

12-2019

Retaining Special Education Teachers in a Rural Arkansas School District

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Retaining Special Education Teachers in a Rural Arkansas School District

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

According to published research, rural school districts across the United States are challenged with obstacles in recruiting and retaining special education teachers. This study presents findings based on special education teachers' experiences teaching within one rural Arkansas school district. This instrumental single case study investigates the factors that encourage special education teachers to remain in their current position within a rural Arkansas school district. Qualitative data is analyzed from 11 participants, nine current special educators, one special education director, and one retired special education teacher. All of the participants are from one rural Arkansas school district in order to gain insight from their experiences and perspectives. Major findings include factors that positively influence retention of special education teachers within the one rural Arkansas school district: small scale of district, administration support, student rapport, positive school culture, extended family living in the local area, and the supportive culture of the rural community.

Keywords: special education teacher retention, rural school district teacher recruitment

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my wife, Jennifer, and our children, Lauren and Nicholas for their love, encouragement, and continued support. Your understanding and encouraging words were immeasurable and inspired me to reach for excellence throughout this study until completion. I would also like to dedicate this effort in loving memory of my mother, Vikki, who taught me about unconditional love, perseverance, and the importance of education. I will forever be grateful for her positive influence on my life.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my chair, Dr. Ed Bengtson, and my committee members, Dr. Kevin Brady and Dr. Marcia Smith, for their guidance and positive feedback. Their willingness to share their expertise throughout the development and composition of this study encouraged me to complete this endeavor. I am also grateful to the research participants within this study for taking time out of their busy schedules and consenting to participate. I would also like to thank my colleagues for their editing assistance, which was essential in the completion of this work.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of this instrumental single case study was to determine factors that had a positive influence on special education teacher retention rates in one rural Arkansas school district. The goal for this study was to discover strategies utilized in retaining special education teachers, thus encouraging them to remain within the district. Discovering why some special education teachers chose to stay within a particular rural Arkansas school district was the first step in addressing this problem of practice. Investigating how novice special education teachers made meaning out of their induction experience and what influenced experienced special education teachers' career decisions were important aspects to revealing what encourages special education teachers to stay within their rural Arkansas school district. The central research question posed in this study is, *What factors contribute to special education teachers' decisions to continue employment in their rural Arkansas school district?*

Problem Statement

When I taught special education within a rural school district setting from 2002–2017, one particular problem of practice that was an ongoing issue was the daunting challenge of retaining special education teachers. Regrettably, this is a problem of practice experienced by many rural school districts.

Of the 10 special education teaching positions within the rural district involved in this case study, two special education teachers were new to the district for the 2018–2019 school year. Three other special education teachers considered leaving their position after the 2018–2019 school year. To prevent a lapse in the quality of education, one special education

teacher was asked to return from retirement to fill a special education teaching position that would have otherwise gone unfilled before the start of the 2017–2018 school year.

Contributing to this ongoing problem of practice is a disruption in the delivery of special education services for students with disabilities, whose need for consistency within the special education classroom is not being met due to high rates of turnover within special education teaching positions. In fact, “the lack of qualified special education teachers threatens the quality of education that students with disabilities receive” (Billingsley, 2003, p. 4).

Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues

The problem of practice that occurs within this case study is the struggle rural districts experience in retaining special education teachers. This problem of practice presents several issues in the delivery of instruction as well as for the system. Due largely to high attrition rates, the quality of education that students with disabilities receive is hindered by the lack of qualified special education teachers in classrooms. Billingsley (2004) stated, “teacher retention is important not just because of the difficulty of finding replacements, but also because of the impact on instruction for students with disabilities” (p. 370).

High attrition adversely affects the interactions among teachers, whose collective teamwork is vital for accelerating students’ progress. With a constant change in special education personnel, it is more difficult for students and families to establish rapport among regular education and special education teachers. School leaders’ interactions with special educators are often thwarted or interrupted by the high attrition rates of special education teachers (Vitteck, 2015). Lemke (2010) stated,

Small and rural school district administrators also report difficulty in retaining qualified teachers. The turnover rate in many districts is high and results in added expense to the districts involved with continual recruitment to replace these teachers and disruption to the students and the continuity of the curricula. (p. 20)

Maintaining highly skilled special education teachers is key to the success of students with disabilities who attend not only a rural Arkansas school district, but other districts as well.

Also regarding attrition, as the population of students identified with a disability seems to increase, special education teachers are unfortunately leaving rural school districts or the profession entirely. Given this, endeavors in moving from problem to highly strategic, effective solutions may best be summed up by Billingsley (2003) who states, “attrition plays a part in the teacher shortage problem and efforts to improve retention must be informed” (p. 4); as well as demonstrated by Vittek (2015) stating, “13.2% of special educators leave their jobs each year.” Additionally, their attrition rates have led to many vacant jobs left that are eventually filled by uncertified teachers, such that “the high turnover rate has a negative effect on students as well as the district as a whole” (p. 1). The placement of an uncertified teacher in one of these classrooms is furthest from ideal—a great disservice to students with special needs and an act of desperation that creates a breakdown in the special education team at any school.

Building further on the certification aspect, according to the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) website, there is a critical shortage of properly certified special education teachers. The ADE utilizes a supply-and-demand formula to determine academic areas in need, and has special education listed in the category of “critical,” meaning this area is considered one of the most difficult to fill with a certified teacher. The ADE website reported that an average of 15% of Arkansas’ special education teachers utilized a teaching waiver from 2014–2017. This

means they are not fully certified in special education but are allowed to teach due to a district's inability to recruit a fully certified teacher. In contrast, the learning experience is enriched when special education students have the consistency of fully certified teachers who remain in their rural school district.

A lack of experienced teachers can have a negative effect on students with disabilities' academic success and behavior (Billingsley, 2003). Futernick (2007) explained,

When teachers leave a school, students are frequently forced to attend classes with inexperienced, underprepared teachers until qualified replacements can be found. In hard-to-staff schools, some students attend classes for months, sometimes an entire school year, without instruction from a fully prepared teacher. (p. 11)

Many unique behavior supports needed by students with disabilities can be better provided by an experienced teacher. This professional ideally has practiced being proactive in certain situations that, without the correct approach, can potentially lead to a lack of success in students' functioning and adaptive behavior at school.

With fewer special education teachers staying within rural school districts, there is a growing need for mentorship of new special education teachers. As a result of the lack of resources, it is often a teacher outside of the special education field mentoring new special education teachers. Unfortunately, unless there are strong mentoring relationships between regular and special education teachers, this situation poses even more retention-related challenges for new special education teachers compared to those being mentored by staff within the special education department. Statistically, novice special education teachers are more likely to leave the education profession. Thus, a well-planned unique mentoring program is crucial to a

new special education teacher's success, and therefore it should be specifically customized. This leads to assisting in establishing a more experienced special education teacher workforce.

A shortage of special education teachers carries serious implications for students with disabilities. According to Billingsley (2003), "the consequences of the shortage include inadequate educational experiences for students, reduced student achievement levels, and insufficient competence of graduates in the workplace" (p. 5). A lack of student success at school either academically or behaviorally can negatively impact their parents and families.

Special educator shortages also have a negative impact on school districts financially. As Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) pointed out, "addressing teacher turnover is critical to stemming the country's continuing teacher shortages. It is also important for school effectiveness, as the academic and financial costs of teacher turnover to student learning and district budgets are significant" (p. 1).

Directly Observable

The second dimension of the five dimensions states that a problem of practice must be directly observable. During the 2018–2019 school year, all of the special education faculty employed by the rural Arkansas school district within this study were fully certified to teach special education. The rural district within this study averaged approximately 25% attrition rate among special education faculty members. Of the special education faculty during the 2018–2019 school year within this single case study, two teachers were new to the district, and three planned or at least considered leaving after the 2018–2019 school year.

How long special education teachers work within a rural school district and how often turnover occurs within special education teaching positions are both directly observable as data can be gathered based on observations and human resource records. Maintaining data can be accomplished regarding the retention of special education teachers within rural school districts by recording when special education teachers are hired, how long they are employed by the district, reasons they return each year, when they resign from their teaching position, and the reasons for leaving the district.

The research method of a case study includes a variety of data sources such as interviews, surveys, direct observations, artifacts, documents, and other sources (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Utilizing interviews among staff members and human resource records within the one rural Arkansas school district assists in directly observing this problem of practice.

Nationally, approximately 40 percent of beginning rural special education teachers leave the field within the first five years of teaching (Beeson & Strange, 2003). Retaining special education teachers will assist rural school districts in improving and preserving available resources in their special education programs by not being required to constantly recruit and train incoming novice special education teachers.

Actionable

The third dimension addresses how a problem must be actionable. Retention of special education teachers within rural school districts is an actionable problem of practice because it can be improved in real time. As more information is discovered related to why special education teachers stay within rural districts, ways of addressing the problem of high attrition

can be proposed. As solutions are put into action, this problem of practice may be used to increase retention rates of special education teachers within rural school districts.

In order to strengthen retention rates of special education teachers, schools need to strengthen relationships between new special education teachers and their colleagues in general education, as well as with their principals (Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013). In my experience, a collaborative approach that includes both special education teachers and general education teachers seems to create a more advantageous learning environment for all students as compared to environments with teachers who teach with little or no interaction among colleagues.

By researching what factors influence special education teachers to stay within a rural school district and addressing the struggles rural school districts have in retaining special education teachers, improvements are both observable and directly actionable.

Connection to Broader Strategy of Improvement

My problem of practice satisfies dimension four as it shares a correlation with the district's broader improvement plan. This includes keeping operation costs within projected budgets and utilizing resources as productively as possible. Training new special education teachers can cause additional costs to the school district by requiring the district to provide mentoring support, professional development, and other services; as such, retaining special education teachers within rural school districts is vital to ending the cycle of constantly training a continuous stream of new special education teachers. Addressing the consistent turnover in special education teaching staff requires more resources including special education mentors, yet many rural school districts already struggle in providing proper training for novice special

education teachers due to a shortage of special education teachers qualified to mentor novice teachers. Of prime interest to these same districts, students with disabilities deserve consistency in their classroom environment to facilitate their academic success. Having a consistent, more experienced special education teacher with an established rapport with students, their families, and colleagues creates a learning environment that is more conducive to learning.

According to the special education director of the district, the current improvement plan at the state and district level includes higher achievement for students with disabilities.

Retaining special education teachers is a step in the right direction for rural Arkansas districts to achieve the action plan goal of special needs students attaining higher achievement scores on state-mandated testing. Also, by having lower attrition rates among special education teachers, students will have more classroom consistency and will also have a special education teacher with more experience in providing support and addressing students' individual needs.

Once special education teachers are hired, it is vital that their work environment meet their needs to help improve retention rates. By closing the revolving door of new special education teachers, the district will save time and money in the training and mentoring of new special education teachers. Furthermore, students will receive a higher quality education due to having more experienced teachers who are valuable assets to the overall educational program (Osterholm, Horn, & Johnson, 2006).

By retaining special education teachers, rural schools will greatly benefit students with disabilities who receive special education support from a more experienced staff. This helps address the district's mission statement which states that all students need to have varied

opportunities for continuous, successful learning so that they may become active, productive citizens. Retaining special education teachers is critical to the success of special needs students (Lewis, 2003).

High Leverage

My problem of practice for this study also satisfies the fifth dimension of a problem of practice. Beeson and Strange (2003) stated that “nearly one in three of America’s school-age children attend public schools in rural areas or small towns of less than 25,000, and more than one in six go to school in the very smallest communities, those with populations under 2,500” (p. 3). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), 492 out of 1,112 public schools in Arkansas are considered rural. As outgoing teachers leave rural districts, several things are lost, including their expertise, experiences of school culture, student performance history, collegial relationships, and rapport with the families of students with disabilities. Incoming new teachers require time to gain proficiency in their professional practice and to build relationships with colleagues, students, and parents. When constant teacher turnover occurs, the school climate is disrupted, ultimately creating a negative effect on school atmosphere and student achievement (Lemons, 2013). Retaining special education teachers among rural schools increases teaching staff experience as a whole which significantly improves students’ learning and their transition into post-graduation goals. This directly improves community health as students become more independent by the time of high school graduation and are better able to attain gainful employment or participate in further job training. This has a positive effect on the families of students with disabilities and their community.

By addressing the retention of special education teachers within rural school districts, it may have a positive impact on students' lives, their families' lives, and conceivably the community. An increasing shortage in qualified special education teaching staff impedes the quality of instruction students with disabilities receive in the classroom (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). As students with disabilities receive consistently higher-quality instruction, they are better equipped to attain their post-graduation goals. With a more experienced special education teacher, students could possibly be better equipped to achieve their individual potential and gain independence as they work toward graduation and beyond. An experienced special educator with years of service in the district will more likely be aware of unique opportunities within a rural community, thus allowing them to better assist students with disabilities in their transition from high school to adulthood. Therefore, it is probable a teacher with more experience within the rural district benefits each student, their family, and the community at large. Higher teacher turnover rates can negatively affect the collegial connections that help a positive school atmosphere (Greyson & Alvarex, 2008). This is why it is vital and urgent for rural school districts to address retaining special education teachers. Samuels and Harwin assert that "the number of special education teachers nationally has dropped by more than 17 percent over the past decade, a worrisome trend in a career path that has seen chronic shortage for years" (Samuels & Harwin, 2018, p. 5); this statistic further adds to the need for rural districts to offer this mentoring.

The number of unqualified teachers is directly related to low achievement of the students they teach. Lower overall student achievement due to teacher shortages creates a situation where

unqualified teachers who fill teaching positions negatively affect student success and possibly their productivity within the community (Futernick, 2007). In regards to qualified special education teachers leaving their teaching position, “Attrition negatively affects student achievement by reducing the aggregated effectiveness of teachers in a school, and disrupting collaborative relationships, resulting in a negative effect on the effectiveness of teachers who remain” (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019, p. 698). Retaining higher-qualified special education teachers can assist in improving overall student achievement.

Research Questions

This research question will assist in guiding qualitative research and data analysis.

1. What factors contribute to special education teachers’ decision to stay in one rural Arkansas school district?
 - A. What factors contribute to novice teachers’ decisions to stay or leave the district?
 - B. What factors contribute to veteran teachers’ decisions to stay or leave the district?

Overview of Methodology

Through a qualitative single case study, qualitative data was gathered utilizing a focus group interview and individual interviews with special education teachers and the special education director employed with the district, as well as an interview with a special education teacher retired from the same rural Arkansas school district. This ensured the case study enables a deeper understanding of the factors that encourage special education teachers to remain employed within one specific rural Arkansas school district.

Phase 1 of the research consisted of a focus group interview with nine of the 10 special education teachers employed within a rural Arkansas school district. The participants were asked to participate in a focus group discussion followed by individual interviews.

Phase 2 of my research consisted of individual interviews. These interviews included the nine special education teachers who participated in the focus group, a retired special education teacher with over 15 years of experience within the rural Arkansas district, and the special education director employed within the same rural Arkansas school district.

The focus group ascertained how the nine special education teachers felt about different factors that affected their decisions to stay within one rural Arkansas district. After the focus group process was completed, individual interviews took place with all 11 participants, including a special education teacher who retired from the same rural school district as the nine focus group participants. The special education director from the same rural Arkansas school district as the other participants also participated in phase two individual interviews.

A second follow up interview was conducted when necessary to clarify any questions that arose during the ongoing analysis process in which analytic memo notes and recordings of interviews were reviewed. This assisted in pinpointing factors that contribute to their decision to remain teaching at one rural Arkansas district.

Through a focus group discussion and individual interviews within this case study, the steps this one rural Arkansas district took to encourage special education teachers to remain in the district was determined. By including nine of the 10 special education teachers employed

within the rural Arkansas district in my focus group and individual interviews, I found firsthand information on their experiences while teaching at a rural Arkansas school district.

Positionality

I taught special education within a rural school district setting from 2002–2017, which consisted of elementary grade levels (kindergarten through sixth) and high school grade levels (ninth through twelfth). Teaching within a rural school district was rewarding; however, in 2017, I decided that teaching at a larger, more urban district would offer new experiences and opportunities. This relevant background inspired wanting to gain a better understanding of the reasons special education teachers decide to remain in rural school districts and the factors that have a positive influence on those decisions. This could likely be the first step in finding a solution to this problem of practice and assisting districts in lowering attrition rates.

Researcher's Role

I am currently a special education teacher at a large urban school district in Arkansas. The rural Arkansas district involved in this case study has fewer than 2,000 students enrolled. Approximately 10% enrolled at the rural Arkansas school district receive special education services. The community around the district is considered a rural community with very little industry. During the 2018–2019 school year, there were two special education teachers new to the district, and three additional special education teachers who considered leaving the district after the 2018–2019 school year. An in depth look at the reasons that influence special education teachers' decision to remain teaching within one rural Arkansas school district was investigated. The information discovered will benefit rural Arkansas district administrators and assist them in

developing strategies that can be taken to encourage special education teachers to remain in those districts.

Assumptions

As a researcher of this problem of practice, I am aware that I may have certain biases about why special education teachers decide to stay or leave a rural school district, especially since I taught within a rural setting from 2002–2017. One central assumption is that a link exists between something that the one rural Arkansas district is doing or not doing related to special education teachers' decisions to stay or leave their district. Being aware of possible biases and assumptions enabled me to remain consciously objective during my interviews, analysis process, and other data gathering research. My experiences were extremely positive, yet I still left for a much larger district to pursue new challenges and family opportunities. While gathering and analyzing data, being as objective as possible was a priority to prevent any influences on data results collected through a focus group and interviews.

Definition of Key Terms

- Attrition—A reduction in numbers usually as a result of resignation or retirement.
- Rural School District—A school district within a “census-defined rural territory” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).
- FAPE—Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is an educational right of children with disabilities in the United States that is guaranteed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

- IEP–The Individualized Education Program, also referred to as an IEP, is a legal document that is developed by a committee that consists of the student’s parents and school staff members, including the child’s general education teacher and special education teacher. It describes the individualized special education services that the qualifying student will receive. The IEP is reviewed at least annually (Arkansas Department of Education, 2018).
- Novice Teacher–For the purpose of this study, a teacher is considered a novice with zero to five years of teaching experience.
- Special Education Teacher–An individual who is specifically licensed to educate students with mild to moderate disabilities. Special education teachers adapt general education lessons based on students’ individual needs.

Chapter Summary

The central research question posed in this study is, *What factors contribute to special education teachers’ decisions to continue employment in their rural Arkansas school district?*

This question addresses the problem of retaining special education teachers within one rural Arkansas school district. This education problem satisfies all five dimensions of a problem of practice.

Through an instrumental single case study of a rural Arkansas school district, qualitative data was gathered directly from individuals who could provide insight into retention strategies the rural Arkansas school district could introduce. Utilizing a focus group discussion and

individual interviews with special education staff within a rural Arkansas school district, answers to the research questions posed in this study were better understood.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this instrumental single case study is to determine the factors that positively influence special education teacher retention rates in one rural Arkansas school district. Retention for special education teachers in general is a national problem. The goal of this study is to discern what factors encourage special education teachers to remain within one rural Arkansas school district, thus encouraging special educators to remain within the district. Finding the reasons that special education teachers stay is the first step in addressing this problem. The central research question posed in this study is, *What factors contribute to special education teachers' decisions to continue employment in their rural Arkansas school district?*

The articles referenced within this study were discovered by utilizing Google Scholar, along with the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search Complete, Professional Development Collection, and ProQuest Central (ProQuest Education Journals). Access to these search tools was gained via Mullins Library located at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas. Several search inquiries were used, including *induction of special education teachers within a rural school district, novice special education teacher within a rural school district, special education teacher retention rates, special education teacher retention among rural Arkansas schools, rural school teacher retention and attrition, special education teacher within rural schools, mentoring process of novice special education teachers,*

induction process for special education teachers, mentoring of novice teachers in rural school districts, process of teacher mentoring, retention versus attrition rates of special education teachers, retention of experienced special education teachers within rural school districts, recruiting strategies of rural school districts, and teacher retention strategies of rural school districts. Researching via these databases allowed for a better understanding of the attrition of special educators in general.

