped her to become more confident in her teaching. She indicated this confidence has changed the way she teaches and affected the reason why she still enjoys teaching students with disabilities:

I became way more introspective in terms of evaluating what I did and that changed the way I teach. I think I've become a lot more mellow and calmer, and I think that's part of the reason I still love what I do. I think because I'm a more effective teacher, I feel better about my teaching. Because of that, I'm more comfortable with what I do and that probably does affect the fact that I'm not ready to go yet.

Participant Four expressed feeling confident and successful as a special education teacher. She indicated that her ability to develop relationships with kids is one way she measures her success as a teacher.

You're not going to get every child to be president of the United States, but every child is going to have some kind of emotional attachment to you, they need someone they can rely on. That makes me feel good. In my situation I get my kids for several years running. So I am involved in their lives, and I'm invited to graduation parties; I know these kids. And when they go on to another school there still is an attachment. I find that I am really good at teaching, and when

you're good at something, you get more confidence. I like what I am doing. It's one of those things, if it works, don't fix it.

She also stressed that confidence cannot be built in an environment where special education teachers feel intimidated or discouraged:

If a young teacher comes into an environment where there is fear and intimidation, they're not going to last. I have enough self-confidence and enough experience to ask a question, and it doesn't mean I'm a bad teacher. I have seen a lot of people who were afraid to ask questions, because it would reflect on them negatively.

Participant Eight echoed the sentiment that she enjoys being a special education teacher because she is good at it. She indicated that being good at it encourages her to want to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

I stay because I really love teaching. I like seeing their progress. I really think I'm good at what I do. I think if maybe I didn't think I was good at it, it may be easier to leave, but I really do think I'm good at it.

The importance of seeing growth as a precursor to feeling efficacy in teaching was stressed in Participant Five's comments. She stated that during her "green period", her confidence level was affected due to the lack of responsiveness from students:

I went through this really green period where I wasn't really connecting with students at the high school level, so that affected my confidence and discouraged me. It did affect my desire, so I knew that that population may not be the best fit. I knew that things take time. It was something that I was not going to master in one

day and I needed to trust in myself. I needed to take a look at what I'm capable of and have confidence in myself and realize that I have a lot to give.

The advice she provided for beginning special education teachers is for them to be patient and allow themselves time to grow professionally and acquire the skills necessary to be a successful teacher:

So my advice is just to realize that it's an imperfect field and to allow yourself quite a lot of time to feel confident that you are a teacher. Knowing that I have taken students from a place that is different from when I got them is very rewarding.

When asked about how the National Board process may have impacted her decision to remain in the field, she stated that the process has boosted her confidence level and sense of efficacy as a special education teacher:

It's a big achievement. When I put up the diploma, it reminds me of the fact that I have what it takes. I have the drive; I have the ability to handle any problem.

There is an answer for something if I continue to look for it and be reasonable with my expectations.

Participant Seven indicated that she plans to continue teaching as long as she feels she is successful in teaching her students. She reported that one way she measures her effectiveness as a teacher is by student's level of motivation. She mentioned that being a part of that "light bulb moment" is one of the most rewarding parts of working with students with disabilities in low-income schools:

Once I walk in the classroom door, I immediately get that sense of joy. I want to teach them new things, I want them to get excited about learning, and that is what

keeps me here. I will continue to teach as long as I am successful. When that light bulb goes on, that is just so exciting. To me that's like a personal best.

Participant Nine also spoke of her excitement as she notices student academic growth:

I just love the moment that things just click for students. I have the luxury of having students for several years in a time. I think that's something that not many teachers get and I don't know many other positions that have that so I love that. But just seeing the child grow and reflecting back on where so-and-so was in fifth grade, and we're she is now, it is really pretty amazing.

When asked to offer advice to new special education teachers, Participant Nine mentioned the need for new teachers to allow themselves a few years to feel comfortable with the curriculum and seek teaching improvements in increments:

Accomplish and tackle and master one area of content and the next year you become a master of the second area. You can kind of build... you don't try to achieve all of them in one year. Become an expert in something and make sure to brand yourself. I think in life you have to do that, brand yourself in something. The school needs to realize you are irreplaceable and then they'll start treating you like you are.

In sum, study participants repeatedly discussed the need to see growth with their students, and responses indicated that this need contributed to a feeling of confidence as a special education teacher. Participants made direct comments indicating that their level of confidence and their perceptions of success about their teaching performance are linked to how they feel about teaching and ultimately their decision to remain a special

education teacher. Several participants also indicated that being in the right position or school has also added to feeling confident and having a sense of teaching efficacy.

My professional work extends beyond the classroom.

The fourth theme is labeled “my professional work extends beyond the classroom” and refers to the myriad of comments in which teachers clearly indicated that working with their students is only one aspect of their professional lives. Beyond the classroom, these teachers are busy interacting and collaborating with other professionals; at times, they are leading various groups toward educational objectives. For example, these teachers provide professional development activities to other teachers in their buildings as well as to those in other schools. They work with parents and teacher candidates, mentor, serve on the Local School Council, take leadership roles in the teachers’ union, and are frequently asked by the principal to lead initiatives in their schools. Additionally, many of the participants expressed the feeling that having leadership opportunities within the field is important to them, and has an impact on their decision to remain in the field. This theme is divided into sub-categories for clarity: (a) I enjoy being in a leadership role; and (b) Professional development is critical.

I enjoy being in a leadership role. Participant One was asked to paint a picture of her role as a special education teacher. She described herself as a leader and advocate for students, parents, and colleagues:

I advocate for my students. I advocate for my peers. I believe in supporting my colleagues. I think that's my job, and I just think that's how you keep the morale going and keep motivation.

When asked if her role in her school affects her feelings about remaining in the field, she stressed the importance of advocating for her colleagues and the profession as a whole:

My goal really is to advocate for special education teachers. I just feel like I need to advocate for our profession, so we can collaborate and work to make a difference. Originally, I wanted to stay in the field because I want to lead in terms of becoming a resource for all the other teachers. I would like to be more of a resource, that person who just knows what to do and can make a difference.

She also mentioned that she is a liaison for the schools No Child Left Behind parent program at her school and indicated feeling strongly about providing this support to parents. She stated that serving this role keeps her wanting to remain teaching students with disabilities:

I was just asked to be the liaison for No Child Left Behind parent program. The needs of our parents are very important to me, to know that I am helping them with at least part of their life. I think that's one thing that keeps me going knowing that the families need help too.

Participant Two discussed wearing many hats in her position as both a service provider to students with disabilities and a case manager. In describing her position, she stated she has a voice in her school and holds a leadership role. She mentioned that she is often seen as the expert in her building and feels needed by both her staff and students:

I have the responsibility to make sure that my service provider team is making their service minutes and to basically oversee everything regarding special education. Right now I am in a position I do get to decide how things go. I decide service delivery models, and maybe that's my personality, maybe I like to be in

control. I really feel that I am an expert in the field and I feel that people need me here. If I don't come to school, it does make it hard for my staff and my students. She also discussed how having a voice in her school and being part of the decision-making process affects her decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

You have to be a strong advocate in your building, because if you're the one who knows the field and knows what your students are entitled to, you're going to have to be the one to get it. So having a voice helps with that so you can say, yes, I can do my job. Right now I am in the position where I get to decide how things go.

Participant Three described the many leadership opportunities within her building. She mentors teachers who are going through the National Board Teacher Certification process and is a successful grant writer. She indicated that being involved in these opportunities motivated her to remain in the field:

I am highly involved with National Board certification in Chicago and I mentor teachers. If I left the field I probably would no longer be able to do that and I like being part of that process. This year we won another Fund for Teachers grant to go to a technology conference in Philadelphia. This motivates me to stay in the field, to keep abreast of everything that's going on in terms of education, and in terms of technology.

Participant Three also reported that due to her Nationally Board certification status at her school, she has been given “a voice” within her school building:

When there's money to be spent, the principal tends to come to us and say, "Okay, there's money to be spent, what do you think we need?"

Participant Four reflected on her leadership roles and described herself as a teacher who is willing to participate and take part in school initiatives. She stated she values clear leadership and indicated willingness to be part of changes within her school and the school system:

I am a huge joiner; I like being a joiner and getting things done. I end up participating in working with the National Board people, working with the school improvement plan, and different things because we really think we can do better. I don't want to sit here and complain about things. If I want things to get fixed, I have to be here. I have to be part of something. So I join and I try and participate and I want to be heard.

Participant Seven indicated that she is appreciated and valued as a Nationally Board Certified special education teacher in her school. She mentioned enjoying helping other teachers and mentoring younger special education teachers as well. She discussed being part of the driving force of her school:

One of the things our principal has stated over and over is that she is extremely grateful to her National Board teachers. She looks upon us for advice and suggestions. We feel very valued and very important. It makes us feel that we're counted on for our opinions and they are valued. We get to plan conferences, help write grants and really help people. We are on the principal's committee for professional development. National Board Exceptional Needs teachers are really the driving force of the school, they're the innovators.

Participant Eight explained that she is involved in leadership roles within her school as well as in the community. She mentioned that in the past she has taken on too much and has since decided to cut down on her commitments outside of the classroom in order to decrease the stress of teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

I belong to the Council for Exceptional Children. I've gone to a couple of their national conferences. I was the coordinator for the least restrictive environment program here and I've done professional development. I'm also on the Local School Council and was the union delegate for a while. Some of that just got to be too much, so I tried to kind of slow down a little bit this year. It's another way to deal with some of the stress.

Participant Nine also emphasized the importance of being a leader in her building, and among special education professionals. She reported that she is a National Board mentor and takes part in many leadership activities within her school. She also mentioned participating in a professional development program bi-monthly, where she and other colleagues collaborate and talk professional development books. She indicated that she sees herself as a fighter for the underdog and that her role requires her to lead teachers to better understand students with special needs:

I think part of it too is like fighting for the underdog. I love collaborating with the teachers, especially the tough ones because it's like a therapy session. I have to be a salesperson for the teachers and I think that's a big part of my day. I need to advocate for the child.

Additionally, she expressed that being a leader is just part of her skill set:

I love working alongside colleagues through the mentoring process through National Boards. I really like doing that and helping teachers. Right now I'm part of the literacy committee, and a group of teachers here wrote a grant so we can help the rest of the CPS system buy into the idea of "strategies that work" by having workshops together. I will facilitate the discussion about how they see themselves applying it to the classroom.

Based on many comments regarding their professional lives outside of the classroom, this group of special education teachers indicated they perceive themselves as leaders. Many considered themselves advocates for students, parents, and other colleagues and appreciate the voice they feel they have in the decision-making in their schools. Several participants mentor prospective Nationally Board Certified teachers, while others provide professional development to staff in their building. Still others reported being members of school improvement plan committees and/or are members of organizations outside of the school building. Many of the study participants indicated that having leadership opportunities and extending their professional work and talents beyond the classroom play a role in their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Professional development is critical. Participant One stressed the need for more professional development at various levels within the Chicago Public School district. She indicated the need for more collaboration between special education teachers within the field:

I think it's important to get together in order to have the same language, and the same tools that all special education teachers can pull out.

Participant Two stated that she is still being trained as a special education teacher and reflected on the many continuous learning opportunities within the field:

I think I am still being trained. You want to reach that master teacher level, but there is always an opportunity. You need to know the field well. I feel like I still want to get more professional development, if I am going to tell others how things should be done. My administration has given me professional development opportunities, a voice. Special education is a field where you are constantly learning and growing, so there is always an opportunity to do that.

Participant Seven discussed her successful grant writing projects and mentioned that she writes these grants in order to have more professional development opportunities:

We got this enormous grant and got to go to all these conferences. We were asked to be part of writing the grant, planning the conferences, and then doing a presentation about the conference afterwards. I am doing things that actually help people and being a part of the principal's committee for professional development.

Having professional development opportunities appeared to also be very important to Participant Nine. She stated she remains in her present school in large part due to the wonderful professional development that is available to her:

The school's expectation is that you read two professional development books a year together and every other week we sit and collaborate and talk about them.

The professional development that we have at this school is like no other. We lead

it. There's no way I would ever be the teacher I am today without being here and being exposed to all the amazing professional development. I read four professional books a year in this school and I discussed them with my colleagues.

Although not all study participants directly mentioned the importance of professional development opportunities as a factor in contributing to their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools, a pattern emerged from the data. This group of special education teachers indicated that they continuously seek to improve themselves professionally whether through traditional coursework or professional development opportunities. In fact, several of the participants stated they pursue their own professional development opportunities and pay for these opportunities through their own funding.

