

## **Why Stay? A Phenomenological Look at Special Education Teacher Retention**

**Jennifer J. Lesh, Ph.D.**

Lynn University  
Ross College of Education  
United States of America

**Karen Shatz, Ph.D.**

**Judy Harris-Looby, Ph.D.**

**Catherine Roberts, Ph.D.**

Barry University  
United States of America

### **Abstract**

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*This phenomenological study examined the teaching experiences of veteran special education teachers (SETs) and why they chose to remain in a special education teaching setting. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework, veteran SETs were interviewed and asked to describe the experiences and situations that have influenced their decision to remain in special education. Three themes and two sub-categories emerged as their motivation for persevering: (A) a calling from above, (B) standing up for the underdog, (b) personally committed to my kids, my babies, (C) beating the bushes with the apathetic, (c) against my ethical judgment. Specific information related to these themes is reported with implications for hiring practices of special education teachers and future special education teacher retention/attrition research.*

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**Key Terms:** Veteran special education teacher (SET), stayers, attrition, retention

The turnover of special education teachers (SETs) can have a devastating effect on establishing high quality programs for students with disabilities (SWD). Researchers report that special education teachers leave the field in less than five years of teaching experience and at a faster rate than their general education colleagues (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Williams & Dikes, 2015). The most recent information reveals that U.S. schools are experiencing a continuing severe shortage of qualified special education personnel. In the 2012-2013, school year the U.S. Department of Education reported that almost 17 percent of the entire special education workforce either moved or completely left the field (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). Evidence shows that there are even more severe shortages in urban areas and remote rural areas (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Lopez-Estrada & Kayama, 2010). Attrition is a significant factor in the demand for SETs (Ingersoll & Smith, 2001; Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Many school districts struggle to find qualified personnel to teach their special education population. Ninety-eight percent of the nation's school districts report SET shortages (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippin, 2004; Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). When district administrators are continually replacing SETs, they have difficulty ensuring that their academic programs are consistent in pedagogy, philosophy, and implementation (Brownell, Smith, McNellis & Miller, 1997; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). There is a direct connection between veteran SETs and the learning gains of SWD (Billingsley, 2004b; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). In addition, in accordance with current federal and state general and special education response to intervention initiatives, veteran SETs often are responsible for implementing Tier 3 interventions to diverse struggling learners (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Continual SET attrition is also detrimental to school district budgets.

The ongoing induction and training of new SETs cost school districts more money than it would to pay veteran SETs their salary steps (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008).

There has been extensive research investigating SET attrition through quantitative and mixed methods approaches (Billingsley, 2004b, Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). These survey and phone interview studies provide a basic understanding of the factors that influence special education teachers' intent to leave the profession, such as no administrative support, poor working environments, lack of mentorship from a veteran SET, and little or no professional development. These studies, however, do little to portray the deep, rich stories of SETs who have remained in the field or the critical transition points that sustain their persistence. This prior research fails to generate a process or substantive theory or to allow veteran special educators to frame their lived experiences (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell, et al., 2009; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010).

Two conceptual frameworks have been put forth that explain the factors that influence SETs' profession decisions in the special education field. The first, Billingsley's (1993) model proposes that career decisions are swayed by three types of factors. Employment factors and external factors (i.e. societal, economic, and institutional), in other words, these factors are outside the scope of the SET and the school district where the SET is teaching. According to Billingsley (1993) personal factors (demographic, family, and cognitive/affective) may directly or indirectly influence a SET's decision to stay or leave the field. Billingsley (1993) posits that when working conditions and professional qualifications are not favorable, SETs are likely to experience less incentive, and therefore have less commitment to the district, school and special education profession; whether these SETs actually leave depends on myriad situational personal, social, and economic factors.

The second conceptual framework put forth to study the decisions whether SETs remain or not is offered by Brownell and Smith (1993) which is based on an adaptation of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977). This framework integrates four nested, interconnected systems. Brownell and Smith (1993) argue that a special education teacher's decision to leave or stay is based on many of these interconnected systems, such as decision making power, administrative support, and professional growth.

No qualitative studies have been published using audiotape interviews asking semi-structured open-ended questions of current veteran SETs with more than ten years of special education teaching experience (Ketrone, 2007; Prather-Jones, 2003). This study will attempt to learn from veteran SETs and why they stay in the special education field. This study's findings may help to increase SET retention rate, improve special education teacher mentoring programs, and guide administrators in assisting special education teachers when they are going through difficult periods prior to leaving the field.