Review of the Literature

The first step in gaining a highly qualified pool of special education teachers is attracting their interest in a rural school district's special education teaching positions. The subsequent step in successfully maintaining qualified special education teachers involves retaining qualified special education teachers that have been recruited. By retaining qualified special education teachers, a revolving replacement cycle of teachers is avoided. In order to further develop the conceptual framework for this study, the literature review is organized into seven subcategories:

1. Recruiting Rural Special Education Teachers
2. The Idea of Growing Your Own Teachers
3. Retaining Rural Special Education Teachers
4. Induction/Mentoring Programs
5. Professional Development Support
6. Role Design Within Rural School Districts
7. Positive Work Atmosphere Within Rural School Culture

Recruiting Rural Special Education Teachers

Authors of the article “Finders Keepers: Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools,” stated that although rural districts face unique challenges in recruitment, a variety of approaches to make a district more appealing to potential teaching candidates can be used (Osterholm et al., 2006). Lower salaries within rural districts are one obstacle in recruitment of prospective teachers. Although raising salaries may not be realistic, there are more creative strategies that can be used in recruiting teachers. Options include loan forgiveness and tuition support along with signing bonuses to teachers willing to commit a certain length of time to teaching within a rural district. Some rural districts have offered land to potential teachers to assist in relocation as well as offered interest-free loans. Districts can also emphasize advantages to living in a rural area, such as a sense of community, belonging, and knowing students and their families (Osterholm et al., 2006).

School districts that are innovative with their recruitment approaches may be able to develop strategies that are successful. Three strategies for effective recruitment are “offering financial incentives, emphasizing the positive aspects of rural living, and building a sense of community from the first interaction with prospective teachers” (Osterholm et al., 2006, p. 6).

Recruiting and retaining qualified special education personnel are some of the greatest challenges rural school districts face, as described Ludlow (1998). Although critical shortages of special education teachers are prevalent across the nation, rural districts have experienced the effects of shortages to a greater degree. Along with the added shortage of special education teachers, rural districts might lack special education teachers with proper certification. Proper certification may be difficult due to complicated requirements, hence creating more challenges in

obtaining proper certifications: “These untrained teachers often do not have the skills to provide appropriate instruction and classroom management and they quit at the end of the school year only to be replaced by other untrained teachers” (Ludlow, 1998, p. 64). Along these lines, Lemke (2010) discussed how this creates a situation where students with disabilities receive instruction and services from a stream of minimally trained teachers, which is unlikely to ensure their right to a free and appropriate public education. Just as consequential may be how rural schools experience a difficult time locating and hiring qualified teachers who are compatible enough with the school and community to stay permanently. Difficulties in finding qualified teachers can sometimes lead to vacancies for extended periods of time (Lemke, 2010).

Ludlow (1998) relayed how unique recruitment strategies have been developed to assist in decreasing the shortage of qualified special education teachers. One example is for districts to approach college-bound high school students and offer incentives in special education programs. Offering current college students loan forgiveness incentives for teaching special education for a predetermined amount of time is another recruitment strategy. Rural schools have turned to nontraditional recruitment due to the lack of traditional students filling special education positions (Ludlow, 1998).

In addition, smaller rural schools have difficulty filling positions with highly qualified teachers due to lower salaries. Teachers with advanced degrees tend to teach at larger districts with higher salaries: “In a national survey of rural school district administrators in 44 states, more than 84% of responding districts said they experience some difficulty in filling teaching

vacancies; more than half of the respondents reported moderate to extreme difficulty” (Barton, 2012, p. 1).

A recruitment strategy implemented by rural school districts in partnership with colleges is exposing college students to teaching practice opportunities within a rural district before graduation. This opportunity, wherein college students are paired with a host teacher, gives future teachers a realistic idea of the conditions associated with teaching in a rural school district. As revealed in Barton (2012), “after surveying participants in the program, the researchers found that even a one-week program can start the change process for pre-service teachers unaware of the opportunities and dilemmas facing those who teach in rural, remote locations” (p. 4). There is a great need to inform potential teachers of the benefits of working and living in a rural setting. Typical benefits are smaller class sizes and less-expensive housing costs. Ideally, this strategy attracts teacher candidates who will remain within the rural district (Barton, 2012). Teacher candidates placed in rural school districts for their field experience are exposed to the benefits of rural communities, schools, and classrooms including a safe community environment, strong parental involvement, and a close family atmosphere. Notably, the most positive outcomes resulted from rural districts that closely coordinated with university partner schools (Sindelar et al., 2018).

Another teacher recruitment strategy found in the literature, is through Future Teachers of America clubs, whose efforts highlight awareness of careers in education within local rural communities. Working closely with local colleges to encourage student teaching experiences within a rural school district increases potential teachers’ familiarity with the district, which may

make them more likely to apply for teaching positions. Rural schools may need to offer incentives such as housing or transportation. The extra cost of incentives may be a necessary expense for recruitment (Lemke, 2010).

Technology has assisted rural school districts with encouraging results. Many rural school districts have utilized social media for recruitment. Through a digital media forum, rural schools are able to advertise incentives and provide information regarding the benefits of living in their rural community (Sindelar et al., 2018).

The literature concerning recruitment of special education teachers within rural school districts makes several suggestions for recruitment strategies. The literature also details how these strategies are being used with success in many rural schools across the country. With low recruitment rates, it can be difficult to fill vacant special education teaching positions.

The Idea of Growing Your Own Teachers

Some rural school districts have incorporated a “grow-your-own” (GYO) approach by developing programs that assist in training paraprofessionals employed by the district. Another GYO approach is financially assisting those who plan to return and teach in their community (Barton, 2012).

The challenges rural districts with lower salaries face in recruiting teachers is a significant obstacle: “Salaries for teachers and the smallest schools are 16.5% lower than the national average” (Monk, 2007, p. 161). This can make it difficult for rural districts to attract qualified applicants from other geographical areas. Also according to Monk (2007), “the lower wages in rural schools may also simply reflect a lower fiscal capacity in rural areas, coupled with

only limited efforts by states to offset the effects of poverty through equalizing grant-in-aid programs” (p. 163). The GYO program allows the utilization of local talent within the rural community. The intention of GYO programs is to encourage prospective teachers to return after certification and gain employment within the rural school district. Supporting paraprofessionals working within a rural district to acquire appropriate teaching credentials is another GYO approach utilized by rural districts (Monk, 2007).

People with a connection to an area are more likely to stay in the familiar place. Given that, the GYO strategy is one method of retaining educators from within the community (Ludlow, 1998). GYO strategies work by training and targeting future educators who want to work in their own communities and stay there. As relayed by Barton (2012), “In the *National 2007 Rural Teacher Retention Study*, 12% of hard-to-staff districts said that they were using a GYO (grow your own) strategy because traditional hiring strategies weren’t working” (p. 3), which shows that rural districts might best call upon such alternative approaches as standard. Also, candidates from within the local rural area provide cultural capital other novice candidates can not provide (Sindelar et al., 2018).

Working with paraprofessionals who are already employed in the district to work toward teacher certification has been one promising approach to a solution to the shortage of teachers in rural areas (Monk, 2007). Assistance is provided for some paraprofessionals in rural schools to pursue proper certification as a special education teacher: “Rural schools may be more successful in recruiting and retaining new personnel from community members with an established commitment to the local area” (Ludlow, 1998, p. 65). Additionally, people with family roots in a

rural area are more likely to stay within the rural district. Some rural districts have offered alternate positions such as paraprofessional positions to potential teaching candidates while they complete their degree, with the hopes that individuals will stay and teach once fully certified (Ludlow, 1998).

Retaining Rural Special Education Teachers

A large contributor to teacher shortage is simply high attrition. It is vital that rural districts provide a work environment that meets teachers' needs so that experienced teachers are retained. Conducting frequent job analysis, establishing support groups, and offering benefits and rewards are three ideas that may help keep attrition to a minimum in rural districts (Osterholm et al., 2006). As indicated by Berry (2012), feelings of isolation can lead to attrition, especially from teachers without personal ties to the rural area. Berry (2012) also emphasized that "a lack of recognition from colleagues, lack of support from administrators, and insufficient assistance grappling with the challenges of their position contributed to rural teacher attrition" (p. 4).

Establishing support groups is a successful strategy in diminishing teacher professional isolation and encouraging retention among rural school districts. Support groups could be established in a formal or private setting. Faculty meetings with refreshments is one example of a formal setting where educators can connect and collaborate on a variety of classroom issues (Osterholm et al., 2006). Belonging to a professional learning community is a less formal opportunity for rural special education teachers to collaborate and develop a rapport with their colleagues.

Encouraging connectedness outside of the school setting may also give educators a sense of belonging and loyalty which may lead to a sense of pride in the community, thus encouraging longevity in the district (Osternholm et al., 2006). This could also assist in avoiding social isolation among rural special education teachers, which can occur when rural teachers relocate to a rural community. A study by Morrison (2013) found that a novice rural area teacher felt social isolation being away from her family due to relocating to a rural area.

Benefits and rewards together serve as another retention strategy used with success, as “retention is usually less expensive than recruitment” (Osternholm et al., 2006, p. 7). Tracks of land, no interest home loans, and vacation packages for veteran teachers in the district are several examples that may be far cheaper than mandatory recruiting each year. Although many meaningful rewards are intrinsic in nature, there are also several examples of meaningful extrinsic rewards, such as providing trophies, awards, and certificates for outstanding service; teacher of the month awards; and reserved parking spots (Osternholm et al., 2006).

Finding such creative solutions to attrition may be the difference between educators who choose to stay in a district and ones who leave, especially since inexperienced educators can be enticed by the social opportunities of larger areas. Otherwise, these experienced special education teachers might easily be attracted to relocate for advanced or administrative positions within larger school districts, or merely for higher salaries (Osternholm et al., 2006).

Effective teacher support by staff and administration is one tool that can increase the likelihood of retaining not only novice teachers but veterans as well. Research by Cullen (2018) reveals that among factors that encourage special education teacher retention, “Fellow special

education colleague support was the highest rated out of the most influential factors; it was rated at 84.21% collectively by the special education teachers who were surveyed” (p. 88). Ensuring that teachers are recognized and rewarded for their successful classrooms can also promote retention. As described by Ludlow (1998), “Career ladders that recognize the contributions and expertise of individuals through enhanced prestige and salary increments may also help to minimize the transfer of personnel to other positions in education or other jobs outside the field” (p. 66).

Preparing educators for special education administrative positions within rural areas poses some difficulty as well. These programs require higher education that may not be available in smaller areas, causing these prospective candidates to move to larger districts to complete their education. After receiving such education, qualified administrators may have the option to work in higher education instead of staying in the public school systems. This eventuality may result in additional shortages of qualified special education administrators.

Another concern of special educator retention is a lack of consistency for licensure standards. That is, “the standards for licensure of special educators vary widely from state to state, with some states providing a generic license across all disability categories and others licensing personnel in specific areas or at specific grade levels” (Ludlow, 1998, p. 62). These inconsistencies pose a threat to rural districts due to difficulty in attaining the requirements they need to fill positions. Nationally board-certified special education teachers are one solution to this dilemma but do require an added extensive certification process.

Ludlow (1998) reported that teacher retention in rural special education positions is critical to rural districts' success, and a focus on more unique strategies in retaining special education teachers has been sought. Special educators are more prone to leaving the teaching field and working in a new position. Some other reasons for leaving include job mobility, personal reasons, job stress, better pay, and working conditions. One of the harder hit areas in special education is in working with children with severe, multiple disabilities, and emotional and behavior disorders. Transferring to regular education positions and less-demanding special education positions are outcomes of working with such students. Additional factors that contribute to attrition in rural areas include geographic, social, and professional isolation and limited career opportunities. Not only can these factors lead to the chronic shortage in areas, but the shortage is believed to persist due to said constraints (Ludlow, 1998). A study by Morrison (2013) found that it is important for novice teachers in rural districts to “establish relationships with colleagues and school leaders” (p. 130). Morrison (2013) further explained how a novice teacher in a rural school district felt isolated and how “the absence of meaningful and productive relationships with others in her professional environment had significant and detrimental effects on her professional identity” (p. 130).

Retention rates influence teacher salaries; higher turnover and the need to hire the available, inexperienced educators lowers the average salary, as emphasized by Monk (2007). Retention rates are greater within higher-paying districts, as teachers frequently leave rural schools with lower salaries for higher-paying districts. It becomes a cycle since salaries are generally lower in rural schools. Certain rural schools struggle to obtain qualified teachers;

therefore, they often must settle for hiring educators with fewer qualifications. It is that process and those conditions together which result in higher turnover rates. One solution is to offer higher wages to those willing to work in such hard-to-staff settings (Monk, 2007).

Although special education shortages may be prevalent across the board, the retention of these teachers is critical. Knowing the reasons why so many special education teachers are leaving is paramount to developing solutions to ensuring they stay.

Demographic variables such as age, gender, and race can possibly have an influence on attrition rates in special education (Billingsley, 2003). Of all these attributes, age was the only demographic variable linked to attrition in special education educators. The findings showed that younger special educators had a desire to leave their position, or they actually left their position more often than older educators. Other factors that have an effect on attrition include teacher certification, the extent of their education, work and school environment, salary, and administration support. Uncertified special education teachers had a higher risk of leaving than certified teachers. Two studies regarding intent to leave indicated that educators with more training had a stronger intent to leave over those with less training (Billingsley, 2003).

Novice special education teachers are over two times as likely to leave as compared to general education novice teachers. Retention of novice teachers can be even more challenging within a rural school district due to fewer resources such as lower wages, geographic and social isolation, less support available, and fewer opportunities for professional development (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

Rural school districts may be able to lower attrition rates by developing long-term incentive strategies. Monetary compensation for professional association memberships and tuition reimbursement to educators that remain loyal to the district could assist in retaining teachers for longer periods of time.

Two of the most cited reasons for higher teacher attrition rates are higher salaries elsewhere and willingness to deal with problems. In fact, “twenty-six percent of new teachers leave the profession after their first two years, and sixty percent of all teachers leave after their first five years” (Lemke, 2010, p. 17). Some other novice teacher concerns are classroom discipline and management, managing and adjusting to the demands of teaching, and creating a rapport with staff and parents. Rural schools’ incentives will have to be more creative and organized with fewer resources, with administration bearing most of the responsibility (Lemke, 2010).

Although salary has shown to be a factor in attracting and retaining novice teachers, Sindelar et al. (2018) showed that financial incentives did not have a lasting impact on retention rates among rural school districts. Bonus incentive programs rewarded teachers in school districts with high poverty and those having fewer than a thousand students. Financial incentives increased recruitment numbers, but unfortunately retention did not improve over a long period of time. “Approximately 15% of new teachers did not return after their first year of teaching, and after 5 years, nearly half had left the field” (Sindelar et al., 2018, p. 16).

Induction/Mentoring Programs

Appropriate induction programs can improve retention rates of novice teachers. It is important for these programs to be more individualized for special education teachers to assist in acclimating to the unique responsibilities in a special educator role (Bay & Katz, 2009).

Responsive induction programs, deliberate role design, positive work conditions and support, and professional development opportunities are four factors in retaining special education teachers, according to Billingsley (2003). A healthy induction program provides support to novice teachers for their first year to prevent them from leaving the school. A mentoring program is one example.

Bay and Katz (2009) reported that mentoring provides first-year teachers with support from a seasoned educator, not only in job-related tasks and support but community establishment. Having a liaison for both questions concerning job requirements and procedures and questions about the community provides a sense of belonging and eases some of the burden of getting established in a new area. These collaborations are why mentoring within induction programs is vital to ensuring novice special education teachers are supported. This can encourage novice teachers to remain within their rural school district. For example, a novice special education teacher should optimally be provided a mentor who is not only a special educator, but who teaches students with disabilities and ages similar to the novice teacher's caseload. The mentor should also be an experienced teacher with a recommendation from an administrator. This more individualized approach to mentoring provides better support for teaching responsibilities and accountabilities related to due process procedures. Novice special education teachers frequently report on the overwhelming aspects of the variety of roles they fill.

Induction programs and a mentoring process designed specifically for novice special education teachers can assist in reducing anxiety and stress many novice teachers in the special education field experience. This may result in greater job satisfaction which encourages novice teachers to stay teaching (Bay & Katz, 2009).

In the literature there are several general recommendations involving the induction process of novice special education teachers. The first is to “designate an experienced special educator to serve as a readily accessible mentor to the beginning special education teacher” (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007, p. 40), which can be accomplished by having structured time arranged for the mentee and mentor to meet on a regular basis for collaboration. The next recommendation is to “exercise flexibility when planning induction and professional development for special educators” (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007, p. 40), which can assist in attaining the most relevant training for novice special education teachers that pertains to their practice. Another recommendation is that “for districts with structured induction programs for the general population of teachers, [we should] verify that activities or components of that program address the needs of special educators” (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007, p. 40). Induction programs are far more effective when the programs are modified to meet novice special educators’ needs. A study within the article revealed that although most novice special education teachers were provided a mentor by their school, one-third of those novice special educators found their mentor ineffective (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). The advantages of a well-developed mentoring program include helping the new teacher adjust to the demands of the job and gaining skills for success in the school setting (Ludlow, 1998). Novice teacher success is

vital, as Billingsley (2019) reported that “special educators with less experience are more likely to leave” (p. 713).

As technology has improved, it has increased induction opportunities and has provided mentoring that otherwise might not be available. For example, novice teachers can receive additional support remotely from universities via web conferencing, which reduces novice teacher isolation (Sindelar et al., 2018). E-mentoring has also developed as a viable option for some rural districts, Bailey and Zumeta (2015) stated:

State Education Agencies can reduce professional isolation and improve access to professional development by providing innovative approaches to online mentoring. These programs provide new teachers opportunities to engage in professional collaborative problem solving to address challenging situations, navigate complicated state and federal paperwork requirements, and provide immediate access to answers. (p. 44)

The effectiveness of induction programs is essential for retention of beginning educators. Ideally, novice teachers should be introduced to the policies, culture, staff, curriculum, and community of the school from day one. In a University of Florida investigation, it was shown that the lack of such support could lead to teachers leaving their schools who otherwise might have stayed (Lemke, 2010).

It is necessary for administrators to be aware of the unique support needed for a novice teacher’s classroom success in order to encourage retention. Results of a study by Willis (2019) indicated “the need for administrators who provide support to early career teachers to be knowledgeable about teachers’ needs, despite the novice teachers’ inabilities to express the needs specifically (p. 83).