In sum, special education teachers who took part in this study clearly suggested that holding leadership roles and having professional development opportunities strengthens their desire to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. These teachers seek out a myriad of professional opportunities and view them as a part of their contribution to the profession.

Teaching brings me joy and allows me to contribute to society.

A fifth theme that tends to stand out among interview participants is labeled “teaching brings me joy and allows me to contribute to society.” The theme captures the participants’ many responses surrounding the idea of how they view the field of special education and why they remain. Many of the participants indicated that they viewed teaching as a lifelong career. Some participants referred to their attraction to the profession as a calling or passion and many mentioned feeling they are benefiting society

in some way. These responses suggested their commitment and decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools is associated with how they view the field.

Participant Five repeatedly stressed that teaching is not just a job, but also a career. After working in the business world, she realized her need to contribute to society. She stated that teaching students with disabilities is one way of making a difference:

I was part of the corporate world, and I was very unhappy. I was empty inside because I was not contributing anything, it was just a job. I wanted to do something that had more meaning. I knew I wanted to do something that contributed to society or would make me feel better about what I was spending my time doing. Teaching is not just a job, it's a career. It's a life experience that you're doing some service to mankind. I feel complete as a person and feel that the energy I expend is different. I feel that I have moved something or have contributed to something. I have made a difference, and in doing so fulfills me more than any type of regular job.

Participant Five also talked about teaching as being spiritual and discussed how contributing to others increases her level of commitment:

I think it's a daily check-in with where you are as a person, emotionally, spiritually, physically. It comes from the how your human spirit is developing. Teaching is all about the human spirit and what you're contributing to others. I feel teaching really exposes to me when I need to work on as a person and teacher. It comes down to you as a person, to your commitment.

Participant One described her personal struggles with school and explained that because of her challenging experiences, she wanted a career that allowed her to advocate for students who struggle like she did. She also expressed the desire to make a difference:

I just think every day is a reward. I love being with them. I think it's the daily things that I love. Every day there is something new, there's always something with somebody that we work through when they overcame something or I even overcame something. Knowing it is my opportunity to really make a difference keeps me going. One reason why I keep staying in it is because not everybody is the same. We don't come from the same backgrounds.

Participant Three described how she began working with students with disabilities as a high school student. Teaching students with special needs is the only career Participant Three has ever considered. She described it almost as a “calling”:

When I was 16 or 17, I started working and helping in the classroom and that's when I decided to go into this field. I knew right away. It was one of those things where it was a match. I knew I had to do this. I knew this is what I wanted to do. I knew the people who work here and I saw what they did and I wanted to do it too.

Participant Four reported becoming interested in teaching students with disabilities as a result of a family member having a speech difficulty. As a general education teacher already, Participant Four expressed wanting to be more effective in the classroom in order to meet the needs of all of her students. She mentioned that teaching is a way to benefit society:

There was a component of trying to figure out what you want to do in life and teaching was one of the options and it worked. I can't think of anything that I

would want to do that I would have so much passion for. I could do a lot of things; I just wouldn't find the joy in it. I did work in the business world, and it was not satisfying. What I'm doing is very beneficial to society.

Similarly, Participant Six was influenced due to her having a family member with a disability. She mentioned that she has always had a passion for working with students and sees herself as a surrogate parent in the classroom:

It is kind of a passion working with students and people. I was the ultimate volunteer before I started working. There are a lot of other things going on in these kids' lives. You are being a surrogate parent.

Benefiting society by preparing students to become successful in life is a responsibility that Participant Seven does not take lightly:

I've always been interested in children. I've always felt that the responsibility of the teacher is to train her students to be successful in the world. So it is important to me that our special education population not be neglected in any way. We need to train people to work around their disability or compensate in some way for the disability so they can be productive, happy members of society.

While deciding on a career path, Participant Nine only considered the teaching path because she desired a nurturing career that would allow her to advocate for students and adults:

I knew I wanted to be a special education teacher. I think I was just very much in awe the more I learned about disabilities and even more intrigued and inspired by invisible disabilities. It was just like a whole new world to me. It was almost like empowering. When I was younger I knew I would get into some kind of nurturing

career. I wanted to get into where I was also helping the community out. As I sat in front of students during my field experiences, I had so much more energy than I ever had, I just felt so alive.

In sum, special education teachers that have participated in this study indicated that they view teaching as a profession rather than just a job. Some of the participants have always known they wanted to be special education teachers, while others worked in other fields prior to becoming a special education teacher. Many of the participants expressed that they enjoy their role as special education teacher and believe they are benefiting society by making a difference in the lives of students with disabilities. Participants' responses indicated a strong association between participants wanting to contribute to society and their commitment to remaining in the field of special education.

My previous life experiences helped prepare me for teaching.

The label for theme six pertains to the fact that all of the participants made direct comments regarding their life experiences and the extent to which those experiences prepared them for their role as a special education teacher. Additionally, participants reported that having these life experiences had an impact on their decisions to remain in the field.

Participant One struggled in her own academic career and stressed that those experiences had an impact on why she became a special education teacher and why she remains teaching students with disabilities:

I struggled in school throughout, but I fought it. I struggled with people understanding the differences in my struggles and I wanted to be there and so

that's how I went into special education. I think it's one reason why I keep staying.

Additionally, while Participant One was a teacher candidate, she held a position as a substitute teacher a few days a week in order to gain more experience in the classroom. She stated that this experience helped her to feel more prepared:

Luckily, I was subbing a few days a week before I graduated, so I got a sense of what it felt like to be in the classroom.

Participant Two explained that she was exposed to many kids with disabilities while growing up. In high school she became president of the Council for Exceptional Children club and got involved in many community projects. She indicated that all of these experiences impacted her decision to become a special education teacher:

I always had kids with disabilities in my school, so I didn't realize it wasn't the case for everybody. I became president of the CEC club at our high school. The mentor I worked with was encouraging me to become a special education teacher. The teacher I worked with had a really strong vocational program so we did a lot of community projects and the high school kids would volunteer.

Participant Two also indicated that attending a rigorous teacher education program resulted in her being well prepared. She reported that her program required many observation hours and a full school year of student teaching:

It was a tough program. The very first semester you enrolled. They have you do observation hours and every semester you are enrolled you're somehow in the schools. I had to do a full semester practicum and a full school year of student

teaching, which is more than what most schools require. College was difficult, but it was good because there were people who decided not to do the program.

Participant Four was originally a mathematics teacher and got endorsed in special education through the Chicago Public School's STAR program, which encouraged general education teachers to become special education teachers as a result of the Cory H. Settlement. Prior to becoming a mathematics teacher, this participant worked in the business world for several years. She indicated that this experience was one of the reasons why she appreciates teaching:

I've been in the real world, I've been in the business world, where it is high stress, high-tension job, it's a whole different stress out there. Teaching was a good fit for me. It gave me the flexibility and independence that you don't get in the business world. When I was getting my degree, I just didn't think that teaching special education was an option at the time. I did work in the business world, during and after college and was not satisfied, not feeling the challenge, or the benefit to society.

Additionally, Participant Four indicated that her experience as a substitute teacher helped her to gain confidence and persevere in teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

I didn't have to do student teaching at all, but by that time I was already a substitute teacher doing some other stuff. So I was already in the classroom going "I can do this." I was a substitute teacher, so I had the two years of real trench experience.

Participant Five got certified through an alternative certification program and during this program experienced four different schools in seven years. Additionally, she worked in the corporate world for 13 years and reported feeling like she was not making a contribution. Participant Five reported that having had experiences outside of education solidified her purpose in becoming a special education teacher and her commitment to teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

I was part of the corporate world for about 13 years and I was very unhappy. I felt empty inside, I was not contributing anything and I wanted to do something that had more meaning. I knew that I wanted to do something that contributed to society or made me feel better about what I was spending my time doing. The money was good, but it was just a job. When I went through the corporate world, I did not feel the energy that I expended promoted anything, moved anything, or contributed to something. I make a difference and doing so fulfills me more than any type of regular job. That's where I find that no matter how bad a day is, teaching will always be more fulfilling than any regular type of 40 hour a week job.

Participant Six described her experience working outside of the education field. She worked as a banker and later operated a home daycare. She expressed feeling like teaching was a natural next step in her career. She also added that being a mother of six and a volunteer prepared her well for teaching students with special needs in low-income schools:

I think being a mom helped prepare me more than anything else. I have six sons. I have the kind of passion, working with people and students. I was the ultimate

volunteer before I started working. I was really good with the kids and that is why I thought I would go into early childhood because I was watching so many babies and toddlers and stuff. It just made sense.

Additionally, Participant Six referred to the many opportunities she had to observe good teachers while working as an aide in a classroom during her teacher preparation program. She reported that these experiences helped her to determine that teaching students with disabilities was a suitable career for her:

I observed a lot of good teachers, very good teachers. While I was going to school, I was working in an autistic classroom as an aide. I said, this is cool, I want to do this.

Participant Seven initially began her teaching career in the private schools, and she later worked in the private sector for five years. She reported that during that time, she missed being in the classroom; she decided to get her Master's degree in special education in order to make herself more marketable to teach in the public schools. She indicated that having this experience in the private sector solidified her passion and commitment for teaching:

I taught in private schools, and it made me happy to be with them. However, I realized that at my salary in the private school I could either move out or I could buy a car, but I couldn't to both. So I decided to leave teaching for five years. I got married, had two children, and then realized I missed teaching so much.

As a career changer, Participant Eight mentioned the importance of being certain that teaching was the right career for her. She described trying to get as much classroom

experience as possible early on in her teacher preparation program in order to ensure that she made the right career choice:

I did make a point of doing all my observation hours the first quarter and do as many as I possibly could because my thought was, if I don't like this, I'll be screwed. So I put in as many observation hours in as many types of schools as I could. I thought I really needed to be prepared for any sort of situation. I have to really know that this is really what I want to do.

In sum, study participants commented at great length about the relationship between their previous life experiences and their work as a teacher. Some participants reported having experiences with students with disabilities at a young age, having a variety of strong field experiences during teacher preparation, or having experience as a previous general education teacher or substitute teacher. Some have mentioned their own personal struggles in school as a drive for them to become special education teachers, while others have mentioned being influenced by family members who have disabilities. Participants have reported that previous life experiences have had an impact on their decisions to remain in the field.

Having a supportive work environment is critical.

The final theme that emerged as a result of the data pertains to the participants' comments about their work environment. For clarity, the theme is divided into subsections in order to offer a detailed description of a supportive work environment. The subsections are (a) Supportive administrators are important; and (b) Supportive colleagues are important. The special education teachers that took part in this research study made many direct comments indicating that a supportive work environment has a

significant effect on their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. A few participants mentioned the need for special education teachers to have support during their “green period” of teaching, while others indicated that a supportive work environment is important for teacher motivation and commitment throughout their teaching career.

Supportive administrators are important. Participant Two stated that she believes she is well supported by her administration through the demonstration of professional respect:

I am well supported by my administration. I feel well respected. Having an administration who listens and who respects you and who is able to work with you to get things is nice.

Participant Three emphasized the importance of having a supportive administration in ensuring a positive work environment. She stressed that she is completely supported by her administration and referred to being valued as a member of her faculty:

I have been here through four principals and every single one of them has been extremely supportive and looking for the best professional aspect for the teachers. If you go to them with an issue or problem they try to deal with it. I have learned to value what we have here. Here it's more of a collaborative effort with the administration rather than they are in charge and they tell us what to do.

Participant Seven echoed the sentiment of Participant Three and reflected on feeling extremely grateful for having the support of her administration:

I know that I can go into my principal or assistant principal, and I know that when I make a request or when I asked for help or something I am never told no. I am told, “Let’s think about it, Let's look at it. Is there any other way we can make this happen?” I feel more like work equals rather than “oh that's the boss coming down the hallway.”

She also mentioned not ever wanting to leave her school, especially because of the support she receives:

We are so lucky here. This is the third principal we have had and one is more committed than the other. You're putting 100% of yourself into your teaching, and if you have a principal who doesn't understand you, I don't think I could work for someone like that.

Participant Four expressed that her administration fosters teachers to work as a team. She mentioned appreciating the many good qualities in her principal. She also stated that if she did not have the support of her administration, teaching would be difficult:

Here we are encouraged to be a team. My principal doesn't believe in intimidation, you know when she's mad at you. She is logical, and shall be honest with you, and can clearly communicate when something is not right.