## **Rationale**

There is a need for both quantitative and qualitative studies in the SET attrition and retention body of knowledge (Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Quantitative studies in SET attrition and retention research provide the statistics that have assisted in defining the crisis in SET attrition and retention (Carlson, Chen, Scroll & Klein, 2003; Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). However, these quantitative studies do little to convey the thick, rich descriptions as to why SETs choose to leave or remain in the field; little is known about how SETs conceptualize their work (Brownell et al., 2009). Several renowned special education researchers, such as Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) argue that qualitative approaches do provide science-based evidence that can inform special education policy and practice. To that end, rich accounts cannot be elicited through quantitative work; they must be discovered through the essence of qualitative research, more precisely through phenomenological SET attrition and retention studies.

## **Research Design**

The purposive sampling was sought through the School of Education at a local university in the Southern United States. The sampling was integrated through identified cases of interest from veteran SETs who know other veteran SETs who would be interested in discussing their experience (Creswell, 2007). SETs with more than five years of special education teaching experience and still currently teaching in the special education (not administration) field in some capacity were considered in the criteria for inclusion. The field of participants was left after the fifth participant because experiences and themes became reoccurring (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Table 1 lists demographics for the individual participants (by pseudonym) in the study.

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants*

| Name   | Years of teaching | type of certification | current position      |
|--------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Barbie | 29                | traditional           | Lead SET              |
| Dusty  | 12                | alternative cert.     | RtI/inclusion teacher |
| Liz    | 19                | alternative cert.     | Fulltime SET          |
| Lynn   | 18                | alternative cert.     | RtI/inclusion teacher |
| Marge  | 26                | traditional           | RtI/inclusion teacher |

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms. Participants were given the option of choosing their own pseudonym. Three participants choose to do so.

**Data Collection and Processing Procedures**

The interviews were set up for a time that was convenient for each participant (Creswell, 2007). Data was collected from the participants through semi-structured, in-depth, audiotaped interviews. Each veteran SET was interviewed for approximately 60 minutes and asked two broad general questions (Moustakas, 1994): (1) What has been your experience as a veteran special education teacher? (2) What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences as a veteran special education teacher? Participants were also given two other open-ended questions as prompts to illicit more discussion (Creswell, 2007): (3) What have you done to keep yourself in the special education setting longer than the average special education teacher? (4) What would you say to a beginning special education teacher just starting his or her career?

**Data Analysis Procedures**

For each participant transcription, every germane statement was listed as to why SETs stay in the special education field. Each statement was tested for the following: (1) Did it contain a snapshot of essential and sufficient elements for understanding why SETs remain. (2) Was it possible to summarize and label the essential elements? If not, the statement was eliminated. If so, then it remained and became part of the invariant constituent of the experience. The invariant constituents were clustered into themes of the SET experience were clustered. Then the clustered themes were compared to each participant's transcript and description of the themes, and participants were asked if the themes were compatible with their transcripts. If the themes were not relevant to each participant's experience, they were eliminated.

**Findings**

From the five participants' transcriptions, 48 significant statements were identified. Table 2 includes some examples of significant statements with their textural meanings.

Table 2

*Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Veteran SETs and Textural Meanings*