Professional Development Support

Professional development can provide encouragement for special education teachers by providing validation from administration in viewing teachers as professionals with special expertise (Osterholm et al., 2006). It is important that schools ensure accessibility to resources that support novice teachers' practice. In a rural school setting, offering ideal support resources can be a struggle due to a lack of finances and available personnel (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). One strategy that can assist is developing a partnership with professional organizations and universities to aid in providing professional support and development for teachers within a rural district (Sindelar et al., 2018).

Research shows that monetary rewards are not always sufficient in retaining teachers within rural school districts. Providing professional development opportunities, connecting with other rural teachers, and developing and nurturing relationships with parents and the community are also needed for retention success (Barton, 2012). Results of a study investigating special education teacher burnout in relation to job satisfaction indicated that special educators' "job satisfaction includes providing meaningful professional development opportunities and helping them feel supported by their school" (Robinson, Bridges, Rollins, & Schumacker, 2019, p. 6).

Professional learning communities (PLC) can provide an opportunity for special education teachers to collaborate with other educators and receive professional development with their colleagues. Jones, Stall, and Yarbrough (2013) stated that "with a considerable amount of clarity and improved cultures, educators in professional learning communities report that the job becomes easier when learning communities are in place" (p. 360). PLC groups can offer support to novice teachers with answers to questions that may arise throughout the school year. DuFour

(2004) reported that “educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture” (p. 8).

Role Design Within Rural School Districts

Role design is a second proactive solution in retaining rural educators. Knowing job obligations and having a clearly defined job expectations can ease the burden of retaining educators in a rural setting.

Districts that struggle in finding and hiring special education teachers often hire candidates right before school starts or later. These novice teachers often have multiple duties and a wide range of caseloads without proper support, which can leave novice teachers feeling overwhelmed. In such cases, it is necessary to take steps to “lighten the load of beginning special education teachers and pay particular attention to late and midyear hires” (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007, p. 40). Administration can also analyze the number of extracurricular activities educators are required to uphold in order to determine whether the amount of responsibility is overburdening them (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007).

Although it is well known that educators leave schools due to burnout from stressful working conditions, new teachers are more likely to leave the field if they are having difficulty adjusting to the demands of the job (Ludlow, 1998). Rural special education teachers who are not prepared for the unique environment they face may burn out from the stress and shock of their duties. In fact, rather stunningly, “staff turnover in rural special education positions has been reported to be as high as 100% every 3 to 5 years” (Ludlow, 1998, p. 58).

Modifying working conditions while becoming adjusted to their responsibilities and environment is one strategy to retain educators. This will help decrease the stress and anxiety educators have in managing their new position and adjusting to a new area (Billingsley, 2003).

Positive Work Atmosphere Within Rural School Culture

Research indicates that some rural school districts have overcome teacher retention challenges by emphasizing their positive qualities. According to Berry (2012), “researchers have documented how schools that are successful at meeting the challenge of teacher retention have capitalized on the positive qualities found in small, rural school communities” (p. 4).

Furthermore, teachers are often highly regarded in rural communities as the school, and are typically a focal point of the community. Having fewer students in a rural school district leads to fewer students in each class, which can mean fewer disciplinary problems for teachers. Some teachers feel safer in a rural school district due to generally fewer discipline problems (Osterholm et al., 2006).

Emphasizing the positive aspects of working in a rural district is one strategy that rural districts find beneficial. Teachers in rural districts have greater job satisfaction than urban schools, which is partly due to smaller class sizes, an increase in parent participation, and greater teacher control on the curriculum (Barton, 2012; Lemke, 2010). Positive working conditions within a rural district can be prolonged by support plans in place by administrators that encourage a teamwork mentality among teachers across all domains, including special educators (Osterholm et al., 2006). Billingsley (2019) suggested that “administrative and collegial support

and school culture, particularly, a culture of collective responsibility, contribute to special education teacher retention” (p. 731).

Some rural districts have developed concrete ways of easing burdens on novice teachers by purchasing resources such as handouts and lesson plan software. Teachers are able to utilize these resources that make daily tasks and preparations easier while allowing more time for instruction (Osterholm et al., 2006).

Recruitment of parents may be another solution to easing some of the responsibility of the educator, such as by including parental involvement in student’s clubs and activities. This proactive approach not only might ease some of the teacher’s workload but shows teachers support from administrators (Osterholm et al., 2006).

Novice teachers who see their work environment as supportive are more likely to remain in their position. One special education teacher at a rural school reported how a broad network of support is what encouraged her and assisted her in deciding to stay (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). The advantages of many rural school districts include smaller classroom size, more autonomy for teachers, sense of social belonging, and fewer discipline problems; case in point, “the longevity rate for rural teachers staying at one school is an average of nine years. That exceeds the national average of 8.4 years for all public schools and is higher than the rates for both cities and towns” (Barton, 2012, p. 1). Some positive environmental work factors may have a greater influence on retention than salary alone:

Teachers’ intent to continue teaching in the same rural schools and districts was most powerfully influenced by nonpecuniary factors, including degree of community appreciation and the degree to which teachers perceive the community as being committed to improving and supporting education. (Sindelar et al., 2018, p. 17)

Billingsley (2003) pointed out that on the whole, work environments are key to job satisfaction and impact career decisions that educators make. Studies of career intentions have linked job satisfaction and attrition. Essential to job satisfaction and lower attrition are salary and benefits, expected roles and responsibilities, and overall school climate. Positive view of an educator's overall work climate equals a better chance of longevity in their district. Several studies were conducted on the effects of turnover due to salaries. Moving and leaving the school district decreased as salaries increased: "Teachers who stay in their positions are almost four times more likely to strongly perceive administrators' behavior as supportive and encouraging" (Billingsley, 2003, p. 17). Such support is even more important to novice special education teachers who may leave due to excess stress related to paperwork; developing and maintaining IEPs; formulating accommodations; and collaborating with general education teachers, paraprofessionals, as well as parents. One way leaders can show support is through collaborative environments. Such environments foster cohesion between the general education and special education teachers, foster a sense of belonging, prevent burnout, and encourage educators' growth (Billingsley, 2003). Furthermore, Berry (2012) explained how "special educators who are involved in collaborative relationships with other special educators report lower levels of professional isolation and work-related stress" (p. 4).

Conceptual Framework

According to the literature, rural school districts have to be somewhat creative in their recruiting strategies, and several helpful approaches were revealed. One such strategy was how some rural districts are coordinating with colleges of teaching programs. Students of teaching

programs are assigned to a school district for their student teaching portion of the program. Colleges can coordinate with rural districts in the state to become a training site for student teachers, which provides exposure of rural districts to a potential pool of new qualified teachers. The strategy suggests that by giving student teachers an opportunity to experience the positive aspects of working within a rural school district, it ultimately increases the chances of recent graduates of teaching programs to apply for positions within rural school districts.

An additional recruiting strategy discussed in the literature is something referred to as the home-grown approach or grow-your-own (GYO) approach, which encourages local citizens of the community to receive training and then return home to teach within the rural community. The idea is that people from the rural community are more likely to stay for longer periods of time compared to recruiting teachers from out of the district area. Often, paraprofessionals already working for the rural district are encouraged to gain the proper credentials and return as a teacher.

Another approach focuses on recruiting people from outside of a rural community by offering interest-free home loans within the local community. Offering low- or free-interest home loans can be combined with a strategy discussed in the literature; that is, several rural districts in an area partner up to share expenses of recruiting, so administrators from the partnering districts take turns visiting job fairs at colleges to advertise teaching opportunities within their rural area.

In my experience as a special education teacher within a rural Arkansas school district, a strategy that seemed to work well for the district was having student teachers assigned to the

district to see firsthand the benefits of working within a rural school district. This strategy was suggested in the literature, and several general education teachers were hired this way in the district in which I taught. Unfortunately, none of the student teachers assigned to the rural district I taught at were in the special education field.

The strategy that was used most often throughout the years as a special education teacher within a rural Arkansas district was advertising online. This was done on the district website as well as teacher job opportunity websites such as www.schoolspring.com. Several special education teachers over the years were recruited this way.

Once special education teachers are hired, it is vital that their work environment meet their needs in order to help in retention rates. Teachers with experience are invaluable assets to the overall educational program. By closing the revolving door of new special education teachers, the district should save time and money through cost savings in the training and mentoring of new special education teachers (Osterholm et al., 2006).

Chapter Summary

The current literature supports the idea that there is a need to find out more about the reasons why special education teachers decide to stay within one rural Arkansas school district. Clearly there are issues with both recruitment and retention of special education teachers within rural school districts. There are, however, suggested strategies within the literature for both recruitment and retention. Determining which factors influence special education teachers' decision to remain employed at one rural Arkansas school district are the first steps in finding possible solutions to address this problem of practice.

Chapter III describes how through a qualitative single case study, nine of the 10 special education teachers employed within one rural Arkansas school district participated in a focus group interview in which general questions related to the research questions posed in this study were discussed. The second phase of research included individual interviews with all of the focus group participants. Other participants in the individual interview process included the special education director of the same rural Arkansas school district comprised in this case study and a retired special education teacher with over 15 years of experience in the same rural Arkansas school district. All 11 participants have an association with the same rural Arkansas school district. Information was also gathered from current publications regarding retention rates of special education teachers within rural school districts.

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this instrumental single case study was to determine the factors that have a positive influence on special education teacher retention rates in one rural Arkansas school district. The goal was to discover strategies that the school district could utilize in retaining special education teachers, thus encouraging them to remain within the district. Discovering why some special education teachers choose to stay within the rural Arkansas school district was the first step in addressing the matter of the district's policies and practices that affect retention. The central research question posed in this study is, *What factors contribute to special education teachers' decisions to continue employment in their rural Arkansas school district?*

Through a qualitative case study, authentic data were gathered in two phases. A pragmatic approach was utilized in both phases. Prior to initiating phase 1, permission was requested from the district's special education director to conduct the study. All participants were asked for their consent to participate in the study, then asked to sign an institutional review board (IRB) consent form. Each individual gave permission to be included in the study.

Phase 1 was initiated by asking special education teachers within the rural Arkansas school district to participate in a focus group that primarily assessed general factors that affect their decisions to stay within their district. The focus group also discussed general factors that were viewed by participants as challenges to being a special education teacher within the district. The session was guided by focus group protocol questions (See Appendix A). Before

participation in the focus group, each participant filled out a focus group demographic data form (See Appendix F).

Participants in this study included 11 special education staff members, all from the rural Arkansas school district. Participants included nine of the 10 special education teachers employed in the district. Other participants included one special education teacher who retired with over 15 years of employment within the same district, and one special education director of the district for a total of 11 participants.

Phase 2 of the research consisted of individual interviews with all 11 participants including the focus group participants with a second interview option. This second interview was to be conducted to clarify any questions that might have arisen during the review of analytic memos and transcripts of audio recordings from interviews. Three separate interview question protocols were utilized: One was used for the current special education teachers (See Appendix B), one for the special education teacher who retired from the school district (See Appendix C), and the third for guiding the interview with the special education director (See Appendix D). Information was also gathered from current publications regarding retention rates of special education teachers within rural school districts.

The research questions posed for this study were as follows:

1. What factors contribute to special education teachers' decision to stay in one rural Arkansas school district?
 - A. What factors contribute to novice teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?
 - B. What factors contribute to veteran teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?

Rationale

Recruitment and retention of special education teachers is a problem of practice that affects school districts nationally (Billingsley, 2003). Unique factors within a rural school district in Arkansas present their own set of challenges in retaining special education teachers. This situation can affect students with disabilities' need for consistency within the special education environment. To discover factors that influence special education teachers' decision to remain employed with the rural Arkansas school district within this case study, answers to the questions posed in this study were gathered, coded/categorized by theme, reviewed, and compiled into an analytical narrative of the findings. These results can be used by the study's school district and similar districts to support teacher retention.

Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena that typically draws on multiple methods of inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A qualitative research study method was chosen so that a broad study approach could be utilized.

This study included a focus group interview that lasted approximately 20 minutes during Phase 1 of the research. Phase 2 of the research included individual participant interviews. Each individual interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. The analysis process was ongoing during the focus group session, the individual participant interviews, and afterward during my reflection process. All 11 participants in this research were from the one rural Arkansas school district involved in this case study.

Through qualitative research, this study was intended to discover the factors that affect retention rates among special education teachers in one rural Arkansas school district. In

addition to the primary research goal, open-ended aspects of this instrumental single case study organically revealed challenges special education teachers encounter staying in one rural Arkansas school district, each time revisiting a focus on what encourages them to remain within the school district, or potential solutions to the challenges discussed. Discovering data directly from people who were currently special education teachers within the rural Arkansas school district, a retired special education teacher from the same district, and a special education administrator within the same rural Arkansas school district provided many answers to the study's research questions. Furthermore, the findings from the qualitative study have the potential to assist district leaders in lowering attrition rates in the study's Arkansas school district and other schools in similar settings.

Problem Setting / Context

My problem of practice involved determining factors that encourage retention rates among special education teachers in one rural Arkansas school district. Therefore, the study's setting for research inquiry was an instrumental single case study within one rural school district in Arkansas. A case study design should be utilized when trying to answer "how" and/or "why" types of questions; in particular, an instrumental single case study can provide useful insight related to an issue as the single case is examined in depth. A single case study design is appropriate for research questions regarding a single unique group or environment (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Hancock and Algozzine (2008) emphasized how developing a case study supports a deeper analysis and understanding with access to resources within the natural environment that the problem of practice occurs, defining the conducting of a case study as "identifying a topic

that lends itself to in-depth analysis in a natural context using multiple sources of information” (p. 16).

The rural Arkansas school district in which this study took place is in a community with primarily small and local businesses. There are no factories in the community, and the closest local hospital is over 25 miles away. According to an administrator within the school district, the district serves approximately 1,600 students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. The area the school district serves has a combined population of approximately 6,500 people. The district is composed of an elementary school campus, a middle school campus, and a high school campus. The district is comprised of multiple small towns and all of the students in the district feed into the same elementary school, middle school, and high school. During the 2018–2019 school year, there were two special education teachers new to the district and three who considered leaving the district after the 2018–2019 school year.

Among the district student population, approximately 70% receive free or reduced meals. Poverty is an issue for many rural districts in Arkansas and is a factor in this study’s problem of practice and the school in which the case study took place. With fewer resources and a high percentage of families living in poverty, a school district within this rural community tends to struggle to provide services compared to a school within a more affluent community. The lack of resources includes lower teacher wages and sometimes less support for students at home. The combination of these factors alone could very well cause enough long-term stress that might encourage a special education teacher to leave the district.

The process of teacher development and retention also correlates with the challenges rural school districts face. Sometimes limited resources require a newly hired special education teacher to be paired with a general education mentor, which is not an ideal pairing. The special education teacher many times needs assistance with due process paperwork, individualized education program (IEP) meetings, other required meetings throughout the school year, and advice on addressing unique classroom behaviors for which the general education mentor may not be fully equipped to provide appropriate assistance (Bay & Katz, 2009). Identifying issues early and developing solutions can provide the support many novice special education teachers may require. There are many aspects of a special education teaching position in which a general education mentor teacher is not trained; therefore, the novice special education teacher may not receive the support he or she needs to become successful or even correctly comply with special education policies and state requirements. The rural Arkansas school district within my case study follows the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) state mentoring guidelines, which do not require a special education teacher to mentor a novice special education teacher.

The organization of the district begins with the superintendent as the lead administrator. Supervisors directly under the superintendent in the chain of command are the principal and vice principal at each of the three campuses which includes the elementary school (grades K-4), middle school (grades 5-8), and high school (grades 9-12). The special education department consists of the special education director, one special education teacher who provides indirect services, and three special education teachers at each campus (elementary school, middle school, and high school). At the time of this case study, the specific positions of the special education

teachers at each of the three campuses were resource English teacher, resource math teacher, and self-contained/life skills teacher.

Research Sample and Data Sources

To find accurate information that is directly linked to the research questions posed within this study, Phase 1 of this research study involved nine of the 10 special education teachers who were currently teaching within one rural Arkansas school district. The special educators participated in a focus group discussion in which the focus group protocol questions (See Appendix A) were general questions closely aligned with the research questions posed in this study. Participants were also requested to fill out a demographic data survey form (See Appendix F).

Phase 2 of this research consisted of individual interviews with all of the focus group participants. The special education director of the same rural Arkansas school district was also interviewed, as well as a retired special education teacher who retired from the same district as the other participants. The interview question protocol for the current special education teachers (See Appendix B) differed slightly from the interview question protocol for the retired special education teacher (See Appendix C). Additionally, the interview protocol questions designed for the director of special education were individualized (See Appendix D). All interview protocol questions consisted of comprehensive questions aligned with the research questions posed within this study.

To gain a better understanding of the factors that encourage special education teachers to remain within one rural Arkansas district, a qualitative single case study was conducted. This

instrumental single case study included special education teachers and the special education director, both currently employed and retired, from the rural Arkansas school district in this study. All participants were selected from the same rural Arkansas district. Each was asked to fill out a demographic data survey, which aided in understanding each participant's personal viewpoint. Table 1 depicts participants' demographic data.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym and Position	Extended Family in Area	Grew up Locally in Area	Degree Higher Than Bachelor's Level	Currently Seeking Additional Degree	Currently Licensed in Special Education	Licensed in Special Education at Start of Career in Special Education	Had a Mentor Within This District
<u>Emma Avery</u> Novice Special Education Teacher	X			X	X		X
<u>Ava Clayton</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher					X	X	
<u>Diana Evans</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher			X		X	X	
<u>Penelope Farrell</u> Retired Special Education Teacher	X						
<u>Gordon Hewson</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	X		X		X	X	
<u>Julia Homme</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	X	X	X		X		
<u>Jasmine Hughes</u> Special Education Director	X	X	X		X	X	
<u>Layla Mullen</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher			X	X	X	X	
<u>Delilah Navarro</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	X	X	X	X	X	X	
<u>Sophia Perkins</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	X	X	X		X		
<u>Paul Sumner</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	X	X			X		

The identities of all participants and the name of the school district will remain confidential, and pseudonyms were used throughout the findings report. None of the participants were identified or linked by their real name to their responses in the qualitative study, as participant privacy is a priority. Privacy was ensured by assigning a unique pseudonym to each interview transcript instead of using individuals' actual names or school district name. All interview recordings were destroyed after being transcribed. Table 2 describes career demographic data for the participants within this study.

Table 2
Career Demographics

Participant Pseudonym And Position	Years in Special Education	Total Years in Education Field	Years in this School District	New to School District 2018-2019 School Year	Years of Experience in Other School Districts	Career Experience in Urban School District	Number of Years in Current Position
<u>Emma Avery</u> Novice Special Education Teacher	3	3	3		0		3
<u>Ava Clayton</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	19	19	1	X	18		1
<u>Diana Evans</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	15	38	32		6		2
<u>Penelope Farrell</u> Retired Special Education Teacher	41	41	18		23	X	NA
<u>Gordon Hewson</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	6	12	1	X	11		1
<u>Julia Homme</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	8	8	4		4		4
<u>Jasmine Hughes</u> Special Education Director	14	14	14		0		3
<u>Layla Mullen</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	6	6	3		3		3
<u>Delilah Navarro</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	23	23	21		2		21
<u>Sophia Perkins</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	19	21	14		7		5
<u>Paul Sumner</u> Veteran Special Education Teacher	25	25	12		13		12

Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection method utilized within this instrumental single case study was a demographic data survey, a focus group interview, and individual participant interviews. Through a case study, more in-depth information was found by focusing on one rural Arkansas school district. An instrumental case study was explained by Hancock and Algozzine as when “we want to better understand a theoretical explanation that underpins a particular issue more than we want to understand the issue itself” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 35). The demographic data survey assisted in attaining information about participants that aided in understanding their frame of reference. A focus group interview created an opportunity to gather general data from participants and set the stage for individual interviews to occur at a later time. Individual participant interviews were used for following up on focus group questions and exploring other questions in greater detail.