Participant Nine also emphasized the value of support from her administration. She discussed having respect for her principal and stressed that her principal has impacted her professional growth as a teacher as well as her decision to remain at her present school:

My principal is amazing. She honors authentic literature, text, and literature discussions and student driven work. Even though some schools have a lot more resources, it could not replace the quality of curriculum that I feel we have. Our principal does a good job of giving us flexibility to kind of run the day how we want to run the day. There's a lot of cohesiveness and that's why you definitely feel like a family.

Participant Five, described the qualities she appreciates in her current administration. She mentioned valuing consistency and straightforwardness in knowing the expectations:

I don't want my administrator to be my friend. I want him or her to be able to look at a situation and call it by its right name. I had another administrator that was very well liked, but I didn't feel safe. With my current administration I feel more confident. I feel that if there's ever a situation, she will deal with that fairly. I want to feel safe. I want to feel they are impartial, that there is no favoritism.

Participant Six indicated that she is supported by her administration, but explained the limitations involved in having administrator that lack special education knowledge:

There is support if I need it, but there's no knowledge.

Participant Eight reflected on the role administration plays in her perceptions of the field. She also explained that having an administration without a background in special education does make it difficult for her to advocate for her students and the program:

I think in general, the administrators have no idea what you do. I think in that respect, they can't advocate for special education students or teachers. I think they

can't advocate for the program if they don't really understand what it all involves. It sort of means I don't have any power, and it makes it a lot harder to get materials. These issues affect me personally.

Most participants expressed that they value the support of their administration and acknowledged the important role administrative support plays in their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities. Even those participants who did not necessarily have the support they needed from their current administration indicated the value of creating a supportive working environment.

Supportive colleagues are important. Participant One indicated that she has been teaching in a co-teaching/inclusion model and reported being successful in teaching with her co-teacher. She expressed seeing herself as an advocate for other teachers and stressed the importance of collegial support:

I finally get to do inclusion and we actually co-teach. We work well together. I advocate for my peers and I believe in supporting my colleagues. I just think that's how you keep the morale going and keep motivation. My colleagues are great, and that keeps me going.

Participant Two consistently referred to working as a team and expressed that she values the cohesiveness in her school building:

Being able to work in a team with your coworkers is important.

Participant Three has been teaching in her present school for the majority of her career. During her interviews, she emphasized the importance of developing strong relationships with colleagues and stressed that these relationships have impacted her decision to remain in the field:

The place I work is perfect; no one ever really leaves here voluntarily. It's a great place to work. It's a family. Part of it is the people who work here really make it a special place, the collaborative effort is so important. You have to be able to collaborate with other people, and this is such an excellent place to do that because people know each other and work well with each other. Who would want to leave a place like this, when you love what you do and the faculty is a family?

Participant Seven also stated that she deeply appreciates collegial support and recognized that this support plays a role in her decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools:

The relationships I've built here are so wonderful. If you need anything in the world, you can always go into somebody's room and say, "I'm having a problem" and that's the attitude at this school. You never feel alone.

Participant Four discussed her belief that special education teachers who leave the profession do so because they do not have collegial relationships and a support system in their school:

When it's adversarial, teachers tend to want to leave, but when you have a collective unit, almost a family situation, it is different. Here we're all stressed out, but we are together in it, and we are sharing the grief. Even in the poorest, gang infested communities; if the teachers are there as a team they can do so much.

Participant Five discussed the need for support from colleagues in terms of collaboration:

I have learned to approach others in a more professional way. I come across as wanting to help, or to collaborate, or to offer something to make the situation

happen easier. I find if you come with something to offer the other teacher, it makes doors open better.

Participant Six indicated that the support of her colleagues acts as stress reduction:

I knew I was in the right place because of the people and the support from them and parents. I have been here long enough now that I think people respect me and my opinion. I am pretty tight with a lot of my colleagues and when we feel stress, at least we can bounce it off each other, and it helps.

Participant Nine also mentioned valuing relationships she has built with colleagues, but stressed the need to develop collegial relationships with special education teachers in other schools as well:

It is really about relationships with other teachers and I think this is a strength of mine. I think learning from other colleagues is so important. We need to have community base where professionals are coming in and leading workshops. I work with a great team of teachers, so it works very well and it's a fun group to work with. So I think your colleagues are extremely important. Maybe because you're around like minds that value different learning styles, so you can work well together as a group.

When Participant Nine was asked to provide advice to beginning special education teachers she mentioned the need to have a professional support system:

I think it's important to surround yourself by supportive people. Find a mentor or a support system to surround yourself with.

Participant One echoed this piece of advice by saying:

Find one or two people that you know you can trust in order to hammer out any issues.

Many of the study participants referred to the importance of having support from colleagues. Several of the participants referred to their colleagues as “family” and expressed how much they value this relationship. The findings support the association between collegial support and special education teachers’ decisions to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

In sum, many of the study participants indicated that they are well supported by their administration and that this support not only allows them to do their job well, but also encourages them to grow professionally. Overall, most participants in this study indicated that administrative support has an impact on their work environment and on their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities

In addition to administrative support, the findings from this study show a link between collegial support and the special education teacher’s ability to persevere in stressful and challenging situations. Throughout the interviews, participants indicated that having support of colleagues was strongly associated with their decision to remain in the special education field.

After interviewing these teachers about their perceptions of why they remain in the profession, the data revealed certain qualities. These qualities include attention to continually improving their practice; the ability to persevere, remain flexible, and embrace change; feelings of success and confidence; enjoying leadership roles and associated professional development opportunities; gaining satisfaction from their work; recognizing the impact of their life experiences on their decision to teach; and

recognizing the importance of working in a supportive environment. The final chapter, Chapter V, will present an interpretation of the findings, implications of the study, study limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter V: Discussion

The shortage of fully certified special education teachers has been a significant problem in the United States as four out of every ten special education teachers will leave the profession before their fifth year of teaching. This qualitative study sought to add to the existing literature on teacher attrition by interviewing highly qualified National Board Certified special education teachers in order to have a better understanding of why good teachers choose to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

To effectively address the teacher shortage issue, the rate of special education teacher attrition needs to decline. Because much of the research thus far has focused on teachers who have left the field of special education or who have expressed intent to leave the profession, it was vital to investigate possible reasons why experienced special education teachers remain. In addition, to fully understand the teacher shortage problem and address teacher retention, it is imperative to not only determine why beginning special education teachers are leaving the field, but also to learn from experienced special education teachers as to why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Experienced National Board Certified special education teachers were interviewed to ascertain their perceptions as to why they have remained teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools while so many leave the field within the first five years. Through the design of this study, I was able to learn about the participant's individual experiences directly from his or her perspective.

Discussion of Findings

According to the existing research, a number of variables appear to affect special education teachers' decisions to remain teaching. Most of the studies indicate that

teacher variables, workplace variables, and personal/affective variables appear to have an influence on special education teachers' reasons for remaining teaching students with disabilities. The findings from this study appear to support aspects of the existing research.

To better understand the participants' perceptions of why they remain in teaching, I explored a number of central categories to envelope and explain the seven themes that emerged from the data analysis (described in Chapter IV). Whereas, often, one central category is presented to organize and explain all of a study's themes, I determined that two central categories were needed in order to represent the themes that captured experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. The two central categories that synthesize and explain the research findings are labeled: "Go-Getter" and "Professional Fit." A discussion of how these central categories explain study participants' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools follows.

Go-Getter.

The first central category is labeled "Go-Getter." When I examined the seven themes for patterns, four specific themes clustered. At the core of each of the themes was this essence of the Nationally Board Certified special education teacher as a "go-getter". A "go-getter" can be defined as a self-starter and self-motivator, one who never gives up and persists, and as a person who enjoys a challenge and continually strives to improve. This study strongly suggested that experienced special education teachers who remain teaching possess specific characteristics and utilize particular practices that assist them in

remaining in their positions despite the many challenges of being a special education teacher.

Four themes that appeared to cluster around the idea of “go-getter” were: (a) I strive to continually improve my practice; (b) I possess some useful qualities when the “going gets tough”; (c) I am successful and confident as a teacher; and (d) My professional work extends beyond the classroom. Chapter IV presented findings related to these four themes separately and in this chapter I will describe how these four themes together form the central category of “go-getter.”

Two of the ways participants expressed they continually improve is by valuing learning and reflecting upon their practice. Participants clearly identified themselves as lifelong learners and viewed this characteristic as a drive that propels them forward in persevering in teaching students with disabilities. They described this value as something they not only possess themselves, but try to stress with their students as well. Several participants commented on the need to continue learning throughout a teaching career in order to keep up with the changes in the field and remain current. They also understand that teacher preparation programs are unable to teach pre-service teachers all they need to know prior to going into teaching. The participants not only value continued learning as a characteristic within them, but also see this as a characteristic that all special education teachers should embrace. This group of National Board special education teachers view continuing their education and knowledge base as vital to being a successful teacher as well as to remaining teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. It is likely that school districts that encourage professional development and offer

opportunities for growth and advancement will be more successful in retaining experienced and qualified special education teachers.

In addition to valuing learning in order to improve their teaching practice, study participants indicated that being reflective in their teaching was of great importance. Within participant responses there appeared to be a strong relationship between a special education teacher's confidence in his or her teaching abilities and the decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. They indicated that this feeling of confidence has been fostered through reflection as a teacher and person and does impact their career decisions. Many of the participants expressed their continuous need to look for ways to improve their teaching and indicated that this is cultivated through the National Board Certification process. One participant suggested that having the ability to reflect on teaching should be one indicator of whether a teacher should remain teaching in the field.

In describing themselves, study participants discussed useful qualities they possess that help them when the "going gets tough." They reported that perseverance and resourcefulness is a quality they perceive themselves having as a teacher. This group of special education teachers appeared to be problem solvers who seek out solutions, overcomes obstacles, and persevere even in some of the most difficult situations. This perseverance was aided by the special education teacher's ability to find resources when not readily available and perseveres when challenges appear to be impossible. Participants' perseverance in teaching students with disabilities was propelled by their personal experiences with schooling, overall personality, professional maturity and age, understanding of the importance of being resourceful, and a feeling that giving up on

students is never an option. Some study participants were resourceful and showed perseverance by taking advantage of learning from other teachers, getting other teachers to collaborate with them, making use of previous teaching experiences, and using creativity and tact to accomplish their goals. Having the ability to persevere in challenging situations and finding resources to help accomplish this appears to be a significant characteristic of experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers who remain in the field.

In addition to being able to persevere in challenging situations, participants indicated that they enjoyed the challenges and variety that the teaching role provides. Other participants suggested that the role design related to variety within the profession positively affects their decisions to remain in the field. Several participants painted themselves as teachers who enjoy wearing different hats, having every day be different, teaching in various settings, and having to seek new knowledge in order to keep up with the field. Also, many study participants saw challenges as something that keeps them motivated to want to persevere. The findings suggest that teachers who value a challenging work environment involving variety within teacher responsibilities are “go-getters.”

Similarly, flexibility appears to be a key characteristic experienced special education teachers possess. Participants often used the term “flexibility” to describe what sets them apart from teachers who have left the field. Having the ability to embrace change and remain flexible appears to help special education teachers keep up with the changing field, minimize stress, find a position that is suitable for them, work with a diverse group of students and parents, collaborate effectively with general education

teachers, and manage student behavior. Several participants in the study also mentioned that they appreciated the flexibility that teaching offers. Having the ability to transfer schools or positions with relative ease and having a degree of flexibility in the classroom were mentioned as advantages to their profession. Although flexibility is not a term widely discussed in the current literature, participants in this study repeatedly identified flexibility as a characteristic they perceive having and one that helps them to fit the demands of the profession, be more effective special education teachers, and be more likely to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

This group of teachers appeared to enjoy a challenge, value variety, and remain flexible. In addition to these characteristics, study participants described the confidence they feel as a special education teacher as well as the factors that relate to this confidence. Looking for growth in their students seemed to be a practice that contributed to teachers' feelings of confidence, success, and a sense of efficacy. This is particularly important because the research on teacher efficacy states that those that have a sense of efficacy "believe they have the power to produce desired effects in their classrooms" (Swicegood, 2005, p.1) and having that sense of perceived efficacy may have a positive effect on teacher attrition. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) discussed the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence, and they reported that efficacy affects teachers' perseverance, especially during challenging situations. Although much attrition research has focused on external variables, this study along with other research on teacher efficacy report that a sense of perceived teacher efficacy can play an important role in whether teachers decide to remain in the field of special education.

