

**Is It Too Late to Save Ms. Angel?: What Elementary Educators Say About
Professional Development and IDEA**

By
Monica Suy Loas

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Chair of Committee: Dr. Cameron White

Committee Member: Dr. Laveria Hutchison

Committee Member: Dr. Jane Cooper

Committee Member: Dr. Rhoshanda Miller

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Dedication

To my father, mother, and sister: Without your never-ending love, encouraging words of wisdom, and continuing support, I would not be standing here, breaking down barriers. Words cannot begin to express my appreciation. I love you from the stars and back.

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To my administrators and colleagues, past and present: Thank you for making me who I am today. I will never forget about the experiences that I had with you. Promise.

To my friends: I legit do not know what I do without you. Thank you for allowing me to share my crazy stories with you at all hours of the day and giving me a shoulder to cry on when I needed it. By the way, please stop me from going back to school.

To all of my former teachers: I am honored to be your student. Thanks for never giving up on me.

To the participators of my study: Thank you for taking the time to help – you made me remember why I decided on this topic.

Finally, to the teachers who are the “Ms. Angel” of their campus: Please do not give up ever fighting for the students and yourself – I promise you there is a reason for everything.

Abstract

Background: Effective professional development for elementary inclusion educators in meeting the needs of students under the special education program is essential. The researcher focuses on special education teachers who are serving students receiving academic support under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). An analysis of peer-reviewed literature shows that if teachers do not have available effective professional development, teachers' retention will be negatively affected by burnout (experiencing emotional exhaustion). **Purpose:** This was a qualitative study of teacher perceptions of staff development for a special education program in a Texas urban district. **Research Question:** What are special education teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the professional development for inclusion instruction in elementary classrooms? **Methods:** Teachers from an elementary campus (1st grade to 5th grade) located in an urban school district in Texas participated. The researcher utilized narrative research as she combined her experiences with the participants' lives. The researcher, using case study design, interviewed participants to obtain anecdotal data and analyzed responses obtained from individualized and focus interviews using available word processing software and an online word cloud generator. For the study, the researcher conducted interviews with three participants over a month, no more than an hour each for each interview phase. After the researcher conducted the initial individual interviews, there was a follow-up interview for member checks and enhancement and a focus group. Responses were manually transcribed and reviewed for keywords via an online word cloud generator. Furthermore, the researcher re-read the transcripts, coding them for patterns of themes. Themes emerging from the analysis informed the study of

participants' perspectives of their district's special education professional development program. The researcher suggested recommendations for future research. **Results:** Overall, themes emerging include the current state of preparedness of special education inclusion teachers; the overall structure of the campus and district's special education program; the current state of professional development available; and future direction of the special education's professional development program. The findings revealed special education inclusion teachers desired to have a choice of professional development available to them as well as ongoing support through mentorship from their diagnostician, administrators, and fellow department members. Campus leaders should also attend professional development, according to the participants' interview responses. Topics for development desired by the participants include strengthening the co-teacher relationship as there was not a strong understanding of the special education teacher's role in the classroom. Another commonality among the interviewees was the need for special education teachers to be involved in the campus' decision-making process due to lack of communication from leaders on attending instructional planning meetings, discipline, and scheduling. As a result, the inclusion teachers were unable to plan effectively (and attend related professional development sessions) to ensure the success of students. **Conclusion:** A continued investigation of the impact professional development has on special education teachers' capability to carry out their duties is needed. Continuous evaluation for improvement of the professional development program can lead to innovations within the teaching practice for the studied district and beyond. The interviews with the participants reflect the need to improve current offerings so the students with whom they service may achieve their academic and behavioral goals.

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Chapter I:

Introduction

Overview

Ms. Jen Angel recounted the year when she started to be in a never-ending doubt about whether or not she was in the right place. Ms. Angel was a special education teacher in a large urban district in Texas. That particular year, she serviced a student, James Camp, whose behavior manifested out of the norm as time passed. The behavior included displaying sexual misconduct toward female students and teachers, including Ms. Angel. James was also experiencing prolonged periods of depression (shut down) if he was told “no” to his request. On occasion, he would be throwing furniture across the room, prompting Ms. Angel to evacuate the room with her students. Despite all the detailed documentation that followed the recommended district’s guidelines showing that James needed intervention in maintaining appropriate behavior, no progress was made.

In order to receive academic and behavioral support in public schools in the United States, students are placed in “Tiers” or levels of interventions. James was still considered Tier I for Behavior by the time he went to the district’s alternative school due to a physical assault on Ms. Angel. Ms. Angel was frightened for her life as the assault happened and had to act quickly to protect the rest of the students within her class. As soon as the student was escorted, Ms. Angel took a mental health day off the following day as the administrators investigated the case. It was rare for Ms. Angel to take any day off as she knew that her students would not be serviced according to their minutes outlined in their individual education plan.

The administrators, since the beginning of the school year, have placed the cause of James' behavior manifestation on Ms. Angel for several months. However, the administrators, after the incident, eventually stepped to put into place – they sent James to an alternative campus within the district. Only then, the student was labeled “Emotionally Disturbed.” Requests were made during the annual Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee held at the alternative campus to test for a possible “Emotionally Disturbed” diagnosis. Little did Ms. Angel know this struggle in helping James in getting proper behavioral interventions was the least of her worries as a special education teacher within this district.

Ms. Angel thought something was amiss as she and her fellow special education teachers were not prepared to handle the challenges of the position but initially dismissed it due to her being a rookie teacher. Even though she since left that campus for the pursuit of a promotion, Ms. Angel would often have nightmares and permanently affected how she would perceive her relationships with her administrators and colleagues. Her stress levels and mental state have not been the same. Initially distrusting anyone, Ms. Angel often hid her fears from other fellow educators at her other campuses in fear of losing her job in education.

Statement of the Problem

As time went by at the campus where the assault happened, Ms. Angel began to lash out at her special education department members. She walked out of the room during disagreements. Ms. Angel also refused to talk with them for days at a time on matters that did not pertain to the students' upcoming meetings in updating paperwork and accommodations outlined in the individual education plan. She began to have

breakdowns in front of the students when she was servicing them throughout in the inclusion and resource setting. Ms. Angel often skipped lunch to cry with her mentor. Ms. Angel knew that there was a constant disconnect between the general education teachers and the special education teachers. There was no communication between the caseload manager and the level of services needed for the students, leading to misunderstanding and rage between the parties involved.

Essentially, Ms. Angel began to fall into a period of severe depression and felt worthless, taking her frustration out at her family members and closest friends at the end of the day. It got to the point of often isolating them at times. Ms. Angel thought that there was no hope for her, especially listening to her administrators' feedback on finding another position or risk losing her career in education time after time again. Could effective professional development intervention can prevent burnout in Ms. Angel and other special education faculty and staff members like her, giving the teachers tools to be more prepared in duties and relationships?

At that time, Ms. Angel was at a school serving 5th and 6th-grade students in a high-poverty area. Families zoned to Ms. Angel's campus often meet the guidelines for federal government assistance programs and successfully applied for benefits. Experience from Ms. Angel's time at her campus shows why it is essential for leaders in the district's special education department to look at the structure of the individual campus' program at all angles. Research (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010; Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013) shows specific, attendee-gearred professional development responding to the culture of the students and campuses, instead of a generic one provided by the district, could prevent burnout from happening within the special education teacher population.

In regards to Ms. Angel, her special education department overall became under severe scrutiny from the general education teachers and the campus' administration team. It started when there was a complete shift in the department due to promotions and retirements in Ms. Angel's second year and continued for years afterward. The feeling of frustration and early stages of burnout is not just at Ms. Angel's campus, but district-wide. Overall, Ms. Angel became more worrisome that if there were not a sort of intervention to help her department, it would reach a point of no return.

Again, reasons for Ms. Angel's campus' special education department being under scrutiny range from miscommunication plaguing the school and its administration team to the concern of the students' progress in their academics and behaviors. According to quantitative data obtained from eduphoria! – the district's data management system for local, state, and nationwide assessments – none of the 5th-grade students receiving in-class support under the campus' special education program met passing standards on the 2014 administration of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). This trend mentioned above was the first time of this phenomenon of no students passing in Ms. Angel's campus' history. In the following 2015 STAAR administration, there were no students who were with the special education program from the beginning of the 2014-2015 academic year at the campus meeting passing standards. Something needed to be done.

The pattern continued, resulting in interventions by the administration team. Changes included the new assistant principal overseeing the special education program to being one having experience as an inclusion teacher at a similar grade-level campus within the district as well as adding new staff – an additional classroom teacher unit for

the special education department with an additional certified paraprofessional. The special education department at the campus had three diagnosticians during the short time that Ms. Angel had her teaching position. The campus also has a turnover of diagnostician clerks, thus proving difficult in establishing a network of support needed to tackle the challenges that lied ahead.

It is also important to note that within the campus' special education program, there was little collaboration between the members and its leadership team and the general education teachers. There were situations where the administration team had to be brought in to mediate between conflicts between special education teachers themselves as well as between general education teachers and special education teachers. Ms. Angel faced everyday lack of communication and collaboration, thus increased her level of burnout. Regrets from one such case still are with her today.

Research (Lu, 2010) supports the need for partnership and coaching as well as continuing professional development support via the campus and district-wide. Based on the informal observation projected regarding teachers like Ms. Angel district-wide, there is a need for intervention regarding technology integration and instructional support in addressing the needs of students.

Research Question

The research would address the question, “What are special education teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the professional development for inclusion instruction in elementary classrooms?”

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effectiveness of professional development for elementary inclusion educators in meeting the needs of special education students. The focus will be the special education teachers who are serving students who are receiving academic (instructional) support. In other words, these are the students who are considered by the state and the national government to be eligible in the 13 categories under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA for short. An elementary campus (1st grade to 5th grade) located in an urban school district in Texas will be participating in this study. This study is unique that the participants all have experience in the 5th and 6th grades (intermediate grades). Due to the reconfiguration of the district, it resulted in the intermediate grades to be dissolved. The district then reshuffled of faculty and staff members. At the time of the study, the participants are serving students in an inclusion setting. After the reconfiguration, none have received the proper training required to serve students in the elementary grades.

Significance of the Study

Current quantitative data from the state shows that more than half of the district's students classified as special education under the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) indicator are not meeting passing standards on most of the statewide assessments given each spring (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The district is currently undergoing an audit with the special education program, which has started in the academic year of aligning with Ms. Angel's second year of teaching. According to the 2017-2018 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR), the state's accountability report, the district is being marked as "Needs Substantial Intervention" under "2018

special education Determination Status” (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The district would still retain the status of needing interventions from the state agency in the school year in which the study would take place.

Research Design

This research question will be answered using the techniques of a narrative case study design. A narrative research design is when the researcher would study the stories about specific events in their life and retell by the researcher (Creswell, 2014, p. 13). Since the researcher has experience as a special education teacher, the researcher can combine views “from the participant’s life with those of the researcher’s life” (p. 13). The inquirer reflects about how their experience and background shape their role in the study. In a case study design, the researcher will identify and gain access to individuals and sites; will identify what types of information will answer the research question; will design protocols to collect and record the information obtained; and will administrate the data collection (p. 200).

This study would also be considered explicitly as an action research study. With an action research design, the researcher would review the well-being of the teachers in the district’s special education program by evaluating the interviews. Based on the results of the study, the researcher plans to recommend changes to the appropriate audience of special education district-level directors. The answers to the questions of the participants during the initial observations would offer and guide the study: Sample questions include the following:

1. “Define professional development in your own words.”

2. “What professional development have you attended in the past? Why did you choose those professional development sessions?”
3. “Where do you feel are your areas of improvement in terms of your current position in Special Education?”

Setting

The sampling would be purposeful “qualitative” sampling (maximum variation sampling) (Creswell, 2014, p. 200). In other words, the researcher would have the participants who can best help us understand and learn about the phenomenon surrounding professional development for special education teachers (p. 200). The participants would come from an elementary campus (identified as the studied campus) in Water Independent School District, the chosen site for this study. The researcher would focus on special education teachers, the sample (or a subgroup that the researcher plans to study for generalizing) of the target population of faculty and staff members.

All participants would have given consent. They would also be permitted to drop out at any. All data will be collected off-campus of the teachers’ assigned campus (participants would determine the location). The audio conferencing would be done over three visits during the three weeks. This study is a minimal risk volunteer study that has no reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, hazards, or inconveniences to the subjects related to the subjects’ participation in the research. The study is voluntary, and subjects are free to withdraw from the research at any time without explanation or penalty. If subjects withdraw, their interviews and data will be discarded and not used.

The district is currently undergoing an audit with the special education program over several years due to concerns of low achievement scores. One of the reasons behind

studying the selected campus is to start small and analyzing how to best make the impact of limiting burnout and retaining teachers in the identified district well after the study is over. Hopefully, with the perspectives from teachers involved in the studied campus' inclusion programs as well as others who may be deemed successful, the district can put forth interventions to help teachers at campuses similar to Ms. Angel's campus.

Definition of Terms

- **ARD:** Admission, Review, and Dismissal; the ARD committee is responsible for making the educational decisions for a student
- **Accommodation:** change how the content is taught and do not change what the student is expected to master
- **Modification:** change how the content is taught and do not change what the student is expected to master; do change what the student is expected to master
- **IEP:** Individualized Educational Plan; outlines accommodations/modifications
- **PLAAFP:** Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance; outlines data and evaluation results that guides the writing of the IEP
- **Related Services:** Anything that may be required to assist a child with a disability (exceptionality) to benefit from special education
- **Supplementary Aids and Services:** Aids, services, and other supports provided in education-related settings
- **Level of Services:** Based on the academic and behavioral needs of the students
 - **No In-Class Support:** Students will only receive accommodations.
 - **Support Facilitated:** A Special Education teacher or paraprofessional goes in two to three days out of the week for a certain number of minutes.

- **Co-Teach:** A certified Special Education teacher goes in and services the student daily for a certain number of minutes.
- **Co-Teach Modified:** A certified Special Education teacher goes in and services the student daily for the entire length of the class, and the student receives a modified curriculum.
- **Resource:** A certified Special Education teacher is the teacher of records, and the student receives a modified curriculum (this level of service is typically not recommended for students who just admitted/qualified into the Special Education program; however, the ARD committee will communicate with each other to discuss this option).

Chapter II:

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Federal law states the terms of “special education” to mean specifically designed instruction at no cost to parents and families to meet the unique need of a child with an exceptionality, including gifted and talented education (Mamlin, 2012). For this study in analyzing the perspective of special education professional development, “special education” means students receive services due to an identifiable disability (exceptionality) that would negatively impact their academic and behavioral progress.

Special education includes instruction in the classroom, home, hospitals, and physical education. In essence, special education is the vehicle that students who have a disability (exceptionality) are guaranteed to receive within the public education system an education that would support and reach their learning potential. Misunderstanding of special education is common, despite being a “term regularly used in discussion of schooling” and as a result, the topic has experienced a resurgence in interest in dissecting on how to make the program more effective for students needing specialized instruction (Kauffman et al., p. xi, 2018).

Special education teachers and other faculty members face many duties, including teaching assigned subjects (sometimes outside of the area of subject expertise), mentor new special education teachers at the campus, and consult with campus’ faculty/staff regarding special education paperwork. Special education teachers also monitor students’ progress on individual education plans (IEPs) goals using district applications. They are also called to assist diagnosticians and administrators with special education program

referral caseloads coming from parents' referrals or an established early intervention team on campus. In essence, special education teachers can be considered as a "masters of weaving" (Lavian, 2015, p. 104).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was a United States federal law that was initially proposed by President George W. Bush in 2001 and been revised since that time to reflect the current trend of accountability and assessments. Its current form is ESSA—Every Student Succeeds Act, passed by President Barack Obama in 2015. The legislation funds some federal programs aiming at improving the performance of United States schools. The government does this by increasing standards of accountability for individual states in addition to providing parents and guardians flexibility in choosing which schools their children will attend. Public data are typically available and provided by the Texas Education Agency, the state in which the study on the perceptions of professional development in special education will take place. The ESSA, at its core, promotes an increased focus on reading and math. The intent is that all children will meet state academic achievement standards to reach their full potential through improved programs, including special education. However, the intent remains a challenge to the "masters of weaving," as professional development is generally lacking in assisting teachers and administrators in perfecting their craft.

The history of special education is covered in this study along with applicable laws as it relates to special education. Accountability plays a part in what is being taught and how it is being taught. Because of the way that standardized testing is set up, time is of the essence as teachers are often covered new state standards up to the last minute to the district and state assessment. Being proactive is critical in special education.

Educators should ethically respect the differences of the students, regardless of background or ability. In addition to having the choice of professional development to help address the challenges that come with being involved in the special education program, special education teachers should have access to instructional coaching. This type of coaching is a way that special education teachers can participate in enhancing their understanding of their specific setting (such as inclusion classrooms) as well as behavior management strategies. If teachers do not receive proper assistance in the form of professional development, burnout, or experiencing emotional exhaustion over time, would occur – Ms. Angel is a prime example.

Role of Special Education

Thomas Armstrong (2017) writes that special education “needs to rid itself of its negative baggage and embrace a more progressive way of educating students who learn differently” (p. 11). Special education “has too often remained insular” and needs to build on the student’s strengths and “using them to overcome challenges” (p. 11; p. 13). There are key concepts related to special education, such as related services (speech services, for example) and supplementary aids and services. Families of students who are receiving services are required to have a meeting with the school’s members – teacher(s), administrator, and the special education caseload manager— to discuss the educational decisions for a student. This meeting in the state where the study will take place is called an Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meeting. The ARD meeting at the minimum should be once a year. However, parents and educators can request to call an additional meeting if sufficient progress is not made and a possible change in accommodations, modifications, and education settings.