Advantages of a focus group interview are the discovery of data from the group’s dynamic that may not be revealed with just an individual interview, since as stated by Sharon Ravitch and Nicole Carl, “focus groups facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in an interview with a single participant” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 168). Focus groups also create an opportunity for participants to interact with other participants and comment on each other’s responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Although there were strong advantages to utilizing a focus group interview within this study, there were also potential disadvantages. Because participants were in the live presence of other members in the focus group, their answers and opinions might not have been independent

and may have potentially been influenced by other focus group participants. According to Ravitch and Carl, this may especially be the case if some members are viewed as being more powerful than others or as having extrovert personalities, which can influence the general answers from other group members (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

There are many advantages to interviewing as a data collection method. Interviews provide an understanding of participant experiences. It is advantageous that the information comes directly from the individual participants who work directly within an institution. As Irving Seidman points out, “Interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). Interviewing enables a researcher vital access to information pertaining to educational issues directly from the people whose lives and work are directly affected by those issues. With that in mind, “if the researcher’s goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (Seidman, 2013, p. 10).

Although interviewing in a qualitative research study is vital to gaining a better understanding, there are also disadvantages. Shortcomings of interviewing as a data collection method include the enormous amount of time involved in conducting interviews. More specifically, as Seidman states, “the researcher has to conceptualize the project, establish access and make contact with participants, interview them, transcribe the data, and then work with the material and share what he or she has learned” (Seidman, 2013, p. 11). All worthwhile data collection methods require effort and time; however, “interviewing is especially labor intensive”

(Seidman, 2013, p. 11). Transcribing the interviews can also require large amounts of time, as “it will normally take from 4 to 6 hours to transcribe a 90-minute tape” (Seidman, 2013, p. 118).

The nature of this study fit well within qualitative research parameters. A focus group discussion and subsequent individual interviews with each participant were conducted to enhance the understanding of factors that have a positive influence on special education teacher retention rates in one rural Arkansas school district. Initially, permission to conduct interviews with special education teachers and the director of special education were requested from the special education director of the school district. After consent from the director was received, all participants were asked to participate in this study. Each participant was asked to sign an IRB consent form giving their permission to take part in research utilizing a focus group interview and up to two individual interviews: the initial individual interview and a second follow-up interview, if needed, to clarify any questions that arose during analysis. All participants were informed that the audio of the focus group discussion and individual interviews would be recorded and then destroyed after being transcribed.

Discovering factors that promote retention within the rural school district required listening to and analyzing answers directly from special education teachers employed within the district. This approach was optimal for the study, since as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016), “qualitative inquiry seeks to discover and to describe in narrative reporting what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them” (p. 7). The first phase of data collection occurred during a focus group interview with nine of the 10 special education teachers employed by the school district. The second phase of data collection consisted of

individual interviews with all nine of the special education teachers within the focus group and the special education director. Also included in Phase 2 was an interview with a special education teacher who retired from the same school district as the other participants with over 15 years of experience within the district.

Alignment with research questions in this study was accomplished by piloting the focus group and interview protocol questions with five colleagues. To maintain validity, adjustments were made to the interview protocol questions based on the feedback provided by the pilot participants. The focus group interview took approximately 20 and each individual participant interview took approximately 40 minutes. The data gathered from the focus group and individual interviews provided information explaining reasons the participants chose to teach and remain employed within a rural Arkansas school district. The data also revealed factors that discourage the participants from remaining in their special education position within their rural Arkansas district.

After analyzing data gathered from the focus group interview, participants were asked whether they would agree to participate in an approximately 40-minute interview that elaborated on the focus group interview with more detailed questions aligned with the research questions of this study. Choosing a participant from within an administrative role provided information from their perspective regarding strategies being used by the district and their perception as to which ones provide the most benefit. Participants teaching special education within the one rural Arkansas school district provided information regarding their experience and how they felt about different aspects of teaching. To gain another perspective from someone who has taught for an

extended period of time within the study's rural Arkansas school district, a final interview was conducted with a retired special education teacher who taught over 15 years within the district. The interviews were essential in gathering more in-depth answers in addition to the focus group because beyond the more easily obtained surface information, "one of the most important aspects of the interviewer's approach is conveying the attitude that the participant's views are valuable and useful", as Marshall and Rossman discuss (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 148).

Respect for participants' points of view and their privacy was crucial to the success of the interview process. Confidentiality was a priority and was accomplished by assigning a unique pseudonym to each survey and set of interview data instead of using a participant's actual name or district school name. All audio recordings of interviews were destroyed after being transcribed.

Data Analysis Methods

A three-pronged data analysis process is important in finding accurate data results. The three categories: data organization and management, writing and representation, and immersive engagement, were all connected throughout the data analysis process. It is also vital to organize and manage data as data collection occurs employing a data management plan (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Aspects of these approaches were utilized within the case study. The analysis process was ongoing beginning with the focus group interview. Analytic memos were taken as the focus group discussions occurred and throughout the individual interviews. After the interviews, reflections were made based on analytic memos recorded during the interviews and transcripts of audio recordings of the interviews.

Coding data is described by Elliott (2018) as “indexing or mapping data, to provide an overview of disparate data that allows the researcher to make sense of them in relation to their research questions” (p. 2851). Interview transcripts are language-based data, appropriate for coding. It is an important link from collected data to explaining what the data means. During the coding process, data are assigned individual codes that help reveal consistencies and patterns within the data, which is a primary goal of research (Saldana, 2013). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) emphasize that “coding reduces lots of data into small chunks of meaning” (p. 3355). During data analysis within the case study herein, significant patterns and differences in question and answer data gathered from interviews were coded, which assisted in identifying correlations, themes, and categories of the research data. Coding according to positive or negative correlation findings during analysis of the data assisted in developing themes within the data. As similarly relayed by Bloomberg and Volpe, the primary goal was to report findings in an interesting, credible, and accurate manner (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

In qualitative research, an assigned code, as Saldana defined, is usually “a word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 3). The data analysis process for this study involved three cycles of coding within the grounded theory approach. Kolb (2012) explained how “in a grounded theory approach, the areas of reducing the data into manageable units and coding information are integral parts of the analysis process” (p. 84). Open or initial coding was utilized for the first coding cycle, axial coding for the second, and selective coding for the third.

The initial step in the case study data analysis process entailed reading and re-reading the data while posing critical questions in relation to what the data was really identifying. Initial coding provided a basis for further examination, as Saldana explained: “Initial coding is intended as a starting point to provide the researchers with analytic leads for further exploration” (Saldana, 2013, p. 101). Pandit described open coding as “part of analysis that deals with the labelling and categorizing of phenomena as indicated by the data. The product labelling and categorizing are concepts—the basic building blocks in grounded theory construction” (Pandit, 1996, p. 8). During the Open/Initial Coding phase, the first cycle of assigning unique codes to individual sections of data occurred. Many units of data from different participants overlapped in code, and this was the initial step in developing themes. Saldana emphasized that “one of the coder’s primary goals is to find these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 5). During the open coding phase, all of the transcript data, analytic memos, and demographic surveys were reread several times while initiating codes according to trends in the data. The data supported the development of themes as each piece of data was reduced and categorized.

After completion of the first cycle of coding, a second cycle was initiated: “second cycle coding is reorganizing and condensing the vast array of initial analytic details into a main dish” (Saldana, 2013, p. 208). Axial coding was utilized during the second cycle. Saldana explained that “axial coding describes a category’s properties and dimensions and explores how the categories and subcategories relate to each other” (Saldana, 2013, p. 209). Kolb (2012) indicated that during the axial coding process, “data are pieced together in new ways after open coding

allowing connections between categories” (p. 84). Critical questions were asked during data analysis, which helped determine meaning from the data and the appropriate category and theme that each set of data belonged to. Subcategories began to develop within central themes of data.

Selective coding was used for the third and final cycle of coding. Kolb explained selective coding as “the process of identifying and choosing the core category, systematically connecting it to other categories, validating those similarities and relationships and then completing categories that need further refinement and development” (Kolb, 2012, p. 84). During the third cycle of coding, evident themes in the data took form. It became apparent to which theme the individual pieces of data belonged and how they were related to other themes and subthemes. Furthermore, Pandit emphasizes that “selective coding involves the integration of the categories that have been developed to form the initial theoretical framework” (Pandit, 1996, p. 9).

Identifying themes or patterns within the data and then utilizing those themes to assist in answering research questions or resolving an issue is the primary goal of a thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). A thematic approach of analysis is “the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). Saldana further explained that “a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” and how “a theme is an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means” (Saldana, 2013, p. 175). A thematic approach to data analysis was utilized within an interpretation of interview data results. The interview questions and responses were transcribed and organized into a summary of results. These answers were organized according to

the category theme to which each question and response applied, as the analysis process was ongoing throughout this study. Utilizing a thematic data analysis method was vital in the development of the report of research findings in an accurate and credible manner. A successful thematic analysis does not simply summarize the data in themes, but rather “interprets and makes sense of it” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3353). As a result of a thematic analysis approach, six predominant themes emerged from the data. Each theme contained subthemes that went into greater detail in answering the research questions posed in this study.

Trustworthiness

Potential ethical issues that were predicted to arise during this study were related to identifying participants and the school district in which they were employed. Confidentiality was and remains important due to participants sharing honest opinions that may or may not be positive toward the district in which they are employed. It was vital that trust and confidentiality were maintained throughout this study and that participants were ensured of protection so that they could express their opinions freely concerning aspects of special education teacher retention in this particular district without fear of any retribution.

It was important to provide assurance that the data would be ethically treated as far as anonymity and confidentiality, including how participants were portrayed in the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although IRB informed consent was obtained from all participants, safeguarding participant confidentiality was accomplished by assigning only pseudonyms to interview transcripts instead of anyone’s real name or school district name. Assigning pseudonyms ensured that the name of the school district and participants remained anonymous in the study

findings. Furthermore, this method helped safeguard the identity of individuals who participated in the study.

In addition to objective coding and analysis of data, the predominant threat to the validity of this research study was depended on whether potential participants decided against partaking in the interviews, or not giving honest detailed responses to questions related to the research questions. By not participating, the total number of participants would have been affected, making the data more subject to specific individual experiences, ideas, beliefs, and opinions.

It was vital to include certain procedures to ensure that standards of trustworthiness were met. These measures included member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Member checks involved sharing data with research participants, and that included interpretations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). When necessary, interpretations of the interview data were shared with participants to ensure clarification.

Peer debriefing involves sharing findings with critical reviewers to “ensure that analyses are grounded in the data” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 46). The study’s findings were shared with several colleagues to assist in identifying any weaknesses in the data analysis.

In data triangulation, researchers utilize multiple sources through different methods to gather data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This included analyzing demographic data, as well as focus group interview data and individual interview data, to determine whether a second interview with any of the participants was needed to clarify any information in question. This process assisted in gaining insight to factors that encourage a special education teacher to stay employed within

one rural Arkansas district. Both the focus group interview questions protocol and the individual interview questions protocol were closely aligned with the study's research questions.

In 2003, Maxwell and Loomis developed an interactive model to help visualize where the components of a study design are connected and how they impact each other to make up a whole study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Figure 1 illustrates how the various components of this research design were aligned utilizing Maxwell and Loomis' (2003) Interactive Model of Research Design.

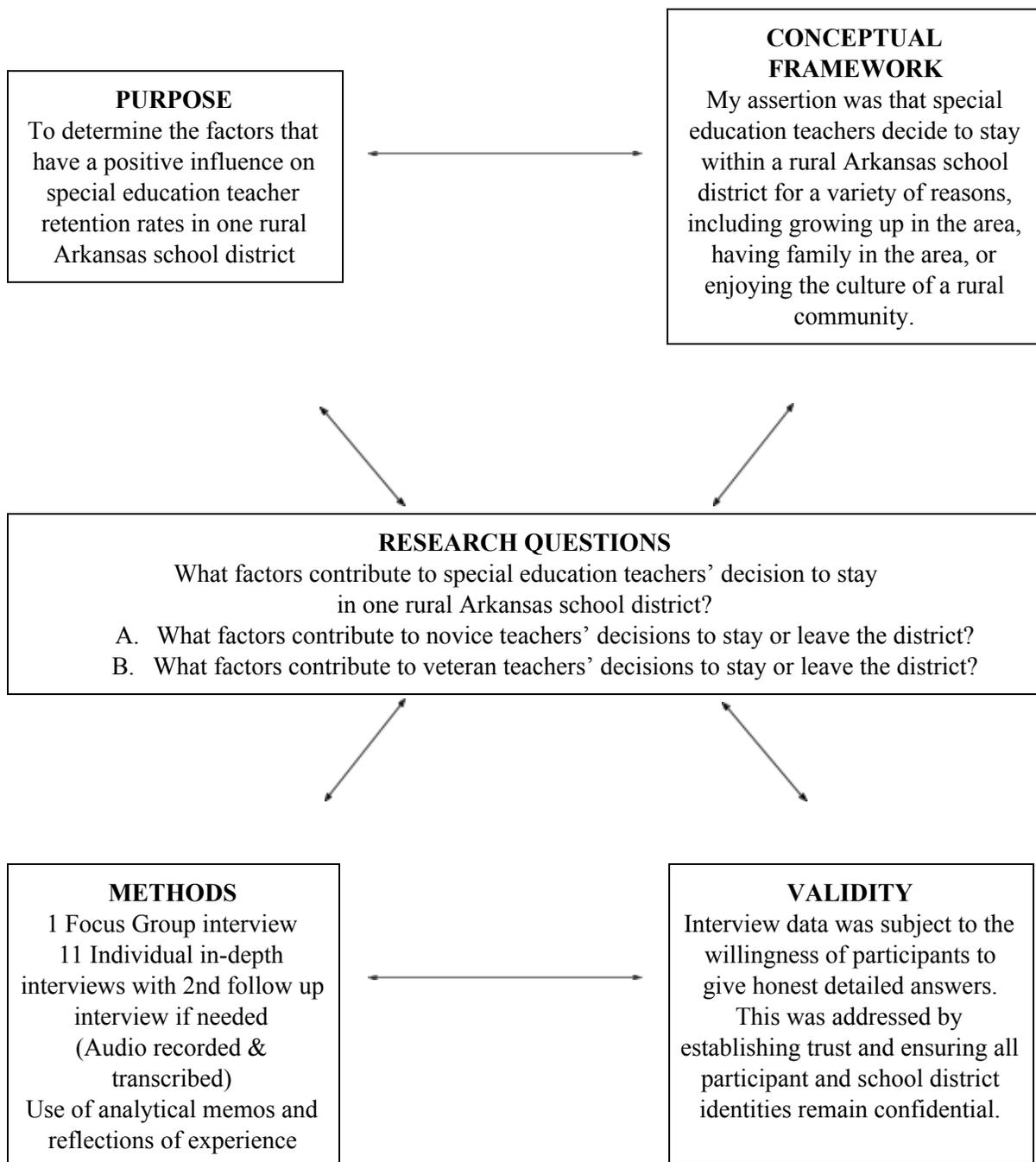


Figure 1. A model for qualitative research design. Framework adapted from Maxwell and Loomis' (2003) Interactive Model of Research Design.

Limitations and Delimitations

No research project is perfectly designed, as they all have limitations and tradeoffs (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This study relied on potential participants agreeing to participate and give thorough, honest answers to interview questions correlated with the study's research questions. Information obtained from the group study had potential to be skewed if any participant's answers were influenced by other members of the group study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data collected from the interviews was subject to the willingness of participants to give candid, complete answers—which was vital to establishing trust with all participants. By making participant confidentiality a top priority in this research, identities of all participants remained confidential. Furthermore, this process allowed continued trust to be maintained with participants.

As far as delimitations, by design this study limited its scope to just a small percentage of all special education teachers across the state who teach in a rural Arkansas school district. The study's selected group of special education teachers and director from one rural Arkansas school district within this case study represented the entire population of special education teachers that teach within that one rural school district in Arkansas. Answers to the research questions depended on the sample of rural Arkansas special education staff. By focusing this case study on one rural Arkansas school district and by being able to follow up with more interview questions as necessary, the answers to the study's research questions provided more comprehensive and in-depth answers. Moving forward, these findings may predominantly be helpful to this specific

district and other rural school districts in Arkansas. Some aspects of special education teacher retention strategies that were found might also be useful to larger school districts.

Chapter Summary

Determining the factors that have a positive influence on special education teacher retention rates in one rural Arkansas school district was the purpose of this study. Two phases of research were included within this single case study. The first phase consisted of a focus group interview with nine of the 10 special education teachers employed in one rural Arkansas school district. The focus group interview protocol contained questions aligned with the case study research questions.

In Phase 2 of research within this study, individual interviews took place with the nine special education teachers and the director of special education, all within one rural Arkansas school district. An interview was also conducted with a special education teacher who retired from the same rural Arkansas district for a total of 11 participants. Interviewing special education teaching staff at one rural Arkansas school district gave insight to factors that encourage special education teachers to remain employed at one rural Arkansas school district. An interview with the director of special education from the same district provided an overview of the special education department within the district as well as success rates of various strategies used by the district in retaining special education teachers. An interview with a special education teacher who retired from the same district with over 15 years of teaching experience within the one district provided vital information from a different perspective. Individual interview protocol questions were aligned with the research questions posed in this study.

A qualitative single case study provided more detailed information regarding the answers to the research questions posed, thus providing more accurate results. The analysis process occurred throughout this study. After reflection and transcription of interview data, coding occurred correlating positive or negative trends within the data. Any information that could possibly identify the participants or the school district were kept confidential and not included in any reports. Through this study, the goal of finding the answers to the research questions posed was to provide data to assist the one rural Arkansas school district in addressing the problem of practice issue of low retention rates among special education teachers. Furthermore, information gathered might then also be useful to other rural Arkansas school district administrators.

Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

The central research question posed in this study was, *What factors contribute to special education teachers' decisions to continue employment in their rural Arkansas school district?*

To find answers to this research question, interviews were conducted with nine of the 10 special education faculty members of a rural Arkansas school district. The district special education director and a special education teacher who retired from the district were also included in the interview process of this qualitative research inquiry for a total of 11 participants. To protect participant identity, pseudonym names were assigned to each individual and are as follows:

1. Emma Avery – Novice Special Education Teacher
2. Ava Clayton – Veteran Special Education Teacher
3. Diana Evans – Veteran Special Education Teacher
4. Penelope Farrell – Retired Special Education Teacher
5. Gordon Hewson – Veteran Special Education Teacher
6. Julia Homme – Veteran Special Education Teacher
7. Jasmine Hughes – Special Education Director
8. Layla Mullen – Veteran Special Education Teacher
9. Delilah Navarro – Veteran Special Education Teacher
10. Sophia Perkins – Veteran Special Education Teacher
11. Paul Sumner – Veteran Special Education Teacher

The objective of this instrumental single case study was to determine the factors that influence special education teacher retention rates in a rural Arkansas school district. Conducting qualitative research with participants directly involved assisted in finding reasons why special education teachers decide to remain employed within their current district and reasons they would consider leaving.