In addition to being successful and confident, many of the participants reported that they view themselves as leaders and discussed how this quality helps them to make a difference in the field through advocacy, professional development, and collegial collaboration. They seemed to value having a voice in their schools, which allowed them to be a part of the decision making process within their schools. Also, many of the special education teachers discussed their role in mentoring other prospective National Board teachers and shared the value it holds in cultivating and helping other teachers grow.

This group of special education teachers also indicated that in addition to seeking leadership opportunities, they continually seek to improve professionally through either traditional coursework or professional development opportunities. This study suggested that there is a clear association between professional development opportunities for teachers and their commitment to remain teaching students with disabilities. Findings from this study supported existing literature claiming that professional development is a form of support that special education teachers need, regardless of how many years they have been a special education teacher. Gersten et al. (2001) found that there is a direct relationship between professional development opportunities and a teacher's commitment to remain teaching in special education. Other studies also show a significant relationship between opportunities for professional growth and a teacher's sense of commitment to the field (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). Lichtenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen (1991) reported that teachers who have access to professional development felt "revitalized-professionally empowered" (p.5-6) and more successful in the classroom. The literature also reported that having opportunities to grow professionally increased

teacher satisfaction and the likelihood that a special education teacher would remain in the field. I concluded from these findings that participants saw their leadership roles and professional development opportunities as contributors to their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

It is particularly interesting to me that although I did not originally seek a description of the characteristics of a Nationally Board Certified teacher who remains teaching students with disabilities, all of the participants interpreted my questioning to be seeking this information. Instead of explaining the reasons why they remain teaching students with disabilities, participants told me more about what qualities they possess and how those qualities help them to remain in the field. Apparently, they wanted to share who they are as teachers and what it is about them that have allowed them to remain teaching. Although the current literature on teacher attrition does address some personal or internal qualities of a teacher who is more likely to remain teaching students with disabilities, teachers in this study describe the qualities they possess as teachers and link those qualities to why they stay.

Professional fit.

The second central category is labeled “professional fit.” As I was comparing themes, it became evident that three of the themes were significantly related and together described one of the fundamental messages study participants were reporting in their interviews. Two of the participants validated “professional fit” as a central category by making direct comments indicating that they believed being a special education teacher is the right “professional fit” for them. They stressed perceiving themselves as being professionally suited for their roles. Some examples of direct comments follow.

Participant Two acknowledged that her personality fits the profession, but also matches her skill set:

I think you need to be able to choose a profession where you can use your personality in a way that fits you best. Special education fits me, because I get bored easily and so it's fun to have a job where you can do different things every day, where you can have interactions with kids and teachers. If you're more of an individual person, then teaching is not a profession for you.

Participant Three had significant experience working with students with disabilities prior to college and realized instantly that teaching was the right fit:

I knew right away, it was one of those things, where it was a match. I knew I had to do this. I knew this is what I wanted to do.

Participant Four directly referred to teaching being a good professional fit for her: Teaching works for me, it's a really good fit. I know I'm good at it, which makes me feel like I'm not struggling and fighting. I found what I really want to do and I know what other stuff is like. I'm good at it, I like it, it's fun, and why should I change if it's good. If it works, don't fix it.

Participant Nine expressed that not every person is suited for the profession and stressed that there needs to be a good fit with a person's personality:

I guess either you have the personality or you don't.

The three themes linked to “professional fit” are: (a) Teaching brings me joy and allows me to contribute to society; (b) My previous life experiences helped prepare me for teaching; and (c) Having a supportive work environment is critical. Chapter IV presented findings related to these three themes separately and in this chapter I will

describe how these three themes together form a central category to explain the participants' perceptions of why they remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. These findings offer insight into what type of person might be a good "professional fit" to be a special education teacher. There are many implications for both teacher preparation programs and school districts.

Participants interviewed in this study viewed teaching as a means to feed the spirit through making a difference. They saw this fundamental teaching purpose as a reason why teaching students with disabilities is a good "professional fit" for them. Participant Five provided a summary of this by stating: "Teaching is all about the human spirit and what you're contributing to others." Participants appeared to value contributing to society and whether they discovered this desire after having a previous career, or whether they always wanted to become a teacher, this group takes their teaching role seriously. They expressed viewing their teaching position as a lifelong career dedicated to making a difference and indicated that they feel this way towards the teaching field because teaching is a good "professional fit" that supports their need to make a difference. Additionally, they expressed that this view influences their level of commitment as well as their determination and choice to remain teaching students with disabilities. This finding was significant in that a good "professional fit" appeared to be a disposition that may influence whether a special education teacher will have longevity in the field.

In addition to participants feeling that teaching is a good "professional fit" for them because it is feeding their spirit by contributing to society, these participants repeatedly mentioned the role previous life experiences played in their choosing to become and remain a special education teacher. Findings indicated that the experiences

special education teachers have had either outside of education through a previous job, within education as an aide or a substitute teacher, or through personal experiences with family members with disabilities, may be linked to a special education teacher's level of commitment to the field. Participants expressed that having certain types of previous life experiences helped them in identifying teaching as a career that best suited their personalities.

Although there is little known in the existing literature regarding the effect of specific teaching experiences on special education teachers' decisions to remain in the field, some studies have found that the more experience a special education teacher has and the more time a teacher has invested in the profession, they are less likely to consider leaving the profession. The findings from this study indicated that experiences teachers have prior to becoming a special education teacher have an impact on special education teachers' perceptions of the field as well as on whether they see teaching as a good "professional fit" for them. This is important in terms of prerequisites for university coursework as well as programmatic content within teacher preparation programs.

In addition to life experiences solidifying teaching as a suitable career, this study found that having a supportive work environment can affect whether a special education teacher feels teaching is a good "professional fit" for her. The findings indicated that both administrative and collegial support play an important role in creating a supportive work environment. These findings support much of the existing research regarding the effect a teachers' work environment has on teachers' decisions to remain in the field.

Participants stated that having administrative support allows them to do their job well and grow professionally. Existing literature has regularly linked administrative

support to special education teacher attrition, largely due to the influence administrators have on the working environment in the schools. According to Littrell et al. (1994), administrative support affects how teachers feel about their role as a teacher. Further, it has been reported in the literature that teachers who feel supported by their administrators see teaching as “more rewarding; enjoy a productive, motivating work environment and experience less job-related stress and burnout” (p. 297). Additionally, it has been suggested that principal support greatly impacts stress levels, role issues, job satisfaction, and commitment, all of which have an impact on teacher attrition (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Singh & Billingsley, 1996). When teachers feel supported in doing their job, they may feel less overwhelmed by the trials faced in the special education classroom. Supportive administrators can provide teachers with emotional support and useful feedback, and foster work environments that are safe and comfortable for teachers. Administrative support is an important variable to focus on because it is amenable to change if districts are interested in working towards retaining their special education teachers.

Participants in this study also clearly mentioned the impact collegial support has on the work environment and on their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. This finding is supported by current literature which states that reduced collegial support was linked to teachers’ leaving and more support with special education teachers remaining in the field (Miller et al., 1999). Additionally, according to Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harness (2001), it is not just the support of the administration that is important, but rather the combination of principal, staff, and overall school climate that strongly influences whether special education teachers feel

supported or not. Findings from this study supported current findings in the research literature that indicated that in addition to administrator support, support from colleagues strongly affects a special education teachers work environment and their decision to remain teaching students with disabilities.

From this study, it appears that three themes are associated with a participant feeling that teaching is the right “professional fit” for her. Having the right “professional fit” appears to be related to experienced special education teachers’ decisions to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Although it is unclear from this study how each of the themes impact a teacher’s perception of “professional fit” and its impact on teacher retention, it is clear that these themes are related to experienced special education teachers’ decisions to remain in the field. Investigating the relationship between the themes and the central category warrants further research.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations specific to its sample, researcher bias, and research methodology. Although representative of the special education teaching profession, this study was comprised mostly of female special education teachers. Having such a large proportion of female special education teachers may have an impact on the data. Additionally, although special education teachers were interviewed twice, having a small sample size may have impacted the ideas that emerged due to the limited number of special education teachers that were interviewed.

Another limitation of this study relates to the school district where the participants are employed. Although I contacted 171 Nationally Board Certified special education teachers in Cook County, all nine of the participants taught in one large urban school

district. Cook County is the second most populous county in the United States and contains 785 public school districts and the Chicago Public Schools is the third-largest school district in the country. Because of this, I knew that there would be a strong likelihood that Nationally Board Certified teachers from this area would be teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools and would make up the majority of the participants in this study. However, it is recognized that a limitation to this study is that variability among study participants is low in terms of all participants teaching in a single school district. Questions emerge such as, “Are the factors which effect special education teachers decisions to stay the same for all special education teachers, or might they change if participants are teaching in more affluent, suburban, or rural school districts?”. More research is needed in this area in order to explore this question.

Another possible limitation to consider is researcher bias. Although I was fully aware of the potential for bias, personal experiences can interfere by imposing personal bias. To carefully avoid this, I audio recorded interviews, transcribed them word for word, and summarized findings from each individual interview. In order to be sure that the participant’s voice was being heard accurately, transcriptions and interview summaries were sent to each participant after each interview in order to verify accuracy of the transcription as well as of my interview interpretations.

My professional experience with teaching students with disabilities became more of a benefit rather than a limitation to this study. Because I have had extensive prior experiences in the classroom, I believe the participants felt comfortable in sharing their perspectives, with the understanding that I could relate and appreciate their individual experiences. My background was disclosed in an initial consent form, as well as at the

beginning of the first interview. In addition to the participants feeling comfortable during the interview, because of my background and our common professional vocabulary, I was able to ask participants probing questions during the interview. This allowed for both breadth and depth in my questioning without having to first understand and clarify educational context or meaning.

Limitations related to the study design are related to the participant criteria. Because study participants were required to have taught for six or more years, this study does not take into account factors beginning teachers may view as having an effect on their likelihood to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Additionally, this study focused on Nationally Board Certified teachers. By only interviewing Nationally Board Certified teachers, this excludes high quality experienced special education teachers who have not attained the National Board Certification, but would offer valuable insight on why they stay teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Having broader criteria for participant selection could yield rich results and perspectives on teacher attrition. Despite these limitations, the themes presented in this research study are important, worth exploring more in depth, and offer considerations regarding both pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Implications

Despite the limitations of the study, there are many important implications for school districts, administrators, and teacher educators. Study participants expressed that their decisions to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools are strongly related to “go-getter” personal characteristics as well as the extent to which a person is a good “professional fit” as a special education teacher. These central

categories, which explain teachers' perceptions of why they remain, have significant implications for special education teacher attrition and retention.

Go-Getter.

It was very interesting and somewhat surprising that study participants interpreted questions like "What helps you to persevere?" and "What sets you apart from those who have left the field?" as questions asking them to describe personal qualities about who they are rather than what skills or knowledge they have as a teacher. Instead, they told me about the qualities they possess as a person and why it is important for a special education teacher to have these qualities. Knowledge of these qualities can help a potential teacher candidate decide if she is suited for a career in special education and similarly, a teacher preparation program can use this information in choosing to admit teacher candidates into their programs. There are many implications for both teacher preparation programs and school districts related to having the knowledge of how experienced National Board Certified teachers view themselves.

This study offers insight into what an experienced special education teacher values in themselves as a teacher and what they think new teachers need to possess in order to be successful. Because it appeared that special education teachers saw themselves as lifelong learners it is important for teacher preparation programs to provide learning opportunities that go beyond graduation. For instance, it would be beneficial for a teacher preparation program to sponsor a support network open to special education teachers who have graduated so that additional support can be provided to teachers in their first few years of teaching. This support could be in the form of an interactive webpage, online professional development, or question and answer support. Most of the

participants commented that continued learning is vital to their success as a teacher, so having the support from their teacher preparation programs could prove to be very helpful in retaining special education teachers. Additionally, school districts will need to provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities to teachers if they are going to hope to retain experienced special education teachers.