| Significant Statement  | Textural Meaning  |
|--|---|
| For me special education teaching is a vocation. As much as it would be easier to do many other things, I really believe it is what I am supposed to be doing. Because every time I go away, I come back, even when I stray I always come back to the most difficult of the most difficult.  | This is a calling to service, no other job or career will suffice. She assumes she is to be doing this missionary work with the most complex SWD.   |
| I told my supervisor at the district I could no longer service that school because I was out there beating the bushes with people that didn't understand special education. I need to be in a school where I have direct impact on students.   | Frustration with educators that do not understand the needs of SWD is a continual occupational hazard, therefore change in teaching venue to a school with like-minded educators will improve perseverance and resiliency.  |
| There are so many students that have influenced my career as a special education teacher. I have looked at a number of student's that have gotten scholarships and gone on to college that I have impacted their life and I think that those are things that I am most proud of. Those are the ones who said they would never read, never pass all the classes, those are my babies.   | Personal commitment of SETs toward their SWD is tremendous. There is a close relationship between the SET and the SWD, a bond that cannot be broken. It is the sense of commitment of the SET making sure the SWD succeeds. |
| There are days when I say, how can I go on, but at the end of the year when administration asks me what else I would like to teach, I put nothing else but special education, E/BD, not SLD, not pullout, nothing else.  | Personal commitment to SWD. Teaching SWD is tough, days will sometimes be hard, but it is rewarding.  |
| I think in my case it is innate. It is as if I was always meant to do it, I was born to do it, it is fulfilling.   | Teaching SWD is a calling.  |
| I know, I spent the first eight years of my life being told there was something wrong with me. There wasn't anything wrong with me; I am a Ritalin child. I just needed someone who understand that I have a hard time paying attention when you talking, give me books, sit me in a corner, let me read it, I'll come back and regurgitate anything you want me to. But don't sit there and lecture to me because I can't process it. | Personal life experience has shaped the way she teaches. She can relate to the SWD, because she herself was treated as a SWD when she was a child.  |

Six themes emerged from organizing the textural meanings into clusters. Table 3 consists of an example of the thematic clusters that emerged from their textural meaning.

Table 3

*Example of Thematic Clusters Derived from Textural Meanings*

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Personally Committed

Find away into their heart  
Tap into SWD's intelligence, you can find away to change their future  
If you can keep them focused, deal with their bad days, their good days, they are smart  
I believe that one student at a time, I will change their future  
I really work hard to sit my kids down and explain their disability  
If you help them understand why they don't, they will understand how to help themselves  
A lot of very interesting experiences, some very rewarding, some very frustrating  
The kids know they can come to me when they have an issue  
It is really hard to be a SET, it takes longer than seven and hours a day  
It takes dedication and willingness to do what it takes  
If you are not willing to do what it takes, I would say don't do it  
It takes a lot of money out of your own pocket to make it work

Standing up for the under dog

I really like working for these kids, fighting, being a champion for the underdog  
Mrs. B. taught me to read and it changed my life  
I have always been one who fought for the underdog  
Even as a little kid I stood up for people I felt were being treated unjustly  
I have beaten up a few boys  
I do not want to ever hear a child cannot learn because he is in special education  
Or that he cannot be in your class because he is in special education  
I met many general education teachers who went into teaching for the same reason I did,  
to help the underdog  
I think it is a kid issue

A Calling

I am a nurturer; I like to help people  
I can't see myself doing anything else  
I think that is why I am put on earth, to work with those types of children  
I really believe it is innate  
I love to help people, which is my passion  
I think it is a faith thing  
I think God wants me to do it  
I think it is a vocation  
I think I was called by God to teach students with disabilities

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*Theme 1: Personally committed to teaching SWD.*

Several participants noted their commitment, loyalty, and dedication to teaching SWD. Marge explained her personal commitment to SWD.

“The kids know that they can come to me when there is an issue, they know they can come to me when they need to help to study after school. The ones who know they can sit in my office and take a test. The ones who text me over the weekend and say they need help and I will call them and work out something.”

Marge went on to say,

“There are so many students that I can refer to that have influenced my career as a special education teacher. I am a high school person. I have looked at the number of students that have gotten scholarships and gone on to college that I have had an impact on their life, I think that those are the things that I am most proud of. Those are the ones who said they would never read, never pass all the classes, those are my babies. It gives me pride, it gives me satisfaction, it makes me happy if I can touch one kid’s life, and I have touched many, then I feel satisfied, full. I really do. I look at the cup as half-full, and want to change someone’s attitude to look at the cup is half-full. These kids come to high school, beaten down for so long, you can’t do it, you won’t do it, and you’ll never pass. And you know, still to this day kids that I have recently left, send me drafts and I will fix and send it back to them. You know some teachers won’t do that, but that is how I have kept in touch with kids, but that is just me.”

Liz believes it is a must to go above and beyond for many students, “to go that extra mile, because that is what we are here for (laugh). I believe we must help make positive changes in the students.” Liz looks at her commitment to her special students as a way of life not just a job or career, “it is probably a work ethic, because I think with teachers, we don’t have a go in at 9 and leave at 5 kid of job. We don’t, it is not just a career. It should be life changing for the students that you’re helping.” Liz feels that her experiences with working with SWD will strengthen the SET’s commitment to the special education profession along the way.