Demographic data provided information revealing participants' perspective. Of the 11 participants in this study, eight had extended family living in the local area and five of the participants were raised within the local community. The age range of participants was 33 to 69. Degrees attained by participant members ranged from Bachelor of Science to Educational Specialist. There were three participants seeking an additional degree within the 2018–2019 school year; one of the participants seeking an additional degree was pursuing a counseling degree and planned to seek a position within the counseling field. Key to this study, six of the participants were certified in special education when they began their career. All of the participants employed by the district were licensed in special education. Of the participants, two were new to the district for the 2018–2019 school year and three others considered leaving their job position after the 2018–2019 school year. Of these, one was considering retirement or returning for one more school year, one was planning a career shift into the counseling field within another district, and one wanted to move to a district that was closer to her family with a higher salary schedule. Experience within the district ranged from 1 to 32 years. Experience within their current position ranged from 1 to 21 years. Only one teacher had a mentor within the district, and she was in her third school year (2018–2019) of teaching. Additionally, one

teacher returned from retirement to fill a special education teaching position, and the 2018–2019 school year was her second school year back with the district. The special education teacher already retired from the rural Arkansas school district was the only one who had any experience within an urban school district setting.

Analysis of interview data revealed six major categories of environmental influences on special education teachers' decisions to remain employed within their current rural school district. Each of the six core categories contain themes that go into further detail. The six predominant categories that emerged were as follows:

1. Encouraging Components
2. Discouraging Components
3. Hiring and Supporting Novice Teachers
4. Advantages of Local Rural Community
5. Disadvantages of Local Rural Community
6. Strategies Recommended for Retention

These six categories, and the themes within each category, assisted in answering the research questions posed in this study:

1. What factors contribute to special education teachers' decision to stay in one rural Arkansas school district?
 - A. What factors contribute to novice teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?
 - B. What factors contribute to veteran teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?

By organizing and analyzing the data into six major categories, answers to the research questions posed in this study were revealed through identification of themes. These themes within each category were found by coding and analyzing the qualitative data gathered from the participants through their lived experiences as discovered through surveys and interviews.

Encouraging Components

Benefits of a Small School System

Out of the 11 participants, the rural school district's small scale was referred to by nine participants in a positive manner. The interviews revealed that participants enjoyed the small size of their classes, the small system, and a small number of staff members.

When discussing what she valued most about teaching at a rural district, Sophia Perkins mentioned, "how small our classes are and that we're able to build a rapport with our students and see them grow." Valuing the smaller size of the rural district was backed up by Julia Homme who commented that "being more personal with your students because you have smaller class sizes, the teachers, and the administration. There's less of you so it's easier to be personally involved with them and knowing their needs and my needs."

Delilah Navarro liked how there is a sense of closeness due to the overall smaller size: "To me it would be the closer connection with the students and with colleagues than maybe in a bigger school." Ava Clayton also enjoyed the reduced size of the district and felt the smaller campus was much friendlier, safer, and comfortable compared to larger districts: "Smaller schools with less chaos is what I like, smaller schools, that's it for me."

Another participant, Paul Sumner, relayed how it was easier to maintain camaraderie with coworkers in a smaller rural district:

I think that I just love the smaller schools, the smaller classrooms, the getting to know the people you work with better because it's a small school and you interact with them on a daily basis, being familiar with the community and all those things that go with living in a small school district.

Gordon Hewson mentioned how nice it was to easily establish a rapport with his students:

“Every teacher knows every student; you know them by name. That is definitely one positive: that you get to know the kids more on a personal basis.” Jasmine Hughes, the special education director, also expressed her enjoyment in maintaining rapport with coworkers and students within the smaller rural district:

Being a smaller school, having a wonderful specialized staff and more family. I mean, this is my extended family, this is my work family. We are part of a team, and if I didn't have that connection, I feel maybe sometimes when you're in a bigger school, you may not have those connections that you do in a smaller school and sometimes with some of your kids as well.

Jasmine also mentioned making a conscious effort to fairly distribute student caseloads among special education teaching staff: “I try to keep their teacher-to-student ratio lower; I try to have enough teachers so I can distribute student numbers.”

The only novice teacher among special education teaching staff, Emma Avery, who was in her third year of teaching, stated how she enjoyed the smaller scale of the rural district and how collaborative relationships are easier to establish and maintain due to the smaller size:

To me it would be the closer connection with the students and with the colleagues than maybe with a bigger school. We're willing to be supportive, and I really don't know if that would be the way it would be in a big school. I wouldn't think so. I mean, here with it being so small everybody just seems to have each other's back.

Both novice and veteran teachers articulated how they enjoyed the small scale of the rural school district; in fact, 82% of the participants commented in a positive manner regarding the smaller size of the district. This positive factor contributes to why some of the special education teaching staff decide to remain within their current position at the rural school district.

Importance of Administration Support

Participants spoke in a very positive manner when referring to their administrators, most notably the special education director. It was mentioned by eight participants in their interviews how supportive the special education director is who was currently in her third year as director (2018–2019). Paul Sumner stated:

I don't think there's a better director in the state or in the country when it comes to support, motivation and help, and knowledge of what she's doing. If you make a mistake, she's there to help you fix it. She gladly does it. She doesn't make you feel like you did something disastrous and made a big mistake. She just works you through it and corrects the problem.

Similarly, Delilah Navarro said in reference to the special education director:

I truly believe that we have the best support that we have had in a long time. I feel like anything now that I ask, it gets answered, whether I like it or not. But yeah, I feel like we're advocated more, or we're supported more now than we ever have been.

Additionally, Julia Homme mentioned how supportive the special director was: "Anything I need, she helps, she helps with paperwork, she's always there to support us." This view was echoed by another participant Sophia Perkins when speaking about the support the special education director provides: "a lot of support as far as paperwork and even classroom support."

When discussing what encourages her to stay in her current position within the rural district, Emma Avery communicated how the positive approach of the director encourages her to

stay. She commented that “[s]he really genuinely seems to want to know, ‘Do you have a problem? Are you happy? Can I do something to help you along?’ And so, having that positiveness there, I think that’s what helps encourage me to stay.” Layla Mullen also emphasized how supportive the special education director was by stating that “[a]nytime you have an issue, if you call her, I mean she has your back. I mean, she tells you what to do, what needs to be done. She’s always there.”

Other administrators were also referred to in a positive way. When discussing how administrators try retaining special education teachers, Diana Evans said:

They do because I feel like whatever a teacher wants or needs, I think they have the backing of the whole school district, school board as well. It’s a good school. The fact that you know that they have your back, that they would be there if you needed them for anything.

Julia Homme discussed how other administrators are supportive as well: “I’m totally supported by our school administrators. I rarely have any problems, but if I do, they’re quick to help me and they’re very supportive if we need something.”

When discussing positive characteristics of the school district, Layla Mullen commented on how the administrators are very approachable and that “you can truly say they have an open-door policy. If I have a problem, I can go in and say and it gets addressed.” This sentiment reflected that of the majority, 73% of participants’ responses, regarded the special education director highly among special education teachers.

Building administrators were also viewed in a positive manner. This collaborative approach among building administrators and the special education director seemed to be a factor

that participants expressed as something that encouraged them to remain in their current teaching position.

Rural Student Rapport

Based on participant responses, working with students in the rural district was unanimously viewed as a positive aspect of working within the rural school system. This was the only positive factor that was mentioned in 100% of the interviews.

Delilah Navarro gave a common response among the interviews related to her students by stating: “Well, I just love my kids. And then, I have always been blessed with really good parents.” Gordon Hewson further explained how the students keep him motivated to stay:

Seeing improvement and confidence in children, knowing a lot of them come from a single-parent household or raised by a grandparent. Being a father figure, a mentor, just like I do to my kids, and seeing their confidence develop is something that helps me stay with special ed.

Gordon also shared how motivating it was for him to stay knowing he was making a difference in students’ lives. He elaborated by stating that “it helps me keep my focus on the kids in need and knowing that a lot of it is low poverty, and knowing that these kids really need somebody in their life, that’s what keeps me motivated.”

Diana Evans, who came out of retirement to fill a special education teaching position that otherwise would have gone unfilled before the beginning of the 2017–2018 school year, also discussed how her students have encouraged her to stay in her current position. She had considered leaving her position after the 2017–2018 school year and going back into retirement; but, the students were the largest positive factor she considered in her decision to return: “I felt like the kids needed me.” When asked what encourages her to stay the most, Diana replied, “The

kids, the kids and their parents because they wanted me to come back and that was nice to hear that and the respect from both the students and parents.”

Paul Sumner was another participant who described how motivating it was to be able to teach his students within the rural school district. He explained, “I like the kids I work with because when you do see improvements in their skills, it’s a big plus to you, big motivator to keep going. That’s the biggest thing for me.” Paul was one of several participants who added further explanation when asked what encouraged him to remain within the district in his current teaching position and how students were a part of his reasons:

Students, because they want to keep in contact with me even after they graduate, which, when I left school, last thing I wanted to do was contact my teachers, so it shows that I had some kind of influence on them if they still want to talk to me after they graduate.

Penelope Farrell, the special education teacher who was retired from the district recalled students being one of her reasons she enjoyed teaching within the rural district. She described, “seeing our children move on and make something of themselves. I’ve got a student who is now a resource police officer at the school, he was my student, that’s what you want to see.”

The special education director Jasmine Hughes also cited being able to assist students as a major positive factor in her position within the rural district: “Knowing that even if I changed one child’s life, in their education, then it’s been worth it. It’s what we strive to do, making a difference in kids’ lives.”

The data revealed that not only was having the opportunity to teach students within the rural setting favored among staff, it was mentioned by 100% of the participants within the study. Participants expressed how working with students provided intrinsic value in their position

within the district, thus a factor that encouraged all of the participants to remain within their current position.

School Culture Characteristics

Based on interview responses, the rural school culture was highly valued among participants, with nine out of 11 indicating the school culture being a factor that encourages them. Many comments describing the school culture were similar among participants. During the focus group discussion, it was mentioned how supportive the school culture was: “I feel like everyone gets along, willing to try new things. If they don’t know something, they ask. We’re all kind of a team here.”

Julia Homme discussed how she appreciated the culture: “It just makes it a lot easier because you know everyone and it’s definitely an advantage most of the time. I really value the relationships that I have with teachers, administrators, and kids.” Furthermore, Emma Avery, who was in her third year of teaching, affirmed her appreciation of the rural school culture as well. She explained it was one of the reasons she continued to stay:

We’re close knit. If we have an issue or need help with something, we can reach out. It doesn’t matter if it’s the high school teachers, the middle school, the elementary. I mean we’re all willing to help each other out. The closeness, the support, the having each other’s back, I mean, if that wasn’t there, I’d probably not stay.

Sophia Perkins valued how everyone helps each other, adding to the positive attributes of the school culture. She explained that “we have a strong team here, and we always help each other, we all know each other, we’re all friends, we’re all family.” This apparently has been the rural school district’s culture for some time, just as Penelope Farrell who had retired from the district remembered the culture being positive from years back as well:

I think it was the camaraderie with the teachers. We were one big family, absolutely one big family. If one of us had a problem, we all had a problem, and we all solved it. We worked as a team, and it was just, like I say, it was family, and I wouldn't take anything for that camaraderie that we had and that closeness we had.

Jasmine Hughes, the special education director, also emphasized the positive culture—comparing colleagues to an extended family: “The fact that we have a family-based atmosphere with my staff and the administrators here, and you wouldn't have that close-knit family if you were in a bigger school.” Similarly, Jasmine further explained how the positive culture and the relationships it provides within the rural district was a major factor behind why she enjoys being the special education director. She stated, “I'm pretty close to the people here. When you have a work family atmosphere, it definitely helps.” With 81% of the participants referring to the culture within the school district as being positive, it was a significant factor that encouraged most participants in their decision to stay within their rural Arkansas school district.

Under the of category of encouraging components of teaching within a rural Arkansas school district, four themes emerged from the qualitative data. The themes are small system, administration, students, and school culture. All participants referred to at least three of the themes to some degree as encouraging in their decision to remain in their current position within the rural school district. All four themes were indicated by 54% of the participants as a positive factor in their choice to stay at the district. These themes assisted in answering the questions posed in this study as they addressed factors that contribute to special education teachers' decision to stay within their rural Arkansas school district.

Discouraging Components

Due Process Paperwork

Often stated as a great source of stress throughout the interviews, due process paperwork was negatively referred to by 82% of the participants. Delilah Navarro explained how constantly ensuring the correctness of due process paperwork consumed more time than she would like, and felt that her time would be better spent planning for her students. She also discussed how stressful the legalities could be with due process paperwork:

A lot of it goes back to legal issues and sometimes second-guessing everything you do because you weren't sure if you did things exactly right on paper. I think a lot of time is spent worrying about paperwork when really the kids need more of our time.

Sophia Perkins' comments were similar. She discussed how she had been discouraged at times when completing her due process paperwork: "Finding the time to get all the paperwork done, the paperwork is discouraging, every year." Layla Mullen expressed that some co-workers may not realize how much time is involved developing due process paperwork for both current and new students:

I don't think general education teachers realize just how much paperwork special education teachers go through. When a new student comes into a general education classroom, you might assign them a desk, or a book, or something, but I mean, you're talking about a folder's worth of paperwork just to allow them to walk into the special education room.

Due process paperwork has been a source of stress within the district for years. Penelope Farrell recalled how due process paperwork was a main contributor of stress for her before she retired: "I think paperwork is a little overwhelming, it was even when I left, and I don't know if that could ever be solved in any way."

Paul Sumner suggested a longer teaching contract with the district to allow more time to complete conference paperwork each year:

We hold our annual reviews in April and May so they could put us on a 10-month contract so we'll have time to do paperwork that we need to do, and get caught up on and get ready for the next year. So, there's things they can do that would help.

Based on participant interview responses, the stress from due process paperwork was due to the extensive time it takes to develop IEP's and other paperwork associated with special education due process conferences. Adding to the participants' stress levels was the legal responsibility associated with special education due process paperwork. It was suggested by some participants that time set aside specifically to complete paperwork would assist in lowering their anxiety related to maintaining due process records.

Communication Obstacles

A lack of communication was reported as a challenge by four participants. Three participants discussed an occasional interruption in communication with either their supervisors or coworkers outside of the special education department. Emma Avery, who was in her third year of teaching during the 2018–2019 school year, discussed a lack of communication she sometimes experienced with general education teachers. Emma suggested stronger communication with general education teachers and building administrators: "I always feel like there's ways to improve better communication. So that would be something they could improve on and have better communication between the general education and the special education teachers, and from the administrators to the teachers." Julia Homme expressed how messages from building administration to special education teachers are occasionally overlooked, "I don't always get information, but I think I see that in other districts as well and I think it just goes along with special education."

One participant mentioned a lack of communication with students' parents. Ava Clayton explained how difficult maintaining communication with some parents has been:

In general, a lot of times it's that communication with parents, the ability to get across what you mean, whether they understand. Or just getting them there, to sign papers, to know that this is something that's going to help their child.

Members of the focus group expressed similar obstacles in communication with parents and expanded discussing by stating that "sometimes it's hard to meet with parents because a lot of them don't have transportation."

Although communication was not a large obstacle reported within this study, the data suggested that communication was important to participants. The novice teacher within this study was one of the participants that noted communication as an area that could be improved upon which might be important especially for novice teacher support.

Salary Challenges

Aspects of individuals' salary were cited in 100% of the interviews with currently employed participants. Salary was often mentioned by participants as a challenge to some degree, and how staying within the rural district would be easier if monetary compensation was higher. The only participant that did not mention salary was the retired special education teacher.

Delilah Navarro discussed the salary steps and that she is topped out at step 19, which is the highest step for teachers at the district, "my income has stayed steady for the last several years. However, my bills keep going up and our income keeps staying here." A lack of salary

steps was only one factor viewed as a challenge. Delilah also expressed how the district needs to be more competitive with its salary scale:

We have to stay competitive. If there's a school just 11 miles up the road that might make two or three thousand dollars more a year, then what can we do? And inflation keeps going up. You have to match it.

Paul Sumner also discussed how other districts in neighboring areas have a higher salary scale and he would like to see the district match other district's higher salary:

I think a big factor is money because we have districts in our area that pay up to \$2000 more a year, it all comes down to money. Even though people like this area, like the school, and may feel comfortable, if they're offered a job closer to where they are from or even just down the road for another \$2000 a year, they're going to take it.

Diana Evans brought up that she felt in order to retain special education teachers, the district might be able to give raises. She stated, "I think special education teachers should be paid more, some school districts do pay their special education teachers more. If you want to keep somebody that is good, you've got to pay them." When asked what improvements the district could make toward assisting in retention of special education teachers, Gordon Hewson had similar opinions as Diana: "I would definitely say compensation, as far as the demand and what they ask of a special education teacher, it is a whole lot more. I think that they deserve more pay." The special education director Jasmine Hughes agreed the district did not pay as high as some larger districts, but the local economy was different than at larger districts: "Oftentimes the pay is not as good as it is in bigger districts, but when you live in a rural area the cost of living you know is usually less than in an urban area."

Number of Responsibilities

Responsibilities was identified as a challenge in a small rural school district. Of the 10 participants currently employed within the rural district, 80% felt overwhelmed at times with the amount of responsibilities they had. Jasmine Hughes, the director, spoke about filling different roles that in a larger district would be filled by several people:

Being in a smaller district compared to bigger districts, they have special supervisors and assistant supervisors, sometimes one in each building and a secretary for paperwork, some do the reporting, someone does budgeting, here I do all of that. That's one of the things with smaller districts is that you wear several hats and it sometimes gets piled on. I guess making sure that every child gets what they need and then try to do what's best for the child and have good, open communication with parents, sometimes, it's just very hard to balance all of that.

When explaining extra responsibilities, Julia Homme described how time consuming it can be to assist and train new teachers: "I guess just working with new teachers, because there's always a new teacher coming that you need to help, and train, and that's time consuming." Emma Avery, in her third year of teaching during the 2018–2019 school year, had other reasons she felt overwhelmed:

I would say my challenge is because I'm new at it, just trying to gather as much information as I can and keep everything straight because when I first started, I just kind of felt like I fell in a pool and was drowning because there's so much going on, so I would say that was my biggest challenge.

Several participants had similar challenges as Delilah Navarro, who expressed feeling stressed by having many different responsibilities but the same accountability: "If you're wearing more hats in a small district, then you're stretched thin. That makes it scarier because it's the same accountability but you're stretched doing more roles."

Under the of category of discouraging components of teaching within a rural Arkansas school district, four themes emerged from the qualitative data. The themes of discouraging

factors are due process paperwork, communication obstacles, salary challenges, and number of responsibilities. These themes assisted in answering the questions posed in this study as they addressed concerns that possibly discourage special education teachers' decision to stay within their rural Arkansas school district.

Hiring and Supporting Novice Teachers

Recruiting Strategies

According to the district special education director Jasmine Hughes, recruiting special education teachers has been a challenge for the district:

Finding teachers, getting good quality applicants, finding any applicants, you can't. I mean, it's just tough finding people in this area, and it's hard to attract people that are not from this area unless they know somebody or their family or there's some incentive. One of the things as far as how I try to address it is, I reach out, I have a lot of connections, so I try to reach out or contact people to try to get more people to apply, it's hard though.

