

# Views of Special Educators on Leaving the Field



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# Welcome

Who we are?

Who is here?

# Goals for the Presentation

- ❑ Articulate research questions
- ❑ Brief overview of the current research
- ❑ Share the study and findings
- ❑ Obtain perspective from the audience regarding the major challenges associated with recruiting and retaining Special Educators
- ❑ Identify future research needs and implications

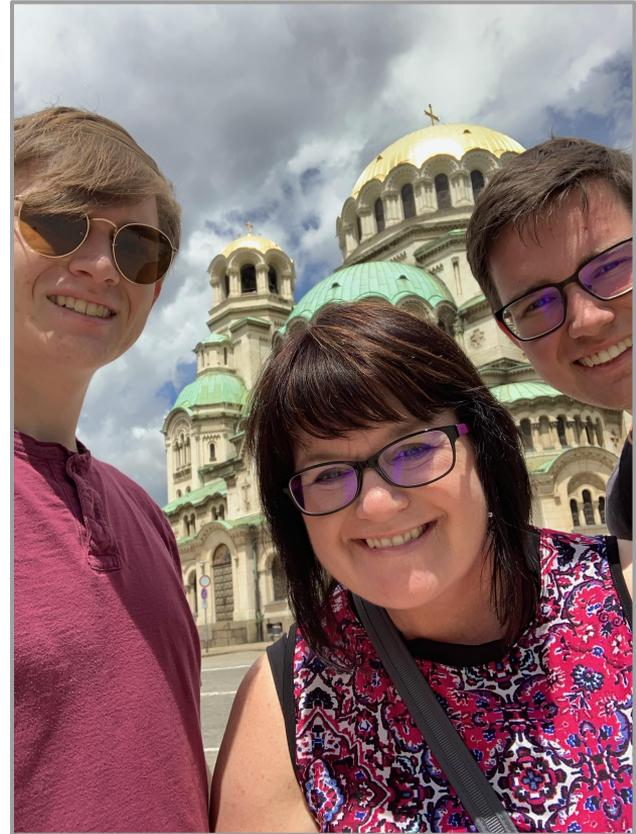
# Meet 'Clarissa'

*Special Education Teacher 11 years*

*Administrator since 2002*

*M.Ed. in Special Education*

*Doctoral Student in Prevention &  
Intervention Studies*



# Meet 'Danielle'

*Special Education Teacher for 9 years*

*M.Ed. & CAS in Special Education*

*Doctoral Student in Prevention &  
Intervention Studies*



# Purpose of the Study & Research Questions

## Purpose of the Study:

To discover and describe the reasons why eight special educators recently left the field.

## Research Questions:

1. What are the reasons special educators chose to leave the field?
2. What supports are essential to increase the retention of special educators?



# Personal Purpose

What is your perspective?



# Literature Review

- In the last decade, there has been a 17% decrease in the number of special education teachers (Dewey et al., 2017).
- Currently, 49 states report a shortage of fully qualified special educators (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2016).
- Special educators who leave the field voluntarily account for nearly 67% of the attrition rate (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019)
- Based on Billingsley's (2019) comprehensive literature review, there were eight qualitative studies that focused on retention and attrition, however, very few focused on special educators who have left the field.

# Qualitative Study Design

## Methods Overview:

- Collective case study design
- Purposeful sampling
- Semi-structured interviews
- Document analysis (journal prompts)
- Data Analysis process

# Who are our participants?

Eight total participants

- Years of experience
- Program type
- Their exit from special education
- Willingness to participate in the study

# Findings: Emerging Themes from Research Question #1

*Q1: What are the reasons special educators chose to leave the field?*

- ❑ Supervision of Educational Technicians
- ❑ Competing Work Demands
- ❑ Excessive Responsibilities on Veteran Teachers
- ❑ Personal Impact

# Supervision of Educational Technicians

“I had, I think at the time, probably seven to eight ed techs underneath me. That was the worst part. Just the management of people, and not having them doing their jobs or following your plans or following the kids' IEPs.”

“So there wasn't a lot of clear expectation as far as what I should do with ed techs. You're the boss of other adults that probably have more experience than you.”

“Also, supervising, I just felt like, it's a whole different job. I spent my time supervising, I wasn't with the kids.”

# Competing Work Demands

“I was in IEP meetings all the time, writing stupid IEP's.”

“I feel like special ed teaching is three different jobs in one.”

“The most challenging part of my job was the constant and consistent responsibility for the 18 students on my caseload. Regardless, of the time of day (lunch, meetings, classroom time) I was 100 percent responsible for the students. If something went wrong, I had to drop what I was doing to ensure the students could be successful the remainder of the school day. When I walked in the building at 7:15 I started working full speed with students until all students left the building at 3:00. No other staff members have this constant responsibility for their students.”