In short, in the ARD meeting for the student, an adult family member who has guardianship; the administrator who would represent the campus; and teachers discuss accommodations and modifications. In Texas, only the parent(s) and the administrator have voting power to approve or deny additional changes to the student's individual education plan. Accommodations focus on accessing the content and do not change what the student is expected to master regarding the state standards. However, modifications do change what the student is expected to master. Assessment options are discussed as well as evaluation results if necessary –it is required for the student to be reevaluated for services every third year of being enrolled in special education. At the end of the ARD meeting, members of the committee would finalize the individual education plan (IEP) and measure progress toward the goals outlined. Overall, the amount of paperwork a special education teacher is tasked with preparing for the meeting, and follow-ups are considered to be “daunting.” The special education teacher would need to continuously track progress through all subject areas assigned to them (Williams, 2015, p. 338). In the majority of campuses, the caseload manager is not directly servicing the students and can lead to miscommunication.

Special education has its roots since the 19th century (Spaulding and Pratt, 2015, p. 92). Before the 1800s, people with disabilities (exceptionalities) were viewed as “less-than-humans” (p. 94). They were offered “nothing in the way of formal education unless their families could pay the cost of private, highly unusual education” (Kauffman et al., p. 6, 2018). However, due to the work of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, with his study of the Wild Boy of Aveyron, showed improvement could be made with training. In essence, special education grew as the result of society's attitudes being improved and of

legislation to protect people with exceptionalities were created and passed (Spaulding et al., 2015, p. 94).

Edouard Seguin published one of the first books about special education and its inner workings. Dorothea Dix fought for adults with disabilities (exceptionalities). Dix “framed disability as a quantitative rather than a qualitative difference among individuals”—that although “a person’s physical or cognitive functioning may be restricted, they were no less worthy of dignity and deserved the same rights as others” (Spaulding, 2015, p. 95). As a result of Dix’s then-conversational comments, Massachusetts and other states revised laws and hospitals, schools, and training facilities to help adults were established. Dix inspired a movement, and eventually, children were the focus of equality. Because of the new wave of immigrants in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century, compulsory public education began to grow in size. Special schools were “often funded by religious groups or other charities if not the state, played a very significant part in the early days of special education” (Kauffman et al., p. 6, 2018).

Because the majority of students who have disabilities (exceptionalities) were unable to keep up with peers academically, educators pushed for separate classes, instead of implementing differentiated instruction and universal design of learning techniques that are common-place now. Although not required by federal laws at that time, special education classes for students with specific disabilities (exceptionalities) became increasingly common in the first half of the 20th century (Mamlin, 2012).

It should be noted that there are several laws affecting education nationwide, and that came during the time of growth of compulsory public education, including the

General Welfare Clause, the Commerce Clause, and Judicial Review. The General Welfare Clause is a constitutional provision that has served as the legal foundation on which Congress has relied to pass laws and to appropriate federal tax monies to support and influence education within the states. The Commerce Clause means the federal government could influence education in the states through congressional legislation primarily in the areas of employment, labor regulations, and transportation. The Judicial Review is when the United States Supreme Court can declare/review laws that violate the United States Constitution, including segregations and providing protections for students served under the special education program.

The federal government, under immense pressures nationwide to provide more guidance when dealing with compulsory public education, passed the first federal law to address the education of children with disabilities (exceptionalities): Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Spaulding et al., 2015). It provided funding to states to assist them in creating and improving special education programs. In the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1974, Congress further focused its efforts by charging states with creating full educational opportunities for students with disabilities (exceptionalities). P.L. 94-142, an amendment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, became the basis of many special education practices (Spaulding et al., 2015). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is its current form and essentially is the United States' special education law. It provides early intervention guidelines, as well. Its sister law, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), provides support to people with disabilities (exceptionalities) outside of the school setting. Overall,

there are strides, but the United States has a significant amount of work in improving equitable access to education for all learners.

Zero reject one of the cornerstones in IDEA. All students with disabilities (exceptionalities) are entitled to a free public education regardless of the nature or level of severity of the disabilities (exceptionalities). Zero reject must include related services, supplemental services, and specialized instruction by trained personnel (Spaulding et al., 2015). FAPE is used to describe this regulation – Free Appropriate Public Education. The “Child Find” process was created to inform the public about available services. If the student’s least restrictive environment (LRE) is not being respected, then it is cause for litigation; in other words, this means that the school fails to service the student in the setting most like that of typical peers (Spaulding et al., 2015). Typically, most students would be serviced in the general education setting with support built-in; this phenomenon is referred to as inclusion. Supreme Court cases mainly focus on the right of special education students, and from this comes policies and terminology that are shaping the program nowadays (Spaulding et al., 2015).

Special education, with its complex process, starts with the idea of early “intervention.” Being proactive is critical in that educators would need to get in that mindset that everything that they do in the classroom setting would respect the differences of the students, regardless of background. Also, what may work with one student may not work with another student who has a similar background. Every student is like a fingerprint. Uniqueness is vital, and the classroom environment must cultivate and respect those differences, or the educator would face many difficult challenges for years to come.

Instructional leaders would also need to step in from time to time to ensure students and teachers are successful. Now it is crucial than ever for teachers to be able to guide and prepare students for their roles in the future. Teachers employed by any district (especially a diverse district such as Water Independent School District) must be effective in what they do. In other words, this would mean that the teachers will be knowledgeable in their content areas; will be respectful to both students and other colleagues; will participate in the professional and local community; and will have a strong rapport with the students. It is up to the instructional leaders to facilitate such a climate. It is important to review data (both objective and subjective) to ensure that there are enough personnel on campus to facilitate learning. If not, the principal will need to go to the proper channel for permission to hire more staff/faculty members. Also, the principal will need to facilitate a climate that will allow faculty and staff members to communicate with each other and participate in professional development activities (both on and off-campus).

How would the United States address gaps in academics and be at par with students attending “affluent” districts/campuses? There are special funds reserved to address special population students (English Language Learners, special education), and budgeting should be a priority. Consistent re-evaluation of program and materials are needed. To understand how to help this group of diverse students, one must continuously/consistently review qualitative and quantitative data (e.g., district benchmark scores, state assessments, running records, anecdotal notes, information from the Texas Education Agency, to name a few). Data, at its core, allows faculty, staff, and administrators to review and analyze strengths and room for improvement for the students whom they serve. After a complete analysis of the data and review of possible

factors that might have an impact on students' success, a plan of action that includes interventions and strategies is created and implemented.

The state in which the study takes place underwent a significant change that took place during Ms. Angel's role as a special education teacher in Water Independent School District: the unavailability of the modified version of the state assessments. The intent is that a small group of students who receive special education services would be eligible for this assessment. Unfortunately, Texas administered the modified assessments for the final time during the 2013-2014 assessment cycle. The United States Department of Education informed the nation's schools that assessments based on modified standards for students served under the special education program could no longer count toward accountability purposes after the 2013-2014 school year.

It is important to know that as the availability of modified state-wide assessments began to decline, the language and concepts are being more complex in vocabulary. As such, students receiving services would struggle to meet their academic goals. If one would review state assessment questions from 1985, then they would find questions that are more factual and rote memorization than the questions that students see today. For example, a geometry question from 1985 is factual based ("Which shape below is a circle?"), but now, a geometry question requires more critical thinking ("Which figure best describes the box of cookies? Mark your answer."). Also, the standards are raised higher. Compared to students in 1985, the students in 3rd grade now have to know perimeter. These significant differences can attribute to raising the bar in education during the Cold War. Is it a change that we need? In a way, yes. The United States needs to continually prepare students to meet the needs of a globally connected economy.

However, there are ways to do it without relying solely on a single assessment. Morse (2001) writes that the entire special education program “highlights the fact that curriculum decisions school personnel make on their behalf are of utmost importance” (p. 6).

Overall, it must be noted that the removal of the state assessment in a modified form or increasing academic standards for students should not stop educators in reviewing research-based instruction methods and getting effective professional development to support that direction. Generally, when a campus compares the scores to others, the campus has to look past the numbers and dig deep in terms of demographics and uncontrollable factors (natural disasters or a global pandemic disrupting a normal school year). Ms. Angel, the teacher, highlighted at the beginning of the paper, as she gained experience, often implored the campus administration to look at the progress of students receiving special services more so than satisfactory (meeting standards). However, Ms. Angel realized that it is not all that easy to change that mindset.

Burnout's Prevalence

In Hamama et al. (2012) study of stress and its link of job satisfaction among teachers in special education, positive well-being overall involves individuals' work lives as work encompasses a significant life role in adulthood (p. 732). Administrators are then encouraged to boost the overall climate of the campus as that would allow teachers to have “stronger dedication and loyalty to their job,” and that would help to lower turnout in this high-need area (p. 732). Overall, Ms. Angel experienced teacher burnout, as shown in her actions of isolating and feeling depressed as time went on that campus.

Burnout is experiencing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as well as having low self-worth; emotional exhaustion “refers to a lack of energy, a loss of motivation, and a depletion of emotional and physical resources causing work to become a chore” (Boujut et al., 2016, p. 2875). Reasons for burnout vary. Some may burn out due to the stress placed by the administrative team regarding the students not meeting passing standards on local and state assessments. Others may be emotionally drained in taking care of the extensive physical and emotional needs of the students in the special education program.

The causes and effects of teacher burnout, particularly in the field of special education, were analyzed in the Brunsting et al. (2014) study. This particular study is cited in subsequent studies as it relates to the burnout and teachers in special education programs across the nation and uses the Maslach Burnout Inventory, an instrumental tool to assess the level of burnout among participants. Recommendations regarding minimizing the causes of special education teachers’ burnouts were made. The recommendations in the Brunsting et al. study (and other similar studies) can allow the district to retain Ms. Angel and other highly qualified and dedicated special education teachers. Brunsting et al. reviewed the literature on burnout in the education field by including special education teachers as participants as well as included a quantitative measure of burnout. The studies reviewed in the referenced literature provided a clear connection between burnout and a range of variables (i.e., specific factors or characteristics) stemming from the individual, classroom, campus, and district levels. Brunsting et al. pointed that the variables of teacher experience, student disability, role conflict, role ambiguity, and support from administration played a vital role in

understanding why teachers in the special education program had the most burnout compared to their general education teachers' counterparts (Brunsting et al., 2014).

The purpose of the Brunsting et al. (2014) study was made clear in the introduction; in addition to summarizing the literature on overall teacher burnout, the gaps in the research for burnout for special education teachers were analyzed as well as suggestions for future researchers were mentioned. Furthermore, the thesis was made quite clear in that the study review and assess the effectiveness of limiting the causes of special education teachers' burnout and thus retaining teachers in this high need/critical area. The authors highlighted the need for educational institutions moving away from recruiting to retaining special education teachers via training and support (professional development). Furthermore, they supported their theory of the impact of burnouts have on the emotional, physical, and social needs of the special education teachers as well as the students whom they serviced. The authors then focused on what type of special education teachers would be affected the most by burnout (inclusion versus adaptive behavior units, for example).

The Lavian (2011) study cemented the idea of teachers' burnout of being an international phenomenon. McDowell (2017) writes that collegial support is also an essential part as special education "would often find themselves isolated from their colleagues" (p. 115). Professional development sessions in Water Independent School District would be able to provide a way for attendees to bounce off ideas of each other. However, with limited professional development sessions available currently, it may be more challenging to limit burnout as special education teachers have fewer outlets to express concerns and get ideas to help their students. They may feel intimidated to go to

the administrator over their program for assistance to improve their teaching practice.

Overall, a support network, including professional development, would help teachers feel that they belong, and keeping feelings of isolation at bay will lead to less burnout and make them more capable of helping their students whom they serviced (p. 117).

At Ms. Angel's campus, there was a need for the members of her special education department and the core subject departments to collaborate among themselves. Collaboration would ensure that the students who are receiving in-class support under the special education program are showing growth throughout their time in the district. As mentioned earlier, trends in the quantitative data from the state show that more than half of the students classified as special education under the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) indicator are not meeting passing standards on most of the statewide assessments given each spring. The trend also shows that the campus needs to focus more on differentiated instruction; special population groups (particularly English language learners and special education), overall, are not at par with the campus' success rate (Texas Education Agency, 2018). It is important to note that compared to the district and state, the campus had at the time the lowest percentage of students enrolled in the special education and bilingual/English language learners program and a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students than the state, but lower than the district.

Retention

Swars et al. (2009) review the teachers' perceptions of teacher retention at the professional development school and a university using a mixed-method study (p. 168). That university develops a partnership with a local elementary campus in which there was a higher student rate mobility compared to other areas in addition to having a higher rate of students who are considered economically disadvantaged. Due to these factors related to the students, there, in turn, affects the rate of teacher's mobility. Because of the turnover, the climate of the school is negatively impacted (p. 169-170).

After collecting data via quantitative means (surveys) and qualitative means (interviews and open-ended questions), the findings follow in the footsteps of established literature. Information in regards to values shared among colleagues; the student population in which they serve; the rapport of the teachers with the administrators at the campus; the daily life experience of the teachers; and collaboration among their fellow teachers were reviewed (Swars et al., 2009, p. 172). Furthermore, the agreements between members of their school, trust, parity, and the style of leadership can affect a teacher's mobility. This study can be applied to the Water Independent School District. If there is a stronger professional development program, then it would have a positive effect on teacher's retention rate and a negative effect on the level of burnout.

Collaboration & Support of General & Special Education Teachers

Because of the common scenarios of burnout stories like Ms. Angel, again, changes within the special education program would need to be implemented and evaluated before the projected student growth within the district takes root (activities such as professional development in meeting the needs of special populations). Studies

have been carried out regarding the benefits of inclusion within the special education program and its positive impact on students' academic success, including Roden et al. (2013) study. Roden et al.'s study looks at information obtained from schools like each other across the state. This study could help campuses minimizing burnout by having effective special education programs along with ongoing professional support.

Roden et al.'s (2013) study reviewed the effects of the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. Furthermore, the researchers discussed the state's Performance-Based Monitoring Assessment System, inclusion, and grade-level assessment on the achievement level of students with disabilities (exceptionalities). The data showed that the improvement of the inclusion classroom was taking place. The purpose of the study was made clear in the introduction of Roden et al.'s study. The authors first outlined the problem of the widening achievement gap between students in the special education program and students in the general education program as the students advance through the educational systems. Roden et al. then described the history and the proposed changes within the current state accountability system. Finally, the authors support the positive effects of the changes with quantitative data from the accountability system.

In the Roden et al.'s (2013) study, the relationship between the success of the student on state standardized assessment and the educational setting (inclusion vs. specialized special education students) were reviewed. The correlational research design allows the researcher to predict an outcome. In Roden et al.'s study, it would be the understanding that the student in the inclusion setting would be more successful on state assessments than his or her peer in the specific special education setting.

The Roden et al. study (2013) concluded that the requirement of AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) might contribute to the fact of the increased number of students meeting passing standards on the annual state assessment. Looking at the continuum of services, once a student is admitted to the special education program, they typically would be served in the inclusion setting. Overall, the Roden et al. study supports the need for professional development geared toward professionals getting the tools to assist students in the general education setting (inclusion setting).

To have a successful inclusion program, one would need to have trained general education and special education teaching partners in the identified classrooms. Because of the lack of support of focusing on inclusion students successfully being serviced in the general education classroom, there is a sense of limited commitment, different levels of uncertainty, and generally negative feelings. There is a need for school administrators to be committed to the success of the inclusion program (Caputo & Langher, 2014, p. 211). Because co-teaching programs on individual campuses vary in support, there should be professional development sessions geared to these specific groups of teachers, not just with content but with techniques and exercises designed to strengthen the relationship. Buczynski and Hansen (2009) studied the effect of professional development on teacher practices. They concluded that teachers were beginning to have a deeper understanding of the content at large, to have a stronger commitment to inquiry-based learning activities, and to have students of their own to show progress (p. 606). The more teachers from a single campus that are involved, the stronger the impact of professional development on that campus. Teachers “have neither the agency nor resources to overcome these barriers by themselves,” and being provided with techniques will help (p. 606).

In essence, special education requires training and support of partnership and collaboration between educators and their administrators so that it can ensure the success of the students. However, it does not take a revamp overnight. It takes a considerable amount of effort over time to support teacher's retention rate as well as developing a stronger inclusion program for the students who receive in-class support.

Supporting Novice Teachers

As special education teachers retire or move from that campus, the administrator would need to fill that teaching spot as soon as possible. However, these new teachers (either to the campus or to the profession) must be supported during those rough years. McLean et al. (2017) concluded that early-career teachers' mental health is essential, and intervention should come before they stepped foot in accepting their first teaching job (p. 239). Bettini et al. (2017) wrote those novice special educators (those in their first three years teaching) "often report feeling overwhelmed by trying to fulfill their complex responsibilities" (p. 246). Sweigart and Collins (2017) discussed that campuses are faced with a shortage of highly-qualified special education teachers as compared to the general education counterpart. Beginning special education teachers "are about 2.5 times more likely than other beginning teachers to leave the profession" (p. 209). It is theorized that special education teachers may have broad knowledge across content areas from their university-based (or alternative certification) teacher-education program. Teachers may "struggle to translate that knowledge into practice in the specific areas in which they are teaching students" (p. 209).

Teachers also have a broad knowledge of classroom management styles. A beginning special education teacher may rely on an ineffective behavior management

system to combat the behavior of students receiving in-class support (p. 209). It is possible due to its natural reliance (such as sending out the student without providing in-class interventions like moving the student at a different seat). In Anderson and Olsen (2006), the teacher turnover is a central challenge facing public schools with a majority of the student population is considered to be “economically disadvantaged” and where the costs regarding financial, organizational, and human incurred are high (p. 361).

Novice special education faculty members are also studied in Collins et al. (2017). The special education teachers are expected to be prepared to face a “daunting list of responsibilities and expectations,” and at the same time, address the needs of the students whom they served (Collins et al., 2017, p. 214). Collins et al. (2017) mentioned the two domains in that beginning special education teachers must manage successfully. The first is the personal domain, in which the teacher is “managing the many stressors presented by their new role and the relationships it brings” (p. 214). The second is the professional domain, in which the teacher is “developing the necessary skills to teach students effectively and perform numerous additional job duties” (p. 214).

The personal domain can include support from informal and formal mentors and mentees. Cancio et al. (2014) reviewed how administrators would support students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (so similar to what Ms. Angel faced with James, who was later found to have emotional behavior concerns and required special counseling services). The research offers the benefits of using a mentor program. Effective mentor programs coupled with professional development are “of paramount importance to novice and beginning teachers to prevent or minimize that trajectory” of burnout affecting the performance of the special education teachers (p. 307).

