



# Special Education Teacher Attrition



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## Abstract

Rising attrition rates and shortage of highly qualified special education teachers (SETs) have a negative impact on students with disabilities (SWD) as effective SETs are needed to help learners experience success in school settings [1]. Researchers and other stakeholders must learn more about the common experiences of SETs to better understand what these educators need to experience more job satisfaction and subsequently remain in the field to assist SWD [2]. Conversely, school leaders and other stakeholders need to have a better understanding of the professional experiences related to SET satisfaction in their workplace to comprehend the severity of this issue [3]. Gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of SETs can help others in the work environment to affect change to support SETs and maximize the potential for SETs to remain in the field and continue to develop and enhance their abilities to help SWD [4]. This qualitative phenomenological descriptive case study draws on a purposive sample of five SETs currently serving SWD [5]. The study's participants were asked to share their experiences and insights into the challenges of their job in public school settings. An analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of three significant constituents: (1) collaborative experiences; (2) isolation and exclusion, and (3) marginalization. The subsequent discussion offers points related to the identified themes and provides readers with suggestions to help support SETs in varied settings and potential areas of further research.

**Keywords:** Meaningful units; Teacher attrition; Special education teacher shortage

## Introduction

The shortage of special education teachers (SET) available to serve America's six million students with disabilities (SWD) is a significant concern that must be addressed. Mason-Williams [5] reports that 98% of public-school districts in the US do not have enough qualified special education teachers to serve our students [6]. The circumstances worsen each year because of teacher attrition (teachers leaving the profession). In fact, the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education reports that the attrition rate among SETs (12.3%) is higher compared to 7.6% of general educators [7]. A lack of certified personnel and high teacher turnover can result in greater expenses in recruiting, training and supporting new staff and difficulty closing the achievement gap. More importantly, this can impede the ability of students with disabilities to reach their full potential and leave school unprepared for adult life [8]. Commonly cited reasons why teachers are leaving the profession include salary, excessive paperwork, limited resources, unsupportive leadership, student behavior, student motivation, and limited funding to attract and support graduate students. Many recommended solutions to the problem require financial investments such as increasing teacher salaries, providing teacher mentors, increasing professional development, and adding additional support personnel [9]. More research regard-

ing teacher shortages relating to attrition is needed particularly

in the field of special education. The issue is more problematic as the number of special education teachers leaving the profession increases. Studies showed school districts nationwide struggle to recruit and retain new teachers, in particular, SETs [10].

## Materials and Methods

### Theoretical framework

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the phenomenon of experiences with job satisfaction and attrition among special education teachers. For the purposes of this study, special education teachers will be defined as employed in a public-school setting to serve students identified as eligible for special education services [11,12]. Teachers of this student population are in a unique position to share perspectives about their job satisfaction and provide insight to key stakeholders in education to develop policies and practices to help recruit and retain teachers of SWD [13].

### Research questions

RQ1 What are the most significant challenges related to job satisfaction for SETs in public school settings?

RQ2 What can educational leaders and other key stakeholders do to better support SETs to reduce teacher attrition?

The data was derived from in-depth, open-ended interview questions, [14]. Conducting in-depth interviews with SETs will allow participants to willingly engage in historical stories about their professional experiences and employment challenges.

This qualitative phenomenological study advances scientific knowledge by narrowing the gap with the current research because sufficient qualified SETs are needed to fulfill the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [15] mandates for students with disabilities (SWD) to receive an appropriate education in their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). If SETs are leaving due to inadequate job satisfaction, we need to learn more about common experiences [4]. A better understanding of what practices and/or policies exist in their educational environment is needed. Learning more about the lived experiences of special education teachers can offer insight into factors which may adversely impact teachers. Once factors are identified, strategies can be used to help SETs develop meaningful social relationships with their colleagues. As a result, SETs will be better able to help SWD meet their academic milestones and reach their full individual potential [16].

Research related to SET job satisfaction and attrition is limited. There is a critical need to better comprehend SET experiences so education leaders and others involved in service delivery can make informed decisions about how to support and keep SETs to maximize their effectiveness and ability to SWD [5]. The focus of the study is an important area of research that could be used to benefit theory, knowledge, practice, policy, and future research. Capturing the perspectives of SETs can help to address the gap in the research base as there is a clear lack of information available related to the needs of SETs in school settings [11].