Other strategies the district used were advertising openings on the district website and career recruiting websites. Equally important, Jasmine continued to discuss other recruiting strategies such as attending job fairs at colleges and making contacts with potential teachers; "we go to job fairs at the colleges and have prizes, we get their names and information, and ask them if they would be interested in moving to our area, then we may contact them for an application."

One participant was asked to come out of retirement to fill a position beginning with the 2017–2018 school year due to difficulties in finding someone to fill the position. The special education teacher was still teaching during the 2018–2019 school year but, at the time, was considering going back into retirement.

One of the special education teachers employed within the district during the 2018–2019 year had a few suggestions that she felt would assist in recruiting new teachers. Julia Homme suggested advertising how family oriented the district culture is and “making sure that the new teachers know there is support and that you’re not just going to be thrown in a classroom with no help or assistance. If they know that in advance, maybe they will come and stay.” Julia also suggested the possibility of a sign-on bonus: “A sign on bonus would probably help, if the district could afford that.”

Mentoring of Novice Teachers

Emma Avery was the only participant who received mentoring at the school district within this case study. The 2018–2019 school year was her third year teaching. When asked how she rated her mentoring experience as a mentee, she replied:

Very good. You know, any problem I had, they would help me with, and I had more than one person, you know, more than just my mentor that I could go to, to help me. So, I felt like I had many mentors to help me learn everything, so yeah, it was very good.

Emma’s mentor was also in the special education field, which Emma felt really enhanced her mentoring experience:

That helped because, I mean, she would give me feedback on the stuff that she watched. Because one of the lessons I had ended up being interrupted two or three times during the lesson. She said, “this is just how special education is and you just have to roll with it.” And she goes, “you rolled with it, but you know, maybe next time you might be able to do this to try to lessen the distractions. And so that helped.

The only suggestion Emma mentioned for improvement was “having a meeting once a week and just go over the things that’s going on in your room and make sure that you’re staying on task with things and see if you can improve things.”

In reflecting on the mentoring process, the director Jasmine Hughes discussed how in addition to teaching aspects of special education, she tries to ensure due process training is included as an essential part of the mentoring process. Gordan Hewson had similar comments when suggesting possible improvements, including a more hands on approach to mentoring: “I would say more hands on, showing things one on one, and more of the due process side.”

Another special education teacher, Julia Homme, suggested a mentoring team:

Instead of one mentor, it could be a group of teachers working together. It makes them more accountable to make sure that teachers are getting what they need. And, more hands on, and having the teachers watch you teach as well as you watching them teach. I think a lot of times the mentoring process is you get watched, but you really need to watch other teachers.

Advantages of Local Rural Community

Grew up in Area

Of the 11 participants, five grew up in the local area and viewed growing up locally in a positive manner. Paul Sumner remembered growing up in the area and enjoying his extended family that reside locally: “I was 10 when we moved here, so this is home to me basically. I know the area and I’ve got kids and grandkids in this area, so that’s one of the biggest draws for me to stay here.” Julia Homme also grew up in the area and expressed an appreciation of having family within the same community:

I grew up here and I went to school at the same school I’m teaching at, and my family’s from here and so, it made it easy for me to decide to come here. I feel it makes you more likely to work here.

Sophia Perkins also discussed how she has enjoyed living in the rural community: “It’s a close-knit community. I’ve lived here all my life.” In sum, growing up and having family roots in the local area seemed to encourage participants to stay.

Extended Family

When discussing the local community, eight of the 11 participants mentioned family living in the local area. Even after retiring, Penelope Farrell stayed in the area because of family: “Actually, because my family was here, I wanted to retire here.” Delilah Navarro had similar comments: “I’m still here because my family’s here, we own a home here, and my roots are here.” Having extended family in the area seemed to influence participants’ decision to remain in the area. Although Gordon Hewson was not from the area, his wife’s family lives in the area, and his mother recently moved to the area: “My mom’s actually ended up moving here and she keeps our kids, it’s pretty much all of our family. This is where we made our home, so unless something unexpected happens, we plan on staying here.” Paul Sumner grew up in the area and his extended family have created strong roots that keep him in the area: “I’ve got kids and grandkids in this area, so that’s one of the biggest draws for me to stay here.”

Supportive Culture

When discussing the local community, six of the 11 participants mentioned how supportive the community can be. During the focus group, someone stated, “I like the fact that everybody knows everyone, so they help you out. If someone has cancer, everybody shows up to lend a hand.” Delilah Navarro explained how it is for her in a rural area:

A rural school district in a rural community, there is a sense of community, like a family community. A lot of people that are here have been here a long time. A lot of the teachers that I teach with, I went to school with and coming from teaching somewhere I

knew nobody, versus teaching where there's family and friends, there's an element that keeps you here.

Paul Sumner described why he enjoyed the smaller school district community:

I know the area and I know a lot of the people and the kids that I have. I know their parents and that's kind of a tight-knit community in that aspect. I think that I just love the smaller schools, the smaller classrooms, the getting to know the people you work with better because it's a small school and you interact with them on a daily basis, being familiar with the community and all those things that go with living in a small school district.

Penelope Farrell, the retired special education teacher from the district, described how the community is like a family:

This community definitely centers around the schools, the churches, the community sticks together. Any time there's a crisis of any kind, the school, the community comes together and solves it, and I think that probably might be what brought me back here, it's a family.

Similarly, Sophia Perkins appreciated the support the rural community provides: "The small community that we live in makes a big difference in support for our school and our students."

Under the category of advantages of local rural community, three themes emerged from the qualitative data. The themes are grew up in area, extended family, and supportive culture. These themes assisted in answering the questions posed in this study as they addressed factors that the participants enjoyed about the local rural community in which they teach. These positive attributes of the local rural community contribute to special education teachers' decision to stay within their rural Arkansas school district.

Disadvantages of Local Rural Community

Fewer Opportunities and Resources

According to participant interviews, there are generally fewer opportunities and resources within this rural community compared to larger communities. Of the 11 participants, six mentioned fewer opportunities as a negative aspect of their rural community. When discussing disadvantages of the local community, retired teacher Penelope Farrell mentioned not having a hospital or any industry jobs for younger people:

Sometimes you don't have access to things you need, resources like medical facilities. Other disadvantages would probably be the economy, and of course we have no industry of any kind in this area, so that our children have to move away after high school for college. A lot of them have to move to find a job, because there's not a whole lot here for them, which I wish we did have that. I wish we had some small industry to keep our young people here.

Layla Mullen felt that opportunities within the local community were also limited: "I believe first of all, we are limited in just the ability to have opportunities, funding, just limited in every aspect of anything that comes to mind." Diana Evans also discussed how limited opportunities affected young people in the community: "Well, it being small, we do not have a lot of jobs or opportunities for some of our graduates." Furthermore, Sophia Perkins cited how there are just not many opportunities available in the local area. She stated that "being in a rural area, there's just not that many things offered as far as outside of school, things to do, or other opportunities." Delilah Navarro hoped that some growth in the future may occur within the local area: "I hope there's going to be some, I don't know, some growth, some possibilities for other things. The community's going to have to have some kind of revitalization."

Prevalent Poverty

Low income in the area was attributed by four of the 11 participants as a negative characteristic of the local community. Diana Evans mentioned how she felt that poverty may be

on the rise in the local area: “It is a poor district, it’s gotten worse, but I think it’s just the economy, and I wouldn’t live anywhere else, it’s a special place.” To expand on the prevalent poverty, Penelope Farrell revealed some of her students’ needs before her retirement:

Poverty is probably right up there as far as problems we had in our area, and of course I saw that as a teacher. You would see the children come in, they were hungry, they needed supplies, they sometimes needed jackets, and so I think that was probably the saddest part of teaching. It was something I wish we could have fixed somehow.

Strategies Recommended for Retention

Income Increase

During the interview process within this case study, several recommendations for retention were suggested by participants. An increase in income in some form was suggested by 100% of the participants currently employed within the rural school district. This was the only recommendation made by all participants currently employed; the only participant who did not mention raising income was the retired special education teacher. Julia Homme had a creative suggestion:

I thought for teacher retention that if every five years, special education teachers had some type of stipend or added bonus along with their salary, or even if it was just a flat rate of \$500. Or, I mean, something small would even help keep teachers longer.

Emma Avery, in her third year of teaching during the 2018–2019 school year, suggested a bonus or more resources for her classroom: “Having a bonus would help, or maybe a bigger budget for your classroom.” Delilah Navarro had other remarks: “Well, being more competitive with income, maybe some more benefits if you couldn’t do income, maybe do a little bit more on the insurance side of things. I capped out at 19 years, so maybe add in steps.” Sophia Perkins proposed that the district could even add days to their contracts which would allow more time for

paperwork and help raise salaries: “The district could pay for the extra work that we do or add steps to our pay schedule. They could give us some extra, I mean, even if they added days to our contracts.” The special education director Jasmine Hughes also discussed the possibility of an extended contract to help with salaries: “An increase in salary would help or maybe a 10-month contract. That would give more incentive for sped teachers to stay. I mean the increase in salary, things like that could help, definitely.” Although Jasmine mentioned how she wished the salary was somehow higher for special education teachers, she also expressed how difficult that could be for the district if no extra money came in for the district to consider raises:

More money would help, I mean we give raises when we can, being on the administrator side of it, doing budgets. I understand that when there’s no money coming in, trying to come up with that money from places is hard when there’s no extra funds coming in. Then you look at asking for a millage increase from taxpayers from the area, and sometimes that’s not always positive with the community.

Layla Mullen suggested a sign on bonus, then a stipend to assist in retention:

A sign-on bonus and stipend for the teachers because the special education teachers are going above and beyond. The shortage it’s there, if you’ve got one and they’re doing a good job then you need to do something to keep them.

Likewise, Diana Evans had similar comments regarding the district giving raises: “We should be given more money. If you want more special education teachers to apply for these jobs that are opening and fill the openings, you’re going to have to pay them.” Paul Sumner summed it up when he said:

You know it always comes down to money. You know, I wish there was a little more money for special education teachers or just a 10-month contract to allow extra time to work on paperwork and the extra things special education teachers have to take care of.

All of the participants currently employed within the district discussed salary as an area the district could possibly improve upon. Several suggestions were made during the interviews that ranged from extending teaching contracts to adding steps to the salary schedule, or possibly having a stipend according to how many years a teacher is within the district.

Due Process Support

Extra support for due process paperwork was brought up by six of the 11 participants and was the second most popular strategy proposed for retention at 55% of participants suggesting due process support. Gordon Hewson offered an idea from a previous school district he had taught at that was supportive: “We had a clerical assistant, so they handled all of the conference notifications and set up the conferences which helped out a ton. I think that would help retain teachers.” Sophia Perkins discussed how a longer school year contract would help special education teachers with the time it takes to complete due process paperwork. Paul Sumner also explained how an extended school year contract would be beneficial for special education teachers:

My biggest thing is that we hold our annual reviews in April and May so they could put us on a 10-month contract so we’ll have time to do paperwork that we need to do, and get caught up on and get ready for the next year. So, there’s things they can do that would help.

Furthermore, Diana Evans also suggested that the district should allow more time for due process paperwork: “You’re going to have to give them some time to do the paperwork because it’s a lot of work that some people just don’t understand what all we have to do.”

Jasmine Hughes, the director of special education, had similar remarks as some other participants’ suggestions. She asserted how an extended contract might be helpful and how a

support staff member could assist with certain aspects of setting up due process conferences: “Maybe a 10-month contract or try to help with paperwork as well as due process procedures with staff. That’d be wonderful to try to do a little bit more there.” In conversing about this issue, Layla Mullen discussed another way of assisting with paperwork: “I think they could look at some of the other schools that are offering like one day a week for paperwork.” This would require a way for teachers to have a day without students, which might be difficult for the rural district to schedule.

Administration Support/More Inclusive

Several participants felt that positive administration support was important. Of the 11 participants, four mentioned administration support during their interview. Paul Sumner felt it was important to have positive leadership to set the culture of the school campus:

“Administration support, I feel like the administrator could make or break a school year for teachers and students. A positive administrator that allows a teacher to do his or her job is going to go a long way.” Emma Avery discussed how a strategy for improvement would be to increase communication of information: “I always feel like there’s ways to improve better communication. So that would be something they could improve on and have better communication between the general education and the special education teachers, and from the administrators to the teachers.” When explaining what administrators could do to support her more, Julia Homme commented: “Just including me more, not planning necessarily, but just information that would help me better benefit my students. That way I could help other special ed teachers that struggle that are new.

Novice Special Education Teacher

Only one participant, Emma Avery, was considered a novice teacher, with her third year being the 2018–2019 school year. Emma’s mentoring experience was a positive one as her mentor was a certified special education teacher that Emma felt was extremely supportive of her professional growth. Emma also reported that other special education teachers were supportive, and explained how she felt comfortable asking questions due to her colleague’s approachability and willingness to assist her.

Emma considered extended family in the local area, the small scale of the district, administration, school culture, and her students as positive factors that encouraged her as a special education teacher. Emma enjoyed having family living in the local area and felt rooted within the community. At work, Emma enjoyed how the district was smaller as it provided opportunities to establish relationships with her co-workers, students, and students' families. Even though Emma felt communication with administration was an area that was sometimes overlooked, she enjoyed how supportive they were, which influenced the positive culture within the school district.

Emma mentioned two factors that discouraged her: the number of responsibilities of filling many different job roles, and sometimes feeling overlooked due to a lack of communication with administrators. Being a smaller district, sometimes extra duties and responsibilities were given to Emma that caused her to feel overwhelmed at times as she was learning her new responsibilities as a special education teacher. While Emma reported that

administrators were supportive, she felt that sometimes when building information was dispersed she was not included.

When asked about strategies that the district could utilize in retaining special education teachers, Emma specified higher salary, more administration support, and a more inclusive environment for special education teachers. Emma was not alone in her suggestion of a higher salary as all of the participants recommended a raise in pay as an area the district could improve upon. Emma also explained that she enjoyed how supportive administrators were, but thought there was room for improvement as she sometimes felt she missed out on information distributed at the building level.

Veteran Special Education Teacher

Of the 11 participants within this case study, eight participants employed within the district were veteran teachers with over five years of experience as special education teachers. Veteran teachers reported that they enjoyed several factors within the rural school district that encouraged them to stay. Positive factors were the small scale of the school district, administrators' encouraging approach, student rapport, and the cooperative culture within the school district. Veteran teachers also reported positive factors within the local community which included growing up locally, having extended family in the area, and the supportive culture of the local community. Almost half of the veteran teachers grew up in the local area, which correlates with the grow-your-own approach found within the literature review.

Negative factors regarding the school district were also discussed, including due process paperwork, communication from administration, lower salary, and having many responsibilities.

Due process paperwork was generally a source of stress for the teachers combined with a lack of time for developing the paperwork. Communication from administration was mentioned by approximately one-third of the veteran teachers, and it was an area they felt could be improved upon, saying that they felt it was more of an oversight than a major issue. Salary was reported by all of the veteran teachers as something that could be improved, and having many responsibilities was reported as creating the feeling of being overwhelmed by a majority of the teachers. The participants mentioned two adverse factors within the local rural community were poverty and having fewer opportunities – including recreational activities, medical care, and employment opportunities.

Veteran teachers made several suggestions for improvements within the district. Due process support was an area of improvement mentioned by about half of the veteran teachers. Improvement strategies included an extra day periodically or a specific amount of time set for due process development. An increase in salary was the most mentioned need in improvement. Strategies mentioned for an increase were adding steps to the salary schedule, creating a stipend based on how many years teaching within the district, and adding days to the yearly contract as this would also assist in providing extra time for due process paperwork development.

Chapter Summary

During the data analysis process, six major categories emerged from the data within this study. There were also several themes revealed within each category. The six major categories are as follows:

1. Encouraging Components Within One Rural School Setting

2. Discouraging Components Within One Rural School Setting
3. Hiring and Supporting Novice Teachers
4. Advantages of Local Rural Community
5. Disadvantages of Local Rural Community
6. Strategies Recommended for Retention

These categories, and the themes within each category, developed from qualitative data gathered from participants directly linked to the school district within this case study. Data were collected with demographic data surveys, a focus group interview, followed by individual interviews.

These six categories and their themes revealed answers to the research questions posed in this study.

1. What factors contribute to special education teachers' decision to stay in one rural Arkansas school district?
 - A. What factors contribute to novice teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?
 - B. What factors contribute to veteran teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?

The findings in this study suggested that there are several factors that contribute to special education teachers' decision to stay at the rural school district in this study. The small scale of the district was favored by 82% of the participants indicating that they primarily enjoy the small class sizes and small faculty, making it easier to establish rapport and collaborative relationships. The majority of participants (73%) cited an appreciation of the support given by administration. One particular administrator most mentioned was the special education director and the positive demeanor she has while providing special education teachers support. Students

and seeing their progress was mentioned by 100% of the participants as a positive aspect of teaching within the rural school district. The culture of the rural school district was highly valued by most and mentioned by 82% of the participants during the interviews. Figure 2 illustrates positive school district factor percentages of participants.

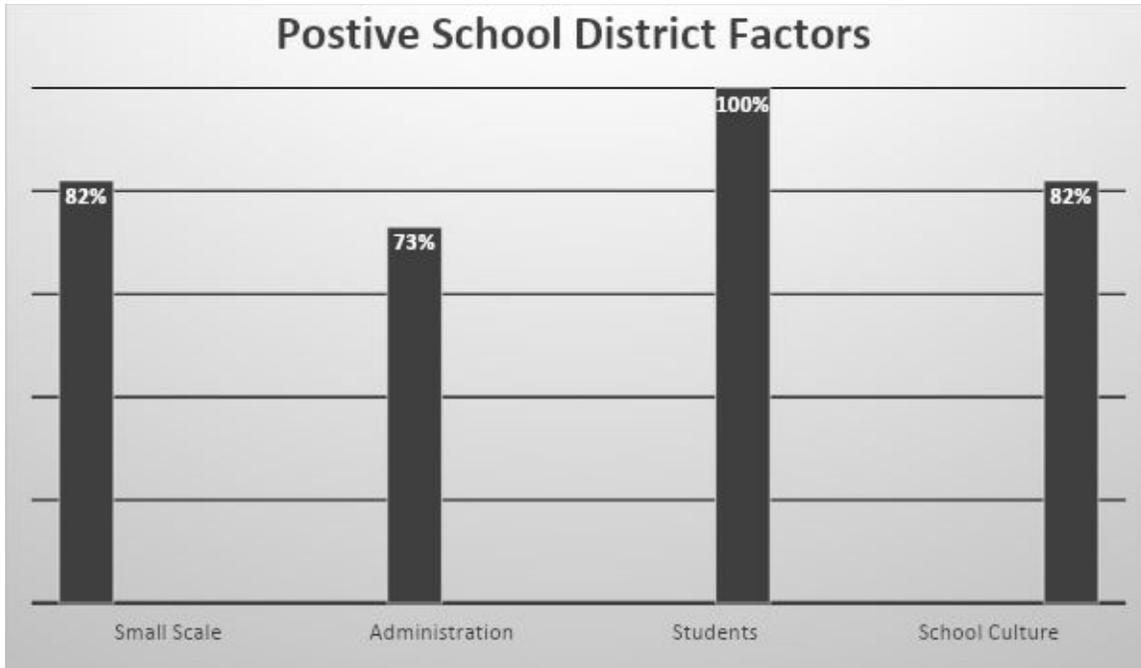


Figure 2. Positive school district factors.

