SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS AND WORK STRESS: EXPLORING
THE COMPETING INTERESTS MODEL

By
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To the Faculty of Washington State University

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of LARRY DEAN BUSH JR find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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The purpose of this qualitative study was two-fold: (a) to explore K-12 special education teachers’ experiences with work challenges and perceptions of stress and potential burnout; and (b) to explore the usefulness of the Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model to explain their perceptions of stress and potential burnout. Four research questions were addressed in this study: (a) How do special education teachers describe their core values in regard to special education and their work motives? (b) How do special education teachers describe and interpret the rewards and satisfactions of their work? (c) How do special education teachers describe the challenges and dissatisfaction of their work? (d) How do special education teachers cope with challenges and attempt to succeed in their work?

Nineteen, novice and veteran special education teachers from 13 rural and urban school districts in eastern Washington State participated in this study. Open-ended interviews were the primary means of data collection. The data analysis used a constant comparative process and resulted in the articulation of four major themes: Who they are – special education teachers’
values and motives; special education teachers’ work challenges; special education teachers' responses to work challenges; and special education teachers’ affective responses to work challenges. These themes were compared to the Competing Interests Model, resulting in modification of the model. The revised model helps explains the work experiences of special education teachers. reflect manifestations of bifurcated school-based cultures created by ideologically based political arenas at the local school level.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the teachers who participated in the study and the many other passionate teachers dedicated to students with disabilities.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Fimian and Santoro (1983) described the increasing incidence of burnout symptoms in K-12 special education teachers eight years after the passage of the ground-breaking legislation, “The Education of All Handicapped Children.” Reflecting Fimian and Santoro’s research, there is a growing body of evidence related to attrition among special education teachers and the difficulty in filling these roles in K-12 schools. Nationwide estimates indicate approximately 4,000 special education positions went unfilled and 28,000 positions were filled by staff not fully certified during the 2000 school year (Eichinger, 2000). Fore, Martin, and Bender (2002) estimated that approximately 20 percent of special educators planned to leave the special education field within five years. Results from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) on 1,153 beginning special education teachers indicated that 50 percent intended to remain in special education until retirement (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig, 2002). In addition, Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, and Willig (2002) indicate that the greatest barrier to recruitment of special education teachers reported by school administrators was a shortage of qualified personnel. In Washington state, the Washington Education Association’s (2002) survey research found that 36 percent of special educators working in the field plan to continue in their jobs for the next five years. Finally, Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) found that the average special education teacher remains in the classroom for approximately six years.

Despite this research concerning special education teacher attrition and burnout, there is a lack of in-depth research that explores the personal experiences of K-12 special education teachers about these issues, especially in Washington State. While some researchers (Billingsley,
Brownell & Smith, 1993; Maslach & Leiter, 1997) have developed conceptual frameworks to explain the burnout and attrition of teachers in general, these do not address the unique contextual factors experienced by K-12 special education teachers. This study seeks to address this issue through an in-depth exploration of K-12 special education teachers’ experiences and perceptions with the goal of developing a conceptual framework that takes into account these unique contextual factors.

**Background**

Freudenberger (1974) was one of the first to conceptualize burnout in the service professions, such as teaching, as a chronic depletion of emotional energy, motivation, and commitment in response to the interpersonal demands of the care-giving professional role. Maslach (1976) further conceptualized burnout as directly related to the care-giving service providers underlying values and beliefs. Maslach’s three-component conceptualization of burnout is the most commonly accepted definition of burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). According to Maslach (2003), burnout is the stress that arises from the interpersonal demands in the work environment and is a pattern of emotional overload and exhaustion. Often referred to as compassion fatigue, the key dimensions of the burnout syndrome are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). Despite thirty years of research, teacher burnout and attrition has no direct indices or unified and predictive models; instead, researchers use indirect measures to discuss teacher burnout and attrition (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

Indirect measures of burnout include teacher characteristics, teacher qualifications, work environmental factors, and affective reactions to work (Billingsley, 2004). Research into teacher characteristics and personal factors include variables such as age, gender, race, (Boe, Bobbitt,
Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; & Singh & Billingsley, 1996), family relocation, pregnancy, and health (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995). Research into teacher qualifications include certification (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; & Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999), academic ability (Singer, 1992; Frank & Keith, 1984), degrees earned and teacher preparation (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Westling & Whitten, 1996). A synthesis of attrition research indicates the work environment is an important variable related to special education teacher’s job satisfaction and intent to stay (Billingsley, 2004). Variables addressed in the research literature include: salary (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Singer, 1992; & Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995), school climate (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; & Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999), administrative support (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Fimian, 1986; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Singh & Billingsley, 1996; & Westling & Whitten, 1996), colleague support (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Singh & Billingsley, 1998; & Westling & Whitten, 1996), colleague support (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Singh & Billingsley, 1998; & Westling & Whitten, 1996), colleague support (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Singh & Billingsley, 1998;) and support through induction and mentoring (Billingsley, 2002, Gold, 1996; Westling, Herzog, Cooper-Duffy, Prohn, & Ray, 2006; Rosenberg, Griffin, Kilgore, Carpenter, 1997; Rosenholtz, 1989; Westling, Herzog, Cooper-Duffy, Prohn, & Ray, 2006; & Whitaker, 2000).

More recently, the field of occupational stress has proposed conceptual models of teacher stress (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Ingersoll, 2001; Maslach, 1999; Thompson, McNamara, & Hoyle 1997; Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).
In addition, extensive research has explored the many variables that impact the attrition, retention, job satisfaction, and engagement of special education teachers (Billingsley, 1993 & 2004; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Brownell & Smith, 1993). Finally, Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) have articulated a teacher burnout model.

Research Problem

Special education teachers experience many sources of stress in their work (Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller, 1997; Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). The attrition and burnout of special education teachers is an ongoing, vexing dilemma for public education (Eichinger, 2000; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). While several models and conceptual frameworks attempt to explain teacher attrition and burnout in public education, very few models or conceptual frameworks describe the unique contextual factors of special education teachers’ work. In-depth qualitative studies are needed to provide special education teachers with the opportunity to use their own words to frame the issues from their perspectives and to describe how the day-to-day contextual factors associated with their work may contribute to job stress, attrition, and burnout (Billingsely, 2004). The Competing Interests Model developed for this study is an attempt to describe special education teacher’s unique contextual factors and to explain how these factors may lead to job stress or burnout.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purposes of this qualitative study were two-fold: (a) to explore K-12 special education teachers’ experiences with work challenges and perceptions of stress and potential burnout; and (b) to explore the usefulness of the Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model to explain their perceptions of stress and potential burnout. Since the context of special education
teachers experiences may vary across school settings (urban or rural) and career stages (novice or veteran), this study includes novice and veteran special education teachers in both urban and rural settings.

Four research questions are addressed in this study: (a) How do special education teachers describe their core values in regard to special education and their work motives? (b) How do special education teachers describe and interpret the rewards and satisfactions of their work? (c) How do special education teachers describe the challenges and dissatisfaction of their work? (d) How do special education teachers cope with challenges and attempt to succeed in their work?

Research Methods

A qualitative, phenomenological approach is consistent with the purpose and research questions of this study. The phenomenological approach assumes human experience is mediated through interpretation (Blumer, 1969; as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and is interested in the meanings people make of their experiences (Seidman, 1998). Qualitative research methods are consistent with this approach. Chapter 3 will discuss these methods in more detail.

Positionality

The reflection and self-disclosure required to express my positionality has been perhaps the most difficult aspect of developing this dissertation. While developing the conceptualization of burnout in special education discussed in the background section required careful reading and analysis of the research literature, it paled in comparison to fully articulating my experiences, motives, hopes, beliefs, and assumptions that led to this project. This project fits neatly within my career as a school psychologist and special education administrator; however, to stop there
falls well short of my experiences as a child of deaf adults (CODA) that led me to a career in public education in the first place.

As a CODA, I faced many challenges related to maturing, growing and fully enculturating within both the hearing and the “Deaf”\(^1\) worlds. I was born in the era before the American’s with Disability Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Education of All Handicapped Children Act. Assistive technology and accommodations for the deaf were rare or too costly to provide my parents with adequate access to the hearing world; consequently, it was my responsibility to be the “bridge” to the hearing world for my parents. As the oldest child in the family, I assumed many responsibilities at a young age. It was not unusual to see me translating for my parents at the grocery store, utility company, and even at parent-teacher conferences. Despite this early exposure to responsibility, the communication and isolation of my parents became mine by default, resulting in frustration, duality, and anger. In a sense, I occupied two different social spaces and could not figure out which space I was to occupy. My parents were not much help. They could not relate to the challenges I experienced; they were squarely within the Deaf world. Was I deaf or hearing?

My eventual response to my duality dilemma was to flee the Deaf world by joining the military. I immediately began taking night courses and weekend seminars to earn a degree in aeronautical engineering. Within two years, I had come close to completing two years of coursework from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University; however, my dilemma was not over. Try as I might, I could not become totally acculturated within the hearing world. To boot, I was just an average engineering student and still frustrated, angry, and bifurcated by the hearing and

\(^1\) Deaf culture defines two types of deaf communities. Individuals with an empathetic understanding of the ideological and ontological understandings of the deaf are described as part of the “Deaf world”; whereas, those who interact with the Deaf world without clearly understanding or supporting the ideological and ontological foundations of the deaf are described as part of the “deaf world”.
Deaf worlds. Three years of military service had not resolved my dilemma; however, I remained convinced that education was my key to success - and perhaps peace of mind.

To satisfy general university requirements, I took Psychology 102 at Wenatchee Valley College. By coincidence, the professor was a soft-spoken man with a mild hearing impairment. Psychology 102 was an immensely rewarding experience. I finally found a forum to explore my experiences and began to appreciate a fuller, more humanizing experience. That introductory class led to a world of reflection and action I was unable to access previously. Eighteen years later, I have come to appreciate a natural empathy for students with disabilities, their parents, and those that support them. I have found a social space between the Deaf world and the hearing world. It is a space all my own.

Similarly, I believe special education teachers occupy a social space that is neither squarely within the disabled world nor squarely within the non-disabled world. They occupy a metaphysically different space grounded in a liberatory praxis and disability centric value system. I shy from calling it an assumption and think of it as a strong hunch. Additionally, I believe this tendency to attempt to occupy two social spaces creates dilemmas and highlights the political nature of education. Education is inherently political. I do not seek to refute or validate the political nature of education. Consider it my assumption. The political nature of education and my experience in education also tells me burnout is a vexing dilemma. Consider it my other assumption. I do not seek to validate the concept of special education burnout in this project. Instead, I hope to contribute to not just the conceptual formulation of special education burnout, but a burnout model that honors the work and passion of those working directly with students with disabilities.
In conclusion, this dissertation is more than just career enhancement. It is a commitment to creating a more humanizing educational experience for students’ with disabilities, their parents, and special education teachers. It is an attempt to create what John Dewey referred to as a “…mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience” (as cited in Hansen, 2007) that fosters the “conscientizacao” (Freire, 1997) of the underrepresented, marginalized, and oppressed. Even more so, this dissertation represents a further step in my own humanization.

Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model

I contend a conceptualization of teacher burnout within special education is not complete without recognizing the role and history of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the socio-political and ideological foundations of special education. The Competing Interests Model developed here is at it’s core a transactional model. It frames special education teachers in the center of an interrelated community of students, parents, educators, and policy makers. Each person in this interrelated community has an interest in the actions and decisions made by the special education teacher; consequently, special education teachers find themselves managing and interacting within a community of competing interests. The central question to the Competing Interests Model is, “Whose interests do special education teachers represent?”

The Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model is my own conceptualization. It is based on an amalgamation of the burnout research of Maslach and Leiter (1997), the research of Wiesniewski and Garguilo (1997), occupational stress, critical race theory, and a disability centric perspective. Additionally, it relies upon the stages of practitioner development proposed by Skovholt (2001). It is also informed by my own professional experience in the field of special education. It is a layered, interactive model that frames special education teachers in the context of their immediate environments, reflecting the Job-Person Fit Model (Maslach &
Leiter, 1997) and the political and societal context of public education. The Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model is illustrated in Appendix A.

As mentioned earlier, the Competing Interest Model frames special education teachers in the center of an interrelated community. Conceptualized in this manner, the innermost layer of the model represents the demands placed on special education teachers from their immediate environment. These competing interests include other special education teachers, parents, students, administrators, and general education teachers. For example, special education teachers may feel pressured by general education teachers and principals to limit the type and amount of accommodations afforded to students with disabilities, as well as limit the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education setting. These varying and competing interests arise from differing ontological and ideological perspectives and results in a dual workplace culture (Falk, 2003; Firth, 1981). Each person has a stake in the work of special education teachers and acts to influence their behavior. This is what I refer to as the competing interests aspect of the model and is reflective of a disability centric approach to educational practices held almost exclusively by special education teachers.

The Job-Person Fit Model is transposed over the immediate work environments of the special education teacher and represents the underlying dimensions of the community and regional culture. Not quite as broad as the political and societal context, the Job-Person Fit Model is the intermediary between the special education teacher’s immediate work environment and the larger societal context. Within their model of burnout, Maslach and Leiter (1997) postulate there are six areas of mismatch between the person and the job. Specifically, those areas include workload, control, reward, values, fairness, and community. This aspect of the Competing Interests Model focuses upon the interaction between the special education teacher
and the community dimensions. Questions from this frame include “Does the community support the rights and the value of individuals with disabilities?” and “Does the community provide a sufficient tax base to ensure equitable workloads and necessary classroom resources?” A mismatch between the special education teacher and these six areas of the Job-Person Fit Model leads to an erosion of energy, involvement, and efficiency.

The broadest, outermost layer of the Competing Interest Model reflects the political and societal context of public education. This layer reflects the impact of the political and societal forces that shape public education. Similar to critical race theory and a disability centric perspective, this layer explores the junction of power, race, class, and gender with social activism, an ethic of caring, and barriers to inclusion for individuals with disabilities. In addition, it reflects the contentious social space created by federal legislation, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the American’s with Disability Act, Section 504, and No Child Left Behind, with local school culture and funding mechanisms. Does a disability centric perspective recognize the historical institutionalization of the disabled and conform to a social justice framework? Furthermore, if there is a disability centric perspective, what are the implications of this theory upon the lived experiences, job satisfaction, engagement, and potential job stress and burnout of special education teachers? Of course, this is a speculative departure from the standard analysis of job stress and burnout in special education; however, it may provide a fruitful venture into a new and comprehensive conceptualization of job stress and burnout in special education.

Another component to the Competing Interests Model is the stages of practitioner development proposed by Skovholt (2001). He reports that the novice practitioner is not prepared for the complexities and ambiguities of the working world. Novice practitioners rarely have
adequate cognitive maps to help them navigate the many problems and dilemmas they will face. Additionally, the novice practitioner may not have access to positive mentoring, may hold glamorized expectations, have porous boundaries, and have difficulty with legal and ethical considerations. Finally, many novice special education teachers experience acute performance anxiety and may be subjected to intense scrutiny by professional gatekeepers.

For the veteran teacher, Skovholt (2001) asserts that the key to maintaining professional optimism and enthusiasm is the degree to which the teacher engages in the caring cycle. Skovholt asserts, “Making positive attachments, being involved, and making positive separations with others in need of counseling, therapy, learning, and healing is, it seems, the core professional skill for practitioners in the caring professions” (p. 13). Often this is more difficult than one might imagine. In order to effectively engage in the caring cycle, teachers must be proficient in three types of skills: attachment, involvement, and separation. Each stage involves different skills and demands different activities of the teachers. For example, in order to engage in effective attachment the teacher must find a delicate and optimal balance between enmeshment and total disengagement with the student. In essence, the teacher must develop an empathetic understanding of the student’s world without becoming overwhelmed in the experience. Some teachers find this a very intuitive process, while others do not.

The final component of the Competing Interests Model is the four factors advocated by Wisniewski and Garguilo (1997). Wisniewski and Garguilo argue that burnout is most likely to occur in the presence of poor interpersonal interactions, irrelevant professional development, organizational complexity, and difficult instructional arrangements. In the Competing Interests Model, stress interacts and influences the coping mechanisms of novice and veteran teachers. Either the teacher reacts to stress with coping strategies that allow him or her to remain engaged
and satisfied, or the teacher reacts to stress with coping strategies that lead to dissatisfaction and burnout.

The inherit conflict of the layers of dual workplace culture, the Job-Person Fit Model, and the political context of public education create a heightened sense of anxiety for the novice and veteran special education teacher. Maslach (2003) asserts,

What is most destructive to a sense of community is chronic and unresolved conflict.

Conflict infuses the workplace with frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, disrespect, and suspicion. It tears apart the fabric of social support, making it less likely that people will help each other out when times get tough. (p. 14)

In summary, the professional world of special education is a community of conflict. Reflecting a dual workplace culture, this community of conflict is created in a shared social space between special education teachers, general education teachers, principals, special education directors, superintendents, parents, and students. This chronic, unresolved conflict places special education teachers at a higher risk for job stress and burnout. Current burnout research in special education does not reflect a unified predictive theory and does not take into account the unique contextual factors inherit to special education.
Chapter 2 – Review of Literature

The conceptualization of stress as a topic of scientific inquiry and occupational interest developed during World War II to improve soldier’s performance in combat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Burnout, on the other hand, has been a topic of scientific inquiry and occupational interest since the mid 1970’s and developed as a response to the increased caregiving professions (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976). This section will include five sections. The first section will provide an overview of the conceptual frames of occupational stress. The second section will provide an overview of the conceptual frames of teacher stress. The third section will provide an overview of the conceptual frames of career pathways of special education teachers. The fourth section will provide an overview of conceptual frames of special education teacher burnout. Finally, the last section will provide a brief overview of the historical context of special education and its relationship to critical race theory, liberatory pedagogy, and disability studies.

Conceptual Frames of Occupational Stress

Several modern events, such as World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, have stimulated interest in the concept of stress, the individual responses to stress, and the relationship between the environment and the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Many terms from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and physiology have developed over time to describe stress. Within sociology and anthropology, social strain is referred to as the conditions in society, such as immigration, war, racism, unemployment, natural disasters, and anomie, which create psychological and bodily stress. Within psychology, the stimulus-response emphasis of behaviorism resulted in stress stimuli and stress response. Holmes and Rahe’s (1967) Social Readjustment Scale is a primary example of the measurement of stress stimuli. Within
physiology, Hans Selye’s conceptualization of homeostasis and the general adaptation syndrome (GAS) created an orchestrated neurochemical set of bodily defenses that has strongly influenced medical and psychological research (1956). Selye referred to environmental stressors, physiological threats, and stress responses. Stressors and threats originate in the environment, while stress referred to the bodily reactions to stressors and threats. Others have further articulated the relationship between stress and strain. Karasek (1979) refers to stress as an internalized arousal that cannot be measured, instead he measures stressors or demands within the job environment, such as timelines and workload. As a result, strain is the inability to meet the job demands within the work environment and is evidenced as psychosocial dysfunction, behavioral dysfunction, or physiological dysfunction (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). Similarly, Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, and Pinneau (1980) define stress as any immediate threat within the job environment, whereas, strain represents any maladaptive response to the threat – such as anxiety, high blood pressure, or smoking.

While the sociological and physiological research frames have been instrumental in developing the concept of stress, there are several limitations to their use. First, stimulus stress is based upon a normative rating of environmental stressors and does not account for variability in responses. In short, not everyone responds to environmental stressors in the same way. For example, the death of a loved one is traumatic, yet the death of a loved one after a prolonged illness may provide respite and closure. Second, defining stress as a response to environmental stressors creates a circular and ambiguous process of measurement. To be useful, stress must be defined as the relationship between environmental stressors and stress responses. This relationship is what Lazarus (1999) referred to as the cognitive meditational approach. The cognitive mediation approach conceptualizes stress as an interaction between the person and the
environment that may endanger the person’s well being. The experience of stress is mediated through a cognitive appraisal of the individual’s ability or resources to cope with the demands of the work environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Many models rely upon a transactional formulation that articulates the relationship between work stress and strain as mediated, moderated, or modified by individual differences or variables. The Person-Environment Fit Model, The Demand-Control Model, The Demand-Control-Support Model, The Effort-Reward Imbalance Model, and the Effort-Digress Model exemplify the transactional formulation of occupational stress. The next section will briefly describe each model and the implications of each model.

The Person-Environment Fit Model

The Person-Environment Fit Model was developed at the University of Michigan in the mid-1970’s (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975; Harrison, 1978; French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982). The conceptual foundations of The Person-Environment Fit Model is four fold and include the objective environment, subjective environment, objective person, and subjective person. (Refer to Appendix B for an illustration of the Person-Environment Fit Model.) The objective environment includes the physical and social situations as they exist independent of the person’s perception. In contrast, the subjective environment includes the physical and social situations as perceived by the person. Similarly, the objective person refers to the attributes of the person as they actually exist, whereas, the subjective person reflects the person’s perceptions of his or her attributes. Additional components of the Person-Environment Fit Model include contact with reality, accuracy of self – assessment, coping, and defense. Contact with reality is conceptualized as the attempt to mediate the differences between the objective and subjective environments. Likewise, the accuracy of self – assessment is defined as
the attempt to mediate the differences between the objective and subjective person. Finally, coping reflects attempts to improve the objective fit between the person and environment through adaptations of the person or environment, while, defense reflects attempts to improve the subjective fit between the person and environment through cognitive distortions, such as repression, projection, or denial.

The Person-Environment Fit Model defines stress as a subjective mismatch between the demands of the job and the individual’s real or perceived ability to meet those demands. This definition leads to two forms of mismatch (Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison, 1998). Either the job environment does not provide adequate resources to meet the individual’s needs, or the person lacks the abilities to meet the demands of the work environment. Within The Person-Environment Fit Model, strain is conceptualized as an outcome of the mismatch and is defined as a psychological, behavioral, or physiological deviation from normal functioning. Examples include anxiety, smoking, or elevated blood pressure.