The current study is qualitative in nature. Michael Patton [17] defines qualitative inquiry as, a set of multiple practices in which words in methodological and philosophical vocabularies can acquire different meanings (Patton). Qualitative is a broad term that encompasses a variety of approaches to interpretive research described as careful, diligent, organized, systematic inquiry directed at answering well-framed research questions. The goal is the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws, or practical use or application of new or revised theories or laws [14]. Data collected in qualitative research varies and may consist of quotations, observations, and excerpts from documents. Qualitative research begins with the use of interpretive and theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individual or groups ascribe to a social or human problem [18].

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in the research study. To some extent, the researcher can control errors by using research strategies proven to be effective. The study makes use of qualitative purposeful sampling which can be defined as carefully selecting subjects that represent characteristics of the phenomenon of interest. This sampling strategy was

used because the qualitative method investigates the why and how of decision-making, not just what, where, and when smaller and focused samples are more often used than large, quantitative samples. Patton [17] describes an advantage of purposeful sampling that can provide information-rich experiences which can deepen understanding of the phenomena. The unique aspect of the interviews can offer insight and promote a deeper understanding of important phenomena (Patton).

This study utilizes the phenomenological research methodology approach because it would allow for a better understanding of the consciousness of special education teachers as the lived experiences of these professionals are revealed [19]. The methodology is appropriate for this study because it allows researchers to understand and identify what participants had in common as they experience life as SETs in public school settings. A phenomenological study is also appropriate for this study because it allows participants to reflect on and share their individual experiences with the phenomenon over times, allowing readers to identify and better understand the primary difficulties and issues of participants [20]. Implementing phenomenological research methods can provide insight into the personal perspective and interpretation of professional teaching experiences as special education teacher participants share their subjective experiences, motivations, and actions [21]. A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of people regarding a common phenomenon in human experience (Creswell & Poth). Phenomenologists attempt to understand what a specific experience is like (the essence) by describing it as it is found in concrete situations and as it appears to the people who are living it. [22]. The type of study offered would answer the questions (1) What are the most significant challenges related to job satisfaction for SETs in public school settings? (2) What can educational leaders and other key stakeholders do to better support SETs to reduce teacher attrition? The focus is to better understand the essential meanings of individual experiences of SETs and the challenges related to their professional role and expectations [17]. The study will illuminate the specific challenges of SET experiences; the primary goal is to identify the ways in which the participants with the phenomena struggle so stakeholders have an opportunity to consider these experiences to inform or support current and future SETs. The methodology allows researchers to deliberately select samples to illustrate or draw attention to specific issues.

### Limitations

Limitations within a study influence the researcher which may place restrictions on the conclusions when generalizing results to a larger population. Specific limitations of this study include potential researcher bias when analyzing results [13]. The researcher (first author) was familiar with literature and has been a special education teacher for 20+ years in varied settings with knowledge related to the challenges of special education teachers. Purposeful sampling was used for this study. Participants were identified by the researcher through a variety of professional development experiences. The study may not represent the views

of the generalized population [18]. The data collection took place over a six-month period that included the researcher finding eligible participants, traveling to the interview sites, and transcribing their experiences, however, the researcher and other participants were able to draw on experiences, considerations, and insights drawn over what was potentially multiple years of experiences. Although the primary variables identified by participants were related to specific themes addressed in participant responses, they are also related to common trends and issues noted in the literature as well as the researcher's personal experience as a special educator [21]. The study instruments are an additional limitation because they were created by the researcher and may have reflected researcher bias. Creswell and Poth [20] note the following concerns are associated with phenomenological studies: The need for a streamlined form of data collection gained from interviews may be too structured, and it is difficult to find all participants who may have experienced the phenomenon. In addition to the challenges noted by Patton [17] to be mindful of diverse experiences and potential biases. Creswell and Poth [20] suggest that bracketing personal experiences may be difficult for the research because interpretations of data always incorporate researcher assumptions. The researcher must always be mindful of how and when personal feelings are introduced into the study.

### Delimitations

Delimitations of this study are choices made by the researcher related to the boundaries [20]. The study does not consider the experiences of all SETs in the local or other geographical areas. Therefore, the experiences described are specific to the study participants. The study does not consider the experiences or opinions of all educators with specialized knowledge of the rewards and challenges of special education teachers in the researcher's local or other geographical areas. Therefore, the experiences and/or opinions described are specific to the study participants [19].