The longer Dusty works with SWD the more intense her commitment and resiliency has become. There have been a lot of very interesting experiences, some very rewarding, some very frustrating, I had a child I had to pull off a John Deere tractor, and when we finally got him off, he held what looked like a wooden spear to his throat. I have been punched in the stomach when I was pregnant, but you get over it. They don’t mean it; they don’t realize what they do. (Dusty)

Teachers always say emotionally handicapped kids are a just behavior problems and no one ever wants to give them the opportunity. If I could just find away into their hearts, I could just teach these kids. They’re not mentally incapacitated. If you could find a way so that kid could function in school, if you can get that them to understand they are smart. If you can tap into their intelligence, you can find a way to change their future. I truly believe you can change a child’s future with the right education. I believe it now; I believed it back then when I was that 12-year-old kid making fun of Bob on our street. If only someone showed Bob how to wear his pants. If anyone would have showed that kid how to act, no one would have picked on him. (Barbie)

Barbie’s commitment to SWD has only gotten stronger with her years of SET experience.

Barbie took that opportunity to go back to teaching high school SWD when it arose, “I do believe that one student at a time, I work with 287 students, and I do believe that if I can touch at least half of them I will change their future. I believe that.” As a seasoned veteran SET, she has strong feelings about the legal paperwork attached to SWD. She believes too much time and energy is spent on the paperwork and not enough time on making the SWD understand what his or her true disability is and how he or she can advocate for his or her needs.

I have found that if you work one on one with a general ed. teacher and help them understand the learning style of the child and help the kid understand it, but our society has been come so far into the paperwork, that we forget that if the kid doesn’t really understand their disability they are never going to be successful. I work really hard to sit my kids down and explain to them that you have a visual motor integration issue; here is why you are not successful. You have an auditory memory problem; you need to say to your teacher, please write it down for me. Those are my experiences. If you help them understand why they don’t, they will understand how to help it. (Barbie)

Lynn has very sound, straightforward words of advice to beginning SETs. She explained:

It is really hard to be a special education teacher, because it takes a lot longer than 7 and half hours a day. It really does, it takes a dedication and willingness to do what it takes.

I would say if you are not willing to do what it takes, I would say don't do it. I would tell them that what they are doing is very honorable and to keep that in mind. (Lynn)

*Theme 2: Standing up for the underdog*

Barbie has had some positive administrative role models; she describes one particular principal: He would stand up at faculty meetings and say I do not want ever to hear a child cannot learn because he is special education or that he cannot be in your classroom because he is in special education. I spent a lot of time with him learning the intricacies of working with other professionals who did not understand special education. (Barbie)

When Barbie was asked what her secret was for staying in special education for the long haul, she expressed:

I don't really think it is a special education secret. I think it is a kid issue. We don't do that for kids anymore. We think they are all college bound. And they are not, they all learn differently. Special education kids look lazy or have behavior problems, if I can touch one teacher in my school, one reading teacher, I can change how she looks at my kids, she will look at all kids differently, that is why I stay in special education. (Barbie)

Lynn commented on this frustration:

It is sad, cause I really like working for these kids, fighting for these kids, being a champion for the underdog, I do, I really do. It is sad because many people don't care, but I DO care. I still have students that keep in touch with me. One kid in particular still keeps in touch so does his parent, he will say from time to time that Mrs. B. taught me to read and changed my life. He was clinically depressed when he started working with me. (Lynn)

When asked how this accomplishment made Lynn feel, her reaction was:

Fabulous that is why I do what I do. Because it is about individual kids for me. I have always been one who has fought for the underdog; you know even as a little kid; I have always stood up for the people I felt were being treated unjustly. (Lynn)

*Theme 3: A Calling from Above*

For Lynn, her beginning in special education was meant to be her professional path. Lynn explains: Honestly, I think it is a faith thing, I think God wants me to do it, I really do, I know that is corny, but that is true. I think it is a vocation, I really do, and different people have different vocations. I think I was called by God to do it. (Lynn)

This strong belief has served well to strengthen Lynn's commitment to students with disabilities (SWD) and her resiliency to remain in the special education profession longer than most SETs.