In addition to learning opportunities, participants viewed reflection as having an impact on their success as a teacher, their sense of efficacy, and ultimately their commitment to remaining in the field. This understanding implies teacher preparation programs should include reflection as a major part of the teacher preparation curriculum. Having teacher candidates self-reflect is not enough, as instructor feedback is needed in order for teacher candidates to benefit from the reflective process. Additionally, schools/districts should build in a self-reflection piece with their teacher assessment protocol in order to make the process both a learning and evaluative experience.

It is also clear that study participants described themselves as having the ability to persevere and solve problems despite the many challenges. They also expressed that new teachers needed to be able to solve problems using existing resources or have the skills and willingness to seek out help elsewhere. Some teachers may possess these skills internally, but some may not. School districts can foster these skills by having strong experienced mentors available to work with teachers so that experienced teachers can impart their knowledge on those teachers who might need it. Additionally, teacher preparation programs can promote these skills by having teacher candidates work with experienced special education teachers through closely monitored quality field experiences.

Additionally, this study indicated that participants perceived themselves as able to identify and utilize strategies to help them persevere in teaching students with disabilities despite the many challenges. It is unknown whether participants innately have the type of personality to be able to do this on their own, but being able to utilize strategies appears to be something that can be fostered at both the pre-service and in-services levels. University courses can focus on realistic situations that special education teachers face and instruct teacher candidates on how to deal with these challenges. University instructors can also assist by preparing teacher candidates to be realistic in their expectations, understand school politics, accept things out of their control, learn to prioritize and pick battles, and develop strategies which help teachers deal with stress and burnout. Providing support via experienced mentors who utilize strategies and resources within a school district would also be very helpful, especially for those teachers who are struggling or at risk of leaving the field.

Knowing that experienced special education teachers value a challenge and variety in their job design can provide school districts with information regarding what experienced special education teachers who remain value in their jobs. School districts could foster creativity in job design. This may include exposing special education teachers to a variety of new strategies and materials in order to increase variety or to offer opportunities for professional development that requires them to use their creativity and offer them a challenge as a way to encourage motivation and passion for teaching students with disabilities. Additionally, when principals choose who they are going to hire, they may want to hire teachers who understand the unique needs of working with students in low-income schools and seek the challenge it provides.

Similarly, it is important for school districts and teacher preparation programs alike to know that experienced special education teachers perceive themselves as flexible teachers who embrace change. Teacher preparation programs may want to consider “flexibility” as a disposition a special education teacher candidate needs to possess in order to be successful in their program. Therefore, having prospective teacher candidates respond to how they perceive themselves personally would be helpful in determining whether they are a “go-getter.” Also, teacher preparation programs should prepare teacher candidates by helping them to understand the importance of being flexible in terms of curriculum and work with families and colleagues.

The existing research supports the idea that when a teacher feels accomplished, she is more likely to remain teaching students with disabilities (Billingsley, 1993). Many of the study participants mentioned that the National Board process positively affected their sense of efficacy in teaching, so school districts should offer incentives for experienced special education teachers to go through the National Board process. In addition to incentives, a district should provide National Board mentors to support prospective teachers through the process.

According to this study, it appeared that special education teachers valued having leadership opportunities as an extension of their professional work. Participants viewed their leadership roles as a means of advocating for parents, students, and colleagues. Whether this is a characteristic of National Board teachers or just of this group of special education teachers, districts should pay close attention to the fact that experienced special education teachers want their voices heard and appreciate being included in the decision-making process. Participants appeared to have a thirst for sharing their knowledge and

moving the field forward. Providing opportunities where special education teachers can use their skills would help them to feel like they are making a difference not only in the lives of students but within the climate of the school. Special education teachers who feel valued and respected are more likely to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Lastly, teachers in this study valued the professional work they are involved in beyond the classroom. This study in addition to existing research supports a relationship between professional opportunities offered to teachers and their decision to remain in the field. Professional development is something teachers in this study discussed as being important to them regardless of how many years they have been teaching. This evidence implies that school districts need to provide opportunities for special education teachers to grow professionally. This may be through coursework, outside district professional development, professional development provided by teachers within the district, or through partnerships between universities and school districts. School districts should also encourage and provide support for special education teachers to observe other professionals in the field in order to share strategies and grow and learn from each other.

Professional fit.

Based on the findings in this study, it appeared that three themes related to a central category of “professional fit.” These themes offered insight into why study participants perceive teaching is a good “professional fit” for them. Having this knowledge could be helpful to universities in selecting students for their programs. For instance, in screening potential teacher candidates, university recruiters should pay

special attention to potential candidates' experiences as well as their reasons for wanting to be a special education teacher.

Special education teachers in this study expressed their need to make a difference in the lives of students with disabilities, with parents, and in society as a whole. It appeared that they see teaching as a career where they can benefit society and make a true difference. Because of this need to make a difference, it is important for schools and school districts to provide special education teachers with feedback, show respect and express value in their job role, provide assessment systems which provide special education teachers information regarding student growth, and provide special education teachers with opportunities which foster their commitment to the field such as working with general education teachers to benefit all students' growth.

Additionally, this group of teachers associated experience with their decisions to remain in the field. They cited personal experiences, experiences within education, and experiences outside of education as having an effect on their sense of efficacy and commitment towards the field. According to Westling and Whitten (1996), the perception of the quality of preparation as well as the type of early teaching experience can be important contributors to the retention of special education teachers. Because educational preparation is linked to teacher effectiveness, special education teachers entering the field more prepared are at a distinct advantage.

Teacher preparation programs may want to explore reasons why teacher candidates feel teaching is a good "professional fit" and require candidates to deeply reflect on their decision to teach. Additionally, since participants in this study valued the varied experiences prior to becoming a teacher, it can be suggested that teacher

preparation programs may be more successful in graduating special education teachers who will remain in the field if their program requires varied and multiple field experiences early on in their programs. A more non-traditional program might want to require that their teacher candidates work as a substitute teacher for a certain number of days per month or have entrance requirements that include experience in the schools as a prerequisite. Having early field experiences might help teacher candidates to discern whether they have what it takes to teach students with special needs.

This study also indicated that having a supportive work environment has an effect on teachers' decisions to remain in the field. Having a supportive work environment is likely to increase teacher efficacy, commitment, and ultimately teacher retention.

Administrative support has been widely associated with teacher retention and attrition in the literature and if administrative support is vital to the retention of special education teachers, then it would be important for administrators to have training on how to provide such support. Requiring administrators to have a knowledge base in special education as well as learning experiences related to understanding the role of a special education teacher could assist administrators in being able to understand and support special education initiatives. Gaining this knowledge may need to be a part of pre-service administrative courses, but also can be made to be part of required professional development and ongoing training for administrators.

Additionally, administrators may want to design a school climate survey and needs assessment tool in order to better understand the needs and perceptions of their faculty. This would help them in organizing the school building, being responsive to teachers' needs, and helping administrators better understand and respond to the

dynamics in their building. It also may provide information regarding what professional development opportunities are needed to support and retain special education teachers.

Lastly, participants reported collegial support as an important factor leading to special education teachers' decision to remain in the field. The importance of collegial support demonstrates the need for school buildings to be organized in a way that promotes teachers working together on teams in a supportive spirit. Administrators can foster this support through the creation of teams to support the individual and collective needs of special education teachers. Also, assigning mentors within the school building is important in order to provide support and feedback to teachers at all levels of experience. Having a mentoring program that offers support and encouragement to special education teachers can provide them with the support they need to persevere and continue their commitment to the field. Additionally, in order to encourage interaction and support among colleagues, it is vital for administrators to foster common planning time for collaboration and data based decision-making.

Researcher Reflection

The process of completing this study was truly a learning experience. I have always been interested in teacher attrition and have been concerned with the amount of high quality special education teachers that decide not to remain teaching students with disabilities. During my initial query into special education teacher attrition, I aimed to garner knowledge of why teachers left the profession in order to gain an understanding to inform retention efforts. In researching the existing literature, I found that there was a gap that was vital to fill to advance retention efforts of special education teachers. Why not ask experienced high quality special education teachers why they stay? It made

complete sense to learn from those who remain and to explore how they are able to do this in light of the many challenges special education teachers encounter. This has been especially of interest to me because I am an experienced special education teacher. It has been intriguing to learn about the perceptions of special education teachers who have made a strong commitment to working with students with disabilities in low-income schools.

Because this was a grounded theory based study, I was dedicated to allowing the data emerge from the interviews without preconceived ideas. Despite the knowledge of the current literature on teacher attrition, I made every attempt to understand the participants' perspectives from their point of view, rather than based on my experience or knowledge of the literature. It is my belief that the participants were invested in this research study and provided honest, personal, and open responses. Participants thoughtfully responded to my request to confirm accuracy of both interview transcripts and summaries, both of which were probably time-consuming tasks. It was inspiring to learn from this group of special education teachers who care about the future of their students and are invested in and committed to the field of special education.

Suggestions for Future Research

The teachers in this study suggested there are specific reasons why they are able to persevere and remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Although it is clear from this study that seven themes are related to special education teachers' decisions to remain in the field, without further research, one cannot understand how each theme might influence the other. It is necessary to understand how the themes within the categories affect one another and can lead to the level of commitment that is

required for special education teachers to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. While this study shows that the themes are related, further research is needed to explore how each theme might influence the other, overlap, or whether any causality can be inferred.

Extending this study to include special education teachers who are not Nationally Board Certified would add to the current findings of this study and allow for comparisons between National Board Certified teachers and non-National Board certified teachers' perceptions. Information gathered from this comparison would allow the researcher to tease out variables which may be representative only of Nationally Board Certified teachers rather than of experienced special education teachers collectively.

Although increasing the number of research participants would require more time and monetary backing, it would be important to validate the findings of this current study by replicating it with a larger sample. In order to extend the participant pool, it would require including school districts within other counties in the state of Illinois. Doing this would also increase the variation among participants by including special education teachers from suburban and rural areas. Additionally, a similar study including several mid-western states could further widen the variability of the current study.

Similar research might explore beginning special education teachers' perceptions of why they are likely to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. Beginning special education teachers may face similar challenges, and knowing their perceptions may have implications for recruitment and retention policies and contribute to the understanding of the special education teacher shortage.

It would also be interesting to extend this current study to include special

education teachers who meet the same criteria with the exception of working with students in low-income schools. It would be valuable to compare the perceptions of why teachers who teach in low-income schools remain in the field with the perceptions of why teachers who do not teach in low-income schools remain in the field. Implications from such a study could yield information reflecting the effects school demographics such as socioeconomic status might have on teacher attrition and retention.

The findings from this study suggested two central categories associated with special education teacher's decisions to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. In this study, the "go-getter" qualities these participants believed they possess as well as the extent to which teaching is a good "professional fit" appeared to play a large role in teachers' decisions to remain in the field. Because the relationship between the central categories is unknown from the data, further research on teachers' perceptions of their qualities and the effect these perceptions may have on a special education teacher being well suited for his or her role would be beneficial. Secondly, having a mixed method study utilizing both interviewing and survey methods could provide a study design that would yield more detailed data regarding what exactly special education teachers believe has the largest impact on their decision to remain in the field.

This study as well as the existing literature supports the relationship between administrator support and teacher retention. Exploring more deeply the perceptions special education teachers have about what effective administrator support looks like would be beneficial to add to the retention research. This could help to provide information to school districts regarding specific administrative/workplace practices that may have a positive impact on teacher attrition by addressing supportive factors that may

be alterable. Knowing what specific supports special education teachers perceive as being important to their retention in the field is an area where future research is needed.

Although this current study did not reveal issues related to the preparation of special education teachers, it is most likely due to the mean age of the participants being 45.4 and the total years of teaching averaging 15.5 years, so teacher preparation issues may have been too far removed from this particular group of special education teachers. General education literature on teacher retention reports that specific teacher education components may play a vital role in the retention of teachers (Brownell & Smith, 1993). Further research is needed to explore whether teacher preparation programs have an effect on special education teachers' decision to remain teaching students with disabilities and what components of a program assist special education teachers in developing the skills to be a successful teacher. Having this knowledge could offer teacher preparation program design suggestions, as well as suggestions for teacher mentoring and retention programs and policies.

Additionally, more research utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods comparing the content and requirements of different teacher education programs with special education teachers' sense of efficacy and level of commitment to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools is needed. Future research should also explore various teacher preparation programs, including alternative certification programs, to see whether different programs have an effect on a teacher's commitment to remain in the field. Research might explore what aspects of "professional fit" are stressed within different programs and make comparisons to teacher retention.