### Review of literature

The literature reviewed included both quantitative and qualitative studies, but the focus was more related to qualitative studies because the specific purpose and goals of this study. The population studied is delimited because it was focused on the needs of SETs in public school settings [7,22]. Special education teacher needs in other settings were not considered such as private & private charter schools. The subjectivity of the data contributes to the difficulty in establishing reliability [19]. The research sample was small, and it cannot be easily generalized as typical experiences of SETs. In addition, the participant's responses may not be a true reflection of their thoughts or opinions. The SET participants may also be limited by concerns about their responses being shared, peer pressure, or embarrassment with the subject matter.

The literature consistently notes a shortage of available SETs to meet the needs of SWD in schools across most of the US [4]. Finding enough SETs to serve SWD in lower socioeconomic areas and with significant support needs serving in more restrictive settings is particularly difficult [23,24]. Keeping teachers in the class-

room is more difficult than ever. Nguyen et al. [25] found there are at least 36,000 vacant positions along with at least 163,000 positions being held by underqualified teachers, both of which are conservative estimates of the extent of teacher insufficiency nationally. as well as implications for teacher preparation and education.

The literature relative to the study noted additional factors contributing to the phenomena of teacher shortages include teacher retirement, COVID-19, and growth in the student population, combined with a declining number of certified teacher candidates have all contributed to the phenomenon of teacher shortages [26]. Within the past 10 years, the number of public school students ages 6 to 11 in need of special education services has increased 25.3 percent, while the number of 12- to 17-year-old special education students rose to 30.7 percent [27]. The extant literature suggests that overall job satisfaction is linked to lower special education teacher shortages [9]. The research identifies a variety of factors that may influence SET recruitment, retention, and attrition. The increase in casework-associated paperwork, fewer opportunities to serve SWD in self-contained classrooms combined with the need for many SETs to serve students across grade levels and subject areas (often simultaneously) are noted as reasons SETs may be exiting the profession [25].

The need for ongoing progress monitoring of the identification and service delivery processes as well as individual student progress has resulted in a significant increase in the amount of paperwork SETs are required to manage while simultaneously teaching students [28]. The significant amount of paperwork, documentation, and time management involved in developing and implementing complex IEPs, which is often generated by complex software programs that consistently evolve and do not necessarily communicate with other programs can be very frustrating [29]. In addition, the increased time needed to collaborate with other teachers and service providers, students, and parents in order to prepare for numerous IEP meetings for each student on their caseload is problematic if SETs do not have the time or support to manage these tasks [30]. Often SETs report they are not satisfied with their jobs because they feel unappreciated, overworked, and ready to leave the profession [4, 31]. Furthermore, limited autonomy to determine how and when all the required tasks are to be completed as well as what to teach students with varied needs were identified as contributing factors. Special Special education teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must juggle multiple roles simultaneously. Much of the research notes SET feelings of isolation and ineffectiveness [16].

### Participants and setting

Five participants were selected to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Given the small sample size of this study and the use of semi-structured interview questions, a qualitative methodology for this study is warranted [18]. A descriptive phenomenological framework was appropriate as the phenomenological recognition, comprehension, and description of sense

appearances which is a method of utilizing a transcendental reduction to explore in-depth descriptive data and gain insights into the phenomenon under study [13]. The data for the study was coded without exposing the identity of each participant, each SET was assigned a code number, for example, participant 1; participant 2; participant 3; participant 4; and participant 5 noted as P1; P2, P3, P4, P5 as identifiers. The coding design can promote the investigation of the unit of analysis or the essence of a phenomenological experience (first-hand description) from each participant. [32]. Each meaning unit was identified, analyzed, and transformed into psychologically sensitive statements of the essential meaning [17]. The perspectives of participant consciousness were explored to help the researcher better understand a phenomenon from the first-person authentic voice. The findings can provide a better understanding of the phenomenon [14]. The researcher utilized imaginative variation analysis of meaning units (MU), then the researcher employed imaginative variation to understand each essential meaning. An analysis of the intersubjective first-hand descriptive data helped the researcher to gain an understanding of the variations of one's experience amid the other participant's experiences [20].