Key modifiers of the model include individual differences in perceptions, skills, tolerance for pressure, and vulnerability to dysfunctional outcomes. Often the Person-Environment Fit Model is used to reduce stress not through modified job demands or work processes, but through personal stress-reduction techniques to improve the fit between the person and the job demands. Consequently, the theoretical framework of the Person-Environment Fit Model is often used to emphasize selective hiring practices or shaping of employees.

*The Demand-Control Model*

The Demand-Control Model (also known as the Job Strain Model) of occupational stress was developed in the late 1970’s by Scandinavian researchers (Karasek, 1979; Karasek, Baker, Marxer, Ahlbom, & Theorell, 1981). Unlike the Person-Environment Fit model, the Demand-
Control Model theorizes stress results from the interaction of job demands and the latitude of decision-making discretion available to the employee (Karasek, 1979). Consequently, stress results not from a mismatch of demands, supplies, abilities, and needs, but from a mismatch of the demands in the work environment and the amount of employee control, discretion, or authority. Articulated as a two by two matrix, the Demand-Control Model produces four potential job situations with job demands on the horizontal axis and decision-making discretion on the vertical axis (see Table 1 for an illustration). The four potential job situations include jobs with low demands and low decision-making discretion; jobs with high demands and high decision-making discretion; jobs with low demands and high decision-making discretion; and jobs with high demands and low decision-making discretion. This matrix produces two predictions of the conditions that create the least and greatest strain. First, strain increases as the job demands increase and the decision-making discretion decreases. Second, strain decreases as the job demands decrease and decision-making discretion increases.

Table 1

An illustration of the 2 X 2 Matrix of the Demand-Control Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision-Making</th>
<th>Job Demands</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low Demands – Low Decision-Making</td>
<td>High Demands- Low Decision-Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low Demands – High Decision-Making</td>
<td>High Demands – High Decision-Making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their physiological research on the elevation or suppression of the stress related hormone cortisol, Lundeberg and Frankenhaeuser (1984) provide additional support for the
Demand-Control Model. Lundeberg and Frankenhaeuser conclude jobs high in controllability and predictability result in lower levels of cortisol. Additional support for the Demand-Control Model is found in the research on Ischemic Heart Disease (IHD) in middle aged, blue color men by Siegrist, Peter, Junge, Cremer, and Seidel (1990). Siegrist et al. concluded that the occurrence of high effort and low control was a predictor of Ischemic Heart Disease.

The key modifiers in the Demand-Control Model are job demands and decision-making discretion. The perceptions, skills, tolerance to pressure, and vulnerability to dysfunctional outcomes is viewed as inherent to the job and not the individual. Thus, the implications of the model lead to an emphasis upon designing jobs with an adequate blend of job demands and decision-making latitude.

The Demands-Supports-Constraints Model

The Demands-Supports-Constraints Model was proposed by Payne (1979) and Payne and Fletcher (1983). It is an amplification of the Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979). In essence, the Demands-Supports-Constraints Model concludes that job latitude is but one of many possible factors that may limit or constrain the worker. The lack of support and resources in the context of high demands coupled with low decision discretion leads to strain. The survey research of Payne and Fletcher (1983) tested the rates of psychological dysfunction, such as anxiety, cognitive impairments, and somatic complaints, among 148 classroom teachers in the Midlands of England. Results from the study indicated that independent and dependent variables such as workload, disciplinary demands, and decision-making latitude, accounted for five percent of the variance in psychological dysfunction; consequently, the authors concluded there was minimal support for the Demands-Supports-Constraints Model. The authors further concluded,
What is clear from these various studies is that self-reports of psychological health must be affected by variables other than perceptions of the work environment. The other variables presumably lie within the personality of the persons themselves, as well as in the environments which stretches beyond the workplace. (p. 145-146)

The Effort-Reward Imbalance Model

The Effort-Reward Imbalance Model was proposed by Siegrist (1996) to investigate the relationship between job demands and reward – not job demands and control – and is based upon the premise that work embodies a central and crucial link between the psychological well being of the employee and the broader work-related community. Occupational status is associated with belonging to a significant group of work colleagues and the reciprocity of contributing, performing, reward, and esteem. Thus, the core of the Effort-Reward Imbalance Model is the balance between the socially organized exchange of occupational demands and intrinsic coping with the occupational gratifications, such as money, esteem, and status. An imbalance resulting from a negative appraisal of the extrinsic obligations of the work, the intrinsic coping mechanisms, and the occupational gratifications results in an emotionally distressing experience. The research of Siegrist, Dittman, Rittner, and Webber (1982) support the Effort-Reward Imbalance Model. They conclude that premature heart attacks are the result of years of excessive occupational efforts and failed attempts to develop occupational gratifications and rewards.

The Effort-Distress Model

The Effort-Distress Model is another variation of the Demand-Control Model (Frankenhaeuser, 1983, 1991). Frankenhaeuser studied the brain-based, neurotransmitter responses of employees and concluded high effort and high demands do not inevitably lead to strain; instead, strain is the result of job demands that are not mitigated by personal control and
decision latitude. Lundberg and Frankenhaeuser found the absence or presence of distress results in different brain-based, hormonal responses. The lack of strain resulted in increased cathecholamines, such as epinephrine, norepinephrine, and dopamine, while distress resulted in increased production of the stress induced hormone cortisol.

Summary

In summary, stress is defined in different ways by sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Most recent models of occupational stress define stress as the relationship between the environment and individual responses. The cognitive meditational approach views stressful experiences as mediated, moderated, or modified resulting from cognitive appraisals of the individual’s ability or resources to cope with the demands of the work environment.

Conceptual Frames of Teacher Stress

The Dualistic Model of Passion

The Dualistic Model of Passion is an adaptation of the theoretical framework developed by Vallerand and Holfourt (2003) that distinguishes between two types of passion: harmonious and obsessive passion (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008). Carbonneau et al. define passion as a strong inclination towards an activity that one enjoys and freely and frequently engages in. This passionate activity is internalized as a central part of the identity of the teacher. Harmonious passion develops from an autonomous internalization that teaching is important without any contingencies or mandates. Harmonious passion results in behavior that is flexible and in harmony with the totality of the teacher’s identity. In contrast, obsessive passion becomes non-volitional and is internalized with contingencies from intra-personal and inter-personal pressure attached to teaching. Obsessive passion is characterized by a lack of balance between the professional and personal domains. Although positive effects can be seen, teaching and
school activities takes a disproportionate space in the teacher’s life and lead to conflict, neglect, and maladaptive outcomes.

Empirical studies provide support for the passion conceptualization of the Dualistic Model of Passion. First, research has supported the dual and distinct constructs of harmonious and obsessive passion (Rousseau, Vallerand, Ratelle, Mageau, & Provencher, 2002; Vallerand, Blanchard, Mageau, Koestner, Ratelle, & Leonard, 2003; Vallerand, Rousseau, Grouzet, Dumais, Grenier, & Blanchard, 2006). Second, the research of Vallerand et al. (2003) supports the positive associations between harmonious passion and positive emotions and obsessive passion and negative emotions during activity engagement. In addition, the research of Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, and Guay (2008) provide some support for the Dualistic Model of Passion in teaching. Carbonneau et al. conducted a questionnaire study with 494 teachers in Quebec City schools over a three-month period with two data collections in March and June using several instruments that measured passion, satisfaction and burnout (e.g., Passion Scale, Vallerand et al., 2003; the French-Canadian version of the Satisfaction with Life Scale, Blais, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Briere, 1989; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffen, 1985; the French-Canadian version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Dion & Tessler, 1994; Maslach & Jackson, 1986; and the French-Canadian version of the Pupil Behavior Patterns Scale, Fernet & Senecal, 2004; Friedman, 1995). Carbonneau et al. concluded that increases in harmonious passion predicted increases in job satisfaction and decreases in burnout symptoms, but that increases in obsessive passion were unrelated to job satisfaction and burnout symptoms.

The Job-Person Fit Model

A conceptual framework for burnout in education – not specifically in special education - has been developed by Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001). Their framework conceptualizes
burnout in education as the “…match, or mismatch, between the person and the six domains of his or her job environment” (p. 413). The Job-Person Fit Model emphasizes the relationship of the individual with their work and is founded upon Rousseau’s (1995) notion of psychological contracts. Mismatches arise if critical issues are left unresolved when establishing a psychological contract either because the nature of the work was not expected or changed over the course of time. The six dimensions of match or mismatch include workload, control, rewards, fairness, community, and values (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Although most of these dimensions appear straightforward, the dimensions may have varying impact depending upon the work environment and individual differences. Work overload has been conceptualized, not just as excessive occupational demands, but also as a mismatch between the teacher skill set and the nature of the work. Work overload exhausts the teacher’s energy and is closely linked to emotional exhaustion. The dimension of control addresses the teachers control over the necessary resources to accomplish their work. Even more so, it addresses the teacher’s responsibilities in comparison to their level of authority. The mismatch then reflects the teacher’s inability to accomplish work they believe is important either because they are not authorized to accomplish the work or lack the resources to accomplish the work. The control dimension is related to a reduced sense of personal accomplishment or efficacy. The third dimension of mismatch is the lack of appropriate rewards for the type and sophistication of work accomplished by teachers. These rewards include financial rewards and social rewards, such as recognition, pride, and appreciation that are intrinsic in nature. Inefficacy is closely associated with lack of appropriate rewards.

The fourth dimension of mismatch in the Job Person Fit Model is community. This occurs when teachers do not make personal and positive connections to their workplace
colleagues. A strong sense of community increases social support, reaffirms shared values, and bolsters group membership. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) report, “…what is most destructive of community is chronic and unresolved conflict with others on the job. Such conflict produces constant negative feelings of frustration and hostility, and reduces the likelihood of social support” (p. 415). The fifth dimension of mismatch is fairness. Fairness within the work environment conveys respect and confirms teacher self-worth. Inequitable workload, financial compensation, employee evaluations, or promotions can lead to a sense of unfairness and exacerbate emotional exhaustion and cynicism. The final dimension of mismatch is values. A mismatch in values occurs when conflicting values between the teacher and the school result in chronic unresolved conflict. These conflicting values come from differing ontological perspectives and drive decisions related to resources such as curriculum, classroom space, administrative support, and inclusive practices.

Summary

In summary, the Dualistic Model of Passion and the Job Person Fit Model are conceptual frames of teacher stress. The Dualistic Model of Passion frames teacher stress within harmonious and obsessive passion, whereas, the Job Person Fit Model conceptualizes teacher stress within the mismatch of six domains within the work environment.

Conceptual Frames of Career Pathways of Special Education Teachers

Generally speaking, the research literature frames the career decisions of special education teachers within the terms of attrition and retention. Other related terms in the literature include the intent to stay or leave special education (Billingsley & Cross; 1992; Cross & Billingsely, 1994; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Gersten, Keting, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Singh & Billingsely, 1996; Westling & Whitten, 1996; Whiteaker, 2000); leavers
and stayers (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller, 1997); and exiters or exit attrition (Haggstrom, Darling-Hammond, & Grissmer, 1988). The last twenty years has seen the emergence of two conceptual frameworks of teacher attrition in special education: Billingsley’s Special Education Teacher Attrition Model and Brownell and Smith’s Special Education Teacher Attrition Model. A more extensive discussion of special education teacher attrition will be provided in the conceptual models of special education teacher attrition.