Ms. Angel had Ms. Betty, a mentor whom she knew from her student teaching and internship who at that time recently moved to the Response to Intervention (RtI) program as its coordinator and teacher. The mentor was quite knowledgeable within her field and guided Ms. Angel to “do what is right, do what is fair, and do what is legal.” Ms. Angel often referred to Ms. Betty’s words of wisdom to keep her grounded in times of frustration and reconsidering her desired leave from education. The professional domain can include professional development and can include a personal reflection piece with additional goals (Collins, 2017, p. 214-16).

Coaching

In a way, via mentoring and guiding her to seek resources, Ms. Betty coached Ms. Angel and encouraged Ms. Angel to attempt to stay at the campus for a bit longer. Coaching could be a way that special education teachers can participate in enhancing their understanding of their specific setting (such as inclusion classrooms) and behavior management strategies. In Gürgür (2017), there is a need in the way that we do professional development for teachers should change to reflect advancement in instructional strategies and technology, such as hearing aids and equipment to assist in prolonging severe disabilities (p. 1784). Professional development sessions are best in a small-group setting or one-on-one cooperation. Coaching is useful since it allows for the exchange of skills in the classroom, for the opportunity to make plans cooperatively and for sharing perspectives. However, the researcher emphasizes that the coaching aspect should be voluntary on both sides.

Speaking of coaching, Hsiu-Lein Lu (2010) mentioned that the central purpose of peer coaching is to enhance teachers' professional development. To maximize the

effectiveness of peer coaching, "there also needs to be formal oversight and support" (p. 750). By participating in peer coaching, the teacher would be practicing "teacher efficacy." Teacher efficacy is essentially a motivation (Bruce, 2008, p. 347). Self-efficacy "affects behavior by impacting goals, outcome expectations, affective states, and perceptions of socio-structural impediments and opportunities" (p. 347). Individuals who feel that they will be successful "adopt challenging goals, try harder to achieve them, persist despite setbacks, and develop coping mechanisms for managing their emotional states" (pp. 347-8). In essence, coaching and developing teacher's efficiency can help special education teachers and faculty and staff members who work with the students who feel that they are typically unprepared, similar to Ms. Angel, when she started in special education.

One of the pressures in special education is the increasing student mandates within accountability because of No Child Left Behind, and now Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and at the same time, of course, having a sense of unpreparedness. There is an increasing demand for professional development. Districts along with local education service centers are meeting the demands, but more so lecture-based and a "sit-and-get" style of learning crammed into a one-day workshop or a quick overview during an after-school training with no to little follow-up from the presenter(s) or district representative(s).

Wood et al. (2016) described the fears of special education teachers and general education teachers to be contributed to the "lack of general education curricula featuring an instructional design that supports students at risk or with disabilities" and the "pre-service preparation in specific intervention" (p. 160). Wood et al. looked at the impact

that multi-level coaching to be considered as an “extension” of professional development. Coaching, in essence, would provide the educators participating in additional supports in the implementation of the new instructional skills. With coaches, they “often have a deep understanding” regarding instructional practices and can assist in encouraging teachers to examine and reflect on the next best steps in meeting the students with special needs (p. 162). After explaining the benefits of coaching, Wood et al. then described the one-day workshop as lacking in its intensity and specificity to “improve teachers’ instructional skills” and encouraged administrators in adopting levels and hiring new persons who would assist in lessening the burden.

Mamlin (2012) stated that teachers’ trainers also needed to be supportive and stay current with the latest research. She emphasized the need to work quickly in addressing the shortage of highly-qualified special educators so that they can mentor the next generation of teachers. There is a common theme in the research so far in that the teachers’ pre-service programs. Ms. Angel did not enter a teacher education program focused solely on meeting the needs of special populations. She became a special education teacher when university-chosen experiences in the field during her student teaching and internships semesters guided her to consider it. Yes, she did have at most two courses focused on an overview. However, more teacher education programs should encourage more experience in the classrooms of ELL (English Language Learners) and special education inclusion students, so that more teachers would be prepared for differentiating instruction.

Mentors again play an essential part in increasing teacher quality. Effective programs have frequent face-to-face contact between mentor and mentee (Wasburn,

2012, p. 60). The mentor has to be open to sharing, and it may be recommended that the mentor would attend the same professional development meetings so that the mentor can help to implement the techniques and tips discussed in the session.

Professional Development Sessions

Professional development can be used to address new laws or practices.

Furthermore, professional development is to address the belief or understanding of crucial issues in education. What does this mean is that professional development can be to address students' needs that come from a different cultural background or belief?

Professional development should be based on collaboration, support, and isolated from evaluation as evaluation can cause stress for the special education teachers, thus affecting their performance during their services of the kids (Westling, 2006, p. 137). It should be learner-centered as the traditional forms of expert-centered professional development have been shown to have a little positive impact on teacher practice or student outcome (McLeskey, 2011, p. 26).

One of the challenges that teachers, especially special education, face when dealing with the needs of students from cultures and economic situations other than one's own is figuring how to activate schema (background knowledge) within students during instructional time. By activating schema, students can grasp the concepts much easier; however, to activate it, a teacher must understand where the students are coming from in terms of background knowledge.

In essence, any adult who works in the school setting should understand the social and economic situations that surround the students' home lives; this would limit the amount of miscommunication and misunderstanding and would allow the teacher-student

relationship to strengthen. However, this can cause stress as the teachers have foundational skills in their content. Since they serve students in various grade levels and content areas, it is difficult for teachers to develop a strong rapport with the students. Specialized professional development can solve this, especially in Water Independent School District, where the population is highly diverse in its student population.

Langher, Caputo, and Ricci (2017) concluded that teachers' professional development seems to "represent an essential key factor for preventing teacher depersonalization," whether it be due to the teachers' desire to perfect their craft or required to attend (p. 137). Krethlow, Cooke, and Wood (2012) concluded in their study that low-cost interventions can be more beneficial to the growth of the special education rather than spending funds on sessions that may not be as effective as one may think.

Besides coaching, another way to approach professional development is to include technology integration and self-choice with professional development. According to Kopcha (2012), there is a gap between the number of technology devices available in classrooms nowadays and teachers' use of that technology for instructional purposes" (p. 1109). Even though the issues have been identified, teachers "continue to report that they lack the time, resources, and training to use classroom technology for instructional purposes" (p. 1110). Instead of offering stand-alone sessions, the researchers would investigate individualized support regarding the mentoring/small community.

Leaders should also provide the space to develop a robust professional learning community. All teachers, including the special education teachers at the campus, should be encouraged to incorporate all subjects into their core content area and are encouraged to contribute ideas in their regular professional learning community (PLC) meetings and

during professional development sessions. Because they serve the students in all subject areas (English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies), the special education teachers should be at least knowledgeable in foundational skills in all areas. They would be able to “pull” information from what the students learned or is currently learning in other classes to support the students while they are servicing them in a specific class. For example, in Social Studies classes, students are currently being exposed to materials where they have to infer, a concept that was the main focus in the English Language Arts classes a few weeks prior. In addition to integrating all subject areas, the special education department reviews areas that are in need based on data and teachers’ recommendations and make the appropriate adjustments (more staff development/in-service sessions and staffing changes, to name a few suggestions). By adjusting, the team of educators would ensure that the students are receiving an equitable education while they are on the campus and would ensure that the teachers are held accountable to the students’ success. Professional development sessions should also be during professional learning community meetings so that the special education teachers can see if they can incorporate that technique the next day.

Paraprofessionals Involved in the Special Education Program

Paraprofessionals are defined as “staff members whose positions are either instructional in nature and who provide other direct services to children, youth, or their parents” (Shyman, 2010, p. 828). For the purpose of this study, paraprofessionals are defined as staff members who provide instructional support to students.

Paraprofessionals are being brought in to close the gaps of instructional service delivery for students being serviced in the special education program as the schools in the

United States is in the process of moving toward having a robust inclusion program (Garwood et al., 2017, p. 206). Paraprofessionals are often in the same situation where teachers “have reported that students with emotional and behavioral disorders are some of the hardest to serve, and those working in this field have the highest rate of burnout” (p. 206). However, paraprofessionals’ professional development is even more limited than professional development for special education teachers and administrators.

Paraprofessionals’ mental health is as important as any educator. It is said that paraprofessionals have the same levels of burnout, if not more, as teachers. Burnout puts any professional at greater risk for chronic fatigue, depression, insomnia, and substance abuse (p. 207).

It is noted that despite having a carefully designed intervention program structured around the students’ individual needs, it is “unlikely to succeed if proper attention has not been given to the feelings of burnout experienced by the interventionist” (Garwood, 2017, p. 207). For students with emotional and behavior disorders, the interventionist is sometimes a paraprofessional. In the state of Texas and Water Independent School District (the district in which the study on perceptions on special education professional development), a paraprofessional can only serve students with support facilitated (not requiring a certified special education teacher) service. Because of the continuum of services, if there is a newly admitted student in the special education program, the ARD team would typically recommend support facilitated services. Unfortunately, this may not be feasible for all depending on the severity of the disability (exceptionalities).

Essentially, paraprofessionals do not have adequate training in evidence-based instructional strategies to assist in serving students (Brock & Carter, 2013, p. 39). Training is critical, as schools would often employ more special education paraprofessionals than certified special educators (p. 39). Brock and Carter's (2013) study focused on the effectiveness of professional development for special education paraprofessionals. Unfortunately, schools and campuses rely on single-event training workshops for professional development. These types of training "may be ineffective at equipping paraprofessionals to deliver high-quality instructional support" (p. 40). It is recommended to have one-to-one coaching with individualized follow-up training for the paraprofessional, not unlike recommended for the special education teachers.

Administrators Involved in the Special Education Program

So far, we have discussed the faculty and staff members' preparation, but what about leadership? According to Thompson (2011), administrators do feel burnout; there is "high emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment" (p. 111). There is a call that the education field would need to be aware of the ways to retain the experienced workload and, at the same time, increase their recruitment of the next set of leaders. Leadership programs, mentoring, and training "should consider to explicitly improving leaders' skill set in self-awareness, coping, time management, and conflict resolution" (p. 112).

Carter (2011) echoed the same sentiment; in her experiment, she outlined the limitation of topics involving burnout research among administration, and it is theorized that administrators are "immune from the adverse effect of stress and burnout" typically found in faculty and staff members (p. 106). Administrators have a significant impact on

providing professional development and coaching to the teachers, so it is essential to review the reasons behind burnout among special education leaders and take proactive steps (Gersten, 2001, p. 551).

With the campus' leaders feeling burnout, then the campus' overall climate would not be conducive to learning for the students and professionals (e.g., low attendance rate, internal conflict as shown in Ms. Angel's experience at her campus). A survey was conducted, and responses to questions were totaled and calculated in the areas of depersonalization, accomplishments, and exhaustion (Carter, 2011, p. 108). Based on the study, there is no correlation (significant relationships) between years of experiences or the age of the participants.

Evidence shows that administrators "were highly emotionally exhausted compared with professionals in teaching, postsecondary education, social services, medicine, and mental health occupations" (p. 108). To assist administrative personnel, the researcher recommends the administrators to maintain emotional well-being and develop supportive, collegial, and professional relationships and where professional development could come in to assist administrative personnel. There is research to suggest that administrative preparation programs should include a paradigm shift of reflective and knowledgeable terrain (Beaumont, 1997, p. 564; Houle, 2016, p. 142). Overall, a poorly designed job without support via professional development and coaching can heighten the levels of burnout in faculty, staff, and administrators.

In Gong et al. study (2013), leaders have been concerned about the higher burnout rates in special education teachers as compared to the general education teachers and budget cuts in education "exacerbated these issues" (p. 969). Because of the layoffs (and

what Water Independent School District was facing at one time in 2017-2018), job duties are consolidated, and resources that are needed to instruct the students become scarcer. Furthermore, teachers would “have to worry about providing for themselves and putting in the time and effort to promote a conducive learning environment for their students” (p. 969). Supportive supervisors would be able to provide positive feedback to the teachers’ abilities and skill set, which would lessen the burden that burnout would have on the teachers’ performance (p. 970). District administrators should give leaders support via guidance and training on how to handle the campus’ special education programs.

Summary

With professional development, special education teachers can be more prepared to address concerns. If districts desire to have a more robust special education program, districts are recommended to support administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals by offering effective professional development. Education is essentially a collaboration nature.

Chapter III:

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter explains the study's qualitative nature and the reasoning behind the selection of the approach. Furthermore, the chapter covers the research design, participants, and procedures. With a qualitative research approach, researchers can find ways to solve typical problems in public school environments. As such, this approach proved fitting for this study on special education teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the professional development for special education inclusion instruction in elementary classrooms. This study came from the researcher's personal experience as a special education teacher and continued invested interest to develop professional development to address the specific demands of a robust special education program. The researcher's campus was the identified campus for the study. Three rounds of interviews of the selected participants served as the basis of data collections by the qualitative researcher for this study (Creswell, 2014, p. 185).

Being an educator at the district highlighted in this study, the researcher received updates and participated in the same offered professional development as the three study participants from her campus. The researcher also observed the general environment of the campus of the three study participants. Understanding that the same concerns persisted from when the researcher was a special education teacher prompted her to want to dissect those perceptions of the preparedness that all educators faced regarding teaching students in the special education program. Since qualitative researchers prefer to "tackl[e] things within their natural contexts" and complete the picture in an otherwise

“complex dynamics in operation in that setting,” it was viewed as the appropriate approach to use for this study (Shank & Brown, 2007, p. 60-61).

Generally, in qualitative research, deductive thinking “plays an essential role as the analysis moves forward” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). Researchers feel that “the whole point of research is to examine the processes and types of meanings that we might find or make in the world” (Shank & Brown, 2007, p. 59). When we study human sciences, it is important to understand why “things are the way they are” and that we “are going beyond the search for the laws of nature” (p. 60). This way of thinking guided the researcher on wanting to dissect the current perspective of professional development in the studied independent school district. By interviewing current employed special education teachers, the researcher gained an invaluable understanding of what were the gaps in the district’s professional development for special education.

Methodological Framework

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative methods researchers collected data in the field at the site where participants experienced the issue or problem under study. The researcher did not bring individuals/participants into an artificial lab or send questionnaires for the participants to complete. Instead, for this study, the researcher designed three rounds of interviews of current special education teachers with open-ended semi-structured questions and analysis of the responses. Afterward, the researcher organized the primary information gathered from the three rounds of interviews into themes. Another qualitative source of data was the narrative provided by the researcher’s journal entries. The journal entries reflected when the researcher was a former special education teacher. The journal entries provided insights about the progress – or lack

thereof - of the studied district's special education program. The journal entries provided a deeper, richer description of the context and experience of the special education teachers on the studied campus.

The researcher used a narrative methodology for this study. The researcher studied the lives of individuals by asking them to provide stories (Creswell, 2014, p. 19). The introduction of this study in qualitative research began with a personal experience from the researcher. This self-reflection created "an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers" (p. 202). Through her journal entries, this researcher included [her] interpretation of [her] findings and used peer debriefing "to enhance the accuracy of the account" (p. 202). Clandinin (2016) wrote that in narrative inquiry, we "retell the stories with attentiveness to the inquiry space" and as researchers and participants "inquire into the storied experiences, new possibilities for ways to live and tell stories to emerge" (p. 22).

The researcher also used techniques found in a case study design by first identifying and gaining access to individuals and sites. She then identified what types of information will answer the research question; designed protocols to collect and record the information obtained; and administered the data collection (Creswell, 2014, p. 200). As Shank & Brown (2007) puts it: "A case study is nothing more than a rich and insightful look at an individual or a group. The key to a case study is the fact that it is an in-depth look. Researchers take their time to observe and probe and often gather information from a variety of sources" (p. 65). For this study, the case study design allowed the researcher to see what the perspectives of the studied participants were. The researcher identified the studied campus and created protocols based on her journal

entries. The researcher also set up a time for audio conferencing for the initial individualized interview, for the follow-up, and for the focus group that brought the three special education teachers together in an open environment. In the conferencing call, the researcher administered the data collection – the interview questions – based on her journal entries and later common themes between the responses.

A major challenge is understanding the boundaries of the case study, generally studies affected by time and place (Creswell, 1998). As such, this case study focused on only one campus due to convenience and time. The studied campus was a former intermediate campus turned elementary with a growing number of special education students being identified and serviced. The campus, at the time of writing, had four special education inclusion teachers, all with experience of more than five years. The boundary of time affected the study and the data collection of interviewing the studied participants took place in the summer of the second year of the participants being at an elementary campus.

By using a case study design, the researcher hoped to understand the setting as the setting can be from a social, historical, or economic viewpoint. For this study, again, the setting is an elementary campus in an urban school district in the southeast region of Texas. The district underwent reconfiguration and thus had a chance to revamp their teaching practices. The researcher also wanted to know if the district revamped their special education program since the district is currently state-monitored for continuous lack of progress of improvement in special education. It should be noted now due to a reduction in staff, reconfiguration of grade level, and high budget cuts in the 2017-2018 academic year, the district scaled back professional development in all areas, including

special education. By scaling back the offerings, the district impacted the help that the three study participants needed as they adjusted to their role at the elementary campus.

The district is currently offering limited courses, mainly led by the ‘district’s special education technology specialist (Digital Learning Specialist) in both a face-to-face and online format – the same personnel that the researcher collaborated with a few years prior. The face-to-face format of professional development has been available on a limited basis, offered mainly at the beginning of the year. Thus, late hires are to wait another year to participate in this professional development session. The Digital Learning Specialist is currently collaborating with the new executive special education director as the district desires to implement/reinforce a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) process. This situation of limited professional development courses became a focus of this research, which sought to answer the question of whether currently provided professional development sessions meet the needs of special education inclusion teachers.