The method of phenomenology is embedded within philosophy and psychology. Phenomenology as a science, from a philosophical perspective, has raised many questions within the scientific community [18]. Conversely in hermeneutic phenomenology, the primary focus is the historical being of one's experiences rather than a single experience. Contrary, the transcendental phenomenological method focuses on the meaning of an individual's lived experiences for the purpose of describing the essence of the phenomenon [21]. It is more suitable to help understand the professional experiences of SETs rather than seeking a causal relationship, (a quantitative study). The intentional and influential experiences transcend a given perspective and may influence a conscious understanding of an experience. Through the incorporation of an eidetic analysis approach as well as the process of reduction and bracketing, essential aspects of consciousness are separated [13]. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological scientific five-step eidetic analysis was used (described below) to explore the raw data [14].

The unit of analysis for the study was the SET professional experience of the participants. The target population of the study was public school SETs employed in public school settings in New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Five SETs were recruited as participants. The first participant [P1] resided in North Carolina, a male who taught middle school, and self-contained classes, taught for 5 years. He held a Master's temporary teacher license to teach special education in addition to an alternative certification in special education. The second participant [P2] resided in New York, a female, held a standard elementary special education license, for 16 years teaching elementary self-contained classes. The third participant [P3] resided in New York, a female, held a standard special education license. She taught Resource Room & Self-contained math classes for 25 years.

The fourth participant [P4] from Virginia, a female, held a standard special education license, based on making a lateral move from general education after taking a proxy and achieving a Master's degree, taught for 9 years teaching high school students in a Co-teacher model, Resource self-contained Science class. The fifth participant [P5], a female residing in South Carolina, held a standard special education license, and taught elementary self-contained classes, for 5 years.

### Data collection

Giorgi's five-step eidetic analysis [32] was conducted to create a psychological structure to answer this study's research questions: RQ1 What are the most significant challenges related to job satisfaction for SETs in public school settings? RQ2 What can educational leaders and other key stakeholders do to better support SETs to reduce teacher attrition? The bracketing process was utilized to assist the interviewer in assuming the phenomenological attitude or putting aside their own experiences to minimize potential bias based on personal experiences associated with the phenomenon [17]. The researcher's goal was to gain a better understanding of the comprehensive (whole) experience by reading through the interview transcriptions in their entirety. The unit of analysis for the study was the SET professional experiences of participants. The target population of the study was public school SETs employed in public school settings in New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Multiple procedures were utilized to protect the participant's confidential information prior to, during, and following the interviews. All participants provided informed consent. Concerns about confidentiality and potential conflicts of interest and confidentiality were discussed with participants prior to and throughout the process [13]. The recorded individual interviews were the data collection instruments. Recordings were transcribed and scanned into an electronic database and stored for three years in a file that was encrypted and password protected. Individual interviews were not shared with others at the interview site [19]. Prior to the interviews, the SETs were reminded interviews were recorded, and confidential, and the interviewees could withdraw from the study at any time. The face-to-face interviews were 60-90 minutes to allow in-depth SETs to provide a psychological description of their professional experiences relative to job satisfaction. The interview time is inclusive of the time the researcher met with the participant, briefed the participant on the study, reviewed and obtained the signature of the informed consent, and debriefed after the interview [21]. The participants were presented with open-ended questions pertaining to the phenomenon. The semi-structured interview questions for this study were open-ended. Asking open-ended questions allows participants to thoroughly explore their personal experiences of the phenomenon in detail [13]. While it is true there are no absolutes when determining meaning, and researchers may find variations of meaning units from the same data, the outcome analysis of the current study data was carefully identified using a five-step descriptive analysis [32]. A digital audio recorder was used to document responses and then transcribed verbatim. The

researcher used computer transcription software, a headset, a foot pedal, and a Word program. The transcribed interviews resulted in 60 pages of transcribed data, single-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font.