I guess it is just part of my personality. I guess for me special education teaching is a vocation. As much as it would be easier to do many other things, I really believe it is what I am supposed to be doing. Because every time I go away, I come back, even when I stray I always come back to the most difficult. (Lynn)

Marge realized her passion for helping people and went to college first to become a nurse: "I am a nurturer. Ironically, I started off in school being a nurse. I liked all the classes; I just didn't like seeing the people suffer, and so I changed to another role where I could work with people and help them. (Marge)

When asked what her secret is for staying in special education as a teacher for so long Marge emphatically responds, "Oh my goodness, I am very passionate about special education! I can't see myself about doing anything else. Anything else!"

Once Dusty acquired a special education teaching position working with children with emotional handicaps, she knew she had realized this was her life's work.

"I happened to be at the right place at the right time at FBA training and this woman who was sitting there, whom I didn't even know, asked me why I was at this training. I told her I really wanted to be a special education teacher.

I think that is why I am put on this earth, is to work with those types of children. Teaching special education has been absolutely the most rewarding experience of my life. Honestly, I felt like I have reached out to these children and I have gotten to them in some way, each one of them in some way. I would never go back to general education. (Dusty)

Dusty was asked what her secret was to staying in special education longer than most SETs. She passionately replied,

I don't know if there is a secret, I really believe it is innate. I love to help people, which is my passion, whether it is the kids or anybody who needs me. I think, in my case it is just innate. It is as if I was always meant to do it, I was born to do it, it is fulfilling. It is rewarding you know. I have a great relationship with these kids. I understand that it is high burnout in this position, but I don't see it any other way. (Dusty)

#### *Theme 4: Change is good/SET evolution*

In Barbie's 29 years as a SET, she has held various SET positions. In one particular SET position, she had the opportunity to work with several new high school special education programs. While in this position, she realized she needed to have more contact with SWD and more control over the fate of these SWD.

I told my supervisor at the district I could no longer service that school because I was out there beating the bushes with people that did not understand special education. I need to be in a school where I have direct impact with children. I don't think we can change the mindset of administrators in a school, I think all you can do is hope to change the mindset of one individual student at a time. I learned very quickly that most high schools don't really care about helping ESE kids. And when my opportunity arose for me to go back to a high school, I did. (Barbie)

Lynn's integrity and ethics have led her to continue down her path as a special education teacher. Lynn explained:

Why was I going to stay there and pretend that it was okay and stay there because it is close to home, they have been here for 40 years. I just can't do that, but there are some teachers who can do that. I think that is the wrong attitude, it is complacency. I would rather put myself where I am in a little uncomfortable situation. I would rather be somewhere in a new place, with a new curriculum or something. As opposed to accept to something that is not right; I just can't do that; I don't get how people can. (Lynn)

When asked what Lynn's secret is for staying in special education teaching longer than the average SET, her reply was,

I have been in it almost twenty years. I think change is good. I think I've always been searching for where I was supposed to be. Because I keep finding myself saying, I can't do this, when they're asking me to do something. I think for me, it's just making a change. I can't do this; I need to do something else. (Lynn)

Lynn also attributes lifelong learning to keeping her resiliency and commitment fresh, she stated:

I always go back to school, I have done Wilson, all have been geared to students with difficulties, it is getting more defined with reading. Always looking for where I am supposed to be doing. I take a course in this; take a course in that. (Lynn)

As a veteran SET, Liz expressed words of wisdom to beginning SETs,

You may get burned out after a certain number of years, so maybe you change what you teach and create new challenges. That is what I believe. I would tell the young special education teacher always to look at what you are bringing to your field of expertise and are you finding a need, and filling a need for your students. Hopefully then they will feel rewarded enough they will become one of the veteran special education teachers of the world. (Liz)

Lynn has very sound, straightforward words of advice to beginning SETs. She explained:

A new teacher is going through a learning process of her own. Therefore, I think as a new special education teacher, you would have to remember you are learning too, and that your best intention is to help the kids. As long as you give it your best, you are going to effect some change. Just hold on to that. If you are willing to listen and open up it will be easier for you. Because I know, the ones who have not stayed have said they have it all under control, or I can handle it myself. They need to listen to the people who have been there. They may have stayed! (Lynn)