Participants, Sampling Design, and Data Collection Methods

Sampling

The sampling for this study was purposeful "qualitative" sampling (maximum variation sampling) (Creswell, 2014, p. 200). Essentially, the researcher, while creating the criteria, kept in mind about what she was looking for in terms of the participants who can best help understand and learn about the phenomenon surrounding professional development for special education teachers (p. 200). As mentioned, the study took place in Texas, one of the highly populated states in the United States of America. The criteria used for selected potential participants included being employed in the same district that

the study takes place before and after reconfiguration as a special education teacher, preferably in resource or inclusion settings and on the same campus.

Again, the researcher focused on special education teachers, the sample (or a subgroup that the researcher plans to study for generalizing) of the target population of faculty and staff members. The researcher sent out emails to the studied campus' four special education teachers who fit the criteria, and three special education teachers consented to the study in the end. The email included information about the research study surrounding professional development within their current district of employment, participant consent form, and additional components required by the university's institutional review board.

Participants

When gathering participants, the researcher ensured that the participants understood that they were participating in a research study. The researcher provided information that reminded the participants about the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2014, p. 98). The ethical code for researchers is to protect the 'participants' privacy and inform the participants of such protections (p. 98). The three participants came from an elementary campus (1st grade to 5th grade) located in an urban school district in the state of Texas. One participant was a 60 years old White female educator. The other two female participants were in the age range of 30-40 years old, one African-American and another Hispanic. Since the participants were assigned to stay at the campus as the campus made the transition to the elementary campus, they were ideal participants as it would allow the researcher to see if there was support during this critical time. All of the three special education study participants serviced students receiving academic support

(in other words, these are the students who are considered by the state and the national government to be eligible in the 13 categories under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA for short).

The participants are the researcher's colleagues, so choosing the participants was of convenience and place. As such, the researcher has already built a rapport with colleagues over the past two years. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the interviews were conducted during the summer to allow the ability for participants to be more willing to accept the call to be part of the study.

One participant, Ms. Betsy Snow, a 30-year teaching veteran with 20 years teaching at the studied campus in Water Independent School District. When Ms. Snow first started teaching, she was unsure how to address the needs of students who had exceptionalities. Because of personal experience with a relative with TBI, she realized that experience gave her "a big heart with children with disabilities" and worked toward being certified to teach special education at her campus. Another participant, Ms. Cathy Summer, is a 14-years teaching veteran with five years teaching at the studied campus in Water Independent School District. Ms. Summer was inspired to get involved in special education during her volunteer work in high school and college. The third participant, Ms. Jennifer Spring, had six years in higher education until an experience pushed her to compulsory education. This school year was currently her 4th year in Water Independent School District. In her experience as a college advisor, Ms. Spring was inspired to seek a way to be a special education inclusion teacher.

It should be noted here that even as the researcher, I was also a participant in this study. Even though I was no longer directly involved with the special education program,

I had an invested interest in this topic because I was a former special educator and that I wanted to ensure that my campus teachers were supported. Choosing these teachers on campus allowed me as the researcher to get a strong, open response in the two individual interviews as well as during the focus group. From feedback and collaboration, as reflected in my journal entries, came the idea of investigation on the actual needs of the desire for the development of updated and consistent professional development sessions. In my journal entries, I also noted archival data from the state's education agency regarding demographics of students and faculty as well as information from the recent rounds of assessments; this provided context for the study. My initial informal observations again, as outlined in journal entries, led to the conclusion that the campus-based special education administrators and educators desired to stay in their field. However, current offerings failed to meet their expectations, increasing their burnout. Without adequate and efficient support needed, then the educators' and administrators' emotional well-being can be at risk. I was invested in this pattern of feeling unsupported.

Data Collection

Data can be in the form of interviews, observations, audiovisual materials, and documents (Creswell, 2014, p. 185). With the use of qualitative studies, the researcher became the primary instrument of collecting data via examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather anecdotal data. When necessary, the researcher used prompts to clarify the questions asked. Interviews allowed the researcher to build rapport in a friendly, open, trustworthy environment (Johnson et al., 2012). Since the participants came from the researcher's current campus, the participants already had

rapport with the researcher. To collect data, qualitative researchers employed methods using skills that we use daily (Shank & Brown, 2007, p. 62). For this study, the researcher conducted two interviews and one focus group. The interviews took place over three weeks. The initial and the follow-up interviews took on average an hour and a half as the researcher continuously engaged with the participants. The focus group interview took about three hours to complete. By using interviews, the researcher engaged in a “specialized form of conversation” (p. 62).

When the researcher interviewed the participants at the beginning of the study, the researcher gathered information on their perspective of professional development for special education teachers in an urban school setting. The topics of the focus group questions were grounded on common topics among the participants’ initial interviews. Having a focus group allowed the researcher to get “information and insights in a collective fashion,” and often, the format “leads to a deeper exploration of issues by participants” (p. 62).

The interview questions’ topic involved the three studied participants’ viewpoint and their experience in the special education program and subsequent professional development. Collected data included the current role at the campus (“What is your current role at this campus?”) and self-assessment (e.g., “Where do you feel are your strengths in terms of your current position in special education?”). The specific questions also included types of professional development and reflection of their experience and the future direction of professional development sessions for the special education program. Questions used for the interview are in “Appendix A: List of Interview Questions.” The collected data helped the researcher answer the study’s question, “What are special

education ‘teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the professional development for inclusion instruction in elementary classrooms?”

As mentioned, the researcher used semi-structured interviews. The participants were asked the same questions in the two individual interviews and the focus group a week after the individual interviews. The researcher wanted to maintain consistency and flow as the questions built upon each other (Shank & Brown, 2007). The researcher took great care to make sure participants were asked the same questions in order to “emulate the same degree of consistency of responses that we find when questionnaires are used” (p. 192). Again, the list of questions is found in “Appendix A: List of Interview Questions.” Interviews are considered to be a personal encounter where the researcher can build a rapport with participants through a friendly, open, nonjudgmental environment; in this case, the researcher already had rapport with the participants. Conducting these interviews allowed the researcher to gain in-depth information about participants' thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, and feelings (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

I, as the researcher, used my expertise to analyze participants’ responses along with my journal entries. I was intimately involved with the special education program at the beginning of my teaching career by presenting to the district’s teachers. At the same time, I focused on addressing academic and behavioral growth in special education at my campus. With a diverse educational background, I drew from a unique perspective – both as an administrator on how to structure a professional development program that could expand across the district and as a certified school diagnostician on how to address needs based on students’ evaluation results.

I had previous first-hand knowledge of the lack of effective professional development and was inspired to research it at a later time. When I started teaching special education in a Title I district, there were only a handful of sessions available on the 'district's professional online portal geared toward educators. The remainder were only for department meetings for 'district's diagnosticians. Attending content-focused professional development sessions in person (as there were none available online at the time due to a developing learning management system) was the norm.

During these professional development sessions, there were special education educators and paraprofessionals who were in a similar boat in feeling distraught with the whole process. Through casual conversation, I came to see that district and campuses needed to offer a more diverse special education-geared professional development session in meeting the needs of special education students. At the time of this first revelation, the district was undergoing the beginning of its multiple years-long audits with the 'state's education agency. The next step was to collaborate with the technology specialist for the 'district's special education program to develop an original series, led by experienced special education teachers who were currently working within the department. The grade levels of these presenters ranged from early childhood to high school. Through presentations over the year, the coordinators received feedback on creating an online version. As a result, the selection available for educators to choose from expanded. Due to word of mouth, I saw this program grow over three years, reaching over a hundred teachers and administrators.

Measures and Instruments

The researcher's personal experience and journal entries contributed to the formation of the first round of questions. When developing the interview questions, as the researcher, I relied on my experience highlighted in my journal entries to consider what information would help explore the effectiveness of the professional development sessions in the district. I believed that it was important to get to truly know the participants and their breadth of knowledge when it came to special education. To prepare for the three interview phases, I created a probe to allow for a way that the participants could add additional descriptions of their vast experiences in special education. With the probes, it would allow me, as the researcher, to extend my knowledge of this study's research question. I developed a total, on average, about five questions per phase of the interviews, along with notes for probes.

The first round of interview questions involved the participants sharing their motivation for being involved in special education. After getting their stories on their motivation, the researcher asked the participants to reflect on their strengths and their areas of improvement, defining what professional development meant to them and the overall opinion of an effective special education inclusion professional development class or program. The follow-up interview questions consisted of their preferred format of professional development and suggested topics for teachers, diagnosticians, and administrators. After the researcher conducted the two individual interviews, a week later, the researcher conducted the focus group interview. The focus group interview consisted of common topics from the two individual interviews after the researcher began to see keywords from the individual responses. Topics included emotional burnout;

campus-based professional development; the reflection of their previous role on this same campus when it was an intermediate campus; and mentorship. As the final findings came together, the researcher used her journal entries to provide an additional viewpoint to the effectiveness of the overall special education inclusion program.

As part of a robust data collection, the researcher provided an appendix of interview questions ("Appendix A: List of Interview Questions") so that the reader can see detailed information about the instrument being utilized (Creswell, 2014). This researcher developed and used an interview protocol for asking questions as well as allowing space to record the three special educator's answers for the interview data that were collected as part of this study (Creswell, 2014). By using this interview protocol, it allowed the researcher to organize thoughts that would serve as the basis for the findings chapter and additional items to look at subsequent interviews (Creswell, 1998). For example, the researcher could discover a common theme of the need to support teachers brand-new to special education – whether they would be in general education as inclusion teachers or actual special education – that could be a topic. The researcher could see that this was an additional topic to explore in-depth during the focus group and create questions based on this topic to answer in the whole group. The researcher felt that there was a need for the follow-up interview to clarify the information collected in the initial interview.

Data Screening and Analytic Procedures

After completing the data collection, the researcher triangulated the responses of the participants from the focus group as well as the individual 'teachers' anecdotes and the researcher's journal entries. It is important to note that qualitative results and findings

are “grounded in the discovery of meaning” (Shank & Brown, 2007, p. 144). The researcher organized into themes or codes and synthesis the findings by formulating innovative ways in reviewing the data (p. 144). As such, the researcher used a commercially-available online word cloud software to break down the commonality of the individualized special education ‘teachers’ responses. In the end, the researcher took stock of the available data and “created an account or narrative or tale “that encapsulates and organizes their major findings” (p. 144). Overall, using the qualitative approach transformed the researcher into an active learner who would be able to share the story from the selected participant’s perspectives (Creswell, 1998).

To ensure data would answer the study question and help with constructing conclusions regarding teacher perceptions about professional development for the special education inclusion program, the researcher used multiple methods of data collection and tools to analyze. Data had already been collected with the researcher's journal entries reflecting on her time as a special education teacher and presenter for the district and local conference. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (two individual interviews, and a focus group), clarifying if needed. After reviewing the automatically-generated transcript from the participant's interviews, the researcher used the process of discourse analysis to see if there was an apparent pattern to help her understand the level of perceived effectiveness of the special education program's professional development sessions from the experienced teachers.

The researcher, to analyze the responses formally, used coding. Coding would be considered to be the process of organizing the collected data by bracketing the text segments and writing a word that will represent that specific group (Creswell, 2017,

p.197). Coding would be based on the actual language of the participants of the study, essentially the transcript from the three rounds of interviews from the three special education participants and the journal entries from the researcher's experience in special education. Attribute coding gave the researcher a great understanding of who participated and their motivation to seek to better their craft in terms of special education. Value coding, the next step, allowed the researcher to dig deeper into the raw emotions of the researcher as well as the three participants. Structural coding helped the researcher to organize the perceptions and values by the study's topics. The topics would evolve into themes. The researcher used an online word cloud generator for organization and a visual to work with as she described the study. Additional data that were also collected included the state assessment performance rate from selected years from the Texas Education Agency's Texas Academic Performance Report to assist in context for the study. Overall, the researcher planned to use a combination of emerging codes. The researcher reviewed data for validity and reliability (p. 200-201).

Triangulation and trustworthiness strategies were also implemented in the study to ensure that the information was reliable. One way that the researcher did this was by doing member checking during the follow-up interview. Member checks allowed the researchers and, in a way, the participants "to reflect on the accuracy of the account" (Creswell, 2018, p. 261-262). Another way was to review the transcription for accuracy using the audio files from the interview to assist in gathering themes from the finding chapter. The researcher compared the study participants' individual and focus group responses to her reflective journal entries. As a researcher-participant, the researcher told her story while at the same time shared the analysis of the three study's participants.

These validation strategies can be considered the triangulation needed to ensure that the study was sound and could be relied upon for additional extension of the study that would be outlined in the conclusion chapter.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability is a crucial part of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process of triangulation established credibility in qualitative studies, including this study on the teachers' perspectives of the special education program. This design merged data in the answers from 'participants' interviews and further supported the key findings of the evaluation (Creswell, 2014). The researcher understood that "although there is no single form, adding something personal as a rhetorical flourish is not sufficient" (Fina, 2015, p. 233). The task is to "account for our situated selves in a scholarly product, thereby lending the research credibility and validity" by using personal experience (p. 233).

When describing the research methods, the researcher would need to keep in mind that information would be easy to understand for the readers and, if needed, easy to replicate. The research must be credible. There should be a triangulation of data as in reviewing and synthesizing multiple sources of data. To review validation, one must look at the peer review, evidence of collaboration, and a significant amount of time in the field to complete observations. The transcript was entered into an online word frequency test generator as part of the tool of the researcher to see if there was a commonality to drive discussion in the follow-up interview. Discussions in the follow-up interview were similarly treated.

The researcher analyzed the data using Creswell's (2014) data analysis approach for qualitative research. This process began with the raw data from the researcher's

journal entries and the transcripts from all three rounds of interviews. After reading through data to get a sense of themes, the researcher continued to use an online frequency test generator to guide the categories as well as their descriptions. Then, the researcher looked for related themes and saw if it connected to the research question in this study. The information from the word frequency test generator gave away to a visual to work with as the researcher described the study in the finding chapter.

Summary

To answer the question on the effectiveness of special education programs through the eyes of the participants, the researcher collected information via interviews, first by an initial interview and a follow-up interview. After the information from the initial and follow-up interview was gathered, the researcher analyzed responses and formulated focus group questions based on additional common themes that appeared during the individualized interviews. Coding was implemented. All three interviews exposed the attitudes and perceptions of the study participants. The researcher used her journal entries to support what the teachers shared in the interviews in her findings in hopes of providing context and background information about the experiences of the study participants.

Chapter IV:

Findings

Data Overview

This chapter discusses the findings of the researcher's study, focusing on the perceptions of special education teachers regarding their district's professional development program for special education. According to the 2017-2018 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR), the state's accountability report, the studied district was marked as "Needs Substantial Intervention" under "2018 special education Determination Status" (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The district has still retained the status of needing interventions from the state agency in the school year in which the study took place. Due to being state-monitored, the special education program in the studied district would need to do an intensive intervention, including strengthening their professional development program to help their teachers in the program navigate the onerous duties.

The study participants' individual stories on their experience in the special education program converged on the need for improvement for inclusion programs in general as well as professional development to support the necessary changes in inclusion. The researcher saw how her own experience in special education correlated with all three participants' responses in all of the three rounds of interviews. This observation prompted her to theorize little improvement to address gaps in the special education inclusion program has been made. All quotes in the findings chapter were from the researcher's journal and from the three study participants.

Data Collection Process

A total of three special education teachers were interviewed throughout the study (out of the possible pool of four special education inclusion teachers). The researcher used purposeful “qualitative” sampling to find the study participants. The special education teachers were chosen due to meeting the following criteria: being employed in the district in which the study takes place within the last five years and currently serving as a special education teacher who is currently serving students in the inclusion setting. The study participants completed an initial interview, a follow-up interview, and a focus group interview with the other participants (see “Appendix A: List of Interview Questions” for questions used in the three rounds of interviews).

In addition to the interview transcripts of the three special education teachers, the researcher drew from her experience to address the research question on the perspectives of the effectiveness of the professional development programs by using her journal entries. The researcher was a special education teacher and a current presenter for her district and at her local conferences and region service center, thus bringing expertise to the topic. In these journal entries, the researcher expressed her frustration with teaching and being met with roadblocks. When the researcher started presenting, she noted feedback in her journal entries after the sessions as well as previous attendees’ anecdotes when they would update the researcher on progress, giving the researcher an avenue to reflect.

In the first round of interviews, the researcher used questions that focused on the experience of the study participants. The researcher first asked the participants for their current role at the studied campus and how did they become involved in the special

education program. The participants then reflected on their strengths and areas of improvement. Teachers naturally attend professional development based on their areas of improvement and would not gain insightful information for topics that they would have extensive knowledge of. As such, this self-assessment from the participants allowed the researcher to gain information on the participants' motivation to attend professional development and topics' interest. After the participants shared their self-assessment, the researcher asked the participants to define professional development in their own words and their reflection of past attended sessions. Again, the initial interviews allowed the researcher to see how the experience affected her study participants' current professional practices. Using the assistance of an online word frequency generator, the researcher then created the follow-up questions for the participants based on the answers to the initial round of interview questions. The follow-up questions allowed the researcher to clarify the participants' initial response as well as to obtain new perspectives on the research topic of the effectiveness of professional development in the participants' district. At the end of the follow-up interview, the participants shared their theory with the researcher on what they would like to see considered as the school district continued to adapt to the changes.

Table 1

Ms. Cathy Summer		Ms. Jennifer Spring		Ms. Betsy Snow	
Think	40	Need	28	Student	30
Know	40	Go	26	Learn	19
Teacher	21	Classroom	17	Need	16
Student	21	Work	17	Educator	14
Need	16	Kids	16	Help	14

Table 1: Individual Word Frequency - Common Word Table

Table 1 above presented the top five keywords (along with their frequency) found in the individual and follow-up interview – these keywords provided the researcher an idea to formulate the names of themes in the finding chapters based on these keywords. Again, responses were entered into an online word frequency generator to see if there was specific verbiage to drive discussion in the focus group interview (like using the verb of “need” instead of “aim”). The keywords also allowed the researcher to frame her narrative approach as she entered the development.