Phenomenological reduction was utilized at the onset of data analysis, so described participant experiences were understood as present to the SET's consciousness. The research questions along with the transcripts of SET participants' professional experiences were referenced throughout the analytical process to enhance the researcher's understanding of the phenomena [17]. Meaning units (MUs) were delineated as the researcher continuously reviewed the descriptive data with the intent to precisely identify and describe shifts of subjective consciousness noted in the data [21]. When a shift was detected, each unit was demarcated with numeric subscripts and forward slashes (/). During this process, a series of meaning units were acquired from the transcribed data. Meaning units were then transformed into psychological statements [13]. The data were reviewed to identify meaning units and transform them into psychologically sensitive statements using third-person expression. Identifying and revising meaning units to third-person expression helped the researcher to avoid bias and maintain an objective (intentional) perspective. The imaginative variation process was utilized in the analysis to help the researcher consider variations in the meaning units for determining the experience essence [21].

Finally, a general written psychological structure was generated for analysis. The general structure is a descriptive paragraph employing all the constituents to provide a representative account of the lived experience of the participants [13]. The psychological constituents (or psychological parts) that make up the whole experience were synthesized during this phase of the study. During this process, all meaning units were compared to identify mutual connections (intersections). The Giorgi analysis method was utilized. The general descriptive title for all the identified essential psychological constituents was generated. Essential constituents connect interdependently to create a whole structure. Nonesential constituents were not part of the general structure [20]. Throughout the data analysis phases, a phenomenological procedure was utilized to enable SET participants to share their professional experiences. Imaginative variation was used to determine if constituents could be included or removed for the structure to be stable. Three major constituents were identified [18].

### Results

Overall, the following three significant constituents emerged: (1) Participants expressed a desire for more collaborative experiences with other professionals in their learning environments. (2) Participants described feelings of isolation and exclusion. (3) Participants described feelings and experiences of marginalization.

#### Collaborative experiences

All (100%) of the SETs interviewed shared a sincere desire to help SWD in their respective settings. However, three (60%) of the

interviewees were not given the opportunity to engage in meaningful collaboration with their general education counterparts, which was needed to achieve the goal of fully inclusive student access to general curriculum classes. More than half (three; 60%) of participants shared that their specialized knowledge of effective instructional practices for SWD was disregarded and ignored by other members of the IEP team.

"Certain teachers are more open to the idea of inclusive practices than others." (P1)

"I felt I had a large toolbox of experience that I wasn't allowed to use." (P2)

"In preparing for IEP meetings, I made forms easy for the teachers to complete on their students." (P3)

Two (40%) of the participants said they were often treated as paraprofessionals rather than certified teachers in the state they provided services. All (100%) participants reported experiences with general education teachers wanting SWD removed from their classes.

"I felt like there had to be an incentive given to general education teachers for them to accept students with special needs in their classrooms." (P2)

"If I was not causing trouble and standing off to the side, it was ok." (P1)

Three (60%) of participants shared experiences in which their general education counterparts had reprimanded them in front of students when the "lead" teacher felt the co-teacher had overstepped when working with or advocating for SWD.

"Some of the general education teachers did anything in their power to remove these students from their class, they did not want to deal with them." (P3)

"When trying to work with resisting teachers, to ensure SWD received their accommodations is when I experienced resentment." (P4)

"I believe as a special education teacher, 90% of my job was to advocate, but then I felt this should have been accepted." (P5)

"The teacher reprimanded me in front of the kids. I was just doing my job helping the students. They would say I was talking too loudly." (P3)

#### Isolation and exclusion

All (100%) of the interviewees described experiences with isolation and exclusion. The isolation and exclusion described included experiences with other educators as well as a sense of inequality and lack of administrative support.

"The principal walked into my (Special education) classroom one time all year while spending a lot more time in the general education classrooms." (P2)

“experience where I co-taught with the general education teacher and she reprimanded me in front of the kids.” (P3)

“If you are like me, you want to give something that is appropriate without looking like a total idiot.” (P1)

“She doesn’t know what she is doing. I have to teach her before I teach the kids.” (P4)

“I felt stuck in these 4 walls and that was it. I got to leave when we went for lunch.” (P5)

All participants reported feelings of injustice and isolation when compared to the general education teachers.

“The special education classrooms are way out, and away from all the other general education classrooms.” (P1)

“In the beginning, it was hard. I took everything personally. I experienced a clear division between special education and general education classrooms.” (P2)

“I caught the principal lying. I felt ever since then I had a target on my back,” (P5)

All (100%) participants sensed inequality between their general education professional colleagues, and themselves and expressed feelings of favoritism from administrators.