Special Education Teacher Attrition

Extensive research from the last thirty years has explicated the relationship between special education teacher attrition and teacher characteristics, personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environment factors, and affective responses to work (Billingsley, 2004). Teacher characteristics include age, race, and gender, whereas personal factors include variables unrelated to work that impact the teachers decision to leave special education.

Teacher characteristics and personal factors.

In terms of teacher characteristics, age is the only variable consistently linked to teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004). Younger special education teachers are more inclined to leave special education or move to a general education position (Boe, Bobbit, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Cross & Billingsley, 1994; Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, & Blake, 1995; & Singer, 1992). Grissmer and Kirby’s (1987) research correlated special education teacher attrition to age with a “U” shaped pattern. Attrition was high among young special education teachers, low among mid-career special education teachers, and high for retiring special education teachers. In fact, Singer’s (1992) research indicated younger special education teachers have close to twice the attrition rate as more experienced special education teachers. In addition,
younger special education teachers are more likely to transfer to a general education position (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). The reasons for this attrition will be explained later in a review of research related to the working environment of special education teachers.

Personal factors unrelated to work impact younger special education teachers attrition (Billingsley, 1993; Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller, 1997; Morvant, Gersten, Gillman, Keating, & Blake, 1995). These reasons included family moves, pregnancy, child rearing, and health. In a study of 99 urban special education school teachers, Billingsley et al. (1995) reported 37% left primarily due to family circumstances unrelated to work. In a similar study of 477 special education teachers, Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Barkanic, and Maislin (1999) reported 35% left due to personal reasons. Research from Cross and Billingsley (1994) and Singh and Billingsley (1996) indicate some teachers who attained higher education levels and had less experience were more inclined to pursue other career opportunities outside of public education.

Special education teacher qualifications have received less attention in the research literature and reflect a tendency to avoid controversial ratings of teacher quality (Blanton, Sindelar, Correa, Hardman, McDowell, & Kuhel, 2002). Despite these concerns, some research has linked certification, academic ability, and perceived preparedness to special education teacher attrition. Miller, Brownell, and Smith’s (1999) research with 1,000 Florida special education teachers indicated higher attrition rates among uncertified special education teachers than certified teachers. Uncertified teachers are also associated with higher rates of transfer to general education teaching assignments (Boe, Bobbit, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997). In addition, Singer (1992) found special education teachers with higher National Teacher Exam scores were twice as likely to leave teaching for other employment options, yet, attrition was not
related to perceived preparedness by special education teachers (George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Miller et al., 1999; & Westling & Whitten, 1996). Overall, the research suggests young uncertified special teachers are at a greater risk for attrition, than more experienced certified special education teachers.

**Work environment factors.**

Overall, the research literature shows that the work environments are important to special education teacher attrition and retention (Billingsley, 2004). Work environment variables include salary, administrative and colleague support, induction, teacher roles, and caseload.

The few research studies that have explored the linkage between salary and attrition report consistent findings. Higher attrition rates are associated with lower salaries and conversely lower attrition rates are associated with higher salaries (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1984; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989; Schlechty & Vance, 1983; Singer, 1992). Compensation should be considered as a retention strategy for special education teachers.

Lack of administrative and collegial support has been linked to higher rates of attrition (Billingsley & Cross, 1991b; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982; Metzke, 1988; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Platt & Olson, 1990). Research indicates teachers who report high rates of principal support are less inclined to report feeling stressed and more inclined to report feeling committed to and satisfied with their work (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Boe, Barkanic & Loew, 1999; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Fimian (1986) concludes principals and colleagues play a key role in moderating special education teacher’s stress. Principals can reduce stress by altering the special education teachers job design (Gersten,
Keating, Yovanoff, & Harris, 2001), fostering supportive relationships (Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994), and improving collaboration between general and special education teachers (de Bettencourt, 1999). Overall, principal support is associated with more professional development opportunities, fewer role problems, greater job satisfaction, reduced stress, and higher level of commitments (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harris, 2001; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

The induction and mentoring of new special education teachers reduces the attrition of novice special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004), yet a very small number of studies have investigated effective induction and mentoring programs. Results from Whitaker (2000) indicate there is a relationship between novice teachers’ intent to remain in special education and mentoring. Specifically, novice teachers reported a strong interest in weekly contact with a mentor teacher currently working in special education and rated informal contacts with the mentor as more important than formal contacts with administrators. In addition, novice special education teachers rated emotional support as the most effective assistance, followed by systems information, interactions with others, and resources and materials. Mentor assistance in curriculum/instruction, discipline, and classroom management was rated as less frequent and effective.

In terms of mentoring, the Teacher Support Program (TSP) was a program developed to support special education teachers in western North Carolina (Westling, Herzog, Cooper-Duffy, Prohn, & Ray, 2006). Unlike traditional mentoring programs, the TSP is a volunteer resource program for both novice and veteran teachers and offered multiple forms of support. The TSP included seven components: collaborative problem solving/mutual teacher support, electronic networking and communication, information and materials search, peer mentoring, on-site/in-
class consultation, teacher release, and staff development workshops. Initial results indicate strong ratings in all but two of the TSP components. Teacher surveys indicate the electronic networking and communication and the peer mentoring components were not well rated or utilized. Beyond those components, teacher comments indicate the TSP was relevant, useful, and timely. In addition, they reported feeling supported and more confident because of their involvement in the TSP.

*Billingsley's Special Education Teacher Attrition Model.*

The model proposed by Billingsley (1993) frames teacher attrition within three broad categories: external factors, employment factors, and personal factors. External factors include the economic, societal, and institutional factors influencing the work environment of the special education teacher. Employment factors include professional qualifications, work conditions, and rewards, as well as commitments to the school, the district, the teaching field, and the teaching profession. Finally, personal factors include teacher characteristics, as well as variables that influence career decisions, such as starting a family, illness, or retirement.

Billingsley (1993) hypothesizes that when the professional qualifications and working conditions are not favorable, the teacher will experience reduced work related rewards. This leads to a reduced commitment to the school, district, teaching field, and teaching profession. Consequently, career decisions depend upon the teacher’s perceived rewards and commitment to teaching, while the timing of personal factors outside of education directly or indirectly impact the teacher’s ultimate decisions to stay or leave.

*Brownell and Smith's Special Education Teacher Attrition Model.*

The special education teacher attrition model proposed by Brownell and Smith (1993) uses four interrelated systems, adapted from Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory,
to illustrate the phenomenon of teacher retention and attrition: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem addresses the teacher’s immediate environment and the interaction between the student and teacher characteristics. The mesosystem is one-step removed and addresses the interrelations of such work variables as collegial and administrative support. The exosystem is the third interrelated system and addresses the formal and informal social structures of the community, such as the socio-economic status of the community. Finally, the macrosystem addresses the cultural beliefs and ideologies that shape the community context of the school. Brownell and Smith did not intend to use their conceptual frame as a causal model for designing and interpreting research. Nonetheless, their conceptual frame provides some basis for investigating the complex and reciprocal relationships between the interrelated systems and the many variables related to special education teacher retention and attrition.

Summary

In summary, extensive research has explicat ed the relationship between special education teacher attrition and various factors. Billingsley’s (1993) special education teacher attrition model and Brownell and Smith’s (1993) special education attrition model articulate the relationship between the special educator’s intent to stay in special education to numerous variables. Billingsely frames special education teacher attrition within external factors, employment factors, and personal factors, whereas, Brownell and Smith frame special education teacher attrition within Urie Bronfenbrenners Ecological Systems Theory. A small body of recent research has begun to elucidate the relationship of supportive factors to novice special education teacher’s intent to stay in special education.
Conceptual Frames of Special Education Burnout

Burnout has been a focus of scholarly research for approximately 35 years. Freudenberger (1974) was one of the first to describe the burnout phenomenon within the care-giving profession as a chronic depletion of emotional energy, motivation, and commitment. Maslach (1976) further articulated the relationship between the care-giving professional and their values and beliefs. Burnout is a psychological syndrome that arises from chronic interpersonal stressors in the work environment and has three key components (Maslach, 2003). The three key components include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is central to the burnout construct and refers to the overextension and depletion of emotional and physical resources (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Emotional exhaustion represents the individual stress dimension of burnout, whereas, the depersonalization component represents the interpersonal context of burnout. Often referred to as cynicism, the depersonalization component represents callous, negative, or excessively detached responses to the work environment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Finally, a reduced sense of accomplishment represents the self-evaluation dimension of burnout and is expressed in terms of incompetence, lack of achievement, and productivity at work.

Initial research in burnout was descriptive and qualitative in nature, utilizing techniques such as interviews, observations, and case studies (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Several burnout models were developed during this time that emphasized a series of stages; however, later research articulated burnout as a continuum rather than a dichotomous construct. Currently, Maslach’s and Leiter’s (1997) theoretical burnout model is the most widely used and accepted (Edmondson & Thompson, 2002). The next section describes the application of Maslach’s burnout model with special education teachers.
Wisniewski and Garguilo (1997) frame special education burnout within four domains: organizational structure, professional interactions, professional training, and instructional arrangements. Within their frame, stress is defined consistent with a cognitive meditational approach and emphasizes the relationship between the work environment and the person. Ultimately, burnout is the response to frequent and chronic exposure to work related stress arising from the four domains.

**Organizational structure.**

In terms of organizational structure, role conflict and role ambiguity have emerged as two sources stress (Banks & Necco, 1990; Billingsley, 2004; Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Edmonson & Thompson, 2002; Embich, 2001; Frith, 1981). Role conflict occurs when special education teacher’s responsibilities are not consistent with the realities of their day-to-day teaching experience. Role ambiguity occurs when special education teachers do not have sufficient information to adequately perform their duties and responsibilities.

In her study, Embich (2001) concluded role conflict contributed to increased emotional exhaustion among teachers working in resource room and self-contained settings. In addition, ambiguity was associated with a reduced sense of personal accomplishment in special education teachers using a team teaching model or a resource room model (Embich, 2001), whereas, ambiguity contributed to reduced feelings of personal accomplishment and increased depersonalization in self-contained teachers (Embich, 2001). In a meta-analysis of special education burnout, Edmonson and Thompson (2000) concluded role conflict and ambiguity was much more likely to predict the variation in burnout. Examples of role conflict and ambiguity include evolving roles and responsibilities related to federal policies, unclear administrative expectations, new curriculum, and innovative pedagogical approaches.
Interpersonal interactions.