The focus group questions also focused on common topics presented in the individual interviews. For example, all three special education teachers mentioned personal experiences with a mentorship with a fellow teacher or a need for mentorship in focusing. The researcher dug deeper into this mentorship phenomenon by asking additional questions during the focus group interview in hopes of the special education teachers participating in sharing more in an open interview environment. At each stage of the data collection phase, the researcher checked her transcripts for accuracy.

The researcher saw that the word “need” comes up to all three participants, a total of 65 times, as well as the word “student” (“kids” as its variation), a total of 67 times. The researcher saw that the word “need” indicated that the participants knew what they were looking for since all of them each had more than three years of experience in

education and were able to articulate what exactly they needed in terms of professional development. During the interview, all three study participants focused on students being successful, hence the recurrence of the word “students” and “kids.” Since students and educators are always reflecting and learning, the words of “think” (occurring 40 times), “know” (also occurring 40 times), and “learn” (occurring 19 times) can be used to describe this phenomenon when the researcher was organizing into themes.

After the three rounds of interviews, the researcher also used an online word cloud generator to help the researcher illustrate the most common terms related to the topic of professional development and to provide another rich description of the data. Figure 1 showed the recurring terms were separated and highlighted. It should be noted that the larger the word, the more times it reoccurred in the participant’s responses. Likewise, the smaller the size of a specific word, the less time it reoccurred. The researcher chose to use a heart symbol when creating a shape on the online word cloud platform to indicate the passion of the participants. When the participants spoke of their personal experience in the inclusion classroom, the researcher heard their emotions and voice come through. Ms. Summer, for example, shared her frustration with the current structure of the campus’ inclusion program, and the researcher resonated with her frustration as her own experience in the classroom came to mind:

When I am in the classroom, I am there to help students specifically special ed students, but I help all the students and if they need clarification on something, I will clarify that. But, when it comes to administration, and they are coming into to assess you, they only see as a part of you, so they do not get to see like everything when they are in there. What is it that they

want from inclusion teachers? As for the teachers, what do you think we are there for? Yes, I am there to help my special ed students, but I am there to help all the students, not just my special ed students, even though they are part of my caseload. I am just not going to say, “oh, no, I cannot help you” –you are not a special ed student. I guess it comes from the very top – we do not know what they want. I do not want that –like all you are doing is wrong and then get called on. Did we need to do it this way? I just think everybody should just be on the same page.

At the centers of the heart symbols displayed in “Figure 1: Word Cloud of Recurring Themes in Individual Interviews,” one can see more clearly that the foci are the “students”/“kids” and the “need” when describing the extent of the effectiveness of professional development for special education.

professional development. As Shank and Brown (2007) would say, “The goal of a focus group is to get at information and insights in a collective fashion. Quite often, this collective format leads to a deeper exploration of issues by participants” (p. 62-63).

It should be noted that to maintain confidentiality and to be ensured that their job security would not be affected as the result of partaking in the individualized interviews and focus group, each participant was assigned aliases as highlighted throughout this chapter. The first interview set the environment of openness and honesty that was needed to ensure that the data is valid. As interviews went on, there was a deep reflection in their tone. One study participant even commented at the end of the follow-up interview:

I guess now that I am thinking of everything that I am saying. [I] feel like our special education students are not getting the best of us. And I am not just talking about special education teachers, but I am talking about regular education teachers. I am talking about skills specialists. I feel like we are not doing a great job on our special populations. I am thinking that am I giving everything that I got? I do not know. I am just thinking like are we there to advocate for our special education students? I feel like I do, but am I doing enough?

Essentially, the interview allowed space for a deep reflection from each of the participants. Without being prompted, the participants noted their own professional goals for the upcoming school year because of their responses to the questions.

Participants

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of professional development for elementary inclusion educators in meeting the needs of special education students. The focus was the three special education inclusion teachers who are serving students receiving academic (instructional) support under the special education program –Ms. Betsy Snow; Ms. Cathy Summer; and Ms. Jennifer Spring. These teachers participating in this study worked at an elementary campus (1st grade to 5th grade) located in an urban school district in Texas. This study was unique that the participants all have experience in the 5th and 6th grades (intermediate grades). Due to the reconfiguration of the district they currently work in two years ago, it resulted in the intermediate grades to be dissolved and reshuffling of affected faculty and staff members. At the time of the study, the participants are serving students in an inclusion setting. Since the reconfiguration, none have received the proper training required to serve students in the elementary grades in Water Independent School District.

Ms. Betsy Snow

Ms. Betsy Snow is a 30-year teaching veteran with 20 years teaching at the studied campus in Water Independent School District; When Ms. Snow first started teaching, she was unsure how to address the needs of students who had exceptionalities. However, after the birth of her family member, who was diagnosed with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), she realized that experience gave her “a big heart with children with disabilities” and worked toward being certified to teach special education at her campus. Ms. Snow then graduated with her degree for special education out of state and a minor in social studies. When she moved to Texas, she accepted a position as a high school

resource teacher before transferring to her current campus as a 5th and 6th-grade special education inclusion and resource teacher at this campus when it was intermediate. In 2019-2020, she completed her second year as an elementary special education teacher at the studied campus.

Ms. Cathy Summer

Ms. Cathy Summer is a 14-years teaching veteran with five years teaching at the studied campus in Water Independent School District. Ms. Summer got involved in special education when she was inspired during her volunteer work in high school and college. During her time at a local adult learning center for children and adults who had exceptionalities, Ms. Summer's favorite experiences involved the students reaching their "small triumphs," their individual goals that they set for themselves. Ms. Summer stated that "People might think they are difficult at times, but I liked working with them." She initially completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education. However, she completed an alternative certification program shortly after that to be certified to teach special education. In 2019-2020, she completed her second year as an elementary special education teacher at the studied campus.

Ms. Jennifer Spring

Ms. Jennifer Spring has six years in higher education until an experience pushed her to compulsory education. This school year is currently her 4th year in Water Independent School District. In 2005, she received a Bachelor of Arts in psychology, and as she was seeking her next step in life, she became a college advisor at a local university. As part of Ms. Spring's duties as a college advisor, she tutored as well as taught students. Out of all of the students who received her services, Ms. Spring thought

about the students who used to receive special education services the most. At that time, these students struggled in grasping the foundations/prerequisites needed to be successful in higher education. She attended a local job fair and happened to chance upon a recruiter talking about the value of a career in compulsory education. She decided to go ahead and complete the requirements to be a special education teacher. In 2019-2020, she completed her second year as an elementary special education teacher in the studied campus. Ms. Spring is currently in progress of completing coursework to be a Licensed Specialist in School Psychology (LSSP), with a special interest in cultural bias in assessment tools used to diagnose students with behavioral concerns.

A Narrative by the Researcher

The researcher-participant's experience as a special education teacher and as a presenter prompted her to study this topic more in detail. She has five years' experience as a special education teacher and currently has four years as an instructional specialist. Despite leaving her role as a special education teacher, the researcher-participant continued to be involved in the school's community by sponsoring students' organizations and serving on the leadership team, dissecting data, and advocating for the needs of students in the special education and the English language programs. The researcher-participant completed a traditional university teacher education route, studying to be an upper-grade general education teacher. For her field experience at all stages (internships and student teaching), she was assigned by the university to observe and teach students/classes of inclusion special education teachers.

Two years later, the researcher-participant decided to be officially involved in special education when subbing for an adaptive behavior unit's teacher vacancy and took

the state certification examination for K-12 special education a few days later. The researcher-participant finally realized there was a reason why she had her field experience and her student teaching period in special education inclusion classrooms. Even though she was hired for a special education inclusion teacher, the researcher-participant still felt underprepared as she lacked more training in the increasing duties required for special education. Her university-based teacher education program was for teachers going into general education, and she had at most one or two university classes primarily focusing on students in special education. During her emotionally draining teaching experience, the researcher-participant began to reflect on whether she was in the right place, like Ms. Angel in our cautionary tale—one such journal entry reads like this:

Unfortunately, my concern about the campus' administration thinking that I am not doing my best for my students was validated when I was highly recommended to find another position within the district by my administration team (this is the second year in the row I was handed a transfer form). I know that inclusion is not the right setting for the students who I served in the resource setting, and so I tried my very best to make sure that they have the tools that they need to succeed in the resource setting. I had to teach both grade levels at the same time for both language arts and mathematics. My campus was on two different bell schedules, and that required balance and true organization to carry out this assignment.

The researcher-participant later completed her studies to be a school administrator and as a certified school diagnostician, and as a result, with a diverse educational background, she can draw from a unique perspective in terms of this particular study. The

researcher-participant also has a background in professional development. She has experience in presenting for locally held educational conferences as well as hosting district-wide presentations, focusing on addressing academic and behavioral growth in special education.

Like her teaching experience, the researcher-participant had an unconventional start in being a presenter. When the researcher-participant first started teaching special education, there were only a handful of sessions available on the district's professional online registration portal geared toward educators. The remainder of the sessions was only for department meetings for district's diagnosticians. The researcher-participant attended content-focused professional development sessions in person (as there were none available in an online format at the time due to a developing district-wide standard learning management system). While attending, she met special education educators and paraprofessionals who were in a similar boat as the researcher-participant in feeling distraught with the whole process.

Through casual conversation, the researcher-participant concluded that the district and campuses should offer a more diverse special education-gearred professional development session in meeting the needs of special education students. At the time of this first revelation, the district was undergoing the beginning of its multiple years-long audits with the state's education agency. She worked with the technology specialist for the district and crafted a plan to help the district's teachers throughout summer curriculum-focused special education sessions. The researcher wrote the following about a revelation after collaborating with the district's technology coordinator:

Throughout the year, I listened to the concerns of my own's special education department and the general education co-teachers. I came up with the "Using Google Apps for the Inclusion Classroom" staff development session. I realized at the core of the concerns, communication is KEY, and Google Apps can help to organize items that can be shared between colleagues. Due to several external factors that were out of the teachers' control, the success of the students was truly impacted, and relationships between co-teachers became broken. It should not have gotten to the point where the general education teachers are now adamantly requesting for me to be their co-teacher next year (and I do not know if I will stay at the campus). And at the same time, I feel that I am still unprepared –I hope to also learn from my attendees.

Again, the researcher had previous first-hand knowledge of the lack of effective professional development and the impact it can make on special education teachers as well as general education teachers. The researcher continued to write in her journal on her struggles as a special education teacher, including this entry reflecting on her way of servicing the students and not wanting to forget her musings:

This year, I began to move into a "stronger" consultation model regarding the students in the general education inclusion classroom and received compliments and praise from doing so; it seems that the other permanent special education teachers still did not employ such a model, but maybe we need an official staff development on it. Checking up with the student's general education teachers assigned to my caseload (and their

service personnel) as well as pulling the students during interventions for small-group instruction helped. Based on the information gathered from my informal assessments/observations, I would like to discuss recommendations—if someone can listen to me—to improve the instruction in the classroom. I noticed that if the teachers are being updated regarding the special education students' progress in class, they are more open to my suggestions.

Theme One: “Needs”

Self-Assessments

The special education inclusion teachers' participants were first asked about their strengths and weaknesses (See “Appendix A: List of Interview Questions.”). Teachers need to be aware of their strengths and areas of improvement in order to know what professional development to attend. All three teachers noted in the individual interviews that they looked for professional development as it relates to the curriculum as they felt that they were confident in behavior and proficient in the required paperwork to keep the district in compliance with local, state, and national laws and regulations.

Ms. Snow felt that her strength laid in her ability to develop trusting relationships with her students in order to create a safe, positive, and productive learning environment. Ms. Snow also was consistent, showed compassion and sensitivity, and thoroughly understood her students' strengths and weaknesses. Ms. Snow believed that her areas of need were more adequately prepared and feeling confident using educational technology and digital learning programs that were so plentiful and are offered by her current district.

Ms. Summer believed that her strengths were communication with parents, good rapport with teachers, and working with students. She also believed that her areas of need were of working in elementary schools as she only has experience with middle school and not understanding the foundational skills students needed to develop at the elementary level.

Ms. Spring's main area of strength was communication with students. She would break down the content by identifying some of the things that students were interested in and incorporate that into the lesson. She also believed that she would need to improve her approach to collaborating with the general education co-teacher. Techniques may be conflicting in the classroom, and she wanted to present a united front with her partner to ensure students' success.

Experience of Burnout

The special education teachers felt burnout in one way or another and shared a unified experience in deeply caring for their students during the focus group interview. Continuing to have that feeling of ongoing exhaustion can affect the inclusion program because teachers may leave the profession, thus affecting the teacher's retention rate at the campus and district. Managing burnout could be a topic for professional development that the district could consider. For example, Ms. Summer faced a mental drain when she was assigned to be a teacher of an adaptive behavior unit. She reflected on one student:

I fell in love with this little girl so much that I would cry because of her experience with parents that they did not want her. It was so sad. I guess it was 7 or 8 years ago, so I always think about her right now like where she is. I found out that her mom gave her up to the state and I am not sure

where she is at right now—she is probably 18 years old. But that year was a big burnout because of behavior and fights, you name it.

Ms. Snow mentioned that the main reason for her burnout was due to the change in the levels of accountability over time. She spoke of increased pressure from administrators on achieving growth on state achievement tests (“They [students] have to take the same test as the gifted and talented students”). Ms. Snow continued to share that administrators did not consider factors outside of students’ control, including their disability. Ms. Snow also mentioned the work-life balance, something that the researcher knows all too well as she reminisced while reading her journal entries from her life as a teacher. Ms. Snow noted that she was worried about the new upcoming literacy curriculum coming to the district as students lacked the vocabulary needed to be successful. The other two participants agreed with Ms. Snow that the “few moments of success keep us going.”

In the focus group interview, Ms. Spring extended that teachers get “attached to students” as teachers build rapport with students and discover their home life. She further stated:

I think that [experience] brings a lot of stress as you want them to do good and your intentions are there wanting them to do good. However, there are so much struggle and so much of a battle to get them to the point where you want them to be and you are consistently battling with that - that makes our job more very - it can be emotionally stressful, it can be academically stressful.

Ms. Spring also mentioned that the ongoing struggle of trying to get materials related to the lesson did have a major impact on her mental state and preparedness

to do her duties as a special education teacher. As a result of not knowing what changes were coming up every year, Ms. Spring was unable to attend professional development that would allow her to gain the knowledge to teach the students when she services the students in the upcoming year.

The researcher-participant remembered weeks on ends of feeling burnout, emotionally drained, and had experiences of restless nights and irritable weekends. At times, the researcher-participant felt hopeless for her situation as a teacher at her campus yet hopeful that changes can happen for others in the future:

These past few years have been a struggle with very laissez-faire leadership and with feeling like a “black sheep” within my campus’ department. The campus’ administrators did not understand why none of my resource students met passing standards on the state assessment (due to my having a small group); they are resource for a reason. So many tears. So much frustration built inside. The administrators kept recommending me to seek another position (and I currently am). Are they right? But I love what I do as a special education teacher and would continue to work with the students within the program in any position. This is why I am still offering special education-g geared staff development, so that I can help more teachers reach their students and effectively balance the paperwork that comes with the position. I am lucky to have a supportive team in the district level to help continue the trend. If I can help someone, then maybe I can stick around a bit.

Motivation on Attending Professional Development

Overall, the participants' motivation focused on bettering themselves for the students. It was not motivated by merely satisfying the requirement of attending a defined amount of professional development per school year, as outlined in their district's teacher's evaluation system. Ms. Snow stated the following when asked about their opinion on professional development at the beginning of the interview:

I seek professional development courses that keep up with the latest educational standards to ensure optimal student learning. I want to discover new teaching strategies through professional development, so I can go back to my classroom and make changes in presentation styles and curricula to better suit the needs of my special education students—professional development training that will help me to become better at planning my time and staying organized. This ultimately makes me more efficient and gives me extra time to focus on students rather than the paperwork.

Ms. Summer and Ms. Spring echoed the same sentiments during their initial interview. Ms. Spring and Ms. Summer, however, expressed their concerns on the gap in current professional development offerings by the district. Ms. Summer wanted a way for general education teachers to experience what is like as a special education teacher, so they can see that the position is multifaceted. Ms. Spring spoke that the professional development sessions required by the administration to attend “aren’t as helpful for special education as there are more general education geared.” Ms. Summer, while acknowledging that the district generally has “a good idea of what needs to be taught,” spoke of the lack of

resources available for teachers to help close the gap for her students. She then gave an example of a 5th-grade student who is currently reading at a level of a 2nd grader. This student can get further behind as the years go by if proper intervention did not take place.

You know teaching elementary is equal to the fundamentals. Our students need to know how to be able to thrive and be successful by trying to reach the grade level or close to grade level and not be so far from it. I have 5th graders that are reading out of the 2nd-grade level, so I think the gap can be addressed by trainings and getting specific resources to address the gaps when coming back from training.

Summary

To recap, the researcher asked the three study participants to do a self-assessment. She asked participants their experience of burnout at any point in their professional careers. All three of them shared that their experiences took an emotional toll on them, but they agreed that the “few moments of success kept [them] going.” There was a *need* to feel successful as the teachers worked through the long days and nights to ensure that the students are showing growth. Furthermore, the participants’ motivation focused on the *needs* of bettering themselves for the students. It was not motivated to get a specific rating on their teacher’s evaluation system. The teachers felt that there was a gap in current offerings (as it was repeating information, great for novices, but *needed* more for experienced teachers). Furthermore, the participants needed resources/materials to carry out the requirements of the district. They mentioned that they *needed* their co-teaching partner to understand their exact role in the classroom.

Theme Two: “Think,” “Know,” & “Learn”

Effectiveness of Inclusion’s Program

Overall, based on the responses from the participants, the district’s and campus’ special education programs have gaps. The researcher formulated that these gaps can be addressed as potential topics for professional development. For example, at the core of the inclusion program was the need for collaboration (and the transcripts from all three rounds of interviews can attest to this observation). Deficits in collaboration can be a topic offered, and in the end, this would make professional development more efficient for teachers. In other words, the teachers would be able to *learn* more from practical sessions of solving issues commonly faced when dealing with the inclusion program. Essentially, the results of the interviews provided a clearer outlook on the effectiveness of the inclusion program, and we can then see where to offer training sessions (See “Appendix A: List of Interview Questions”).