“I would hear my colleagues talking about going to professional conferences or to professional workshops and SETs were hardly included.” (P5)

“I feel schools are political. Certain groups become friends. If you don’t have characteristics of that group...” (P1)

Additionally, all (100%) of the SET participants reported feeling a lack of vocational fulfillment.

“I have been teaching for 12 years and I feel burned out and tired. The job with all the responsibilities is not so fulfilling anymore.” (P1)

“I am burned out and feel tired. I like the kids, but I am not crazy sometimes over who I work with or with the lack of administrator support.” (P3)

The SETs described feelings of rejection, exclusion, and isolation.

“Even though I was pushing into general classrooms a lot, I would not get all of the classroom work to help my students.” (P2)

“We have two tech guys in this school. I feel they do not respect special education. If we need something they will make us wait and I felt like we were a separate entity from everyone else.” (P3)

“Even though my class was in the lunchroom with the general education students, all of the students sat together by their grade level except for my students. We were the last to enter and the last table to be seated experiencing isolation and being by ourselves.” (P4)

“I feel like the black sheep of the group. If my kids were not causing a disturbance, it was ok, we were off to the side.” (P5)

“I feel a sense of unworthiness and being devalued. If I was valued as a teacher, why was my name not added to the student’s schedule nor my name listed on the door next to the general education teacher?” (P4)

The participants experienced a sense of fear, uncertainty, and guilt as they were encouraged to be dishonest about service delivery.

“I was asked to be dishonest, even though I knew what was not happening but was asked to tell the parents and caretakers that it was.” (P3)

“I felt ignored by the general education teachers every day as we all sat at the same table for lunch.” (P2)

### Marginalization

All (100%) of the SETs interviewed described feeling marginalized because they felt their value and contributions to the learning environment were insignificant, and there was little they could do to affect meaningful change. Special Education teachers often choose a career in teaching students with special needs as they desire to help children and believe they can make a difference.

“I became a teacher because I want to help my SWD succeed” (P1)

“I feel responsible when my students fail, and there is nothing I can do about it.” (P3)

“When I team teach, I am there to manage behavior or make copies if the teacher needs something from us.” (P2)

“As a co-teacher, I can walk around the classroom and make sure everyone is okay, but I do not provide direct instruction. It’s never where I go up to the board and teach a lesson.” (P4)

“I am not allowed to interject even if the teacher doesn’t know what they are doing. I have taught that content before. I know how to teach my students.” (P3)

“Even when there is not a single lesson plan, or a teacher is absent. I am told I need to be a co-teacher only.” (P4)

“New SETs are quickly confronted with the fact this is a job that is far bigger than you could have imagined. The problems are systematic, and we can’t change them ourselves.” (P1)

### Discussion

The participants of the study confirmed much of what the literature indicated. The findings suggest that although SETs may begin their careers hoping to achieve personal fulfillment by making a positive difference in the lives of students, several barriers may keep this from happening [25]. Interestingly, inadequate pay and the hours dedicated to non-instructional duties related to the identification and maintenance of special education services (compliance paperwork) related expectations were not noted as

significant factors in this study [1]. All three of the themes identified (collaborative experiences, isolation/exclusion, and attrition) were more focused on the school climate and culture surrounding special education [33].

The participants experienced frustration with inadequate instruction for their students and described reluctance from their general education counterparts to have SWD in their classes. The SETs are presented to their students with disabilities in general education settings. Traditional curriculum formats and instructional presentations must be differentiated for SWD to be successful in the general education setting, and SETs must be treated as valued resources to address the needs of SWD in varied settings [11]. Responses from participants offer several suggestions educators can make to meet the needs of SWD more effectively through active collaboration with SETs. Often, the instructional strategies are specifically generated for SWD, but the same strategies could easily benefit learners across settings with and without disabilities [24].