Interpersonal interactions with other teachers and administrators can be either a significant source of support or stress for special education teachers. In particular, principals are in a unique position to reduce the role conflict and ambiguity unique to special education teachers (Cross & Billingsley, 1994). The survey research of Littrell, Billingsley, and Cross (1994) illustrated four dimensions of principal support, including emotional support, appraisal support, instrumental support, and informational support. Teachers in the study rated emotional support as the most important dimension of principal support. Principals rated high in emotional support provided teachers the opportunity to participate in decisions, showed concern for their students and program, and promoted a the teachers’ sense of importance. Teachers rated appraisal support as the second most important dimension of principal support. Principals rated high in appraisal support provided teachers with either direct or indirect feedback on the performance of their duties. Teachers rated instrumental support as the third most important dimension of principal support. Principals rated high in instrumental support provided teachers with direct assistance with their work, such as behavior management techniques, parent meetings, and the allocation of materials. Finally, teachers rated information support as the fourth most important dimension of principal support. Examples of information support included knowledge of professional development trainings, knowledge of special education assessment procedures, and knowledge of legal education policies. Additional observation research by Cherniss (1988) concluded principals in schools with low rates of burnout engaged in more supportive interactions than principals in schools with high rates of burnout. Interestingly, results from Cherniss indicate principals in schools with high rates of burnout engaged in more interaction with others than principals in schools with low rates of burnout. Although her
research was conducted with two principals, it highlights the importance of the type of interactions between principals and teachers.

Notwithstanding the importance of administrative support, additional research by Billingsley, Carlson, and Klein (2004) illustrated the importance of collegial support. Their survey research of 963 early career special education teachers indicated that 89% rated the informal assistance from other colleagues was moderate or greatly helpful. Similarly, the survey research of Fimian (1986) confirmed the receipt of peer or supervisory support as a key moderator of teacher stress. Additional research by Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler (2005) confirmed the importance of building strong, collaborative relationships among novice teachers and other educators. Strong, collaborative relationships appear to be protective factors that tend to foster a sense of belonging and satisfaction. Finally, research from Carter and Scruggs (2001) confirm the destructive impact of perceived lack of support among teacher colleagues.

*Professional training.*

Special education teachers face a number of occupational stressors while transitioning from pre-professional teacher to professional teacher. Previous research has attempted to articulate the relationship between the level of in-service preparation to burnout with paradoxical results. Early research from Zabel and Zabel (1983) revealed the amount of teacher pre-service preparation represented an inverse relationship. Special education teachers with the most pre-service training had the lowest rates of burnout, while teachers with the least pre-service training had the highest rates of burnout. In contrast, the questionnaire research from Banks and Necco (1990) revealed teachers working in special education with alternative certification had significantly lower levels of burnout than teachers with special education undergraduate or graduate degrees. Finally, a replication of the Zabel and Zabel study twenty years later indicated
the level of pre-service preparation was much less important than previously thought (Zabel & Zabel, 2001).

A closer look at instructional assignments provides some clarification of the relationship between burnout and pre-service preparation. Embich (2001) completed survey research with of 276 special education teachers in self contained and team teaching assignments. Her research revealed no relationship between the level of educational attainment and burnout in self-contained special education teachers, while the degree of emotional exhaustion in team teaching teachers increased as the level of pre-service preparation decreased. Additional survey research by Nichols and Sosnowsky (2002) of 77 special education teachers assigned to self-contained classrooms with endorsements to teach students with learning disabilities further clarified the role of instructional assignments. Their research demonstrated increased degrees of emotional exhaustion with increasing dissatisfaction with professional development opportunities and pre-service preparation.

While speculative, the aforementioned researchers suggest the paradoxical results may reflect an increased efficacy of pre-service preparation, induction support, and mentoring. In addition, the paradoxical results may reflect specific dimensions of instructional arrangements or may represent an aging of the work force and a survivor effect. Additional research is needed to further clarify the role of pre-service preparation and burnout.

*Instructional Arrangements.*

Instructional arrangements and assignments refer to the categorical programs specific to student characteristics in special education. Examples of categorical programs include self-contained settings, resource room, preschool programs, and behavior disorder classrooms. While it is difficult to determine the factors influencing teacher burnout within instructional
arrangements, it is clear that special education teachers have differential patterns of attrition (Singer, 1993; Zabel, Boomer, & King, 1984). Instructional arrangements and its relationship to burnout have received little attention in the research literature; however, previous research has implicated the ambiguity, conflict, workload manageability, and stress to different instructional arrangements.

Teachers working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities are at the highest risk for burnout in special education (Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002). Teachers working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities are less likely to receive administrative, collegial, or instructional support. In addition, they are more likely to report low levels of personal accomplishment, as well as, challenges with student behavior and completing paperwork (Nelson, Maculan, Roberts, & Ohlund, 2001). Unfortunately, not all research is as clear and consistent. In a comparison of resource room and self-contained teachers, Crane and Iwanicki (1986) reported resource room teachers were more likely to exhibit burnout symptoms. Yet, a later comparison of resource room teachers and self-contained teachers resulted in different findings (Embich, 2001). Embich reported self-contained teachers were more likely than resource room teachers to exhibit burnout symptoms.

Different instructional arrangements may have varying impact upon collegial support, principal support, and paperwork. More research is needed to elucidate predictive factors within instructional arrangements. In addition, more research is needed to evaluate the impact of academic standards and recent federal policies, such as No Child Left Behind, upon instructional arrangements (Falk, 2003).
Summary

Special education burnout research leaves many questions unanswered. Wisniewski and Garguilo (1997) frame special education burnout within organizational structures, professional interactions, professional training, and instructional arrangements. Currently, research implicates administrative support, collegial support, role conflict, and role ambiguity as instrumental to special education burnout constructs.

Towards a Conceptual Model of Special Education Teacher Burnout

Francis Fowler (2004) described the Education of All Handicapped Children, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as a redistributive education policy instrument. In Fowler’s words, a redistributive policy is one that shifts resources or power from one social group to another. By doing so, the government “seek[s] to control conduct...indirectly by altering the conditions of conduct or manipulating the environment” (Lowi & Ginsburg, 1994, as cited by Fowler, 2004). Redistributive policies are inherently controversial and create a political arena of sharp differences and ideological intensity. In addition, the IDEA at its core is a fundamental expression of the right of students with disabilities to due process and protection under the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. A conceptualization of teacher burnout in special education requires a careful consideration of the history of special education and the insights offered by the critical perspectives found in the principles of critical race theory and disability studies. In summary, a conceptualization of teacher burnout in special education requires a careful consideration of the socio-political and ideological foundations of public education and special education.
*A Brief History of Special Education.*

Today, the policies and practices of special education represent a contentious, tumultuous aggregate of federal and state case law. Understanding and keeping abreast of special education case law and the day-to-day challenges it creates is a critical responsibility of local special education administrators. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) passed in 1975, was the first overt recognition of the rights of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education. Before the initial passage of this act, literally millions of children were systematically excluded from public education with no due process of law. The foundation for understanding special education case law begins by understanding key judicial decisions and federal initiatives that led to the original passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act.

The special education movement was created during the twilight hours of the Civil Rights Movement and represented the culmination of close to 80 years of legal debate. The most far reaching civil rights Supreme Court decision of the last one hundred years was Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896). Plessy vs. Ferguson contested the established practice of providing separate public transit facilities for black Americans and their white counterparts. At the time, it was the custom for black Americans and white Americans to ride in separate rail coaches. It was typical to find separate transit facilities, restroom facilities, drinking fountains, theaters, restaurants, and school facilities designed to ensure black Americans and white Americans did not interact. The Plessy vs. Ferguson case clearly illustrated the prevalent attitude that black American’s were inferior to their white counterparts by establishing the doctrine of “separate but equal.” The intent of the decision was clearly designed to maintain the separation between the races and
resulted in separate public facilities. Poignantly put, Mr. Justice Brown wrote in the assenting opinion,

    If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equity, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other’s merits and a voluntary consent of individuals … If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane. (La Morte, 1999, p. 267)

Plessy vs. Ferguson established 60 years of de jure segregation and fostered rigid state statute, municipal policies, and school policies created and enforced by the writ of law to ensure that the two races did not interact.

    The doctrine of “separate but equal” would continue until the 1954 Supreme Court decision, Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, reversed the decision by declaring that the “separate but equal” doctrine had no place in public education. A class action lawsuit, the Brown decision represented complaints from five different states and argued that segregated schools violated the protections of the fourteenth amendment for an entire class of American citizens based solely upon their race. Chief Justice Warren clearly communicated the unanimous decision:

    Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group...Any language in contrary to this finding is rejected. We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. (La Morte, 1999, p. 275)
In its decision, the Brown case concluded that education was fundamental to a successful life and all children should be ensured equal education opportunity. The Brown decision initiated educational and social reform and launched the modern era of the Civil Rights Movement.

Shortly after the Brown decision, parents of exceptional children began to file lawsuits based upon the legal premise that the refusal of school districts to provide an appropriate education without due process of law was a violation of the protections afforded to students with disabilities by the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Two of the most influential cases was the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) vs. Commonwealth of 1971 and Mills vs. Board of Education of District of Columbia of 1972 (Wright & Wright, 1999). Both cases contested successfully the practice of excluding students with mental retardation and challenging behavior from public education without due process. In particular, the Mills vs. Board of Education of District of Columbia established the fact that over 12,000 students had been systematically excluded from a free public education designed to meet their needs. The PARC vs. Commonwealth and Mills vs. Board of Education decisions brought the educational experiences of literally millions of students with disabilities in to the national political agenda.

Shortly after PARC vs. Commonwealth and Mills vs. Board of Education, Congress investigated the conditions of education for children with disabilities. Statistics provided by the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped revealed that, of the estimated 8 million children needing special education services, 3.9 million were receiving an appropriate education. An additional 2.5 million children with disabilities were receiving an inappropriate public education, and 1.75 million children with disabilities were receiving no educational services (Wright & Wright, 1999).
In light of the conditions experienced by students with disabilities and the social and economic costs, Congress enacted Public Law 94-142, the Education of all Handicapped Children (EOAHC) of 1975. In it’s investigation, Congress concluded that the long-range impact of the lack of services for students with disabilities would be billions of dollars spent to maintain individuals with disabilities as dependents upon their families and local municipals. Congress concluded, “With proper education services, many would be able to become productive citizens, contributing to society instead of being forced to remain burdens. Others, through such services, would increase their independence, thus reducing their dependence on society” (Wright & Wright, 1999, p. 9).

_Correlates to Critical Race Theory._

Following in the footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement, the legal and philosophical foundations of special education can be found not just in Brown vs. Board of Topeka of 1954, but also in the key writings that informed and shaped critical race theory. In the Foreword of _Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement_ (1995), Cornell West writes,

> The genesis of Critical Race Theory as a scholarly and politically committed movement in law is historic. Critical Race Theorists have, for the first time, examined the entire edifice of contemporary legal thought and doctrine from the viewpoint of law’s role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination. (Foreword, ¶2)

In _Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation_ (1995), Derrick A. Bell Jr, describes the lawyer-client conflict in class action lawsuits related to school desegregation. During the post-Brown period, many class action lawsuits were initiated by the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund emphasizing racial integration and balance, as opposed to emphasizing improved educational effectiveness for students of color.
Many times, this conflicted with the wishes of the clients and reflected the prevailing attitude of the time – racial integration, not educational effectiveness, as a symbol of equality.