Ms. Snow explained in her follow-up interview that she has difficulties with students in the special education program turning away from help. She then shared that collaboration between teachers in the classroom and administration along with the campus diagnostician was needed to address this wide problem:

When I go into inclusion classes, I have trouble with some of them as they do not want to be identified when they have their regular classroom as being special ed, so they kind of turn away when you come to help them even though they badly need it. There is a stigma attached to a special ed teacher giving him one-on-one, and I am thinking of about one student. She learned it so much, and we can help her, you know, but she refused

for special ed services due to self-esteem. The students are not always so in the least restrictive environment. I have students that should not be in inclusion; they should be in resource, and they are not moved. I think because the diagnostician or admins just really does not have the time to plan all the things that we need to do, and teachers can do the paperwork. There was one that we needed to be in resource and finally got moved, but no so now he is doing much better, and I do not know why the student makes it all the way to 5th grade or 4th grade.

Ms. Spring stood firm in her belief that while the accommodations put in place can assist the child, the current way of teaching was not preparing the students for when they leave elementary. Ms. Spring further spoke that when the student reached high school, they relied on the accommodations so much that it hindered their progress in school. The gap needed to be identified early on, but it was easier said than done as the special education department does not have enough “manpower and time to get the kids to help that they need.” As the researcher was listening to all of the participants’ stories, she thought to herself could efficient professional development sessions help the administration on how to manage existing human resources.

Ms. Summer touched on one of the major misconceptions of special education teachers in general: that the special education teachers only service students receiving in-class support. She wanted the general education teachers as well as administration to understand that they were there to teach all students, and to provide support to clear that misconception as “everybody should just be on the same page.” Ms. Summer also felt that the current way that co-teaching training needed to be changed as what was on paper

seems feasible, but how to address real-life issues that may be outside of the control of all of the teachers. As Ms. Summer continued to reflect on her thoughts on the inclusion program, she thought about what she could do as she comes back to work to help address this particular misconception, showing that teachers were reflective by nature.

The researcher can attest to the frustration of the gaps in the inclusion program from her personal experience as a former special education teacher and feedback from participants in her training sessions. In one of her journal entries, she wrote:

I was flexible with meeting times, and as fate would have it, my schedule allowed for me to check with the students [who were referred to special education] during my lunchtime; however, the other permanent special education teachers were not flexible due to service schedules and other factors, and for some reason or another, they would not consult when it was time for the student's ARD. We had a student who "re-qualified" for our program. I was not over his caseload for language arts (just for mathematics), but I was working with the general education teacher, Ms. P, with other students' caseloads. Ms. P mentioned several times that she would never see the other special education teacher. When it was time for the student's ARD, along with my evaluation report and teacher observation form, I recommended for the student to continue with support facilitated in that subject area. However, the special education teacher of the student's ARD recommended co-teach due to the student's qualifying area. Ms. P was very concerned and came to me; I had to recommend for

her to go to the educational diagnostician to avoid being called on for stepping over boundaries.

Overall, by understanding the gaps that existed in the inclusion program, the district's and campus' administration can begin to map out new topics if they do indeed desire to make professional development for special education more efficient to all attendees.

Current Viewpoint on Characteristics of Professional Development

At the start of the researcher's teaching experience, the district hosted professional development designed for faculty members in special education. However, sessions were geared toward paperwork and legal obligations - and understandably so. The special education teachers, including the researcher, were encouraged by program directors and diagnosticians (often serving as department chairs) to attend sessions aligned with their content area(s) in which they serviced students. However, these sessions did not specifically address the needs of students who often have low reading ability and processing skills (and behavior that manifested over time). Essentially, the experience of the researcher was now reflected through the experiences currently faced by the three special education teacher participants.

After her inability to find suitable professional development sessions, the researcher took upon herself to collaborate with the technology specialist for the district's special education program to develop an original series, led by experienced current special education teachers. Because the grade levels of these presenters ranged from early childhood to high school, and due to word of mouth, the program grew to reach over a hundred teachers and administrators. Due to budget cuts from reconfiguration, the district

moved to a limited offering and a general session as opposed to the specific sessions of years past.

All of the three special education teacher participants agreed that the current structure of professional development since then offered by the district would need to include in all sessions on how to address students in special education. Ms. Spring said it best:

I need to see them [the presenter] be able to differentiate between students. A lot of times, they did the skills they are teaching is on a level for kids who are on-level. I needed to be on a level for kids who are struggling—who have a gap—so they had to differentiate how they are presenting the skills that they teach to us [...].

Ms. Summer echoed similar sentiments and further explained that there should be a more specific variety of sessions. The district, as of the time of writing, was going back to offering a model of a professional development camp of pick-and-choose sessions. However, as Ms. Summer mentioned in the focus group interview, it was not what she was looking for as it was already topics that she attended in the past. Ms. Spring extended that thought in sharing that veterans such as themselves would still like to attend sessions. However, they would need to have different sessions as the sessions in the past (and currently) were focused on topics for novice special education teachers.

Essentially, the district was currently taking steps toward supporting their special education teachers. However, it was not fast enough to stop the bleeding of highly qualified teachers as they began to consider retirement or consider leaving the district.

Ms. Snow brought up something that has not been addressed as of yet in professional development sessions, and that could address this specific issue: self-care. The district, according to Ms. Snow, should have more professional development for new teachers on how to handle stress. Ms. Snow wanted novice teachers to feel encouraged --“hey, you know that we are here to help you.” She further extended that professional development on behavior for new teachers would be beneficial.

Give the [novice teacher] a special strategy for the behavior because you cannot have behavior in a classroom disrupting children from learning. In my class, I am constantly having to address behavior issues, that I have to handle that before getting back to the learning. But new teachers - they need help understanding behavior problems in special ed and how to handle them.

All three study participants shared that professional development should be now offered via virtual means and less on face-to-face unless said professional development topic required hands-on learning. The change of format would allow more flexibility in teachers expanding their professional knowledge.

Reflection of Current Offerings

All three special education teacher participants were asked during the follow-up interview on if they were prepared to take on the challenge of their new position as an elementary special education teacher due to the district’s reconfiguration. While Ms. Snow expressed relief as she enjoyed teaching upper elementary, Ms. Spring and Ms. Summer expressed a lack of confidence in their ability. They both shared examples that they had to research on their own time on how to teach concepts such as phonemic

awareness and number sense as they serviced students in the lower elementary grades (1st and 2nd graders).

I had a student in 4th-grade reading, actually not reading. I went to training for dyslexia - stuff like that - just for myself to know like the vowels or consonants blending, all these things that I could help the student instead of him waiting for me to like say what the word was. It was at first challenging because I didn't know how to help him but eventually, like he was confident actually reading through Flipgrid [a web tool to have students share videos of themselves with their teachers and peers] which he could kind of like hear himself reading and think to himself "oh I mess up" or "let me erase it." I think we have to have like kids have ownership of the learning. So that was kind of like an eye-opening experience for me.

Ms. Summer suggested that the district should have offered a list of topics that would be covered in the future curriculum so that teachers can be prepared over the summer. Ms. Spring agreed because she was not abreast of the current techniques of teaching the foundation skills.

In addition to attending sessions of interest available district-wide, their current campus did offer at the beginning of the year special education foundations such as what is an accommodation; what is a co-teaching model; and cultural responsiveness. When asked whether, in a way, this presentation helped to clear up any misconceptions, all three participants were not as confident that the presentation cleared up misconceptions as one said that the teachers went back into their typical habit of not understanding how

much special education entails. During the discussion, all three agreed that the sessions, while informative, should have been broken up into parts or had scheduled follow-up sessions throughout the year. Ms. Snow added if there was a way that the teachers would get pep talks in implementing knowledge from said professional developments on the special education basics.

Administration's Role in Special Education

Overall, another common point that all three special education teachers believed that the administrators needed to have a bigger input with the structure of the inclusion program than their current level of involvement. When asked in the follow-up interview of what was the administration's role in special education, all three participants agreed that the administrators would need to attend professional development. Ms. Snow suggested that principals and assistant principals should attend some inclusion workshops along with the special education teachers (and the pair that work with them)—this would allow them to know what is expected in order to relate.

Furthermore, Ms. Snow remarked that the general education teachers were still very “hold on” to their classroom as they did not want to let go of control of the classroom's instruction. She then shared an example of a strong co-teaching relationship as her partner would allow her to teach and would like to see it continue. She further shared that paraprofessionals would need to go to training and apply the knowledge (or to be supported if even though they might have the training, but do not know how to apply it). Ms. Snow shared there was “a misconception also that students are not capable of learning, so they do not need that much help. They can - slowly but that every child can learn.” From her statement, the researcher then theorized administration would need to

ensure that there was an open learning environment, especially to address common misconceptions like this and topics, ensuring this could be addressed in professional development.

Ms. Spring held a strong belief that administrators would need to build time in the master's schedule for special education teachers to attend planning meetings with the general education teachers in some form or fashion during the day. In other words, currently, due to the need of servicing students according to the minutes outlined in the individual education plan (IEP), often, the special education teacher did not have the same planning meetings as their teacher partner. Professional learning community planning meetings (PLC) often doubled as a customized staff development session for the campus (to avoid staying after-school to attend such a session). However, because the special education teacher was often servicing students in another grade level, they often would miss out on valuable training. Ms. Spring also echoed the same sentiments as Ms. Summer in her follow-up interview.

Because of our schedule being so hectic, we cannot go to all those PLC because we have to go to classes. So, a lot of times it is like we are getting information last of what is going on –of what is coming up. So, we need to be able to either have a time where the special education team needs to either meet so that we can get an update of what is all going on. We are supposed to be working on this with the PLC. So, some of that stuff that for when we can get together, we can bounce skills off of each other if we know what is coming.

The researcher-participant knew all too well about gaps in the inclusion program, as evidenced by one of her journal entries:

There was an illusion regarding my department from the general education program in that we are a “glorified babysitter department.” There was little communication between both programs; I tried to remediate between the two, but any faculty member who did not directly work with me was unyielding and not understanding the other side’s viewpoints. With miscommunication, students’ success was affected, and I highly believe if communication lines were in place, some of the issues would never come into place.

The researcher also had difficulties in attending planning meetings, and she often would be unaware of critical information affecting her students or herself:

Two weeks ago, I had a Science department meeting after-school one day, a special education meeting at 6:00 in the morning the next day, and both Language Arts/Social Studies and Mathematics department meetings later that afternoon. I had to split my time in that afternoon and did miss important information in both departments.

Due to the concern that students were not meeting passing standards on the statewide assessments in recent years, the special education teachers were now required to attend content area department meetings, even though that the researcher’s department was already doing this. The researcher was the only special education teacher who was involved in multiple core subject departments. She was seen running around between meetings. The researcher resonated with

the study participants in needing admins to ensure that time was needed to attend planning meetings, often used for professional development sessions.

Diagnostician's Role in Special Education

In Water Independent School District, the diagnostician also functioned as the liaison between the directors of special education and the teachers. However, as responses from the three special education teacher participants shown, lack of communication affects the level of preparedness of the special education teachers, thus increasing the level of frustration. All three converged on the idea that the diagnostician would need to update on teachers on upcoming professional development opportunities as well as updates in terms of paperwork requirements.

Ms. Spring shared the diagnostician should be knowledgeable on schedule. Mid-year scheduling changes harmed the students' and teachers' relationships with each other as all are trying to adjust to the new teachers. Ms. Spring and Ms. Summer converged on the thoughts that the diagnostician, as the liaison, needs to attend professional development on curriculum changes along with the teachers so that they can create a better plan of action when the annual meeting (ARD) convene in the school year.

When the researcher was going to school to be a certified school diagnostician, she wrote in her journal about changes she would implement if she got promoted and oversaw her own campus' special education program:

One of the things that I would like to do when I become an educational diagnostician is to create and share instructional materials and assessments (digital portfolio, projects, etc.) along with my teachers and paraprofessionals using Google Drive (and its related apps, Docs, Slides,

and Sheets). In my district, the diagnostician is considered to be the department leader as well as the ARD facilitator (I now know why there is a high turnover of diagnosticians here). In keeping in line with this, I want my teachers to feel less stressed out so that they can focus on what mattered most, the students. Furthermore, I would take the time to analyze the data available.

The researcher thought that (and still do) that the educational diagnostician should not be there just to evaluate students for eligibility of special education services and complete necessary paperwork. They come from a strong curriculum background, whether they come from special education or general education. They should share their experience with the department and nurture the talents of their faculty and staff members. The educational diagnostician will need to focus on the teachers who have Special Education students and work closely with them by analyzing the assessment data continuously and communicate possible solutions. If possible, the educational diagnostician should schedule a day each month to attend a professional learning community meeting. If the campus diagnostician needed a refresher in their understanding of the curriculum, then they would need to attend professional development, preferably with their teachers.

Summary

Overall, the second theme focused on the process of *learning*. Concerns of the structure of the district's (and campus') inclusion program from the special education teachers ranged from addressing the stigma attached for in-class services for students to everyone needing to "be on the same page." Teachers, administrators, and diagnosticians

can *learn* via professional development on how to build an inclusive environment; how to strengthen the channels of paperwork to identify students needing to be moved so that teachers can best implement teaching practices; and how to support a collaborative environment for teachers. The format of special education professional development should also change to allow flexibility for teachers/attendees to *learn*. As evidenced by the three participants' and the researcher's experience in the classroom, the administration and diagnostician need to *learn* along with the special education teachers. If a campus is to strengthen its inclusion program, one must learn along with teachers on what is expected for them and build the program from that knowledge. We must be proactive, not reactive.

Theme Three: "Help"

Students' Needs

Due to the pandemic of Covid-19, education has to adapt its current model of instructional delivery. That trickled down to how to address gaps in special education overall in this new age of instruction. Students receiving special education services often have major gaps in basic comprehension in math and reading, often several grade levels below their peers. The studied district was also undergoing a transition of a new literacy curriculum to address equity issues that were made apparent by the lack of growth of reading scores under the previous curriculum. To truly address students' needs, the district would need to *help* teachers.

Ms. Spring talked about since the literacy curriculum is changing, it would be more of a focus of interdisciplinary units. As such, she saw that would affect how the district was going to be presenting information to the students earlier than previously

taught. Due to Covid-19, Ms. Spring shared the need for continuing professional development to ensure that all students and teachers would be prepared in case the district declared a direction toward a fully virtual learning state to ensure educators' and students' safety.

They [students] are going to do a lot more work on computers. You are going to find that there is going to be probably more technology going to be used in the classroom, and these kids are going to be trained on different classroom stuff online. So, I think that is going to be the next big change. I mean, we already do it but not to the extreme like how we did with Covid-19.

Ms. Spring also felt that students in special education may not have the tools to be independent learners as of yet, but that could change when teachers themselves are properly prepared.

Ms. Summer was cautiously optimistic about the new direction as there is a new executive special education director over the district as well as the new literacy curriculum, so she saw the changes as a way to go back to the basics. Ms. Snow believed that the district would be taking professional development further by embracing the “microlearning” model. The microlearning model is a model of teachers registering for short online courses, attend free sessions, such as webinars, or utilize available resources to learn new skills that will help increase students learning. The district, due to the need for growth, would be strongly implementing training that has a multi-faceted approach to ensuring equity across the school. Ms. Snow continued to share the following:

This [approach] will be an ongoing intentional effort to ensure we are culturally responsive to the needs of our students. More than ever before, teachers will be focused on building positive and respectful relationships, and highlighting ways for families and communities to work together to support and advocate for our students.

Ms. Snow also mentioned the district launching a new approach to literacy as this approach included a systematic process for teaching phonics and can build students' comprehension through knowledge and vocabulary development. Vocabulary development was one of the most important areas, while also being one of her special education students' greatest deficits. The district, according to Ms. Snow, would now encourage teachers to communicate with parents often. As such, there would be more emphasis on teachers creating a user-friendly webpage, like a blog, to help communicate information to students and parents. She noted that we must keep the design simple and include the following: telephone numbers, homework assignments, project dates, rules and procedures, classroom schedule, and pictures. As teachers, she continued, we must provide parents both a clear channel and an open-armed approach to their children's classroom. In doing so, we must give parents a variety of options (text message, email, newsletter, website, phone) to help cater to different communication styles. Opening the communication lines would help her establish a rapport and build a solid partnership for the entire year. On the same accord, Ms. Snow mentioned a few times in her interview that technology is of interest to her, and she would like to grow in her knowledge of available tools.

I need to learn how to use products like Zoom [a video conferencing platform] to create whiteboard videos. Zoom would be useful for enhancing written instructions that would allow me to show my struggling readers how to do something, like a comment on a blog. Words work well for giving directions, but just as in any how-to manual, images can make all of the difference between confusion and clarity, especially with my special education population.

Teachers' Needs

All special education teachers in their individualized interviews mentioned in some fashion the power of mentorship. When asked how would the campus or district can create an effective mentorship (or instructional coaching) program, Ms. Snow mentioned that the biggest impact of special education teachers' mental health and retention rate happened before they stepped into the classroom –university's (and alternative certification) teacher education programs. As she was set to retire in a few months (as of the time of writing), Ms. Snow reflected on past colleagues. She shared stories on wonderful special education teachers who left to become a general education teacher or left the field of education entirely due to a lack of preparation. She shared remarks from general education teachers not getting adequate training during their teacher's education programs (the researcher again can attest to the lack of training in teacher's education programs). Ms. Snow said the following:

Colleges do not prepare you for real teaching. You learn on your own - first year; second year; third year. [...] They do not teach you in college of what you really going to have in the classroom and consequently many

teachers began their careers without the strategies they need to manage student learning which leads to them leaving the school. We learned on the job.

Ms. Spring and Ms. Summer once again echoed the same sentiments, reflecting on their personal experience and needing to have mentorship as another way to have professional development. It should be noted that professional development sessions did not have to be a sit and get session but more ongoing feedback in an intimate, personalized setting. Ms. Spring also shared her mentorship experience, and it was similar to Ms. Angel and Ms. Betty's mentor relationship. Ms. Spring shared that she had a great experience with her mentor.