Positive factors within the rural community also influenced special education teachers' decision to stay at their current rural school district. Furthermore, 45% of the study's participants grew up locally. All of the participants that grew up in the local area viewed the experience as positive. A higher percentage of participants (73%) had extended family living in the local community and felt they were deeper rooted in the community because of it. The supportive culture of the local community was cited by 55% of the participants as something

they liked about the local area. Figure 3 clarifies positive local community factor percentages of participants.

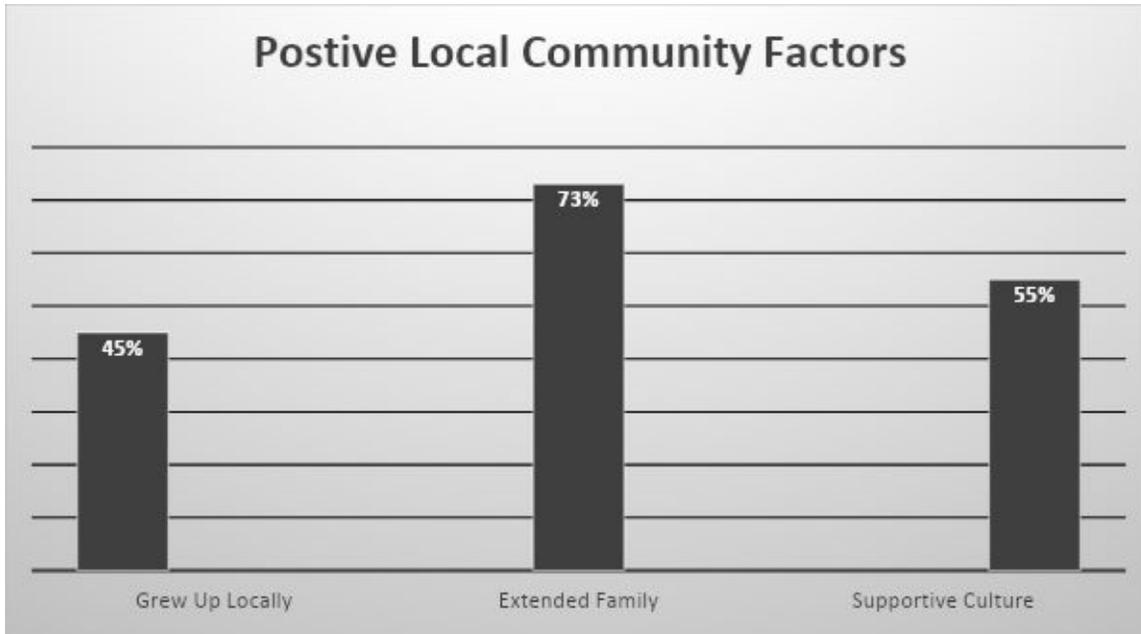


Figure 3. Positive local community factors.

The findings in this study also revealed several factors that participants found discouraging within the rural Arkansas school district. These factors could potentially influence special education teachers' decisions to leave the district. The school district's salary amount and salary steps were a prominent factor that all participants (those currently employed at the district) named as a discouraging component of their job position. Overall, 91% of the participants indicated the low salary as discouraging, as the only participant not to mention salary was the retired special education teacher. Due process paperwork and the enormous amount of time required to complete was cited by 82% of the participants as a negative aspect of working within the rural school district. In third place was the number of responsibilities and

workload that participants carried as a discouraging factor. Many participants, 80% of those currently employed and 73% overall, felt they wore many hats or filled many roles due to being in a rural district. Lack of communication or feeling isolated was mentioned by 27% of the participants as being a discouraging factor. Figure 4 explains negative school district factor percentages of participants.

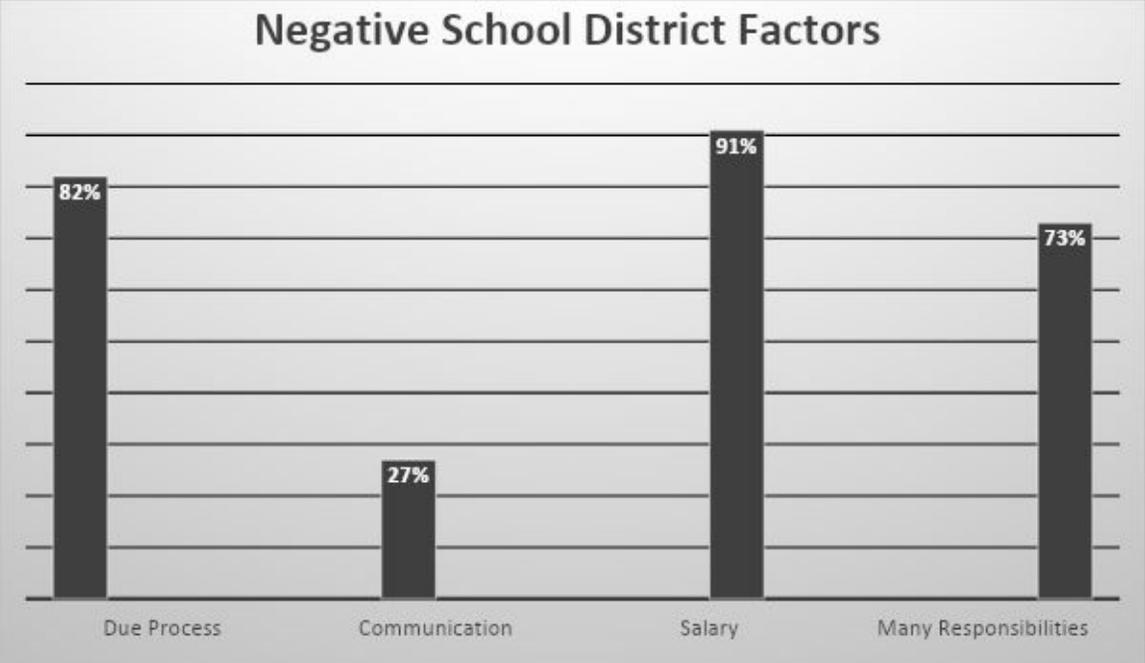


Figure 4. Negative school district factors.

The findings also found disadvantages within the local rural community. Fewer opportunities within the community was cited by over half of the participants, at 55% mentioning few resources and opportunities within the local rural area. Poverty was also brought up by 36% of the participants as being a negative factor within the local community. Figure 5 shows negative local community factor percentages of participants.

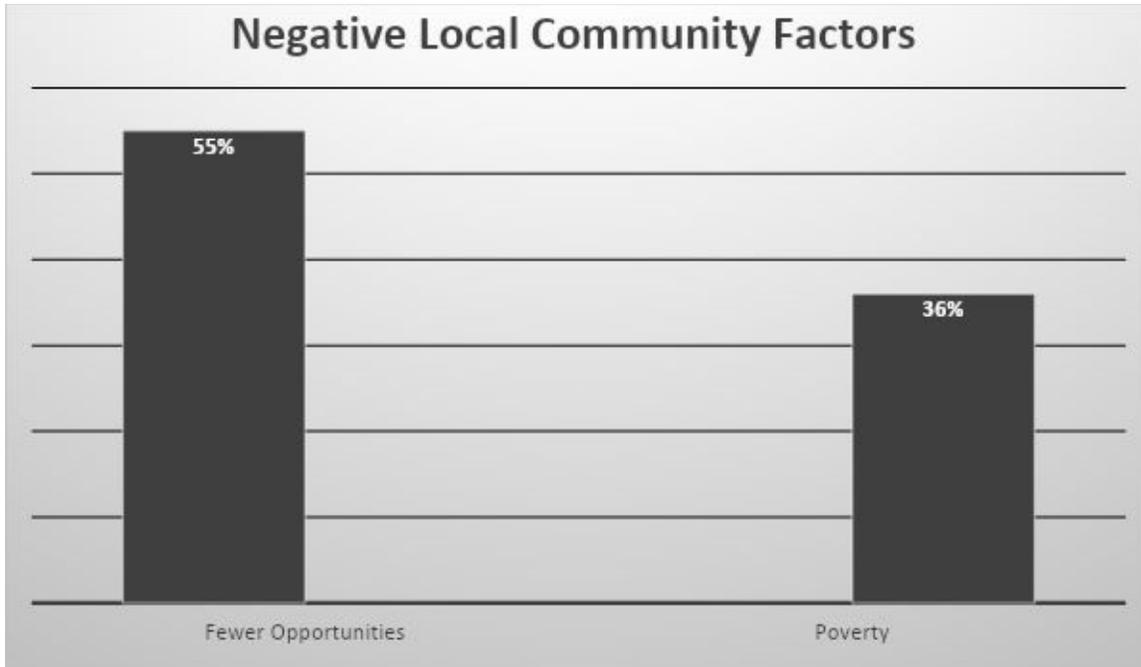


Figure 5. Negative local community factors.

During the interviews, participants also had suggestions for retention of special education teachers within the rural Arkansas school district. The first suggestion was mentioned by 100% of participants currently employed by the district and 91% overall. The suggestion was an increase in salary. Participants had several suggestions regarding ways to increase their compensation, including increased salary, more steps added to the salary schedule, stipends, and bonuses given according to how many years employed within the district. Collectively, these financial aspects seemed to be a suggestion most participants felt would make a difference in encouraging them to stay longer. The next suggestion was given by 55% of the participants and was more due process paperwork support. Several suggestions included more time allotted for processing paperwork by possibly having a certain day set aside for paperwork or extended school contracts to allow for more time, or even a support staff member to assist with parts of the

due process timeline procedures. The last suggestion, mentioned by 36% of the participants, was being more supported or included with the general education teachers as far as the distribution of information and training for new schoolwide programs. Several participants suggested a more consistent line of communication to help prevent not being aware of new initiatives being considered at the building level. Some participants felt that perhaps they were sometimes overlooked when information was distributed from building-level administrators, so a more consistent means of communication was recommended. Figure 6 illustrates strategies that were suggested by participants.

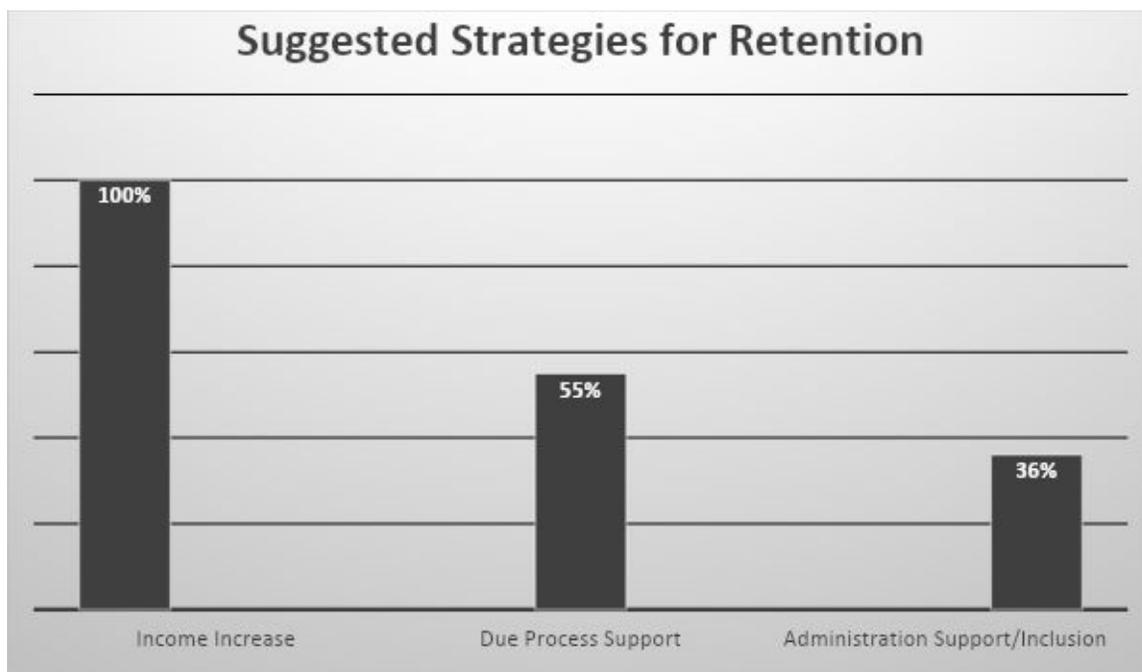


Figure 6. Suggested strategies for retention.

Although overall participants seemed satisfied with their role within the rural Arkansas school district, three considered leaving the district after the 2018–2019 school year.

Importantly, that is 30% of the 10 participants that were currently employed with the rural school

district. Diana Evans mentioned how, earlier in the school year, she was planning on retiring after the 2018–2019 school year, citing that she just wanted a change but had reconsidered and was thinking about returning for another school year: “I’m thinking of coming back.” She was not entirely sure, as her impending retirement remained a possibility. Layla Mullen was considering working at a different district: “I just really don’t know at this point. I’m looking, but I don’t know what’s going to happen.” Sophia Perkins was also considering a position at another school district: “I am currently applying for a position in another school district. Just because I want to be closer to my grandkids and it pays more, for a smaller school, and it pays like 6,000 dollars more a year.” Although Layla and Sophia had considered plans to transition to another district, they were both open to returning to the rural school district within this case study.

Three themes emerged from the category of strategies recommended for retention. The themes are income increase, due process support, and administration support/more inclusive. These were strategies expressed by participants that might assist the district in retaining special education teachers. These themes assisted in answering the questions posed in this study as they addressed factors that participants reported would encourage their decision to stay within the rural Arkansas school district involved in this case study.

Chapter V: Recommendations and Conclusion

Introduction

Recommendations of potential solutions to this problem of practice are offered in this final chapter. Solutions proposed from this case study are based on qualitative data obtained from participants directly affected by this problem of practice. Research limitations of this case study are also addressed. Finally, a conclusion of the study and discussion of future research based on the results is provided.

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to determine the factors that had a positive effect on special education teacher retention rates in one rural Arkansas school district. The goal was to discover strategies that this particular district could utilize in retaining special education teachers – that is, emphasizing advantages for teachers while creating strategies to help smooth out, or overcome, the existing and perceived disadvantages. The central research question posed in this study is, *What factors contribute to special education teachers' decisions to continue employment in their rural Arkansas school district?* By answering the central research question, the rural Arkansas school district could possibly encourage special educators to remain within the district. This would assist in addressing the problem of practice of high attrition rates among special education teachers within the rural Arkansas school district.

Interviews were conducted with nine of the 10 special education teachers employed at the rural Arkansas school district at the time of this study. The district special education director and a special education teacher who retired from the same rural Arkansas school district were also interviewed. Qualitative data collected from these participants who were directly connected with

the problem of practice assisted in finding relevant answers. Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed. Categories were developed, and subsequent themes emerged from the data during the analysis process. These themes assisted in answering the below research questions posed in this study:

1. What factors contribute to special education teachers' decision to stay in one rural Arkansas school district?
 - A. What factors contribute to novice teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?
 - B. What factors contribute to veteran teachers' decisions to stay or leave the district?

Throughout the interview process, the majority of participants mentioned how growing up in the area or having extended family in the local community encouraged their decision to remain within their current district. This strongly correlated with Ludlow (1998) who reported that people with a social connection to a rural area are more likely to stay. The unique rural school culture and community support were also discussed by participants. These were described as encouraging factors in their decision to remain within their position at the rural school district. Many of the current special educators referred to their special education director in a positive manner, discussing how supportive she was both with classroom practices and due process procedures. Participants explained a sense of belonging they felt with the rural local community and the school district culture. These case study findings correlate with the conceptual framework data and support the grow-your-own strategies described by Monk (2007) in Chapter II.

In contrast, some participants were drawn to other school districts outside of the local community due to more opportunities available and higher salaries being offered. Participants discussed that there were not only more opportunities available at larger school districts, but also more opportunities and conveniences available within more urban communities in which larger school districts are located. One participant decided to apply to another school district due to a combination of family living in the other district area and higher salary being offered. The participant had raised her son in the local community, but he had since moved to a different region for more job opportunities. The participant applied to a school in the same community her son moved to in order to live closer to family, along with attaining a higher salary at the school district within the new community he was living in. These findings concur with Osterholm et al. (2006) who reported that experienced special education teachers might easily be attracted to relocating to other school districts for higher salaries. Results of this case study also align with Billingsley (2003) who described how an educator's view of their work climate equals a better chance of longevity in their district, including salaries.

Only one participant, Emma Avery, a third-year teacher, was considered a novice teacher within this study. Emma was the only participant to receive mentoring within the school district and spoke highly of her experience. When asked how she rated her experience as a mentee within the district, Emma replied, "very good, you know any problem I had they would help me with, and I had more than one person, you know, more than just my mentor that I could go to, to help me. So, I felt like had many mentors to help me learn everything, so yeah, it was very good." She also discussed how supportive her special education supervisor was. This reflected

proactive practices within the district. According to Bay and Katz (2009), it is vital for induction programs to be individualized for special education teachers to assist in acclimating to their unique responsibilities in a special educator role.

Although Emma reported a positive experience with administration, she sometimes felt overlooked in the distribution of information. She suggested more communication as an improvement the district could make. This is important to note as Berry (2012) indicated that feelings of isolation can lead to attrition. Emma also felt the school could have improved by raising salaries or giving more time for due process paperwork duties. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) indicate that “several factors are associated with higher turnover rates, including lack of administration support, teacher salaries, and alternative certification” (p. 1).

Although qualitative data suggest that this rural district and community overall are viewed in a positive manner by the educators within this study, 100 percent of the participants currently employed within the district expressed concerns over the lower salaries compared to other school districts. Participants also recommended more time for due process procedures with the possibility of being financially compensated for the additional time required with an extension of their teaching contract. While the general opinion of the local community was favorable among participants, several reported a shortage of growth, fewer resources, and a lack of opportunities within the local rural community. These study findings correlate with Gehrke and McCoy (2007) who reported how retention can be challenging within a rural school district due to fewer resources such as lower wages, geographic and social isolation, less support available, and fewer social and economic opportunities.

Based on the qualitative data from this study, participants enjoyed the many benefits of teaching within a rural school district and living in a rural community. Nevertheless, participants also desired more resources within the community, such as a local hospital and opportunities to increase their salaries as special educators.

Recommendations

The central research question posed in this study is, *What factors contribute to special education teachers' decisions to continue employment in their rural Arkansas school district?* This study is significant because it provides qualitative data from the perspective of nine out of the 10 special educators within a rural Arkansas school district and the factors that influenced their decisions to stay. The rural Arkansas school district within this case study might find this research valuable in the effort to retain special education teachers. Other rural districts with a similar problem of practice might also find this research beneficial in developing special education teacher retention strategies.

Several positive attributes that participants reported within this study are reflected in the literature as well. According to the case study data, positive factors that encouraged participants to stay in their current position within a rural Arkansas school district were rapport with students, small scale of the district, positive school culture, and administration support (primarily via the special education director). There were also encouraging factors within the local community such as extended family living in the area, supportive culture of the local community, and participants growing up locally.

Recruitment of Teachers Who Stay

Out of the 10 participants employed by the rural district during the 2018–2019 school year, 50% grew up in the local area, and 70% had extended family living in the local area. These significant percentages correlate with Ludlow (1998) who reported that teachers with a family connection to a local rural area are more likely to remain within the rural district.