Bell (1995) goes on to describe how the interests of black Americans in achieving racial equality in Brown v. Board of Education was achieved not through a neutral racial equality principle, but through the convergence of white American and black American interests. In *Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma* (1995), Bell explores three economic and political advantages of the Brown decision that changed over 60 years of de jure segregation. First, the Brown decision provided immediate credibility to an American nation struggling with the threat of Communism in third world nations. Second, the Brown decision provided much needed reassurance to the black American community that the hard fought battles for freedom and equality in World War II were applicable to our own nation. Third, segregation posed a barrier to the south during an era when it was transitioning from a rural plantation society to an industrialized society. The crux of Bell’s argument supports the principle that racial equality occurs when the interests of white Americans’ converge with black Americans’ interests.

The lawyer-client conflict and the interest convergence described by Derrick Bell provide a partial basis for exploring the perspective of special education teachers within the broader context of public education and the purpose of public education.

*Towards a liberatory pedagogy (or what is the purpose of education?).*

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1997) convincingly argues that people have a fundamental desire, or ontological need, to be free; however, dehumanization resulting from class conflict and antagonisms resulting from colonialism limited the freedom of the working class, the marginalized, and the disadvantaged in the Brazilian society that Freire critiqued. One
of the basic elements of the hegemonic turn-of-the-century Brazilian social structure was the
prescription of the oppressor’s consciousness upon the oppressed. Freire contends that political,
economic, and educational freedom could not be achieved through a military coup or violent
revolt; instead, liberation required throwing off the prescriptive consciousness of the bourgeois
through a process of reflection and action. In effect, liberation of the proletariat required total
societal and cultural transformation through the humanization of both the proletariat and the
bourgeois.

Inherent in Freire’s (1997) pedagogy was the belief that education was fundamentally
political. Freire argues that,

…the educator’s role is to regulate the way the world “enters into” the students. The
teacher’s task is to organize a process which already occurs spontaneously, to “fill” the
students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true
knowledge. (p. 57)

This filling of the student represented “banking education” and constitutes a method to foster
passivity, limit creativity, and inhibit critical thinking. Furthermore, it represented a
decontextualized education that prevented students from “naming” and reflecting upon the
oppressive realities and conditions of society. Freire concluded that any attempt to name the
world for the oppressed, “…is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning
building; it is to lead them into a populist pitfall and transform the masses which can be
manipulated” (p. 47). Instead of liberation, the naming of the world by oppressors or liberators
substitutes “…monologue, slogans, and communiqués for dialogue” (p. 48). In effect, the efforts
to liberate the oppressed serve to further domesticate the oppressed.
Freire (1997) convincingly argues that a praxis of liberation can only occur when the oppressed perceive and act upon their own reality. This then is a praxis of liberation – reflection and action. Reflection without action is purely an intellectual pursuit and action without reflection is activism. A liberatory praxis must include both critical reflection and action - anything else is oppressive and dehumanizing. Freire concludes,

Those who work for liberation must not take advantage of the emotional dependence of the oppressed – dependence that is the fruit of the concrete situation of domination which surrounds them and which engendered their unauthentic view of the world. Using their dependence to create still greater dependence is an oppressor tactic. (p 48)

A praxis of liberation begins by correcting the teacher-student contradiction. In banking education, the teacher is the authority with the one true knowledge that the teacher conveys to the students. Strong students are those who can store and master the teacher-dispensed knowledge. A liberation praxis begins with the recognition that no one teaches another and no one is self taught. In this sense, the teacher becomes a teacher-student and the students becomes a student-teacher. It recognizes that the world is owned by each person and each person is responsible for teaching each other. No longer is the world or knowledge the private property or commodity of the teacher. Education then moves from a “banking” method to a “problem-posing” method.

Within this framework, the question to explore in special education is not how to provide a free and appropriate public education, but how to provide an education that humanizes and enhances the freedom of students’ with disabilities.
A disability centric perspective.

Disability studies as a field of inquiry is not simply an examination of the medicalized nature of the various manifestations of disability within the broader context of society, instead it is a sociopolitical examination of how disability is socially constructed (Linton, 1998). Informed by women’s studies, queer studies, and cultural studies, disability studies represents an interdisciplinary field and seeks to explore the construction and function of disability as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. Poignantly put, disability studies seek to,

…bring into stark relief, to foreground, the mechanisms by which disability is covered over, layered with meaning and rendered invisible…to turn those processes inside out and reveal them to be not inevitable reactions to human conditions labeled disabilities but devises used to sort human beings according to the social and economic needs of a society. (Linton, 1998, p. 7)

In particular, disability studies seeks to challenge the “…popular psychoeducational models that assume disability as an objective medical, individual, and pathological deficiency” (Baker, 2002, p. 48). A disability centric perspective views disability not as a medical, individual, or pathological deficiency, but as an individualistic and collective humanistic phenomenon interpreted through the lenses of race, gender, power, status, and culture.

Several questions develop from the disability centric perspective. How do special education teachers navigate the social space created by federal legislation and disabilities? In addition, what do they consider the purpose of special education and public education? Do they seek to remove the barriers to a more humanizing and liberatory educational praxis through social activism? If so, how do they do so and how do the barriers to the application of a
humanizing, liberatory praxis impact their engagement, satisfaction, and potential job stress and burnout?

Summary

Stress and burnout are evocative terms, yet psychology, sociology, and physiology define and use them differently. Most recent models of occupational stress emphasize the interactive nature of stress and emphasize a cognitive meditational approach. Within these frames, stress is mediated by cognitive appraisal of the individual’s ability or resources to cope with occupational demands. The Person-Environment Fit Model and the Demand-Control Model represent conceptual frames of occupational stress. The Dualistic Model of Passion and the Job-Person Fit Model represents conceptual frames of teacher stress. Within the Job-Person Fit Model, conceptualizes stress as a match or mismatch between six dimensions. A great deal of research has articulated the career pathways of special education teachers. Within these frames, research has examined the relationship between teacher stress and external factors, employment factors, and personal factors. Within conceptual frames of burnout in special education teachers, research has sought to articulate the relationship between organizational structure, interpersonal interactions, professional training, and instructional arrangements to teacher stress. Thirty years of special education burnout research has implicated role conflict, role ambiguity, administrative support, and collegial support as special education burnout constructs. Finally, a reconceptualization of special education teacher burnout requires a careful consideration of the socio-political and ideological foundations of special education, as well as, the history and insights founded in critical race theory and disability studies.
Chapter 3 – Research Methodology and Design

Introduction

The purposes of this qualitative study was two-fold: (a) to explore K-12 special education teachers’ experiences with work challenges and perceptions of stress and potential burnout; and (b) to explore the usefulness of the Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model to explain their perceptions of stress and potential burnout. Four research questions were addressed in this study: (a) How do special education teachers describe their core values in regard to special education and their work motives? (b) How do special education teachers describe and interpret the rewards and satisfactions of their work? (c) How do special education teachers describe the challenges and dissatisfaction of their work? (d) How do special education teachers cope with challenges and attempt to succeed in their work?

This chapter describes the research design and methods used in this study. This chapter includes sections on research methodology, research design and methods, and credibility and ethics.

Research Methodology

This study will use a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore special education teacher’s experiences. Basic to a phenomenological approach is the assumption that human experience is mediated through interpretation (Blumer, 1969; as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2003); consequently, the core of the phenomenological approach is an interest in other people’s experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 1998). A phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study because it allows special education teachers the opportunity to frame the interpretation of their experiences with their own words.
By using their own words, special education teachers select, reflect, and order the constitutive details of their experiences (Seidman, 1998).

Research Design and Methods

Site Selection

This study expands on two pilot studies that together explored the experiences of five novice and five veteran special education teachers who worked in ten different rural, public school settings in eastern Washington State (Bush, 2004; 2007). To expand on the data set from the pilot studies, an additional nine participants were recruited from three large urban districts in eastern Washington State. Five of the additional participants were novice and four were veterans. In the pilot studies, small districts were selected based upon a student population of 500 students or less. In the expanded study, large urban districts in eastern Washington State were selected based upon a student population of 2,000 or more students. Three sites were selected from eastern Washington State with a population base greater than 30,000 people from the latest U.S. Census.

Participant Selection

To qualify as a participant for this study, a special education teacher had to be working as a special education teacher in a public school in eastern Washington State, be fully certified in special education, and employed full time. Novice teachers had to have three years or less of special education teaching experience, whereas, veteran teachers had to have ten or more years of experience. The experience of the ten novice teachers’ selected for this study ranged from less than one year to just under three years experience, with the average being one year, eight months. The 9 veteran teachers’ experience ranged from eleven years to 29 years, with an
average of 19 years, seven months. All but two of the participants were female. Teachers chosen did not represent extreme cases – such as teacher of the year or teachers on probation.

A list of eligible participants for this new phase of the study was generated by contacting the superintendents or special education directors of the three selected large, urban districts. Once permission was granted for the study, special education teachers within the district were contacted and invited to participate. Participation was voluntary, deception was not used, and participants were not compensated. All participants that were contacted agreed to participate in the study. All interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for the participants. In summary, the final set of participants represented four groups of teachers: novice teachers in rural settings, novice teachers in urban settings, veteran teachers in rural settings, and veteran teachers in urban settings. In addition, the selected teachers worked in a variety of special education service models, such as resource room, life skills, and resource room/life skills combined.

Two-Phase Study Design

This study was conducted in two phases over the course of six years. Phase one was completed in the form of pilot studies concluded in 2004 and 2007. Novice, rural special education teachers were interviewed in the spring of 2004, while veteran, rural teachers were interviewed during the spring of 2007. A list of eligible teachers for these pilot studies was developed by contacting superintendents or special education directors in eastern Washington State working in rural school districts with less than 500 students. Once permission was granted, each participant was contacted first through phone calls, then email. All participants agreed to participate. Each interview was guided by an open-ended interview protocol; one for novice teachers and one for veterans (refer to Appendices B and C). Each interview lasted
approximately one hour and was scheduled at the teacher’s convenience. Most interviews were completed in the teacher’s classroom after school. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Constant comparison analysis of pilot study data resulted in significant differences between work experiences of veteran and novice teachers. The themes and core categories emerging from the data suggested novice special education teachers approached their work differently than veteran special education teachers. Novice teachers were much more likely to express frustration, dissatisfaction, and isolation. In addition, they were much more likely to refer to their work as a fight and to use confrontation or coercive strategies. On the other hand, veteran teachers were much more likely to express satisfaction and relationship building strategies. Finally, data from the pilot studies suggested special education teachers worked in two separate cultures – a special education culture and a general education culture, a phenomenon that I later termed dual culture workplaces.

While the initial analysis was intriguing, it was based solely upon rural special education teachers. I suspected that teachers’ experiences might differ in urban settings. Consequently, phase two of the study expanded the data set to include novice and veteran teachers in urban settings.

Phase two was conducted in spring and summer of 2009 and included five novice, urban teachers and four veteran, urban teachers. The recruitment and data collection procedures from phase one were repeated in phase two.