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APPENDIX A

Table III Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies				
Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Results
Billingsley & Cross (1992)	463 special educators, 493 regular educators from VA	To be able to see which variables are predictors of job satisfaction or commitment and how these variables could predict how long one teaches.	Questionnaire, regression study	<p>Definition of attrition/retention</p> <p>Intent to leave</p> <p>Work related variables bigger predictors of commitment and job satisfaction than demographics</p> <p>Higher commitment predictor of intent to stay</p> <p>Greater leadership support and low levels of role conflict are associated with high job satisfaction.</p> <p>Organizational commitment is associated with more leadership support and lower levels of role conflict.</p>
Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook (1997)	Sample size varies (national sample)- data from the Public School Teachers Questionnaire, SASS, and the Questionnaire for Current/Former Teachers	To provide a national perspective on the four components of teacher retention and turnover (reassignment, migration out-of-state, exit attrition) as well as discuss what teachers are doing upon leaving	Questionnaire, Quantitative Analysis	<p>Retention, reassignment, migration, and attrition of regular and special education teachers</p> <p>SET attrition percentage (7.9%)</p> <p>Most problematic component of turnover is exit attrition=reduction in teaching force</p> <p>Even though many teachers leave, many remain in education (20%)</p> <p>2/3rds leavers may return</p>

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller (1997)	92 non returning Florida Special Education Teachers	To determine reasons for leaving the classroom, identify differences between disgruntled and non-disgruntled teachers who leave, identify occupations leavers choose after leaving, and suggest teacher retention strategies	Phone Interviews, qualitative and quantitative analysis	Leavers (disgruntled and non-disgruntled)-teachers no longer working in the special education classroom	Stress, certification status, and workload manageability can be a predictor of leaving Teachers with emergency certifications were more likely to leave Disgruntled leavers reported poor work environments, lack of administrative support, student behavioral problems, diverse student needs, and lack of resources as reasons to feel stress Some leavers left for better opportunities or unrelated reasons Small portion of leavers left certification was too difficult
Cross & Billingsley (1994)	412 special education teachers from Virginia, 130 are teachers of students with emotional disorders	To uncover the relationship between work-related variables, teaching assignments, and personal characteristics in teacher's intent to remain in teaching.	Questionnaire Path Analysis	Intentions of leaving the field of teaching	Job satisfaction has a huge influence on intent to stay Those believing they could find non-educational employment planned to teach for a less amount of time Whites and those with more experience are more likely to stay Teachers who experienced more support from administrators, had less role problems, and lower stress levels are more likely to be committed to teaching Teachers of students with ED reported greater role problems

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
DeMik (2008)	5 special educators from Indiana-currently teaching (3) or previously taught (2)	To determine which issues have impacted special educators decisions in regards to staying in the field of special education and teaching	Narrative Inquiry	Stayers and Movers	Parallel research to current research on job satisfaction Concerns over standards, assessment, and advocacy surfaced. Aspects of role conflict were discussed: collaboration with general educators, inclusion, instructional materials and presentation. Found paperwork such as IEP's, behavior plans, transition plans, and other documentation overwhelming. All felt supported by administration.
Edgar & Pair (2005)	161 special educators trained at the University of Washington	To document the employment history of former teacher candidates to inform program development/reflection.	Telephone Questionnaire	Movers and leavers	78% of graduates were still teaching, 7% in related field of education 5 year programs yield teachers with higher retention rates
Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff & Harniss (2001)	887 special education teachers in 3 large urban school districts in the Western US	To be able to identify working conditions/ job-design characteristics associated with job satisfaction, commitment to teaching, and the intention to stay or leave teaching.	Survey, Path Analysis (LISREL), uses job design as a conceptual framework	Intent to leave	Building-level (administrative and teacher) support has large effect on working conditions Central office support has much smaller effect It is important for teachers to feel they are continuously learning on the job (professional development) Teacher autonomy is important Stress because of job design is influenced by role dissonance Teachers reported the need to work more closely and develop collegial support

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Gehrke & Murri (2006)	8 special educators graduated from a southwestern university	To understand the experiences of the beginning special educator as well as their intent to remain in the field	Open-ended interviews followed by a Likert type questionnaire	Intent to stay	<p>Areas of satisfaction: feelings of administrative support, collegial interactions with other teachers, caseload manageability</p> <p>Frustrations: concerns related to inclusion, issues related to supervising paraprofessionals, building relationships with general educators and learning the general education curriculum.</p>
Kaff (2004)	341 Kansas Special Educators	To determine why special educators want to leave or stay.	Questionnaire (including open-ended questions) Content Analysis	Intent to stay/leave	<p>45% of teachers reported they plan to leave the field, with teachers of students with E/BD being the largest percentage.</p> <p>Those considering leaving reported lack of administrative support (support for personnel and students, paperwork/regulatory issues, service delivery issues, and resource and monetary concerns), classroom concerns (difficult students and parents, and time and training issues), and individual issues (retirement, family, and health) as three problematic areas.</p> <p>Conditions that would encourage special educators to stay included administrative (increased amount of support), general education (ability to collaborate, coteach, and coplan with the GE teacher, have more access to the curriculum), and resource management (allocated planning time, more input in decision-making process, clarification of roles and responsibilities, decrease in amount of paperwork).</p>

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross (1994)	385 special and 313 general education teachers in Virginia	To determine teacher's perceptions of administrative support and the effects on personal health and stress, job satisfaction and commitment, and intent to remain in the field of education.	Questionnaires	Intent to stay	Principal's emotional support is vital to teacher's well-being. Instrumental and emotional support was strong predictors of teacher commitment. Teachers having emotional support from a principal report less health problems. Interacting frequently with the principal in positive ways influences teacher's perceptions of support.
Menlove, Garnes, and Salzberg (2004)	40 school districts in Utah, data included special education teachers, speech/language pathologists, and school psychologists	To identify causes for teacher attrition	Survey completed by special education directors	Leavers	Early childhood special education teachers left least. In large districts attrition doubled, while attrition decreased in smaller districts. Common reasons cited for leaving: retiring, transferring to general education, other, moving, and changing districts. Little difference in attrition numbers between teachers working with students with different disabilities.

Table III (continued) Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies					
Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Miller, Brownell, & Smith (1999)	1, 208 special education teachers from Florida	To identify variables in the workplace which significantly predict whether a teacher will leave or stay in special education	Survey, bivariate and multinomial logit analyses -Used Brownell and Smith's conceptual framework (Bronfenbrenner's ecological model plus historical factors)	Stayers, transfers (transferred to a similar job), or leavers (left special education)	<p>Demographics, certification status, collegiality, and building support are highly related to teacher attrition</p> <p>Intentions may not accurately be related to actual decisions for teachers to stay</p> <p>Most significant variables determining who will stay or leave are job satisfaction, commitment, and years teaching.</p> <p>Environmental variables are more important predictors than demographic variables (except certification)</p> <p>Certification status, stress, school climate, and age have been shown to be the best predictors of who will leave and who will stay</p> <p>Employing fully certified teachers are needed to stabilize the teaching force</p>

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Morvant & Gersten (1995)	17 special educators from an urban district	To explore issues which influence urban special educators to leave their positions	Post-attrition interviews, Qualitative analysis	Special education teachers who left teaching in an urban district	<p>Reasons for leaving are usually multifaceted</p> <p>Leavers mentioned factors such as job design, relations to the central office, and professional fit for teaching assignment as concerns</p> <p>Leavers reported more stress due to conflicting expectations, were less satisfied with their choice of profession, and compared to stayers (86%), a smaller percentage of leavers (71%) reported that they were making a difference with students</p> <p>Problems reported include lack of support from principal, district office, and other teachers, preparation time, lack of opportunities for professional development, and stressors</p> <p>Need for more preparation for their present positions (collaboration, supervision, paperwork, etc.)</p> <p>Nearly half reported being satisfied with job and profession</p> <p>80% of leavers reported stress on a daily basis</p> <p>More than half expressed frustration with lack of materials and supplies, lack of respect in the community for the profession, and salary and benefits</p> <p>2/3rds planned to stay in teaching for a long time</p>

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Pyecha & Levine (1995)	3 large urban districts in the western US, Memphis City Schools, San Diego and San Jose Unified School Districts, teachers from CBEDS (a statewide file from about 80% of the school districts in California)	To identify SPED attrition rates for districts, describe factors that contribute to attrition rates, and to use the information to help districts develop retention plans.	Analyzed data from a large database- CBEDS	Leaver (special education teacher no longer working in that job the next year)- includes those who left job in district as well as went to another position within the district	<p>Four of six districts attrition rates increased from 1990-1993.</p> <p>The rates of attrition for all six districts (9.1%) were below the previously reported rates (some as high as 30%)</p> <p>A large majority of leavers were female</p> <p>The mean age of leavers in Memphis was 36.8, two years lower than the mean exit age of the other districts</p> <p>Most of the leavers who stayed in their districts moved to general education</p> <p>Most leavers either retired or continued teaching special education elsewhere</p> <p>Of 67% who stayed in education, 30.1% kept teaching SPED, 23.4% went to teach regular education, and 14.4% went to administrative or other non-teaching positions</p>

Table III (continued) Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies					
Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Singh, & Billingsley (1996)	412 special educators from Virginia, 130 are teachers of students with emotional disorders	-Wanted to look more closely at differences and similarities of work conditions for teachers of different disability areas	Mailed Questionnaire LISREL analysis	Intent to Leave/stay	<p>Intent to stay had a lot to do with workplace environment</p> <p>Job satisfaction had large influence on all teachers staying</p> <p>Professional commitment had a large influence on teachers of students with ED and their intent to stay</p> <p>As role problems became larger intent to leave increased for all groups</p> <p>More experienced teachers were more likely to stay</p> <p>Women are more likely to stay</p> <p>Minority teachers reported lower intentions of staying and teaching students with ED</p> <p>Teachers who think they have less outside job opportunities are more likely to stay</p> <p>The biggest effect on job satisfaction had to do with principal support</p> <p>Stress had a negative effect on job satisfaction and professional commitment for both groups, but was more severe for teachers of students with ED</p>

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Stempien & Loeb (2002)	8 suburban schools from 5 different school districts, white, suburban, middle-class neighborhoods	<p>Compared satisfaction and dissatisfaction of general education and special education teachers (EBD teachers)</p> <p>- 3 groups: Teachers of students in general education, teachers of students in special education, and teachers of both</p>	<p>Questionnaire</p> <p>Including open-ended question</p> <p>One way analysis of variance (ANOVA)</p>	<p>Dissatisfaction as it relates to being more likely to leave</p>	<p>All groups reported wanting to change size of classes, amount of paperwork, and amount of time planning</p> <p>All groups reported liking working with kids, seeing growth and progression of students, and working with other teachers</p> <p>SPED only teacher reported the importance of staff colleagues and Reg. Ed. and teachers of both reported enjoying the creativity and challenges of teaching</p> <p>Teachers of students with EBD rate themselves lower in job satisfaction</p> <p>Work difficulties are clear especially of SPED teachers with little experience- they need extra attention</p>

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Westling, & Whitten (1996)	158 special education teachers from mostly rural areas in a state in the Southeastern US	To be able to study the likelihood of current special educators leaving the field and the causes of their choices. Knowing the causes will help in being proactive in the retention of teachers	Questionnaire Quantitative analysis, Logistical regression	Intent to leave	<p>Those planning not to stay reported having a lack of support, not enough help in solving problems, little time for paperwork or planning.</p> <p>Some believed there was little recognition or understanding from regular education teachers</p> <p>Likelihood of teacher staying in teaching is greatly related to job satisfaction, having time to complete paperwork, if the teacher is the main breadwinner, and if he/she has a positive attitude towards the profession</p> <p>More teacher preparation increased the probability of a teacher leaving</p> <p>Teachers were not more likely to leave because of the students or the severity of their disabilities</p> <p>This study mirrored other studies reporting lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork, and attitude towards teaching as factors that impact intent to leave</p>

Table III (continued)
Special Education Attrition and Retention Studies

Author/Year	Participants	Purpose	Methodology	Definition of Attrition/Retention	Results
Zabel & Zabel (2001)	301 special education teachers from Kansas -replicated an earlier study with an updated sample	To be able to determine the relationship between measures of burnout and age, amount of teaching experience, and professional preparation.	Mailed questionnaires	Attrition meaning teachers who leave the field of special education	<p>47 % reported having no regular education experience in special education for this study was 11 years in comparison to a mean of 5.3 in the prior study</p> <p>69% held a master's degree</p> <p>90.6% reported being fully endorsed in SPED</p> <p>There was a "maturing" of the teaching profession- age, experience, and preparation greatly increased</p> <p>Teachers with more "regular" teaching experience scored higher on the measure of personal accomplishment</p> <p>Study seems to explain that special education teachers of today have less stress on the job than teachers of twenty years ago</p> <p>Age, preparation, and experience are not huge factors contributing to professional burnout</p>

Appendix B

Table IV
National Board Teacher Certification Studies

Study	Participants	Purpose	Findings
Benson, Agran, & Yocom (2010)	Special education teachers who obtained National Board Certification as Exceptional Needs Specialists. Sample included teachers from Wyoming and North Carolina.	Determine if certain questions, under the portfolio portion of the NBC process, were difficult for special education teachers to understand and lead to them not performing satisfactorily.	Suggests that the first entry of the portfolio contained three questions, which were worded in a way that was not clear to the special education teachers and did play a role in their unsatisfactory performance.
Bond, Jaeger, Smith & Hattie (2000)	65 teachers who attempted to obtain NBC	After developing 13 characteristics of expert teachers, authors compared those who passed and those who failed NB to these characteristics.	NBCT's students outperformed students of non NBCTs in writing Teachers who earned NBC also "met the criteria for expertise set forth" according to 13 characteristics determined
Cantrell, Fullerton, Kane, & Staiger (2007)	99 pairs of teachers (1 NB & 1 non NB same school, grade yr.) Both +3 yrs. experience, grades 3-5	Examine ability of NBPT to distinguish effective teachers.	Gives information that can be used to find effective teachers. No significance differences between NBCTs and nonapplicants. There were significant differences between NBCTs and unsuccessful applicants.