She helped me. She took the time to actually show me, not just tell me what to do. But she actually would stop what she is doing to come and show you how to do everything and explain all the steps that I needed, and I liked that they were able to work with her. I had a principal that worked with her that allowed her to give those time

As evident in Ms. Spring's anecdote, there was a major factor in why her campus' mentorship program was a success – the backing of her administration, echoing the other two participants' belief that a successful inclusion program lies within the instructional leaders of the campus. Ms. Spring had a principal and diagnostician whom both worked with her and the mentor. She was given time to work together with her mentor during the workday. Topics ranged from showing Ms. Spring and another fellow first-year special education inclusion teacher about required paperwork or instructional techniques to use in the classroom. Ms. Spring realized having like a good mentor like that and having

principals that work with the mentorship was at most critical to retain teachers. She knew (and the other two participants, as well as the researcher, can attest) that it was really hard to show somebody something outside of the day as not having students there would diminish the experience overall. Ms. Spring continued to share the following:

She was able to show us stuff while she was teaching, so I do want to see different techniques—she would have her resource kids in there—she will show it to you with her kids at that moment. When she taught you, you were trained, and that was real training. To me, that was really good. I am telling you the principal works with her because she was a really good mentor.

After Ms. Spring shared that story with the focus group, the other two participants showed interest in that being at the current campus when the researcher asked if there were any additional comments on the professional development program.

Researcher-Participant's Reflection of Teacher's Needs

Due to my experience as a former special education teacher and current presenter, I, as the researcher-participant, highly believed there should be a need to have effective administrative support in the schools to promote a positive culture. Promoting a positive culture would help grow an inclusive environment for all students and educators to work together. Because of my students not meeting standards on state assessments at the beginning of my teaching career, I believed that all teachers should have constant support on research-based implementation strategies in the classroom from the get-go. The state and national standards are changing, and as such, teaching practices would need to change. As I reflected on my own experience as a presenter, I felt that there should be

professional development sessions provided in a variety of formats for keeping students interested and connected in every core subject. There should be a balanced ratio of qualified teachers, and as such, districts should offer stipends and rewards based on growth on the teacher's side as well as their students. There was a saying in the district that if a district's teacher seeks employment elsewhere due to higher pay, they will get chosen quickly, and as such, a top priority should be to figure out incentives to stay in the district.

We must not forget about the parents as they need help too. Due to Covid-19, the parents became in a way more of the primary avenue in receiving instruction, and they may be frustrated on ensuring that their children partake in some learning opportunities as they may not have the skills to teach new skills to their students. When I was reading my journal entries to prepare for this study, I came upon this gem from when I was going to school to be an educational diagnostician:

Every grading cycle, I will invite parents of the students who are new to the Special Education program (both initial and transfer students) to a presentation; I will also invite parents who have students already in the program and who would like a refresher. The presentation will not have specialized language (jargon), and the information will be presented in a clear and very organized format. When I am presenting information, I will provide examples (using pseudonyms, of course) to further explain certain concepts, and I will not read off the slides. If needed, I will have a translator, preferably trained by the district's Special Education department, to assist during the presentation. The format of the

presentation will allow a small group of parents to ask questions in an “informal” setting without feeling overwhelmed.

This idea of walking through unfamiliar water with the parents could also be applied in the Covid-19 learning landscape. The campus could set up a special night for special education students to get questions answered. Once a week, the special education department would be available for tutoring for both the parents and the students. The students could require a more intensive, intimate, live instruction since the studied district is currently exploring the asynchronous model of virtual learning (a model of using recorded videos and supplemental activities and not relying on live teaching). Overall, with this pivot to virtual learning, the parents/guardians of students who are in the special education program could feel more at ease due to additional support for their students. Hopefully, it would lead to more and more parents/caretakers willing to contribute ideas and information regarding helping their children.

Summary

Due to the pandemic of Covid-19, education needs to shift focus on *helping* students, parents, and educators. The researcher split this section based on students’ needs and the teacher’s needs. At the end of the interview experience, the researcher also reflected on the experience. Overall, high expectations for all students would be a critical part of the learning environment. The belief of teachers, administrators, and parents that a student can and would succeed in school often makes it possible for the individual students. We, now more than ever, need to break down the barriers to equity and that we always challenge all students to maximize their achievement.

Summary

Chapter IV discusses the results from the study –more specifically, the themes that emerged after data analysis of the participants’ interview responses. The researcher also used her journal entries and her experiences to reflect along with the three special education teachers chosen for this study. These themes revolve around the past experiences of the study participants; around the teachers are managing the expectations in present-day; and around the future direction of the district’s special education program.

Chapter V:

Discussion and Conclusion

Overview of the Study

This chapter discusses the findings of the research as it relates to Water Independent School District's special education program. The district is currently undergoing an audit with the overall special education program. The district has still retained the status of needing interventions from the state agency in the school year in which the study would take place (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The study focuses on the perception of special education teachers regarding their professional development program available to them and whether it meets their needs as teachers in a newly reconfigured elementary campus.

Chapter I discusses the need for effective professional development support via the campus and district-wide via the eyes of Ms. Jen Angel and her struggle as a special education teacher in the Water Independent School District. Based on the informal observation projected regarding teachers like Ms. Angel district-wide, there is a need for intervention regarding technology integration and instructional support in addressing the needs of students.

Chapter II discusses that with professional development, special education teachers can be more prepared to address concerns (and thus limiting burnout). To have a more robust special education program, districts are recommended to have administrators deeply involved in getting paraprofessionals and special education teachers into effective professional development.

Chapter III discusses the study's methodology in detail. The study is done to determine the perspective of special education-focused professional development. The area of study is in a large urban city within the state of Texas (Water Independent School District), and the three special education teachers selected for the study are interviewed. The responses are transcribed, and the data is analyzed for themes. This study is considered a narrative case study qualitative research design, and the data is presented as a story about the participants' experience with professional development for their field of employment.

Chapter IV discusses the results from the study –more specifically, the themes that emerged after data analysis of the participants' interview responses. These themes revolve around perspectives of the current state of preparedness of inclusion special education teachers based on their experience; perspectives of the current state of professional development, addressing gaps in the district's inclusion program; and perspectives of the future direction of special education.

The researcher will now share further recommendations to enhance the special education program based on interview responses from the special education teachers. Overall, the data supported the researcher's hypothesis that an effective strong, consistent special education-gearred professional development program is needed to support and retain special education teachers so that they can have the tools to service the students assigned to them.

Triangulation and Trustworthiness

Triangulation and trustworthiness strategies were also implemented in the study to ensure that the information gathered in the data collection was reliable. One way that the researcher did this was by doing member checking during the follow-up interview. Member checking gave way for the participants to reflect on their shared stories. Another way was to review the transcription for accuracy using the audio files from the interview to assist in gathering themes from the finding chapter. The researcher compared the study participants' individual and focus group responses to her reflective journal entries. The validation strategies can be considered the triangulation needed to ensure that the study was based on sound research. This study could be replicated if desired by other researchers looking to extend their understanding of the research questions involving the effectiveness of professional development for special education programs.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability is a crucial part of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process of triangulation established credibility in qualitative studies, such as this study on teachers' perspectives. The researcher understood it was best to also include herself as a person who would be able to bring additional insight to the topic at hand.

Items to Consider for Future Research

As I, as the researcher-participant, reflected on the main research question on how the special education inclusion teachers perceived the professional development program of their district, I found the study participants to be eye-opening. I did a self-reflection on how I would further enhance my own current professional development offerings. As the participants shared their responses, I remembered my time in the classroom five years

prior, navigating the same water as these participants, struggles, and all. Through it all, I, along with the participants, remained hopeful, but hungry for changes, within the special education inclusion program at the campus level and the district level. Results from the interview guided direction going forward, including the need for continuous training for veteran special education teachers and the ongoing support from administrators and their diagnostician.

Noddings (2013) writes that teachers “are under relentless attack today and, if we value education and the democracy it supports, we should protest this attack and put an end to it” (p. 152). Teachers “should be treated as we hope they will treat their students; those who are having difficulties should be helped” (p. 154). This statement reigns especially true for special education teachers in urban schools.

Again, there is an anecdote within the district that any special education teacher who worked in this district would be picked up immediately by surrounding districts, so what is this particular district doing to retain/support these teachers? It should be noted that since the study has begun, the Water Independent School District is taking steps toward supporting their special education teachers. However, it may not be fast enough to stop the bleeding of highly-qualified teachers as they begin to consider retirement or consider leaving the district (or role).

Investigating Strengthening Co-Teaching Relationships

Schools similar to where Ms. Angel was at during her years teaching special education would need to consider assisting its faculty in strengthening the co-teacher relationship in the inclusion classroom. There were situations where the administration team had to be brought in to mediate between conflicts between general education

teachers and special education teachers at Ms. Angel's campus. Each of the general education and special education teachers at the campus has a strong knowledge base of content and pedagogy. With specific strategies regarding collaboration, it is the hope that the students in the special education program would meet passing standards and continue to show growth on future state assessments.

With a strong professional development, misconceptions would be eliminated. The special education program is expanding to more teachers due to more students being identified, especially at the elementary level. The general education teachers may be going off misconceptions that are outdated or based on past experiences, and these misconceptions affect the inclusion model in the classroom. Case in point: At Ms. Angel's campus, a class was split often. This situation was common district-wide, as reflected in the researcher's journal entries as a presenter (attendees would share the same sentiments during the researcher's training). General education students were with teachers of records, and special education students were with the special education teacher in another classroom. When the researcher was in the classroom, some classes had the general education teacher teaching all of the content, and special education teacher's role was minimized. That lack of partnership caused harm to the progress of the students in inclusion. As a result, it could be recommended that general education and special teachers go to sessions together that would benefit them (topics as it relates to collaboration and instruction).

Investigating Types of Professional Development & Effects of Burnouts

It is now established that professional development overall is essential. To extend the research, the study would require another design to see what kind of professional

development sessions is needed to minimize the effect of burnout in the district's special education teachers. This is where an experimental design, the traditional and preferred way to conduct quantitative research, comes into play (Creswell, 2014, p. 294). In the experimental design method, the researchers would test options (format) of professional development geared toward special education teachers. This direction would allow the researchers to see whether it makes an impact on an outcome –in research, it would be considered as a dependent variable (which is minimizing the effects of burnout on Special Education teachers). It is important to control all variables that influence the outcome except for the independent variable (which would be the intervention program on the Special Education teacher's well-being) (p. 295).

For this experimental design study, the researcher(s) will identify and gain access to individuals and sites; identify what types of information would answer the research question; design protocols to collect and record the information obtained, and administer the data. The participants would come from the same district of the narrative case study (Water Independent School District). The researcher(s) would focus on special education teachers, so considered to be the sample of the target population of teachers. Scores from Maslach Burnout Inventory from special education teachers who would be part of this study would determine the grouping for the intervention program (categories are of the following: "High-level Burnout," "Moderate-level Burnout," and "Low-level Burnout"). Matching is the process of identifying personal characteristics that influence the outcome and assigning individuals with that characteristic equally to both of the experimental and control groups (Creswell, 2014, p. 299).

For the experiment, the researcher(s) would need to have access to a network of special education teachers with three unique characteristics: type of burnout (as determined by the level scored on the Maslach Burnout Inventory); gender (males versus females), and type of students (in the inclusion setting versus specialized settings). The treatment variables would be reviewed; these are independent variables that the researcher would manipulate to determine their effect on the outcome or dependent variable (p. 301). In this case, the researcher(s) would look at the type of treatment given regarding the type of program (access to customized professional development and without). Each special education teacher in both groups (control group and experimental group) would be submitting a journal entry via Google Docs, a commercially available online word processor. The information from the journal entries would allow the researcher(s) to see a trend and see the effectiveness of a stronger professional development program. At the end of the program, the special education teachers would come together and discuss their thoughts, overall concerns, and other pertinent information. This experimental design can also extend to administrators as they are often seen as the instructional leaders of the campus and would need to be supported in ensuring the students are serviced in the least restrictive environment.

Recommendations

Overall, within the past decade, Water Independent School District hosted professional development designed for faculty members in special education. However, sessions were geared toward paperwork and legal obligations - and understandably so. The special education teachers were encouraged by program directors and diagnosticians to attend sessions aligned with their assigned content areas. But these sessions did not

specifically address the needs of students who often have low reading ability and processing skills (and behavior that manifested over time). Recommendations, as outlined in this section, could be topics for such professional development sessions going forward. Again, as it relates to this study, feedback from the study's participants, as well as others in the "front lines," would help create more in-depth specialized training.

Recommendation #1: Focus on Technology Integration

Based on existing literature and information obtained from the researcher's interviews of the three special education teachers, the researcher sketched possible topics that would expand into a series (see: "Appendix B: Sample of Professional Development"). The sessions of technology integration to assist in students meeting their individual education plan would be offered to the teachers and administration of the Water Independent School District. Follow-up sessions would take place via individualized mentoring sessions as well as the use of an evaluation instrument that would determine the effectiveness of the four-part program. Resources would be provided to the participants as well as a professional reading list. Student work samples would be used to showcase the effectiveness of the resources discussed in the presentations.

Recommendation #2: Focus on Behavior

Within the interview data, there was a discussion on topics related to the role of administrators (Ms. Jennifer Spring, interview, 2020). The most popular topic among the participants' response was discipline and dealing with extreme behavior, as evident in Ms. Angel's situation when she was assaulted by a student in front of her other students. Behavior concerning special education students is a difficult route because there are

specific rules to discipline. Placing a student in an alternative setting without the proper protocol in place would open up litigation to the school district and campus. It would be recommended that the administration is focusing more on the social-emotional learning needs of special education students – with a positive social-emotional outlook, students would be able to focus more on academics.

Recommendation #3: Grow Future Leaders and Mentors

Administrators who are unable to keep with the physical and mental demands of working in often high-need campuses in urban education can have a significant impact on the well-being of their team members and teachers who work with them (basically creating a domino's effect). Riveros et al. (2013) study the topic involves the use of teacher leadership and its impact on retention (p. 1). One of the themes that stick out in the research is that teacher leaders require “flexible structures in the school that facilitate the development of trust and collegiality with their peers” (Riveros, 2013, p. 9). This flexibility would mean that current administrators (especially administrators overseeing special education programs) would need to open opportunities to these future leaders to take risks and experimentation in a safe and open environment, including having a chance to mentor teachers on aspects of special education. Overall, once the teachers experienced the broader context of their role and potential leadership in their campus/district, they “often reported an aspiration to have more of an influence at the district and provincial levels in order to contribute to systemic change” (p. 11). If there was a way for Ms. Angel to be supported in what she did for the campus, maybe she could have made changes that would have benefited everyone instead of the draining morale situations that she was in the middle of at the campus.

Recommendation #4: Focus on Building Family Connections

Overall, parents are of the most important keys in bridging the gap between school and home. Actively promoting parental involvement throughout the year is essential to the success of the school. Ms. Snow shared in her interviews that, as teachers, “we must provide parents both a clear channel and an open-armed approach to their children’s classroom.” This statement rings true, especially during the age of Covid-19, in where schools, at a moment’s notice, could move to a virtual setting. In this type of setting, students have to learn at home with their parents or caretakers. Essentially, schools need to rethink the entire concept of parental involvement during the age of Covid-19.

We especially need to involve parents of students in the special education program during Covid-19 as parents may be feeling lost on how to truly accommodate their students. Some parents may be uncomfortable in teaching concepts when their child needs it, due to either a language barrier or not having the prerequisite knowledge for that specific concept. Like educators, parents can face burnout and need more guidance on what to do. To teach parents on concepts taught in core classes is an uncommon professional development topic because up to now, it was thought to be little need for it – even though there should have been a process in place before Covid-19. Schools need to strengthen that area by providing support to parents via live virtual conferences or providing additional resources for their students. Schools would then be able to build a stronger rapport that would hopefully continue when Covid-19 passes, and full-time face-to-face learning begins again.

If the parents have trust that schools are doing their best for their children, then the parent would be more open to talking with the faculty/staff members. There should be constant and consistent updates regarding the progress of the child. Essentially, the virtual learning model can provide a way to support the family even more. However, it should be noted that to help teachers to complete this particular task, teachers should be able to partake in professional development aimed at using parent communication tools available to them and be supported in this new way of learning and involving parents by administrators' backing.

Recommendation #5: Review Retention Rates

Another recommendation is to review the retention rate of the teachers and have an exit survey when resigning from the district if it is not already included. Retention is a prominent topic that is discussed in education. Using a mixed-method study, Swars et al. (2009) review teachers' perceptions of teacher retention and what can be done to retain highly-qualified teachers at an at-risk school (p. 168). Based on the interview and observations in the Swars' study, the teachers' common themes are that of the values shared among colleagues; the student population in which they serve; the rapport of the teachers with the administrators at the campus; the daily life experience of the teachers; and the collaboration among their fellow teachers (Swars et al., 2009, p. 172). Furthermore, the style of leadership can affect teacher mobility.

Based on the Swars' study and the researcher's study on the effectiveness of professional development, districts would need to provide variety for both general education teachers and special education teachers. Again, the effectiveness of the inclusion portion of the special education program would require a strong partnership

between the team teachers. Furthermore, there should be communication between the diagnostician and administrators on updates from the district, so that teachers could plan effectively. Again, without effective and efficient support needed, then all of the educators' and administrators' emotional well-being is at risk and may desire a different field if the stress and workload get overwhelming. Based on the Water Independent School District's current state-monitored status and increased enrollment and identification of students who are receiving in-class support within the special education program, the district would need to recruit and retain highly-qualified teachers. This goal could be achieved with a strong professional development program that allows for additional flexible types of professional development (self-paced webinars is an example).

Recommendation #6: Individual Coaching and Intensive Interventions

Concerning Ms. Angel in our cautionary tale highlighted at the beginning of the paper, she had Ms. Betty guide her during that rocky first couple of years. A recommendation would have individual coaching sessions, possibly led by teachers who would like to grow into a leadership role in the future. Overall, with a strong leadership team who is tuned in the issues of the campus and work efficiently to resolve issues, including supporting teachers, the teachers involved in the special education program would be more inclined to stay. Participants in need of more help in navigating the uncharted water of special education would be involved, of course, in more intensive mentoring & coaching sessions in terms of building a strong, inclusive community to support new ideas.