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data collection and analysis recommendations of Seidman (1998) and Maxwell (1996) are consistent with the purposes and phenomenological approach of this
research study. In-depth interviewing allows participants to select the essential details of their experiences, reflect upon them, and ascribe meaning to them (Seidman, 1998). For the expanded study, each participant was individually interviewed once using an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guides were slightly different for novice and veteran teachers. (See Appendices C and D.)

The primary goal of qualitative analysis, according to Maxwell (1996), is fracturing the data, reducing the data, and rearranging it into categories that foster the development of theoretical concepts. Each interview was transcribed twice. The first transcription emphasized the dialogue content, whereas, the second transcription built on the original transcription and emphasized the speaking characteristics of each participant. Once the transcriptions were complete, they were read to develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships between categories. Tentative ideas about categories and relationships between categories were further developed through memoranda (Maxwell, 1996). Additional memoranda were used to further explore these tentative ideas, further analytical thinking, and foster possible coding strategies, thematic connections, and theoretical concepts. Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) coding categories were initially employed to explore settings, situations, perspectives, ways of thinking about people and objects, processes, activities, events, strategies, and relationships and social structures. As the analysis developed, I compared the developing categories, thematic connections, and theoretical concepts to the Competing Interests Model. More specifically, the analysis was used to determine the utility of the Competing Interests Model to explain the unique contextual factors that contribute to special education teacher’s work experience. Data from the pilot studies and the second phase were analyzed together.
Credibility and Ethics

By design, this dissertation relies heavily upon the stated perspectives of novice and veteran special education teachers working in urban and rural settings. Seidman (1998) describes the interview study as a “…social relationship that must be nurtured, sustained, and ended gracefully” (p. 79). This social relationship is directly or indirectly influenced by social status, gender, race, and power (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Even more so, in interviewing there is “…no intimacy without reciprocity” (Oakely, p. 83; as cited in Fontana & Fey, 2003). Consequently, every measure was used to reduce the dimensions of social status, gender, race, and power while balancing intimacy, rapport, and reciprocity with interview participants. I will attempt to minimize the impact of my role as a white, male public school administrator by scheduling and arranging each interview to minimize the disruption to the interview participant. In addition, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality will be afforded to participants at every stage of the project. Participants will not be deceived or coerced to secure their participation.

I will give careful attention to the language and words used by the special education teachers. Seidman (1998) points out that the researcher’s paraphrasing or summaries of what people say is the substitution of researcher’s consciousness for the participants. Developing rich data through accurate descriptions, explanations, conclusions, and interpretations is the key to avoiding the imposition of the researcher’s biases and consciousness upon the data (Maxwell, 1996). Finally, member checks and an analysis of discrepant data will be used to verify the correctness, authenticity, and credibility of the conclusions and interpretations.
Chapter 4 – Findings

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to explore K-12 special education teachers’ experiences with work challenges, and perceptions of stress and potential burnout; and (b) to explore the usefulness of the Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model, as described in Chapter 1, to explain their perceptions of stress and potential burnout. This study addressed four research questions: (a) How do special education teachers describe their core values in regard to special education and their work motives? (b) How do special education teachers describe and interpret the rewards and satisfactions of their work? (c) How do special education teachers describe the challenges and dissatisfaction of their work? (d) How do special education teachers cope with challenges and attempt to succeed in their work? Chapter Three described the research methods used to address these questions, including the process used to analyze the qualitative data from interviews with 19 special education teachers. In this chapter, I present the analysis of the qualitative data organized into four major themes: Who they are – special education teachers’ values and motives; special education teacher’s work challenges; special education teacher’s responses to the work challenges; and special education teacher’s affective responses to the work challenges. As the analysis progressed, contrasts emerged between the experiences of novice and veteran teachers, which are highlighted as each theme is discussed below; however, anticipated differences in the experiences of urban and rural teachers did not clearly emerge from the analysis. As each theme and subtheme is discussed in the next section, these contrasts will also be highlighted. Because I want to honor the voices of the teachers in this study, I rely heavily on quotes from the data to illustrate each analytical point.
Who They Are – Special Education Teachers’ Values and Motives

As with all teachers, special education teachers approach their work from a background of experiences that shape their values, motives, expectations, and sense of purpose of their work. Although a great deal of research has been conducted to correlate the personal and demographic characteristics of special education teachers to burnout and attrition, little research has explored the relationship of their personal background experiences with the disabled community to their values, motives, expectations, and sense of purpose of their work (Pugach, 1992). The data in this study suggest that these early experiences often predispose special education teachers to a better understanding of the unique context of special education and the challenges embedded within that context, as well as fostering a strong commitment to improve the education of students with disabilities. The teachers in this study identified four types of background experiences that led them to choose a career in special education. In this section, I will first present these background experiences and then discuss the motivations for their work related to these experiences.

Special Education Teacher’s Background Experiences

In this study, special education teachers reported four types of background experiences that led them to choose a career in special education. First, several teachers reported that their own disabilities led them to pursue a career in special education. Second, many of the teachers reported personal experiences with disabled family and friends. Third, several teachers’ reported other types of experiences during their formative years led them to choose a career in special education. Finally, a few teachers reported the shortage of special education teachers in the field led them to choose a career in special education.
Three of the 19 teachers in this study described experiences with their own disabilities that led them to choose a career in special education. One veteran teacher referred to a disability that was not identified until later in her life. “I am borderline attention deficit. I got lots of swats growing up; that’s how they dealt with people who couldn’t sit still.” These experiences seem to create an empathetic connection between special education teachers and students with disabilities. A novice teacher reflected upon her challenges as a child in school:

I have dyslexia. I didn’t realize until I was much older. It’s not bad, but I’ll flip flop numbers or a whole word in a sentence. I have to go back and read; like it makes no sense to me. I tell the kids I have dyslexia. So, you know, I can kind of relate with that, so, you know, I guess it was just kind of a good fit for me.

Many of the teachers reported these experiences began at a young age. One veteran teacher commented on aligning her experiences in school with her career plans: “I knew from second grade that I wanted to be a teacher. I was dyslexic and struggled in school. So I can totally empathize with what these kids are going through.”

Nine of the 19 teachers reported experiences with their family and friends that influenced their choice of a career in special education. One veteran teacher concluded that her experiences with her cousin led her to choose a career in special education: “I had a cousin who had Down’s Syndrome. We were playmates and grew up together. That’s why I went into special ed; I just figured I could do better than what she was getting.” Another veteran teacher referred to her experience with a high school friend: “My best friend always had a hard time learning and I think I kind of helped her through high school. I got pleasure in doing that and have always been a helper by nature.” Finally, some of the novice teachers referred to experiences with their
parents that shaped their career decisions. A novice teacher related her experience with her mother:

My mom was a special education teacher. So I kind of saw that field first hand and really enjoyed it. I would go with my mom on field trips. So I was exposed to special needs kids ever since I was really little.

Some teachers did not report extensive experiences with disabled family and friends before choosing a career in special education; however, they did refer to other types of experiences during formative years that shaped their career decisions. One novice teacher talked about her experiences during her K-12 school years:

I hurt my knee in the sixth grade and volunteered in the special ed room. I volunteered all the way through elementary school, worked in a self contained room at the high school, and then entered a pre-teaching program in high school.

One veteran teacher referenced the isolation and marginalization of an institutionalized adolescent as her reason for choosing a career in special education:

I was traveling with a group of students visiting hospitals and institutions. We were singing to patients and the nurse told us not to bother with a particular patient. He was 17 years old, hydrocephalic, bed bound, and required a diaper. We sang to him anyway and he looked up at me with his eyeball and smiled. That really changed my life.”

Some of the teachers referred to work related experiences that shaped their career decisions. One novice teacher reported, “I was a para ed for our district autism program. It was fascinating to me trying to get some help for the student.” Another veteran teacher reflected upon her challenges in high school: “I left home at an early age. If I had a teacher that connected with me I may not have found myself in that situation.”
Finally, in this study two novice teachers reported that shortages of special education teachers made them more marketable when pursuing work in public education. One teacher commented, “I choose special education because I wanted to be marketable.” The other teacher reported difficulty securing a position in his first area of certification. He explained, “Getting a job straight out of college is not the easiest thing. There was a para pro position open here. So I thought I would come and work as a para pro to see how much I like it.”

In summary, the teachers in this study reported a variety of background experiences that shaped their decisions to become special education teachers. Early experiences with their own disabilities or with disabled family and friends, or other types of experiences during formative ages, fostered an empathetic understanding of the isolation and marginalization experienced by students with disabilities and a desire to help these students.

*Special Education Teacher’s Motivations*

The background experiences of special education teacher’s in this study seemed to foster an empathetic connection with students with disabilities. One veteran teacher stated, “I’ve got heart for this. I love those kids to death. They need someone to love them and to care for them.” From this teacher’s perspective, special education helps to bring children with disabilities from the “shadows” and recognizes that “not all people learn the same.” These teachers seek to do more than teach specific academic content; they seek to prepare students with disabilities for life. Another veteran teacher explained her aspirations: “Special education means I have a little bit more time to help little Johnny find his feet and help him stand on them academically, emotionally, and socially.” The teachers in this study expressed a strong commitment to creating a more humanizing experience for students with disabilities. One veteran teacher said, “What
does special education mean to me? It means giving that kid some dignity; giving that kid that is nothing in a regular classroom a chance to shine.”

Special education teachers enter the field with strong aspirations and hopes. One veteran teacher reflected, “I was going to save the world. At least the lame would walk, the blind would see, and everyone would hear. I thought I was going to find solutions for everything.” Special education teachers express a strong obligation to empower students with disabilities to accept responsibility for their well-being. One veteran teacher stated, “I want them to recognize that having a disability isn’t an excuse. I tell them, we have a broken oar; we still get across the river, but we just kind of taking a winding path.” Many of the novice and veteran teachers reported they were “champions for the underdog” and sought to “stand up” for them. Another veteran teacher commented, “I always gravitated towards those kids that were made fun of. I’d stand up for them and kind of be their friend to help shield the hurt that was dealt to them.” Finally, most of the teachers reported a strong need to help children with disabilities to become contributing members of their communities. As stated by one teacher,

My goals with my students is that they become a part of their community, not apart from it. The more we feel like we are part of our community, the less we feel like we stick out, and that’s truly my heartfelt goal.

Summary

In summary, special education teachers in this study reported a strong experiential connection to students with disabilities. This connection is grounded in their early background experiences and shapes how they approach their work as special education teachers. Special education teachers seek to overcome the isolation and marginalization experienced by students
with disabilities and to give them hope. As one veteran teacher put it, “I knew what I felt were the problems with special ed and I couldn’t fix it unless I was in it. So that’s why I went into it.”

Special Education Teachers Work Challenges

As many authors have noted, special education teachers work in a unique context that is often contentious, ambiguous, and challenging. To be effective, special education teachers must bridge cultural gaps between special education and general education (Falk, 2002; Frith, 1981; Pugach, 1992). Special education teachers in this study reported several challenging aspects of their work; some of these challenges seem to inhibit bridging the cultural gap between special education and general education and some inhibited their ability to balance instructional and non-instructional duties. Several of these challenges were similar for novice and veteran teachers, yet there were distinct contrasts. Experience and location account for many of these differences. These contrasts will be highlighted in each subtheme. The subthemes related to work challenges include the paperwork challenge; finding curriculum and resources; bridging the gap – understanding dual workplace cultures; and keeping peace in the family – supervising paraeducators.