Table IV (continued) National Board Teacher Certification Studies			
Study	Participants	Purpose	Findings
Cavalluzzo (2004)	Teachers of 9 th and 10 th grade math for large urban school district in Miami-Dade County Schools. (61 NBCTs, 101 applicants)	Look at relationship between math gains in 9 th and 10 th grade students, and NBCT and teacher quality.	Students of NBTs made larger gains than those who never had NBTs and smaller gains of failed or withdrawn. 7 to 8% gain having “in-subject area” teacher, NBC, and state certification = largest effects.
Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor (2007)	Teachers in North Carolina Data came from the N.C. Ed. Research Data Center – state maintained archive. Grades 3-5; reading and math	Determine relationship between teacher characteristics/credentials and student achievement.	Teachers with NBC are more effective in reading and math than those without.
Goldhaber & Anthony (2004)	Teacher and student data from grades 3-5. North Carolina data set and student scores on standardized tests. Compared NBCT with unsuccessful NB teachers and nonparticipants. North Carolina Dept. of Public Instruction- 1 st large scale study over 3 yrs.	Looking at link between NBT and elementary student’s achievement.	NBPT does identify more effective teachers among applicants and prior to getting NBPTS they were also more effective in raising achievement than teachers who are non-NBPTS certified teachers. Mixed Results on whether NB certification can test teacher quality. Questions about effect after NBC

Table IV (continued) National Board Teacher Certification Studies			
Study	Participants	Purpose	Findings
Hakel, Koenig, & Elliott (2008)	Produced by National Research Council, reviewed and extended existing studies.	To evaluate NBCTC and provide suggestions to improve the program.	<p>“Earning NBPTS certification is a useful signal that a teacher is effective in the classroom.”</p> <p>Students who have NBCT make larger gains on performance assessments than those who have teachers who did not get NBCTs.</p> <p>Teachers who are NBCT remain in the teaching profession longer.</p> <p>Based on teacher’s self-reported responses, the process of NBC is excellent for professional development.</p> <p>Cost to do NB teacher certification is most probably cost lower to getting a master’s degree.</p>
Harris & Sass (2007)	Teachers and students in Florida over 4 yr. period. Grades 3-5; reading and math	To explore impact of NBCT on student test performance.	<p>States NBCTS show positive signs of productivity sometimes, but this varies from subject/grade.</p> <p>NB process does seem to increase teacher productivity.</p> <p>Having NBPTS in a school won’t necessarily rub off on colleagues.</p>

Table IV (continued) National Board Teacher Certification Studies			
Study	Participants	Purpose	Findings
McColskey, Stronge, Ward, Tucker, Howard, Lewis, & Hindman (2005)	Results for TAI based on student performance results in math and reading. Phase I – 305 5 th grade teachers from 3 N.C. Districts (4 th and 5 th grade teachers) Phase II – 51 N.C. teachers from 4 districts Results across 2 yrs.	To compare student performance of NBC 5 th grade teachers to other teachers within 3 North Carolina districts. Compare NBCTs teaching practices to other teachers in districts. Used observation, surveys, artifacts, and interviews.	NBCTs had slightly higher TAI in reading and math (not statistically significant). NBCTs scored higher on cognitive challenges and received lower observer ratings in comparison to upper gains score group.
Stone (2002)	Teachers in Tennessee; 3rd-8 th grade in three different subject areas.	Wanted to explore teacher effect on scores for 16 NBCTs in 4 different subject areas.	Only 15% of NBCTs according to criteria were found to be “exemplary”.
Sanders, Ashton, & Wright (2005)	North Carolina – over 2 yr. period used end-of-grade assessments in reading and math. Sample size of teachers and students different per grade and subject (grades 5-8).	To see whether students of NBCTs perform better than non-NBCTs. Compares NBCTs to those who plan to attain NBC and those who tried and failed.	Students of NBCTs did not increase in academic rates than students of “other” teachers.

Table IV (continued) National Board Teacher Certification Studies			
Study	Participants	Purpose	Findings
Smith, Gordon, Colby, & Wang (2005)	64 teachers across 17 states all had 1 of 4 certificates. 55% were NBCTs. 45% attempted NB; but failed.	Look at teaching strategies used by NBCTs and explore the possible impact on student learning. Compared teaching practices with outcomes.	Students of NBCTs were more “likely to achieve deep student learning outcomes” (p. 143). Writing assessments yielded positive correlation between NBC and student performance.
Vandervoort, Amrein Beardsley, & Berliner (2004)	35 NBCTs and non-NBCTs in 14 Arizona School Districts over 4yrs looking at 3-6 th grade in Math, Reading, and L.A.	To explore relationship between NBC teachers and student achievement measured by (SAT-9).	Students of NB Teachers made over 1 month greater gains than students who are not with NBCT's.

Appendix C

Special Education Teacher Demographic Survey
(To be submitted on *Survey Monkey*)

1. Version 1: 1/6/11

This quick demographic information survey will take you no more than 5 minutes to complete. It will allow me to determine whether you fit the criteria for the study. Thanks in advance!

*** 1. Contact Information**

Name:

Address:

Address 2:

City/Town:

State:

ZIP:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

*** 2. Age**

*** 3. Gender**

☐ Male ☐ Female

*** 4. Highest Degree Earned**

☐ Bachelors Degree ☐ Masters Degree Plus

☐ Masters Degree ☐ Doctorate

Other (please specify)

5. Ethnicity/Race

*** 6. School District Where Presently Employed**

*** 7. Years working in pre-K through 12 school settings**

As a special education teacher

As a general education teacher

As a school administrator

Other

*** 8. Years teaching in your present position**

☐ 0-5 ☐ 16-20 ☐ 30+

☐ 6-10 ☐ 21-25

☐ 11-15 ☐ 26-30

*** 9. What grade level(s) do you currently teach? Please check all that apply.**

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kindergarten | <input type="checkbox"/> 3rd | <input type="checkbox"/> 6th |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1st | <input type="checkbox"/> 4th | <input type="checkbox"/> 7th |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2nd | <input type="checkbox"/> 5th | <input type="checkbox"/> 8th |

*** 10. How many students with IEP's do you currently teach?**

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1-5 | <input type="checkbox"/> 16-20 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6-10 | <input type="checkbox"/> 20-25 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 11-15 | <input type="checkbox"/> 26 or more |

Optional Comment

*** 11. What was your path to certification?**

- ☐ Traditional College of Education (undergraduate or graduate studies)
- ☐ Alternative Route to Certification

Other (please specify)

*** 12. What teaching certificates do you hold? Please check all that apply.**

- ☐ Early Childhood (Birth-3)
- ☐ Elementary (K-6)
- ☐ Secondary (6-12)
- ☐ Special (Subject Specific, K-12)
- ☐ Special Education Special Certificate (Pre-School-21)
- ☐ Other

Other (please specify)

*** 13. How many different educational settings have you taught in?**

Schools

Districts

*** 14. Year you received National Board Teacher Certification**

*** 15. National Board Certification Type**

☐ Exceptional Needs Specialist

☐ Other

Other (please specify)

*** 16. What type of setting/model do you presently teach in? Please check all that apply.**

☐ Inclusive Supports

☐ Special School

☐ Self-Contained

☐ Itinerant

☐ Co-Teaching

☐ Home/Hospital

☐ Resource Room

☐ Other

☐ Consultative

Other (please specify)

*** 17. Under which disability classification(s) do the students you presently teach fall?
Please check all that apply.**

☐ Autism

☐ Orthopedic Impairment

☐ Cognitive Disability

☐ Other Health Impairment

☐ Deaf-Blindness

☐ Specific Learning Disability

☐ Deafness

☐ Speech/Language Impairment

☐ Emotional Disability

☐ Traumatic Brain Injury

☐ Hearing Impairment

☐ Visual Impairment

☐ Multiple Disabilities

Other (please specify)

*** 18. Does at least 50% of your school population qualify for free/reduced lunches?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

*** 19. Do you plan on remaining a teacher of students with disabilities?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

20. If you answered YES to the previous question, how many more years do you plan on teaching students with special needs?

☐ 1-5 years

☐ 15-20 years

☐ 6-10 years

☐ More than 20 years

☐ 11-15 years

☐ Until I retire

21. Do you hold membership in any professional organizations? If so, which ones?

*** 22. Would you be willing to participate in this study if you fit the criteria? (For Participant Selection)**

☐ Yes

☐ No

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

Beginning of interview script:

The first two bullets will differ in the second interview as I will not have to repeat those statements.

- “Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in this study and for giving me your valuable time. As we discussed when I set up the initial interview, I will be interviewing you again in a few weeks.”
- “A little bit about myself- I am a doctoral student at the University of Illinois who is working on my dissertation. I am a special education teacher with 14 years of experience in the classroom and I am very much interested in teacher attrition and learning more about why experienced special education teachers remain in the field.
- “As was mentioned in the informed consent form, I will be audio recording this interview so that I can transcribe and analyze the interview. I will send you transcriptions of each of your interviews to ensure accuracy. The transcription and audio recording will be destroyed within 5 years, but you will have access to these at any time prior to that.”
- “I want you to feel comfortable in knowing that I will ensure your confidentiality as you will be assigned a number as an identifier and your school/district will be referred to using a pseudonym. I do this to help you to feel comfortable in sharing your feelings, experiences, and thoughts.”
- “What you have to say is valuable and appreciated, but I want to remind you that you can decide not to participate in interview at any time, or if there are questions/topics you do not wish to respond to, that is at your discretion.”
- “Do you have any questions or concerns that I can address?”
- “I would like to spend a few minutes just reviewing the Demographic Survey you completed on *Survey Monkey*. I just want to be sure I understand everything accurately.”

First Interview Questions

- Why did you decide to become a special educator?
- How did you become a special educator, what was that experience like?
- What helps you to persevere in teaching students with special needs in low-income schools?
- Tell me about the most rewarding part of working with students with disabilities.
- Are there other factors that are not related to the profession that affect your decision to remain in the field? Tell me about those.
- Was there ever a time that you thought of leaving your position as a special education teacher? Tell me about it. What changed your mind?

- Tell me about your future plans. Where do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years? Explain.

Second Interview Questions:

- Second interview questions will be based on questions that come up from the initial interview as well as:
 - ❖ What sets you apart from the teachers who have left the field?
- Additional possible questions for the second interview might be:
 - ❖ What advice would you give to a new special education teacher just starting out in the field?
 - ❖ If you could change special education positions within your school or district, would you? What would your new role look like? Why would it be attractive to you?
 - ❖ Are there any other factors that you have not yet mentioned that affect your decision to remain teaching in the special education field?
 - ❖ Tell me a bit about the National Board Certification process. Has the process impacted your decision to remain teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools?