Recommendation #7: Current Program Evaluation

Water Independent School District would need to understand that to revamp a program takes time and extensive program evaluation. Dr. Leah McAlister-Shields, a professor at the University of Houston, is overseeing a longitudinal program evaluation of teachHOUSTON, a teacher preparation program at the university, was interviewed by the researcher in March 2019. When asked program evaluation means to her, Shields stated it deals with the assessment specifically, not so much of the evaluation itself even through that the word “evaluation” is in the overall title itself. She elaborated that evaluators, along with the clients, are looking at ongoing, continuous improvement. Program evaluation is used to identify resources and what input would generate specific output within the program itself. Program evaluation is not of roadblocks, but with proper preparation, everyone would benefit. The same concept would apply here. Professional development in Water Independent School District would need to be continuously looked at.

The researcher knows that there will be resistance to changes; the changes should be phased gradually, and teachers and administrators should be supported every single step along the way. The studied district is recommended to keep in mind that successful special education programs require all stakeholders to be understanding and open to ideas. Accountability is needed for a strong inclusion program. There will be personality clashes between special education teachers and general education teachers. It is up to both parties to find a medium to avoid negatively affecting the students' academic progress. Duties within the special education department need to be divided equally among everyone; time needs to be reserved for collaboration between co-teachers. The

researcher also recommends that changes of this magnitude would need to involve current special education teachers in leadership roles. How can one meet the needs of the students and ensure that students grow when they are under our care if there is a gap between reality and illusion?

Final Thoughts

Ms. Angel's experience is a cautionary tale of how having an inefficient special education program can affect the well-being of teachers. I, as the researcher-participant, truly can see myself in Ms. Angel. When I was a special education teacher, I thought about how I could help others similar to me, deeply feeling lost, insecure, desperate. I found the answer after attending a curriculum conference that lacked at that time sessions for special education—through professional development. I took the initiative in expanding professional development sessions available in the district because it was heartbreaking for me to know others were facing burnout and feeling hopeless. The takeaways from professional development overall would help teachers to navigate their professional life to the best of their ability. For this study, in particular, I initially wanted to see how the studied district's reconfiguration affected how special education teachers new to the elementary level were supported, or not supported. It since grew to me wanting to take away a better understanding of the perspectives of teachers regarding professional development for the overall special education inclusion program in both strengths and areas of needs. Like fixing a house, we need to see first where exactly the areas of needs of the studied district are and go from there.

This study was conducted during a time of uncertainty and controversy sparked by the worldwide pandemic of Covid-19. This event essentially shaped the way that

traditional education looks like—overnight, school systems shifted into emergency mode. As I write this conclusion, there is now a raging debate on reopening schools and educators taking to social media and peaceful assemblies, expressing concerns about not having a voice in reopening schools for face-to-face instruction. I thought about how this was essentially the norm in education even before Covid-19—teachers in the front lines not being asked their opinion. I then realized this observation proved fitting for my topic.

Leaders at the district and campus-level nationwide really should and want to involve the teachers in planning out these potential topics for professional development. Teachers have wonderful ideas on how to make the inclusion program more effective and just want someone to just listen. While the studied district did indeed have current teachers who are presenters, there is more buy-in for teachers if they get to propose topics and go from there. Furthermore, having administrators' support can help address issues outlined in the researcher's journal entries and the participants' three rounds of interview. Essentially, by letting the teachers take ownership of their inclusion programs, then the district and campus are on their way to a stronger inclusion program at the elementary level. Districts across the nation should promote mental health and teacher's efficacy, especially in special education, one of the hardest fields of education to fill with certified, qualified applicants.

Overall, no matter how experienced special education teachers are, they are “expected to be prepared” to face a “daunting list of responsibilities and expectations” as well as juggling to address the needs of the students whom they served (Collins, 2017, p. 214). Ms. Angel was a plucky, hard-working, young professional during her first years of teaching in special education. However, the experience changed her and gave risen to her

self-doubt, which is still to this day. Support is needed to retain educators like Ms. Angel. Noddings (2013) writes that the United States should recognize that education here is multifaceted. As professionals, teachers should also “expect to justify what they do when they depart from it in recognition of their deeper responsibility to students” (p. 8). It was difficult for Ms. Angel to fight for her students, but she had to do it.

Again, we must not forget the reason why Ms. Angel and others like her, despite challenges with the department, stayed in education: the students. Ayers & Alexander-Tanner (2010) echoes the same sentiments as Noddings. Ayers et al. (2010) remind educators that spaces should be visible; students “should sense their own unique power and potential” and knowledge “like love, is something you can give away without losing a thing” (p. 62). Ayers overall encourages educators not to give up. It is difficult, yes, but not impossible. The work of a teacher is “exhausting, complex, idiosyncratic, never twice the same,” but teaching is a calling that impacts other callings –it is “an activity that is intensely practical and yet transcendent, brutally matter-of-fact” (p. 111). Ayers encourages educators in finding allies, fighting what is right despite peer resistance; continuing to grow; building rapport with children and families, and having balance. With that being said, Ayers’ words hold true for special education teachers.

Conclusion

Overall, through this study, we can continue to develop insight into the influences that professional development has on special education teachers’ capability to carry out their duties (especially educators involved in the inclusion program). Reflection is key to growth. The continuous evaluation of the improvement of the professional development program can lead to innovations within teaching practice for the studied district and

beyond. The interviews of the three chosen special education reflect the need to improve current offerings so the students may achieve their academic and behavioral goals.

The researcher does not offer any level of guarantee that the recommendations outlined in the study would resolve the issue quickly and efficiently. However, the study of the perspectives of including special education teachers does give a promising start to reboot the professional development program district-wide. In short, I give all of my love to all special education teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals for working tirelessly to ensure that all students' needs are being met. This group of professionals will always be near and dear to my heart. I, no matter what I am in, would always fight for them and provide support, guidance, mentorship, and customized professional development whenever possible.

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Appendix A: List of Interview Questions

The following questions are included in the initial interview:

1. “How did you get involved in special education?”
2. “Where do you feel are your strengths in terms of your current position in special education?”
3. “Where do you feel are your areas of improvement in terms of your current position in special education?”
4. “Define professional development in your own words.”
5. “What professional development have you attended in the past? Why did you choose those professional development sessions?”
6. “What is your overall opinion of an effective special education inclusion professional development class or program?”

The following questions are in the first part of the follow-up interview:

1. “What characteristics do you look for in an effective professional development class or program?”
2. “Where do you see the direction of special education inclusion professional development in this district within the next five years?”
3. “What kind of topics would you like to see offered? “
4. “What format (webinars, etc.) do you prefer? Why?”
5. “Are there personal experiences tied to these aforementioned topics?”

After taking a break, the participants would answer the following questions in the second part of the follow-up interview:

1. “What do you believe the types of professional development should be available for diagnosticians?”
2. “What do you believe the types of professional development should be available for administrators?”
3. “What are your thoughts on the special education inclusion program at the campus and district-wide?”

The focus group interview questions are the following:

1. As a special education inclusion teacher, did you ever feel there was a time that you felt emotional burnout? Why? How?
2. Do you believe that professional development could help alleviate some of the issues?
3. Do you think that academics or behavior should be the main focus of the professional development sessions? Why?
4. There was a half-day professional development session at the beginning of the 2019-2020 year. Do you think that it helps with the misconceptions compared to the first year of the campus as an elementary? Why or why not?
5. All of you were at this campus when it was an intermediate and due to the reconfiguration, became elementary. Do you think that you were prepared for the change? What could the district do differently to support you?
6. All of you mention in some fashion the power of mentorship. How do you think that the campus or district can create an effective mentorship (or instructional coaching) program?

7. If you can speak with the executive director about changes in professional development, what would you recommend?
8. Any additional comments about professional development in particular?

Appendix B: Sample of Professional Development

Topic: Be Proactive, Not Reactive: The 411 on Special Education

Audience: General Education and Special Education Teachers; Admins in Urban School District

- A. What is Special Education?
 - a. What is Special Education?
 - i. Students receiving academic support (via in-class support and accommodations)
 - 1. Some students receive additional (related services) such as counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy, etc.
 - ii. Students who receive only speech therapy (pull-out services)
 - b. What are the differences between accommodations & modifications?
 - i. Accommodations: Changes how the information is accessed (e.g., oral accommodations)
 - ii. Modifications: Changes what the information is accessed (e.g., single-step problems vs. multi-steps problems)
 - c. What is co-teaching?
 - i. Finding the right team members
 - ii. Six approaches to co-teaching
 - d. What is considered a small-group?
- B. How do we create a plan of action?
 - a. How do we obtain & analyze data to target students for interventions?
 - b. How do we create a plan of action?

- i. What specific skill(s) I need the individual student to work on?
 - ii. What is the student's learning style (visual, auditory, tactile)?
 - iii. What are the student's areas of strengths/interests?
 - iv. How would the student be instructed to work on that skill?
 - v. Are there other students who can be grouped with that individual who need that extra boost?
 - vi. How is behavior in certain settings?
 - vii. Is the targeted individual under any special populations?
 - viii. How can we monitor progress? What tools are available?
 - c. Why do we need technology integration?
 - i. Allow students to go at their own pace
 - ii. Allow teacher to reach many groups at the same time by differentiating by Content; Process; and Product
 - d. What does differentiated instruction look like?
- C. What easy and online tools are available?
 - a. How do I know what tools are right for me?
 - i. Does it have a way to track progress for your students?
 - ii. Can your students able to follow along with some to no guidance?
 - iii. How does it impact the student's growth?
 - b. Discussion of selected resources
 - c. Playground of said resources & additional findings

D. What is it now?

- a. Using the information that you learn today, what can you take to your classroom (and campus) concerning Special Education and technology integration?

Appendix C: University of Houston IRB Approval



DIVISION OF RESEARCH
Institutional Review Boards

APPROVAL OF SUBMISSION

March 12, 2020

Monica Loas
msloas@uh.edu

Dear Monica Loas:

On March 10, 2020, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE MS. ANGEL?: A VIEW OF PERCEPTIONS ON EFFECTIVENESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ELEMENTARY INCLUSION INSTRUCTION
Investigator:	Monica Loas
IRB ID:	STUDY00002109
Funding/ Proposed Funding:	Name: Unfunded
Award ID:	
Award Title:	
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loas, Monica HRP-502, Category: Consent Form; • Response to Corrections 2020.03.10, Category: Other; • Loas, Monica HRP-503, Category: IRB Protocol; • Interview Questions, Category: Study tools (ex: surveys, interview/focus group questions, data collection forms, etc.); • Loas, Monica's Recruitment Email Flyer , Category: Recruitment Materials;
Review Category:	Exempt
Committee Name:	Noncommittee review
IRB Coordinator:	Maria Martinez

The IRB approved the study on March 12, 2020; recruitment and procedures detailed within the approved protocol may now be initiated.

As this study was approved under an exempt or expedited process, recently revised regulatory requirements do not require the submission of annual continuing review

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documentation. However, it is critical that the following submissions are made to the IRB to ensure continued compliance:

- Modifications to the protocol prior to initiating any changes (for example, the addition of study personnel, updated recruitment materials, change in study design, requests for additional subjects)
- Reportable New Information/Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others
- Study Closure

Unless a waiver has been granted by the IRB, use the stamped consent form approved by the IRB to document consent. The approved version may be downloaded from the documents tab.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system.

Sincerely,

Research Integrity and Oversight (RIO) Office
University of Houston, Division of Research
713 743 9204
cphs@central.uh.edu
<http://www.uh.edu/research/compliance/irb-cphs/>

Appendix D: University of Houston IRB Modification Approval



DIVISION OF RESEARCH
Institutional Review Boards

APPROVAL OF SUBMISSION

May 13, 2020

Monica Loas
msloas@uh.edu

Dear Monica Loas:

On April 15, 2020, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Modification
Title of Study:	IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE MS. ANGEL?: A VIEW OF PERCEPTIONS ON EFFECTIVENESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ELEMENTARY INCLUSION INSTRUCTION
Investigator:	Monica Loas
IRB ID:	STUDY00002109
Submission ID:	MOD00002731
Funding/ Proposed Funding:	Name: Unfunded
Award ID:	None
Award Title:	
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loas, Monica HRP-503, Category: IRB Protocol; • Loas, Monica's Recruitment Email Flyer , Category: Recruitment Materials; • Loas, Monica HRP-502, Category: Consent Form;
Review Category:	Expedited
Committee Name:	Noncommittee review
IRB Coordinator:	<u>Maria Martinez</u>

The IRB approved the following revision on May 13, 2020.

Summary of approved modification(s):

Due to Covid-19 cases increasing across the world, the researcher is ensuring that the participants and researcher herself is practicing social distancing (safely). The changes made in the study are reflecting on that change - wherever it is applicable (the attached paperwork/the research itself), the method of collecting data will be over the phone as opposed to face-to-face. It will be still at a location convenient for the participant and the

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participant will be able to choose a time to do the research. I will modify the HRP - 503 and HRP - 502a documents to reflect these aforementioned changes.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system.

If your study meets the NIH or FDA definitions of clinical trial, or may be published in an ICMJE journal, registration at ClinicalTrials.gov is required. See the [UH ClinicalTrials.gov](http://UH.ClinicalTrials.gov) [webpage](#) for guidance and instructions.

Sincerely,

Research Integrity and Oversight (RIO) Office
University of Houston, Division of Research
713 743 9204
cphs@central.uh.edu
<http://www.uh.edu/research/compliance/irb-cphs/>

Appendix E: Participation Information

Text of Recruitment Email:

Hello, my name is Monica Loas and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at the University of Houston. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research study to understand the current state of the professional development program in the district. I am recruiting special education teachers meeting the following criteria: being employed in the district in which the study takes place within the last five years and currently serving as a special education teacher who is currently serving students in the inclusion setting.

Participation in the study is estimated to be 2 months; 3 visits for no more than 1 hour each via phone calls. You will be participating in three rounds of interview via phone calls: an initial interview; a follow-up interview; and a group interview with the other participants. Again, the interview will take no more than an hour per session at a location and time convenient to you via phone.

Participation is voluntary and there are no consequences for choosing not to participate or withdraw from the study. The confidentiality of all participants will be maintained. The data will be kept secure and password protected.

Any additional regarding the project can be directed to me. Ms. Monica Loas at 832-693-1619 or mloas2010@gmail.com. Please email me if you are interested in participating in this study along with your phone number that you would like to use for this study.

Respectfully,

Ms. Monica Loas
Doctoral Candidate
University of Houston

Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study:



Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

Title of research study: IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE MS. ANGEL?: A VIEW OF PERCEPTIONS ON EFFECTIVENESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ELEMENTARY INCLUSION INSTRUCTION

Investigator: Monica Loas, Doctoral Dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Cameron White

Key Information:

The following focused information is being presented to assist you in understanding the key elements of this study, as well as the basic reasons why you may or may not wish to consider taking part. This section is only a summary; more detailed information, including how to contact the research team for additional information or questions, follows within the remainder of this document under the “Detailed Information” heading.

What should I know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Taking part in the research is voluntary; whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide, and can ask questions at any time during the study.

We invite you to take part in a research study about professional development for special education inclusion teacher because you meet the following criteria: being employed in the district in which the study takes place within the last five years and currently serving as a special education teacher who is currently serving students in the inclusion setting.

In general, your participation in the research involves interviewing off-campus individually via a phone interview and as a group via a phone interview at the end of the research period.

There is no known risk. You will receive compensation for participation. This consent document can be scanned (or signed digitally) and sent to the researcher’s email on file at the university.

Detailed Information:

The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

Why is this research being done?

The study is being done to describe the current state of the professional development program in the district.

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for 2 months; 3 visits for no more than 1 hour each.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about 3 people in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

You will be participating in three rounds of interviews over the phone: an initial interview; a follow-up interview; and a group interview with the other participants. The interview will take no more than an hour per session at a location and time convenient to you (via phone). The research will be completed by May 2020 and the interview will be done before the end of June 2020. You will be asked a series of questions in each session. An example of a question is "What is your experience with special education students?" You may skip questions if it makes you uncomfortable.

This research study includes the following component(s) where we plan to audio record you as the research subject:

I agree to be audio recorded during the research study.

I agree that the audio recording can be used in publication/presentations.

I do not agree that the audio recording can be used in publication/presentations.

I do not agree to be audio recorded during the research study.

You may still participate if you do not agree to be audio recorded.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can choose not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you. Choosing not to take part will involve no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled. Your alternative to taking part in this research study is not to take part.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. If you stop being in the research, already collected data that still includes your name or other personal information may be removed from the study record.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There are no foreseeable risks related to the procedures conducted as part of this study. If you choose to take part and undergo a negative event you feel is related to the study, please inform the principal investigator.

Will I receive anything for being in this study?

Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study

You will receive compensation in the form of an Amazon \$10 eGift card (sent over email) upon exit of the research study.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

There are no known benefits to you from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits to others include improving the profession of fellow special education teachers with the insight of current professional development.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Your taking part in this project is anonymous, and information you provide may not be linked to your identity. If you choose not to take part of the research (withdraw), the data collected would not be used. We may publish the results of this research. However, unless otherwise detailed in this document, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, you should talk to Monica Loas, Principal Investigator, mloas@uh.edu, 832-693-1619, or the Advisor for the principal investigator Dr. Cameron White at University of Houston College of Education, cwhite@uh.edu, 713-743-2255.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also talk to them at (713) 743-9204 or cphs@central.uh.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

May we contact you regarding future research opportunities?

In the future, our research team may be interested in contacting you for other research studies we undertake, or to conduct a follow-up study to this one. There is never any obligation to take part in additional research. Do we have permission to contact you to provide additional information?

Yes
No

Consent to Take Part in a Human Research Study**Signature Block for Capable Adult**

Your signature documents your consent to take part in this research.

_____ Signature of subject	_____ Date
_____ Printed name of subject	
_____ Signature of person obtaining consent	_____ Date
_____ Printed name of person obtaining consent	