# Competing Work Demands

“What do special ed teachers have? Nothing. Goals and objectives and IEP meetings, and angry parents.”

“My paperwork, I felt like it was rushed and not really true to what I was going to be able to provide for kids, it’s just what I knew they wanted on paper. That really bothered me.”

“I think the most challenging thing came down to time. You know, it got to the point where I felt like it was impossible to do everything my job required in the time frame, even of a whole year. “

# Excessive Responsibilities on Veteran Teachers

“And that's the problem, it seems like the best ones, honestly ... we punish ourselves. We put it all in there. And we don't know how to do otherwise. And it seems like the better you are, the more tasks you're given and the less support because “Blank” will do it, “Blank” will take care of it. You know? And it's just ... you hit your tipping point...I couldn't do anymore.”

“When you walk in with a lot of experience, you become the support person for everybody. I think every school needs that, not a lead teacher or a department chair or something, but there has to be somebody you can go to and unfortunately, I was usually that person .”

# Personal Impact

“For me, my experience has been the special ed teachers that are making the most gains with their students are depleting their own selves the most.”

“I physically and emotionally could not keep going.”

“I'm a perfect case of, I did this job, I did it really, really well. It was so successful. And I ... I feel like I was run out of it. Not by choice, you know. In a sense, I really had no other choice, unless to sacrifice everything, personal life and health.”

“I wasn't eating...everything was seeming to snowball.”

## Findings: Emerging Themes from Research Question #2

*Q2: What supports are essential to increase the retention of special educators?*

- ❑ Collegial Support
- ❑ Support for non-teaching duties
- ❑ Mentorship from a fellow special educator

# Collegial Support

“The administration was incredible too, the support that I got from the administration and my assistant special ed director. Completely took me under her wing, and was like ready to shape me, and groom me, and take care of me that way. And brought me to conferences, and that was incredible. “

“I think more check-ins and guidance from my special ed director, or assistant, or principal, or anybody. You know? Like, yes, I have it all together visibly, but just come hear me out for a second.”

# Collegial Support

“My ed techs, you know. We were wholeheartedly a team. That was our biggest support.”

“There was a resource room special ed teacher who was very kind which was helpful and I felt more comfortable going to her.”

# Supports for non-teaching duties

“I would be certain to provide them with the requisite training in special education paperwork protocols as well as how to effectively supervise and evaluate staff.

Supervision and evaluation of paraprofessionals is one of the most challenging responsibilities of the job. Unfortunately, supervision and evaluation of staff needs to happen in order to effectively meet the needs of the ever increasing caseload size.”

“I found that many special education teachers, myself included, tend to give too much of themselves, resulting in a burnout. They need to be certain they are able to have the appropriate breaks similar to that of others in the building...these breaks are necessary and I would encourage all teachers that enter special education to advocate for themselves.”

# Mentorship

“The only mentoring I got my first few years was from a reading interventionist, she was my mentor, but not any help with special ed paperwork at all.

“They were wonderful educators, but to run my specific program, with the kind of needs that I had, the students had, it wasn't enough.”

“Find a mentor, find a mentor, find a mentor! Make sure they are: someone you admire, someone that takes joy in what they do...”

# Rewarding and Satisfying

Consistently throughout the interviews, making the decision to leave was both extremely difficult and very emotional for all of them.

Each of these individuals shared the passion they had for students with disabilities and the love of teaching.

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# Implications for Practice

- How do we get data now?
  - Refining job descriptions
    - Supervision
    - Case Management
    - Teaching
  - Know your staff!
  - Teacher wellness
  - Diversified support
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# Audience Poll

## Website

Audience can respond at [PollEv.com/clarissafish827](https://PollEv.com/clarissafish827), as long as the poll is active. (?)

## Text messaging

Presenter session: Audience texts **CLARISSAFISH827** to **22333** to join the session, then they text a response.

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# Q & A

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# Thank you!

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Teaching a non-desired disability/grade level group

Veteran Teacher Excessive Responsibilities

Didn't feel prepared/not enough training

Paperwork load

paperwork

Challenges

Not actually working with kids enough

Developing an Interest in SPED

Ed Tech Supervision- Challenge

Physical/mental health concerns

Job Description

Parents

Job Duties

Advocating

Support

Conflict with staff

Behavior

Working Conditions

Not enough time to prepare

Building culture

Additional resources

Other

colleagues

other other supports

case management

teaching

Advice to new teachers

Compensation

Provided trainings

Time commitment

Personal Commitment (Family etc.)

High caseload

Lack of support for experienced teachers

conflictual components with leaving

Lack of administrative support

administrative

Information and/or experience with Mentors

Supports to Increase Retention

Litigation

supervision of ed techs

Rewarding and Satisfying

Conditions connected to leaving

administration

Feeling a lack of success to meet expectations

Not enough time during the day

Inconsistent Job Expectations