Marge's experiences in different special education teacher settings have made her the veteran SET she is today. "I have evolved. I started with high school, I went to elementary school for a year and then when to middle school for about five years and was in the classroom for seven years." Over Marge's 26 year SET career, the transformation that has progressed in special education has assisted in making her the veteran SET she is today. When discussing this SET evolution experience Marge says:

I think we're looking at a whole different change today. When I started in special ed., they had a classroom cap of 15, and I had a fulltime teacher aide. We have come to where there is no cap and you can put 40 kids in a class and still call it special education with no extra people. But the reason we lose special education teachers is because we now have people going just to take the certification test. We have lost a lot of special education teachers, with the new highly qualified in the subject area. Why not just teach the subject and not have to do the paperwork. The paperwork is enormous. It is ongoing; it never stops and some of the parents can be as needy as their kids. But, the reason I would never leave special education is we have lost so many good special education teachers. We have people coming in and taking the special education certification who have never taught. I feel like that is a disservice to our students. I want to teach that student that needs that something a little extra. (Marge)

For her own longevity in special education Marge had this to say:

I think there is a lot of things I have done, I have changed schools, I have changed jobs, I have changed areas. I think the change has helped. I think that every time you change, it is a different challenge, and I like a challenge. Maybe that is why I stay in special education, because I like a challenge. I am not afraid to change. (Marge)

Marge specifically points to her change to keep her vibrant as a special education teacher, "I think one of the reasons I have stayed in special education so long, is because I haven't stayed anywhere for too long." She alludes to SETs becoming idle and complacent in their profession, "but you know the people who are afraid of change, just keep staying stagnate. I have changed teaching positions numerous times." Through Marge's various SET, experiences she has evolved into a veteran SET who is still personally committed to each SWD she touches.

After three years of feeling frustrated in general education and continually gravitating to her special education colleagues for guidance, Dusty decided she needed to change academic settings.

I knew many of my colleagues in the special education department at the high school and I would talk to them and learn so much from them; I absorbed all this, and really listen to them. Then one day I said to myself I need to be reaching out to kids who need me. I know every student needs a good teacher, but I felt a bond with these kids that were struggling academically and behaviorally and really needed someone to talk to. I just felt like somebody needed me, I can't put my finger on it, but I don't know why, I have this place that I am supposed to be and it is not here. It is not here in an affluent high school and working with general education students. (Dusty)

This epiphany was monumental for Dusty, "I am not one to like change very much, but I finally made a decision and said I need to do something else. I needed to work with children and especially kids who needed my emotional support." Dusty went on to say:

Each one of these kids touches my life in a certain way and it is a bonding situation. Also, when I see their academic growth, I know it is because their getting emotional stability and love first and that is when they make the academic gains. That is it, I just see these kids the same as any other child, but needing that nurturing and love and things like that. It has been really hard not to bring these kids home. (Dusty)

This revelation has increased Dusty's resiliency and commitment as a veteran SET. When asked what advice she would give to a beginning special education teacher (SET), Dusty explained:

Give it time, hang in there, there is so much to learn; I know everybody is different. I probably had a three-year learning curve before I felt comfortable with what I do in the classroom. I would tell them if you don't have the patience, you will learn the patience. Every time I got frustrated with a kid who acted out, I would turn it around and put myself in their shoes, and say what if that was me or that was my child. I think that was the most important thing to do, to put myself in their shoes, their families' shoes. It is not their fault you know; something is happening for a reason. Have patience with it; give yourself a break. (Dusty)

#### *Theme 5: Beating the Bushes with the Apathetic*

Barbie emphatically discussed her frustration with some administrations she has worked:

I worked with four different principals, setting up special education programming. It was the day a high school principal said to me, kids are only special ed. when they are at school, and then in the community they are not special ed. I don't know why you are still worried about these retarded children. That was when I realized that I didn't want to be there. (Barbie)

Another frustration Barbie sees is SETs who leave to become administrators,

Because most people don't feel the way I do, but my experience has been that when most teachers who start off in special education leave special education to become assistant principals or principals, they forget their roots. They forget that there are many children who are different learners and there are many children who are never labeled special education that needed it, but just weren't labeled. They are dropouts; they are all dropouts. I just don't believe in that. I am sorry. (Barbie)

Liz described her general education experience as not fulfilling.