Probes to use in both interviews:

Can you tell me more about...?
 Can you give me a more detailed description...?
 Any other examples of this?
 You mentioned could you expand on that?
 Can you tell me again what happened?

Feedback terms:

Okay, thank you.

End of Interview reminders:

- “Before we end our interview today, I want to remind you that I will be sending you a copy of a transcript of today’s interview via e-mail. I will follow up with you a few days later to ensure that the transcript of the interview is accurate or to see if there is anything you would like to add.”
- “When we schedule our next interview, I will again send you a copy of the topics/questions I would like to learn about in our next interview for you to preview ahead of time. Please know that these are just guidelines to help keep the interview focused and that I would love to hear about anything else you would like to share about the topic.”
- At the end of the second interview, I will ask, “In addition to receiving a transcript of our final interview, would you like a summary of my final report?”

APPENDIX E**Interview Memo/Journal**

Date: _____

Participant ID _____

1. Description of the interview (brief main points shared).
2. Initial thoughts and ideas about interview.....Personal researcher response...
3. Notable quotes or parts of response.....Why were they notable?
4. Are the participant's comments different and/or similar to that of other interview participants? How?
5. Relevant issues that may have affected the interview? Should the order or way in which questions were asked be altered? Why?
6. What new information should be focused on in subsequent interviews?
7. What theoretical ideas surfaced?

APPENDIX F

E-mail to National Board Certified Teachers

My name is Emily Chambers and I am a special educator in the Chicago area and a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I am very much interested in teacher attrition and learning more about why experienced, quality special education teachers remain in the field. I got your e-mail address from the Illinois NBCT website. For my dissertation study, I plan to interview Nationally Board Certified Special Education teachers in Cook County. Gaining knowledge from your wealth of experience is what I am seeking! Thank you for taking the time to consider taking part in this study; your input would be very much appreciated and valued!

The process would require you to (1) fill out a 3-5 minute Demographic Survey on *Survey Monkey*; (2) participate in two 1 hour interviews which would take place at a date/time and location of your choice over a two month period; and (3) provide feedback regarding my interpretation of your answers to the interview questions. (Note: I would provide you with the interview questions ahead of time for your perusal.)

I am interested in interviewing experienced special education teachers who meet **ALL** the following criteria:

- **hold National Board Teacher Certification (Exceptional Needs Certificate)**
- **teach students with disabilities in low-income schools in the elementary grades (kindergarten through eighth) in the Cook County, Illinois**
- **have taught special education for a minimum of six years**
- **who are teachers who work with students with varying disabilities and provide services through a variety of delivery models**
- **have no current plans of leaving the profession as a teacher of students with disabilities.**

If you meet the criteria for the study and would be willing to be interviewed, please fill out the attached Demographic Survey on *Survey Monkey* (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/95M86ZX>), and I will contact you once a pool of qualified teachers has been determined.

If you have any questions or concerns, please write to me at emily_chambers@sbcglobal.net, or to my advisor, Mary Bay at marybay@uic.edu. (Note: This dissertation study has been approved by UIC's Institutional Review Board and by the professors who serve on my dissertation committee.)

Thank you for considering this request, and I look forward to hearing from you.
Emily Chambers

Appendix G

Leave box empty - For office use only

University of Illinois at Chicago
Research Information and Consent for Participation in Social Behavioral Research
The Choice to Stay: Special Education Teachers' Perceptions

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form such as this one to tell you about the research, to explain that taking part is voluntary, to describe the risks and benefits of participation, and to help you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researcher any questions you may have.

Principal Investigator Name and Title: **Emily Chambers, Doctoral Student**
 Department and Institution: **Special Education, College of Education**
 Address and Contact Information: **1040 W. Harrison Street, Chicago, IL 60607**
 Phone: **(773) 383-9212** E-mail: **emily_chambers@sbcglobal.net**
 Faculty Sponsor: **Mary Bay, Ph.D.**

Why am I being asked?

You are being asked to be interviewed for a research study investigating experienced Nationally Board Certified special education teachers' reasons for remaining teaching students with disabilities in low-income schools. You have been asked to participate because you (1) have been identified on the National Board for Teacher Certification's website as holding a National Board Exceptional Needs Certificate, (2) are currently teaching students with disabilities in a low-income school, (3) teach students in kindergarten through eighth grade, (3) teach across multiple grade levels, (4) teach students with various disabilities, (5) have taught in the field of special education for six or more years, (6) teach across multiple settings, and (7) have expressed your intent to remain in the field.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Chicago. **If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.**

Approximately 15 subjects may be involved in this research at UIC.

What procedures are involved?

If you agree to participate, we would ask you to participate in two audio recorded interviews. Each of the interviews would last approximately one hour each. Interviews will be guided by interview guide questions which will be provided to you ahead of time. After the interviews have been transcribed, participants will be asked to review the transcripts of their interviews to check for accuracy. Additionally, participants will have the opportunity to review a draft summary of the research analysis to provide feedback to the researcher if they would like to. This research will be performed at a location that is convenient to you.

What are the potential risks and benefits to taking part in this research?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. A risk of this research is a loss of privacy (revealing to others that you are taking part in this study) or confidentiality (revealing information about you to others to whom you have not given permission to see this information).

Specifically, the research has the following risks:

- Concern that your identity will be discovered.
- Desire to provide socially acceptable responses to the items in the interview

Consequently, all personal information will be kept confidential and data will be de-identified. The list matching your name and school/district to participant ID number and school/district pseudonym will be kept in a password protected data file until it is destroyed.

Although there are no direct benefits to the participants, participating in the study may prompt participants to be reflective and grow professionally. The study is not designed to benefit you directly. However, participants will likely be happy to be recognized as accomplished teachers with valuable experiences to share which may help future special education recruitment and retention efforts and ultimately increase the quality of education for students with disabilities.

What other options are there?

You have the option to not participate in this study.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

The people who will know that you are a research subject are members of the research team. Otherwise information about you will only be disclosed to others with your written permission, or if necessary to protect your rights or welfare or if required by law. Study information which identifies you and the consent form signed by you will be looked at and/or copied for checking up on the research by: Emily Chambers and Dr. Mary Bay. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

The only people who will know that you are involved are the researchers. No information about you, or provided by you during the research will be disclosed to others

without your written permission, except when required by law and if it is necessary to protect your rights or welfare (i.e. when the UIC Institutional Review Board monitors the research or consent process).

Raw data will be protected and reported in the aggregate form, with the exception of specific teacher comments that will be reported as examples of major themes or results. These specific teacher comments will be reported anonymously, that is, without any identifying information. The names of the participants and their corresponding identification numbers as well as the names of schools/districts along with their pseudonyms will be stored in a password protected data file on the researcher's computer and will be destroyed within one year of data collection.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without consequence. You may also opt not to answer any of the questions during the interview and still remain in the study.

The Researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in your best interests.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The researcher conducting this study is Emily Chambers. If you have any questions about this study or your part in it, or have concerns or complaints about the research you may contact Emily at emily_chambers@sbcglobal.net. Dr. Mary Bay is the faculty advisor and she can be reached at marybay@uic.edu or 1-866-323-7648.

What are my rights as a research subject?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 312-996-1711 or 1-866-789-6215 (toll-free) or e-mail OPRS at uicirb@uic.edu.

Remember:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

Signature of Subject or Legally Authorized Representative

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date (must be same as subject's)

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

VITA

EMILY CHAMBERS

5555 N. Luna · Chicago, Illinois 60630 · (773)383-9212 · emily_chambers@sbcglobal.net

CERTIFICATION: State of Illinois, Type 03 (K-9)
State of Illinois, Type 10 (Learning Behavior Specialist I)

EDUCATION: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO, Chicago, IL
Ph.D. in Special Education, expected August 2011

NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, Chicago, Illinois
Master of Arts in Special Education- Learning Disabilities, 2002

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, DeKalb, Illinois
Bachelor of Science - Elementary Education, 1996

PROFESSIONAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO, Chicago, IL

Assistant Clinical Professor (June 2008- Present)

- Full-time School of Education faculty member
- Teach the following graduate and undergraduate courses:
 - Typical and Atypical Development
 - Exceptional Lives (General Education/Special Education)
 - Middle School Methods (General Education/Special Education)
 - Accessing the General Curriculum
 - Special Education: The Profession
 - Student Teaching
- Coordinator of Special Education Block II and III, responsible for facilitation of all Clinical block duties including conducting block meetings, developing relationships with school sites, securing school placements, and supervising students in the schools
- Member of several School of Education committees
- Student teaching candidate advisor
- Continuous LBS I program development and assessment
- Contributor to NCATE report writing and program evaluation using LiveText data
- Utilize technology such as BlackBoard to enhance course content

BERKELEY SCHOOL DISTRICT 87, BERKELEY, IL

Special Education Consultant (January 2010- January 2011)

- Provide direct support to special education teachers/principals in 6 schools throughout district 87
- Work with general education/special education teachers to facilitate co-teaching and collaboration
- Provided district level recommendations to improve the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY, Chicago, IL

Adjunct/Supervisor (Summers 2008-2010)

- High and Low Incidence Practicum

NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, State of Illinois

Instructor/Supervisor/Placement Coordinator (August 2002- 2008)

- Clinical, Graduate, and Undergraduate Student Teaching Supervisor
- FACE & First Class (Alternative Special Education Preparation Program) Grant Supervisor
- Field-Based Supervision of Interns within CPS schools
- LRE consultant in Chicago Public Schools providing professional development and teacher support
- Instructor of the following Graduate Courses:
 - Characteristics of Learning Disabilities
 - Remediation and Planning in Learning Disabilities
 - Identification and Assessment of Social and Emotional Disorders
 - Survey in the Field of Special Education
 - Methods in Teaching Students with Mental Retardation
 - Collaboration and Consultation
 - Behavior and Classroom Management

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO, Chicago, IL

Graduate Assistant, Special Education Department (August 2005-Present)

- Responsible for program work
- Conduct research and development of curricular modules
- Collected and analyzed data for ISBE Report
- Assisted in preparation of ISBE report
- Revised course materials, student handbook, and standardized program syllabi
- Assisted with new student orientations
- Developed contacts/partnerships with CPS schools to increase clinical sites

TIMBER RIDGE MAGNET SCHOOL, Evanston/Skokie District 65, Evanston, IL

Learning Resource Teacher (September 2003- June 2008)

- Provide collaboration and consultation with Regular Education teachers in grades K-8
- Teach students with disabilities in both the resource and inclusionary settings
- Assess, develop, implement, and monitor student's Individual Education Plans
- Member of Problem Solving/Intervention team

STONE SCHOLASTIC ACADEMY, Chicago Board of Education, Chicago, Illinois

5th/6th Grade Inclusion Teacher (August 1999- June 2002)

7-8th Grade Reading/Language Arts Teacher (January 1999-June 1999)

3rd Grade Transitional Classroom Teacher (September 1998-January 1999)

- Served on the School Based Problem Solving Team
- Developed alternative instructional methods for students with special needs.
- Established excellent parent/teacher/student relationships by communicating daily via e-mail.
- Proven ability to handle extremely challenging classroom management situations
- Taught Early Morning Reading Enrichment Program.
- Developed 3rd Grade Literacy Project.
- Student Council Facilitator
- Local School Council Teacher Representative
- Rochelle Lee Reading Grant Awardee

WILSON SCHOOL, Calumet City School District 155, Calumet City, Illinois

Teacher, 3rd Grade (September 1997-June 1998)

- Devised a variety of instructional models such as study guides, graphic organizers, tests, and hands-on activities to bilateralize instruction.
- Successfully utilized educational technology to reinforce subject matter.
- Implemented an after-school German Enrichment Program.
- Individually tutored at-risk students in help center.

STONE SCHOLASTIC ACADEMY, Chicago Board of Education, Chicago, Illinois

Full Time Substitute Teacher (January 1997-June 1997)

- Assumed responsibility for teaching full curriculum in grades K-9.
- Demonstrated flexibility and professionalism in a multicultural school environment.
- Actively participated in all staff meetings and activities.

SCOTT SCHOOL, Mannheim School District #83, Northlake, Illinois

6th Grade Teacher (September-December 1996)

- Assumed full responsibility for a period of four months during teacher's sick leave.
- Successfully motivated students to achieve a maximum learning experience.
- Planned and implemented curriculum emphasizing reading, writing, and speaking skills.
- Established a safe and positive classroom environment for all students.