Monk (2007) describes a grow-your-own (GYO) strategy that the rural district within this case study might benefit from. The GYO strategy utilizes teaching talent from the local rural area and encourages them to return after training for employment within the rural school district. Also pointed out by Sindelar et al. (2018), teaching candidates from the local rural area bring cultural capital other novice teachers cannot provide. Osterholm et al. (2006) explained how a rural school district can emphasize the benefits of living in a rural area, such as a sense of community, ease in knowing students and their families, and a sense of belonging; this fact parallels this case study, as 55% of the participants herein cited during their interview the positive culture of the local community as a factor they enjoy.

Another strategy the district could implement is offering introductory teaching courses at the rural district high school that might encourage future graduates to pursue a career in education. When reporting on the structure of rural districts, Howley and Howley (2005) noted:

In smaller schools and districts, teachers are drawn primarily from the local population; such as teachers often have strong attachments to their communities. Such strong local attachments can sustain teachers' and principals' dedication to fostering an education that will contribute to the quality of local life. (p. 2)

When describing positive factors that they enjoyed about teaching within a rural school district, 82% of the participants within this study reported that the small scale of the district was something that they enjoyed. Osterholm et al. (2006) mentioned that smaller class sizes typically

lead to fewer disciplinary problems for teachers and how teachers felt safer in a rural school district setting due to fewer disciplinary issues. These advantages can be used as an appealing aspect for attracting potential hires.

The positive culture within the school district involved in this study was referred to as an encouraging characteristic by 82% of the participants. This may also be a quality of the rural district in this study, which itself could aid in advertising and in their various recruiting efforts; this is in line with Billingsly's (2003) report that a positive view of the overall work climate increases the chances of teachers staying within a school district.

When recruiting potential teachers, Osterholm et al. (2006) recommended rural districts emphasizing the advantages of living in a rural community. This can be done by incorporating information regarding advantages of living in a rural area in recruiting materials such as brochures, flyers, school website, and chamber of commerce website. Furthermore, having a relationship with students and their parents provides a sense of belonging within the community.

The district may want to take into consideration the correlation between the participants in this study and the advantages of having extended family in the community. Seventy-three percent of the participants had extended family living in the area and 55% grew up within the local community. By investing training efforts in people from the local community the district could benefit in filling open teaching positions in the future. For example, offering high school students interested in pursuing a teaching career elective educator courses as an introduction to a teaching career. These types of courses may encourage high school students to pursue a teaching program in college.

According to the data, participants enjoyed the small scale of the district and the supportive culture within the district and local community. Participants also found supportive administration as an encouraging factor in their decisions to stay in their current position within the district. These are assets the district could also underscore when advertising available teaching positions.

Salary Increase

Some discouraging findings within the rural district found within this study were also reflected in the literature. Jasmine Hughes, the special education director, reported on the challenges she had in finding and hiring licensed special education teachers. Ludlow (1998) cited recruiting and retaining qualified special education teachers as being one of the greatest challenges rural districts face. Barton (2012) suggested that rural school districts have difficulty in recruiting teachers due to lower salaries. Monk (2007) also identified lower salaries as a significant obstacle for rural districts in recruitment of teachers.

Based on qualitative data from this study, the rural school district could use recruitment strategies such as emphasizing the positive quality-of-life factors of the local community since some of these factors compensate for lower salaries. Barton (2012) also discusses how it is essential to inform potential teachers during recruitment of the advantages of working and living in a rural setting, such as smaller classes and cheaper housing. The district's small scale is a positive attribute for the district to consider and emphasize in recruiting efforts. Howley and Howley (2005) reported that a rural school environment often encourages a collaborative atmosphere, "in many places, the small size of schools and districts promotes cooperation among

teachers, enabling them to improve instruction in ways that develop naturally” (p. 2). This is a positive aspect of teaching within a rural school district that can assist in offsetting the lower salary compared to larger more urban school districts.

All of the participants (100%) in this study who were currently employed by the rural school district suggested some form of higher salary as an improvement the district could attempt. Suggestions included days added to their contract (which would also help with completing due process paperwork), steps added to the salary schedule, or providing a stipend according to how long teachers have been in the district. Lemke (2010) specified the two most cited reasons for higher attrition were higher salaries elsewhere and willingness to handle problems. Participants also suggested higher salaries so their district could be more competitive with neighboring districts. Monk (2007) proposed the solution of offering higher wages for those willing to relocate to geographic areas more difficult to staff. Billingsly (2003) reported that as salaries increased, attrition decreased.

Unfortunately, not all rural school districts can afford to raise salaries. Therefore, creative solutions might make various types of salary increases feasible. For example, the district could form a grant-application committee for special education teachers and administration to assist in expenses. Bailey and Zumeta (2015) emphasized how useful applying for federal grants could be for rural districts, “help rural LEAs maximize federal funding opportunities for special populations. Investing in staff with grant writing skills, along with training and targeted support from SEAs, can increase rural LEA participation in federal grant initiatives” (p. 47). Another conceivable solution is if the rural Arkansas school district could

collaborate with other rural districts within the state to produce appeals to state's legislative representatives for budget increases that might assist in funding a salary increase.

Although the literature and participants suggested an increase in salary, it is not always feasible, consequently the district in this study may consider other strategies to compensate special education teachers. Osterholm et al. (2006) noted that some rural districts offered land or interest free loans to incoming teachers. The rural district in this case study has strong community support, so it might be possible that the local banks within the community would be willing to offer lower interest rates on home loans for teachers employed by the district. This would assist in offsetting teachers' lower salary.

The district could also explore possible school loan forgiveness programs for rural special education teachers. Rude and Miller (2018) suggested utilizing "policies that provide loan forgiveness to government-sponsored loan program recipients for employment in rural and hard to fill positions" (p. 27).

Administrative Support

Teaching her third year in special education during the 2018–2019 school year, Emma Avery spoke highly of her mentoring experience within the district. She reported that her mentor was a certified special education teacher and she also received support from other special education teachers. Gehrke and McCoy (2007) recommended having an experienced special education teacher readily available to mentor and assist novice special educators in acclimating to their unique responsibilities; this resembled what Emma received as a mentee during her

mentoring experience. Although Emma was the only novice teacher within this study, her experience as a mentee supported best practices recommended in the literature.

At some point in the future, if a certified special education teacher is not available to mentor, e-mentoring was suggested as a viable option in the literature review. As reported by Bailey and Zumeta (2015), “e-mentoring for student success focuses on curbing attrition of new special education teachers by providing a matched mentor. The mentor and the rural teacher meet at least two times a week, and the mentor is always available via email” (p. 45).

Only 36% of participants suggested administration become more inclusive of special education teachers, but one of the participants was the only novice teacher—which reveals she might need extra support from administration. Gehrke and McCoy (2007) reported that novice teachers who feel their work environment is supportive of them are more likely to continue in their position.

Although only 27% of the participants in this case study reported occasionally feeling overlooked from a lack of communication at some point, improvement in this aspect could be crucial in bolstering retention rates. Rude and Miller (2018) stated that “the demands placed on special education professionals are unique in rural school environments for a variety of reasons, which may include social or professional isolation” (p. 26). Berry (2012) pointed out that when teachers feel isolated, it can lead to attrition, especially if the teacher lacks personal ties to the rural community. For these reasons, and also because of the differences in this study between novice and veteran teachers’ perceptions on communication, administrators could make a greater effort to communicate directly with teachers with less experience. Ludlow (1998) recommended

support from administration, namely ensuring teachers are recognized and rewarded for successful classrooms in order to promote retention of both novice and veteran teachers. Preston and Barnes (2017) advocated that “successful school rural leadership is founded on the healthy establishment and maintenance of relationships. More specifically, strong leadership is about nurturing interpersonal relationships with/among staff members, parents, students, and community stakeholders” (p. 7).

One approach that might increase the inclusion of special education teachers would be if administrators and special education teachers develop inclusion strategies together in each building or campus. Developed strategies would support information being dispersed systematically and would include plans for oversight and follow-up when information is shared to ensure the strategies are being applied effectively. Utilizing technology such as group email or group text messaging would be one efficient way of accomplishing improved communication. Some schools send out a weekly staff memo where teachers are highlighted. When building a culture and keeping individuals connected and informed this might be an option.

Utilizing the rural school district’s collaborative and supportive culture, ensuring that special education teachers are able to continue to participate in PLC learning groups is a strategy the district is currently utilizing. Special education PLC learning groups could also collaborate with neighboring rural school district’s PLC learning groups. Harmon (2017) reported that “collaboration among schools can contribute to important school improvement” (p. 2). Harmon (2017) further explained that collaboration between school districts can also have a positive effect on students’ academic success. Rude and Miller (2018) stated that “the best investment

that can help to assure the retention of highly effective educators in rural communities is the provision of high quality professional development programs” (p. 28).

Strategies for more support with due process paperwork and conferences were also mentioned by participants, such as adding extra days or adding scheduled blocks of time to complete due process requirements. According to participants, the district currently holds annual reviews during the months of April and May. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a student’s IEP must be reviewed at least annually and active at the beginning of each school year. There are not any restrictions on which month during the school year an annual review can be held. Therefore, the district might consider holding annual review conferences throughout the entire school year so conferences are more equally distributed to ease the stress of due process paperwork.

The district could also hire substitute teachers to fill in for special education teachers once each quarter to allow special education teachers an opportunity to collaborate with each other and the special education director while preparing due process paperwork. According to this case study, this strategy might be more feasible than raising salaries and would support special education teachers by providing more time in a collaborative setting to prepare due process paperwork.

Summary of Recommendations

The outcomes of this investigation complement those of earlier studies. The insights gained from this analysis suggest that the rural district involved in this case study should consider utilizing positive aspects of the district when recruiting new teachers. Attributes to

include are the small scale of the classes and staff, encouraging administration, and collaborative school culture. The rural community as a whole is viewed by current special education teachers as supportive, and information about the positive features of the local area should also be included in recruitment efforts.

The rural district might consider providing extra time for special education teachers to prepare due process paperwork. Administrators could possibly diminish some duties for special education teachers which would possibly allow more time for due process paperwork preparation. The district should be aware that special education teachers need to be included in all lines of communication and in the dissemination of information that is shared with general education teachers.

If feasible, the district could consider adding steps to the salary schedule, adding a stipend according to years a teacher is employed within the district, or adding days to special education teachers' contracts. By extending contracts, special education teachers will receive a higher salary and extra time for due process paperwork completion and training. Other options with a less fiscal impact would be to spread out Annual Review Dates and/or provide quarterly meeting times to address paperwork needs.

Limitations

By design, this study was limited to one rural school district, and therefore, participants represented a small sample compared to all of the rural districts in the state of Arkansas.

Although the special education director and the one retired special education teacher from the rural district in this case study were able to participate, not all of the special education teachers

currently teaching were available to participate. All of the currently employed special education teachers within the district were able to participate in this study with the exception of one, thus, nine of the 10 currently employed special education teachers (at the time of this study) contributed to this qualitative single case study for a total of 11 participants.

All studies have limitations and tradeoffs (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This study depended on participants giving honest, detailed answers during the interviews. Individual interviews might not have revealed accurate information if any of the participants were not completely honest when delivering their answers. Maintaining trust from participants was vital to the success of this study to ensure participants felt comfortable expressing their honest opinions and viewpoints without any repercussions. Anonymity was accomplished by utilizing pseudonyms for the participants and school district so that all participants' identities were protected and remained anonymous.

The focus group discussion depended on honest answers. Ravitch and Carl (2016) reported that it is possible for participants' answers to become influenced by other participants within a focus group session. This could have occurred if anyone within the focus group was viewed as a leader within the group. Participants may have been influenced to agree with or answers skewed due to the presence of any perceived leaders within the group.

Conclusion

Utilizing the findings discovered from this study, the rural Arkansas school district within this case study will possibly be able to lower attrition rates of special education teachers.

Ludlow (1998) reported that in every three to five years, special educator staff turnover is as high

as 100% in some districts. This high rate of turnover can disrupt the delivery of special education services for students. It is vital to take steps in lowering attrition rates to provide more consistent special education services from teachers who have established a rapport with their students and their families. To support teacher retention, the results of the study indicated that the district in this case study should address the following:

1. Recruitment – include positive factors regarding the district work environment and the community in recruitment efforts. Utilize local talent and encourage future growth by offering introductory teaching courses at the high school to possibly encourage students to consider a career in education. Partner with colleges to offer student teacher opportunities for college students in special education field.
2. Administrative Support – diminish some duties for novice special education teachers to allow for new teachers time to acclimate to their new responsibilities. Consider e-mentoring for novice special education teachers if there is not a certified special education teacher available as a mentor. Distribute annual review conferences throughout the school year instead of holding conferences only in April and May to assist in alleviating time constraint stress for participants. Provide a substitute teacher for all special education teachers the same day once a quarter to allow special education teachers an opportunity to collaborate while developing due process paperwork. Have building administration arrange a meeting with special education teachers to discuss strategies that will assist in being more inclusive of special education teachers with the distribution of information. Aspire for district administrators to reach out to local banks

to consider offering a teacher discount in home loan interest rates and possibly car loan interest rates.

3. Salary Increase – If feasible, the district could consider a stipend for teachers according to how many years they have taught in the district. For example, every fifth year of service within the district a teacher could receive a stipend according to what the district could financially afford. Another consideration, if possible, would be adding steps to the salary schedule.

Future Research

Further qualitative research involving special education teachers who decide to leave the rural Arkansas school district in this case study would assist in discovering exact reasons why special education teachers decide to leave. Exit interviews could be conducted as part of the rural school district's resignation process for teachers leaving the district. Additionally, research studies expanded to other districts may highlight more areas that can be addressed. These findings could conceivably assist other rural school districts in investigating why special education teachers leave, thus possibly avoiding or diminishing factors that influence rural special education teachers' decision to leave a rural Arkansas school district.

Rural school districts across the United States are challenged with recruiting and retaining special education teachers. This problem of practice instrumental single case study identified factors that encourage recruitment or retention of special education teachers allowing schools and districts to create support plans to meet their unique needs.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Protocol Questions

1. How many of you grew up in this area? If you didn't, did you grow up in a rural area?
2. What is it like to live in this community, both positive and negative aspects?
3. What is it like to be a special education teacher in this district?
4. What are some things you enjoy about teaching in this district?
5. What challenges are there to being a special education teacher in this district?
6. What has encouraged your decision to remain in your position at this school district?
7. What suggestions do you have that might increase special education teacher retention in this district?

Appendix B

Individual Interview Protocol Questions for Current Special Education Teachers

1. Tell me about what it means to be a rural school district in a rural community.
2. What are the grade levels and severity of disabilities of the students you teach?
3. What challenges have you faced as a special education teacher within this school district?
How were solutions found?
4. What type of support do you receive from building administrators as a special education teacher? What type of support do you receive from district administrators?
5. Has anything discouraged you in your role as a special education teacher within this school district? If so, can you elaborate?
6. How has teaching in a rural area contributed to your decision to remain employed at this school district?
7. What has encouraged you in your role as a special education teacher within this district?
8. What do you value most in teaching within this rural school district?
9. How did the rural community setting of this school district influence your decision to accept a position here? Did it encourage your decision or discourage your decision?
10. How does the rural community setting of this school district influence you as far as how likely you will remain within this school district in the future?
11. What positive characteristics of this rural school district encourages you to stay the most?
12. In your opinion what improvement could the district make to help retain special education teachers?

13. What could this school district do that would encourage you to stay longer than you planned?
14. Do you feel this school district makes an appropriate effort in retaining special education teachers? If not, how could the district improve?
15. What are your plans for next school year?
16. If you began your career in this school district how would you rate your mentoring experience as a mentee?
17. Do you feel the mentoring process provided adequate support for your success?
18. What improvements would you suggest for the mentoring process of Special Education teachers within this district?
19. Was your mentor in the Special Education field and in your opinion, how effective was your mentor's role in helping your success as a special education teacher?

Appendix C

Individual Interview Protocol Questions for Retired Special Education Teacher

1. Tell me about what it means to be a rural school district in a rural community.
2. What were the grade levels and severity of disabilities of the students you taught?
3. What challenges did you face as a special education teacher within this school district?
How were solutions found?
4. What type of support did you receive from building administrators as a special education teacher? What type of support did you receive from district administrators?
5. Did anything discourage you in your role as a special education teacher within this school district? If so, can you elaborate?
6. How did teaching in a rural area contribute to your decision to remain employed at this school district?
7. What encouraged you the most in your role as a special education teacher within this district?
8. What did you value most in teaching within this rural school district? What do you enjoy most about this community?
9. How did the rural community setting of this school district influence your decision to accept a position here? Did it encourage your decision or discourage your decision?
10. What positive characteristics of this rural school district encouraged you to stay the most?
11. In your opinion what improvement could the district make to help retain special education teachers?

12. When you taught at this district did you feel the school district made an appropriate effort in retaining special education teachers? If not how could have the district improved?
13. What advice would you give to new special education teachers at this school district?
14. What are some things you enjoyed most and least about teaching in this district?

Appendix D

Individual Interview Protocol Questions for Special Education Administrator

1. Tell me about what it means to be a rural school district in a rural community.
2. What challenges have you faced as a special education director within this school district? How were solutions found?
3. As an administrator what type of support do you provide for special education teachers within this district?
4. Has anything discouraged you in your role as a special education director within this school district? If so, can you elaborate?
5. How has being an administrator in a rural area contributed to your decision to remain employed at this school district?
6. What has encouraged you in your role as a special education director within this district?
7. What do you value most in being the special education director within this rural school district?
8. How did the rural community setting of this school district influence your decision to accept a position here? Did it encourage your decision or discourage your decision?
9. How does the rural community setting of this school district influence you as far as how likely you will remain within this school district in the future?
10. What positive characteristics of this rural school district encourages you to stay the most?
11. In your opinion what improvement could the district make to help retain special education teachers?

12. What could this school district do that would encourage special education teachers to stay longer than they may initially plan?
13. Do you feel this school district makes an appropriate effort in retaining special education teachers? If not, how could the district improve?
14. What improvements would you suggest for the mentoring process of Special Education teachers within this district?

Appendix E

Research Compliance Protocol Letter



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

To: Eric Ryan Gotte
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee
Date: 11/12/2018
Action: Expedited Approval
Action Date: 11/12/2018
Protocol #: 1810156015
Study Title: Retaining Special Education Teachers Within One Rural Arkansas School District
Expiration Date: 11/04/2019
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Ed Bengtson, Investigator

Appendix F

Focus Group Demographic Data Form

1. Gender _____
2. Age _____
3. Years of experience in special education _____
4. Years of total teaching experience _____
5. Years of experience in this school district _____
6. Years of experience in other school districts _____
7. Years in current position _____
8. Current position _____
9. Highest degree level _____
10. What degrees have you attained and major with each? _____
11. Currently seeking an additional degree? _____
12. If so, what area? _____
13. Are you fully licensed / endorsed in special education area you teach? _____
14. If not, what areas are you licensed in? _____
15. Were you licensed in Special Education when you began in special education field? _____
16. What are all of your licensure endorsement areas? _____
17. What led to your decision to gain employment within this school district? _____
18. Why did you choose the special education field? _____
19. What previous experiences led to your decision? _____
20. What is one word to describe your experiences within Sp. Ed. field? _____