I actually did enjoy the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade honors English, and to teach the honors kids was interesting. I felt like it wasn't enough; what I was doing to help those kids. I didn't think it was everything I could offer to do with the special students. So, I got focused and set out on the track of teaching special education. (Liz)

Administrators and general educators felt Liz was wasting her teacher talent by desiring to teach in special education. Liz stated, "I had an administrator saying what are you doing? Why are teaching ESE? Why don't you stay in English?" Along the path, Lynn has not been without her disappointments and frustrations with the school system and the bureaucracy. Lynn shared some of these frustrations:

You are an elective, and you teach them the underpinnings of language so they can be successful in middle school, but the model at the time, (snicker), I didn't feel like we were doing anything. I didn't think we were effecting change in the language-impaired kid. I was doing academics separate from their classes, and really, I should have been in their regular classes helping them with content rather than pulling them out. I just didn't think I was effecting change, I wasn't helping them get better, I felt like it was haphazard; we were required at the time they were doing these scripted lessons in their class, but they were boring and the kids were bored and not involved. It just didn't fit, so I left. (Lynn)

When Marge was asked about her collaboration with general education teachers, her frustration became even more pointed:

I know they are not prepared for special education students at all! I know they are still not prepared today, and they don't want to deal with it, with giving them accommodations. They still don't get it that accommodations give special education students a fair shot. I have to sit them down and tell them. But they still go behind me and the students' backs and say to other general education teachers, do you believe he/she is getting extra time! (Marge)

#### *Theme 6: Childhood Experiences*

Barbie's childhood experiences such as witnessing her neighbor Bob go through alienation and teasing have assisted in shaping her compassion for standing up for the underdog.

Barbie stated, “There was a mentally handicapped child in my neighborhood, and everyone in my neighborhood made fun of Bob, even my family made fun of Bob, I always felt bad for Bob.” This experience left a lasting impression on Barbie; she realized Bob was different, he did not attend school, she recalls, “There was no special education in my town. Bob didn’t go to school; Bob was made fun of a lot. I know now he was a profoundly mentally handicapped child. At the time, I didn’t know those terms.”

Interestingly, Barbie herself was labeled mentally retarded as a baby and this experience has aided in her resiliency and personal commitment to special education. Barbie shared:

At nine months old I had spinal meningitis, and I was neither dead nor was I mentally retarded. But because the doctors told my parents that those were the two options, I was raised as a mentally retarded child for the first four years of my life. And when I went to kindergarten and got sent home the very first day of school because there was something wrong with me, my parents finally took me to a doctor and the doctor said I wasn’t retarded, but I appeared to have the tendencies of a hyperactive child. I was put on Ritalin and taken to a private school. I always knew I was different from my brothers and sisters. I spent the first eight years of my life being told I would never be successful because there was something wrong with me. There wasn’t anything wrong with me; I am a Ritalin child. I just needed someone who understands that I have a hard time paying attention when you talking; give me books, sit me in a corner, let me read it, I’ll come back... I will come back I will regurgitate anything you want me to. But don’t sit there and lecture to me because I can’t process it. I want to sit there and tap my fingers, tap my foot. Because of my experiences I decided to go to school, I went to State College to be a special education teacher. It was my passion. (Barbie)

## **Findings**

*Why they stay* is a study describing the lived experiences of veteran SETs and making meaning of their experiences through a social constructivist lens. No previous qualitative studies have focused solely on describing the phenomenon of veteran SETs who have remained in the special education teaching profession for over ten years using in-depth, face-to-face, audiotaped interviews. The results of this study are intended to fill the gap in SET retention literature.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of the study include the sample size and demographics of the sample. There were only five co-researchers in the current study, all of whom are white females. Another limitation could possibly be that all the participants came from the same urban school district in southeastern United States. Therefore, different findings may be interpreted from a different sample size, and from a more diverse cultural and linguistic SETs’ population.

## **Discussion**

When co-researchers were asked what their experience has been as a veteran SET, they all began by explaining their passion and commitment to special education teaching, which included a commitment to assisting, and teaching SWD, even the toughest of the tough students. The co-researchers expressed a committed fortitude toward SWD, this finding is similar to the Brownell et al. (1995) study that described veterans SETs “can-do” attitude. This investigation also found that veteran SETs were able to cope or find a way to solve difficult teaching or student situations.