School leaders must help everyone in the learning environment to recognize the need to work smarter, together, to better serve all students in these difficult times. Teaching is hard for everyone, and there is a considerable need to recruit and retain the best in the field to help us make progress [34]. The academic and social skill deficits of learners with and without disabilities are much more pronounced since the pandemic. Every state is reporting a shortage of general and special education teachers [10]. The research consistently notes that effective school leaders can positively impact the challenges shared by these participants. The essential stakeholders must help everyone in their learning community to understand that together, collaboratively, we know more and can work smarter to help SWD who desperately need us to recruit and retain high-quality SETs [7]. Reinforcing the idea that no one person knows everything, and if someone knows more than you do, it does not make you less than others. General education teachers may have content expertise but SETs have instructional design insight that can complement the general educator's lesson goals. General education teachers and SETs must feel as if their efforts are valued and know they are making a positive difference for students across subject areas, grade levels, socioeconomic status, and setting [9].

School leaders who promote and implement collaborative practices in their schools can help prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness like those reported in these findings. Developing a meaningful support system and collaborative atmosphere in the school can help all educators challenged to meet the evolving needs of students with and without disabilities [3]. Administrators must lead by example and simultaneously recognize the contributions and positive efforts of faculty in the special education department. Teams of general and SETs who serve effectively and solve problems together should be acknowledged and recognized by school leaders. Innovative teaching practices that help SWD experience success should be highlighted and shared to promote

a better understanding of SETs unique knowledge and skill sets [16].

Special education teachers of students with significant support needs should be supported and reinforced often to prevent feelings of isolation and exclusion. Professional development needs should be assessed, and subsequent needs addressed to reduce the likelihood of teacher burnout and help SETs learn strategies to manage instructional and non-instructional duties [6]. The SETs must be recognized as professionals with unique knowledge, and they must be valued in the school setting. School leaders are the key to changing the feelings of marginalization described by the participants in this study. Often, general education teachers tend to collaborate and socialize more with teachers on their instructional teams or department. Special education teachers should be part of these groups [35]. An effective administrator can help make this happen by purposefully scheduling common planning time and holding teams accountable for producing collaborative plans to serve students which require input from SETs. Helping general education teachers understand the rigorous training and certification requirements of SETs can promote collaboration opportunities [31].

The SET should never be treated as a subordinate to general education teachers, but the SET must have time to work with the general education teacher to plan instruction prior to walking into the classroom [9]. If not, the SET must automatically assume the instructional assistant role because the general education teacher cannot take the time to explain the lesson when it is time to deliver the lesson. However, school leaders must build time into the SET schedule so they can manage the instructional planning of their own students as well as the time needed to complete non-instructional duties [4]. New SETs must be partnered with one or more mentors to help them learn to effectively manage their multiple roles in the educational environment [6]. Administrators who provide both emotional support (reasonable expectations, trust, and a supportive environment) and environmental support (classroom management support, providing needed supplies, reasonable class sizes, etc.) can significantly reduce feelings of marginalization by SETs and decrease teacher attrition [24].

### Conclusion

Every year teachers are asked to do more with fewer resources, yet teachers are generally willing to do what they need to do for students. Though it is frustrating, many SET teachers work collaboratively with their general education and rise to the occasion to meet the needs of their students and schools. If all education stakeholders could teach, provide examples, and reinforce the need to integrate collegial and supportive communication practices into everyday practice, teachers might feel greater job satisfaction and be less inclined to leave [4]. Each generation of new teachers enters the profession with enthusiasm, and content knowledge to meet diverse student needs. Teacher education programs reinforce the need to develop positive relationships with students/families, but they do not emphasize

the need to develop and use positive and constructive people skills among colleagues [30]. Nurturing these skills and relationships is directly linked to positive feelings about one's own practice. Considering different perspectives, treating others as you would like to be treated, and giving colleagues the benefit of the doubt could make a huge difference in school culture and overall job satisfaction [2]. Most SETs enter the profession with a sincere desire to make a difference in the lives of students. Inadequate pay, limited resources and long hours have, are an understood, albeit problematic, reality of the profession. Perhaps the better way to address SET attrition and strengthen the profession is to better support SETs with recognition and ensure they feel respected and have some autonomy in their practice [4]. Teacher education programs, professional organizations, state, community, central office, and administrators must work collaboratively to more effectively and publicly celebrate and support teachers by making them feel valued and reminding them of what motivated them to become teachers. A purposeful effort must be made to meet the multifaceted needs of the current and future SET workforce [29]. All stakeholders in SET preparation and support must make a commitment to celebrate teaching and collaborate with others to ensure teachers are prepared to meet their own needs as well as the diverse needs of their SWD in 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools [36-39].

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