Many co-researchers gave details about their special education teaching path. Just as Ketron’s (2007) study found that SETs who could make changes in their special teaching profession were more likely to remain in the field, the co-researchers in this study responded similarly. A number of co-researchers have had more than three special education teaching jobs in the same school district. They discussed how this change of special education teaching positions had influenced their perseverance and resiliency. This finding also falls in line with the latest statistics from the United States Teacher Follow-up Survey (Goldring, Taie, Riddles, 2014).

Ketron (2007) further found that if the SET could relate to the SWD he or she was more likely to stay in the special education teaching setting. In this study, standing up for the underdog was a common theme among the majority of participants, which could be interpreted as their relating to their SWDs. They felt compelled to right the wrongs that others had imposed on their SWDs. One co-researcher was mesmerized by the details of her experiences as a youth; they will forever be at the core of her special education beliefs. This was the most poignant example in the study of how participants relate to their SWDs.

While describing their passion and commitment to special education teaching they all professed that they had been called to special education teaching. Some mentioned being called by God, others by an innate power while a few mentioned they were following the path that was laid out for them. All believed that they were meant to be teaching SWD. This interesting finding is not mentioned in any special education retention literature.

When co-researchers were asked what situations typically influenced or affected their experiences as a veteran SET, all expressed their positive experiences first. Brownell et al. (1995) also discovered veteran SETs who showed higher self-efficacy and greater commitment to the profession were more inclined to remain in the field. Assisting and making a difference with struggling students was the most mentioned experience by the veteran SETs in this study, substantiating Brownell's studies.

Similar to Prather-Jones (2003) findings of administration support being critical to SETs remaining, their frustrations with general education teachers and administrators were the highest negative influence mentioned by the co-researchers. Several veteran SETs mentioned general educators not understanding SWD as a major cause of frustration. A few co-researchers described their appalling experiences with administrators who were not compassionate toward SWD, and instead displayed their prejudice toward them openly. These incidents created discourse between administrators and the veteran SETs and ultimately the veteran SETs chose to leave those teaching settings and moved to special education settings that were more responsive to the needs of SWD. Fortunately, the school district was large enough to accommodate such moves by these veteran SETs.

### **Conclusion**

The co-researchers' personal commitment to SWD in this study, their penchant for standing up for the underdog, and their belief in a calling from a higher order to the special education profession have set a foundation for these SETs to become veterans in their field. The co-researchers' experiences have changed or transformed them into veteran SETs. Along the educational path, their foundation and transformational experiences have increased their fortitude, resiliency, and staying power in the special education teaching setting.

### **Recommendations and Implication for Practice**

As we approach the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are still experiencing a shortage of qualified people to fill vacant SET positions (Brownell et al., 2009). In order to fulfill vacant SET positions with quality SETs who have the potential to become veteran SETs, based on the current study we would recommend that recruiters, administrators, and human resource personnel administer commitment to the profession, self-efficacy, resiliency, and teaching style surveys to prospective candidates as part of their interview process. These surveys are not the total answer, but they may give the administrators and human resource development staff more insight as to which interview candidate is more likely to stay even when teaching situations become tough.

University and college special education training programs should look to veteran special education practitioners to advise, mentor, collaborate, support, and if possible, teach in these special education training programs. With words of wisdom and expressed passion from expert SETs who have fought for the underdog, pre-service teachers will be exposed to the experiences and efficacy of those who have come before them.

### **Further Research**

A great deal remains to be learned about SET retention and attrition (Billingsley, 2004b; Billingsley et al., 1995; Brownell, Smith, McNellis & Lenk, 1995; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Smith, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). The current study may assist the quest to retain SETs in the special education classroom, but further research is needed about veteran SETs frustration with general education teachers and administrators' lack of empathy for SWD. Veteran SETs sense of calling to the profession should also be explored. Is there a common thread among other veteran SETs from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as other school district settings (i.e. rural)? Research why high movement and change from one special education position to another special education position exists should also be investigated, as the continual turnover of SETs is detrimental to SWD. In addition, this study may be impactful in the further exploration of SET efficacy.

We conclude that the need to retain veteran SETs is a cost effective endeavor for both school districts' coffers as well as for the affective education of SWD. Therefore, it is necessary for those in charge of hiring and retaining SETs to consider the best candidate for the special education teaching position, rather than just a warm body to fill the vacancy.

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