The Paperwork Challenge

Almost every novice and veteran special education teacher in this study reported that completing paperwork was one of their greatest challenges. Most novice and veteran teachers reported putting in extra time to complete paperwork. Research on special education teacher burnout and attrition conclusively argues that paperwork fosters dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion in most teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002). In this study, the teachers reported that paperwork included writing individualized education plans (IEP), completing Child Find assessments and reports, data collection, and state assessments. Novice
teacher’s were quick to point out that paperwork interferes with lesson planning and inhibits them from focusing on improving their instructional skills, while veteran teachers were more likely to report challenges accessing to up-to-date information. Despite these challenges, a few teachers reported the paperwork was consistent with their work responsibilities and facilitated accomplishing their work.

Many novice teachers reported putting in extraordinary time to complete paperwork. One novice teacher reported working late into the night to complete paperwork: “I’ve been here many nights until 11:30. Yes, I could take my work home, but my computer is here.” Many times paperwork leaves teachers exhausted and emotionally drained. One novice teacher reported, “It is so intense. I’ve been here until 7:30 at night, I get here at 7:30. I’m putting in tons of hours and sometimes it doesn’t even feel like I’ve left. Friday gets here I’m just exhausted.” The paperwork challenge increases the special education teacher’s stress, workload, and emotional exhaustion. One novice teacher linked paperwork to burnout, “I worked over the weekend and one morning to complete report cards and IEP’s. I counted it up. I processed 231 pieces of paper. It was my first ‘ah ha’ experience with what people mean when they mean burning out with the paperwork.” Many veteran teachers reported giving up personal time to balance instructional duties with non-instructional duties. One veteran teacher reported giving up time with her family to achieve this balance: “For the most part, I do put working with the kids and the relationships with the parents first, but then pay personally to get the paperwork done.” Veteran teachers were more likely than novice teachers to balance instructional duties with non-instructional duties by completing paperwork after hours or on weekends. As one veteran teacher stated, “There’s no time to do IEP’s or all the paperwork that needs to be done, unless you give up teaching your classes or you do it at home. I try very hard not to work at home.”
Many novice and veteran teachers reported that the paperwork burden detracts from their lesson planning and prevents them from improving their instructional skill set. One novice teacher expressed her disappointment with this situation:

I haven’t been able to truly focus on my teaching because there is so much paperwork and so many people to contact. Putting all the pieces together, it takes away a lot of my time on effective teaching. I’m very disappointed.

Another novice teacher reported using her planning periods to complete paperwork:

It’s just ridiculous. You have a plan period, but I am not planning. I am writing IEP’s. I’m doing your amendments. I’m doing your behavioral plans and documenting things. There’s no planning. I come in at six in the morning to make the lesson for that day. It’s draining.

One veteran teacher commented that she completed paperwork and instruction simultaneously:

“It was so bad at one time I could be working with one kid on math, and testing another student at the same time.” Several novice teachers had to delegate instructional duties to paraeducators to complete paperwork. One of them discussed the choices she had to make to complete paperwork:

There’s a lot of paperwork. It’s very, very time consuming. I mean - I never realized - thank God I have a fantastic para cause – there are some days where I need you to run these centers and do my circle. I’ll jump in if your kids need assistance, but I have three hours of paperwork that I have to get done.

Finally, some teachers reported the paperwork is an ongoing concern that fosters anxiety. One veteran teacher referred to the emotionally draining nature of paperwork, “The paperwork just never goes away. As soon as you finish a report and an IEP, you’re just going to have to write another report or IEP.” Paperwork requirements often reflect policies developed at the district
level that spell out specific timelines and penalties for non-compliance. One novice teacher commented upon the anxiety and extra work created by paperwork, “Just constantly having to get notices out. And getting them [IEP’s] done in time in order for them to make the kids count, so they don’t get dropped and the district doesn’t lose money. The paperwork is atrocious.” Some veteran teachers reported learning to complete paperwork by trial and error and learning from the painful experience of non-compliance:

I was monitored my first year here. Man! I took a hit. Cause I came from Idaho and I was going by the paperwork that they had. I took a hit. I mean big time hit on that. There's not a list that someone gives you and say here it is.

Often the paperwork challenge can be ambiguous and distressing. One novice teacher referred to the anxiety created by her assessment duties: “The first year I was here they expected me to do preschool screenings for Child Find and their like so just do it and I really had no idea what that meant.” Many teachers reported state assessments (WAAS Portfolio) increased the amount of paperwork. One teacher stated, “That portfolio, I wish that could happen every day, but it's an exercise in how bright I am as a teacher. Can I jump through the hoops and pass that portfolio? It has nothing to do with real progress for this child. I am not going to buy into this dog and pony show.” In addition, novice teachers reported that the individualized nature of special education compounds the challenge. As one novice teacher commented,

There’s also the data keeping. That is paperwork too. You have to keep data on everything you do. I still haven’t gotten my objectives down for each child, for each class, so that I can check them off when I obtain them.
Several of the teachers reported recent innovations in technology, such as online IEP programs, did not decrease the paperwork load: “It’s still the same amount of paperwork it’s just stored on the internet instead of on your computer.”

Many of the veteran teachers reported that the lack of access to up-to-date information makes it difficult to complete paperwork accurately and timely. They reported seeking assistance to ensure special education forms reflected the latest regulatory revisions and were compliant. One veteran teacher criticized the changing compliance expectations:

   That is really a peeve of mine. This year we want our goal written this way. Now the next year we want them written this way. No! No! That’s ridiculous to me because it has nothing to do with kids.”

Many veteran teachers reported that school reform issues add to the paperwork challenge. A veteran teacher expressed her frustration in these words: “Trying to stay on top of all our rules and regulations; keeping up with accommodations for the WASL and keeping up with the portfolio. That’s a challenge.”

Although most veteran and novice teachers report paperwork is a challenge, not all teachers shared this view. Two veteran teachers reported the paperwork was consistent with their work responsibilities and was complimentary to their instructional duties. One veteran teacher stated,

   We had a committee do a self study and develop our own IEP. Now it’s prescriptive. You spend more time with the kiddos, but it’s not more paperwork. It’s more time with the kid getting to know them. Once the plan’s laid out, the IEP meetings run smoother and the parents are more confident.
Another veteran teacher reported that IEP’s helped to bridge the gap between the special education and general education cultures: “I don’t write my IEP’s as a way to disrupt; I write them as a way to encourage. There are those of us who write them in an abrupt fashion. It’s ineffective. A shotgun isn’t a pretty thing to carry into a meeting, you see, and it makes for messiness and nothing gets accomplished. Everything becomes scattered.” Finally, one novice teacher reported receiving assistance from other teachers and administrators completing paperwork. She reported, “They come and help me to write IEP’s. I’ve had really good support writing IEP’s.”

In summary, novice and veteran teachers struggle to balance instructional and non-instructional duties. Many of the teachers reported completing paperwork was extremely difficult and required extra time beyond the school day to complete. Most of the novice teachers reported completing paperwork during planning periods, after hours, or on weekends, instead of preparing lessons and curriculum materials, whereas, veteran teachers reported focusing on instructional duties by completing paperwork after hours or on weekends. In addition, many novice teachers reported completing paperwork often interfered with instructional duties and required the delegation of instructional duties to paraeducators. Veteran teachers were more likely to report that access to up-to-date information was challenging. Some of the veteran teachers had apparently learned to live with the paperwork challenge and saw it as just part of the job.

Finding Curriculum and Resources

Most of the novice and veteran teachers in this study reported working without formal curriculum or classroom resources. The lack of formal curriculum or classroom resources required time beyond the school day to develop lesson plans, find meaningful curriculum materials, and find classroom resources. These challenges seem to increase their stress, lengthen
their workday, and contribute to the cultural gap between special education and general education teachers. Previous research identified finding curriculum materials and developing lesson plans as a major source of stress for novice special education teachers (Kilgore & Griffin, 1998). In this study, most of the novice and veteran teachers reported that they had to acquire curriculum materials and resources from other teachers and colleagues, or by directly purchasing materials with their own money. In addition, the individualization of instruction and diversity of student needs exacerbated the lack of curriculum materials. One novice teacher explained, “I basically lesson plan for 24 different kids. I have 24 different lesson plans going on in a day. So it’s a ton of time on the weekend.” Another veteran teacher stated,

You’re working with so many different grade levels and disabilities. The difficulty is the planning for each grade level that you have to teach. Pulling resources together because sometimes you’re not given a curriculum, you have to pull those things together. The planning is very, very hard.

Most novice teachers reported the lack of curriculum materials specific to their students required them to create their own materials. Another novice teacher summed up these frustrations:

My biggest challenge as a special ed teacher is having to recreate the wheel. I mean you are always having to generate new ideas and trying new things, but not having a good base of any sort of curriculum to draw from.

Of those teachers who did have access to curriculum materials, many reported using outdated materials or materials not targeted for their students. Many novice teachers are surprised, unprepared, and overwhelmed by the lack of materials. One novice teacher said,
We got all this stuff from this other teacher. It was stuff from the 1960’s that he used; the whole room was piled with stuff. And, I mean, it took me and my para ed a couple of weeks to get through it all, and I was just throwing the old stuff away.

Many teachers reported being hired and working in schools with nothing more than worksheets and dittos. One novice teacher likened her inadequate materials to garbage, “I have these three drawers packed full of ditto sheets. So I had to get rid of that, I mean there was just garbage.” In contrast, a few novice teachers reported an abundance of curriculum materials but no knowledge or time to learn how to use it. A novice teacher stated,

We have tons of English stuff. Last year when I came in, I go what am I supposed to teach and the response I got was you teach whatever you feel is important. So, last year I didn’t have anything. I made it up as I went along.

Despite these challenges, many teachers feel obligated to provide enriching materials and experiences to students with disabilities, but lack the time to do so. One novice teacher commented, “I feel like I owe them an opportunity to have exposure to the general ed curriculum, but I don’t have time to paw through that. I just don’t.”

Many novice and veteran teachers reported looking for materials outside of the school, using creative means to acquire curriculum, or spending their own money. They reported purchasing curriculum materials and resources because their districts were either unwilling or unable to supply the necessary materials. A veteran teacher stated, “I was refused too many times. I buy it myself. It’s just easier to do it this way.” Another veteran teacher sheepishly commented, “Please don't let my husband know, but if we need something I go out and buy it. Probably 90% of what you see I have purchased.” One novice teacher reported spending substantial sums of money: “It’s just little things that add up quickly. Books, puzzles, games,
paint — stuff that we don’t have that I need. It’s close to $100 to $150 a month.” Other teachers reported they acquired curriculum and materials from other teachers or other people. As one stated,

My master teacher recommended Read Naturally and my mom recommended Expressive Writing. I guess most colleges would think you’re going to a bigger district and they’re going to have all of that stuff for you already, and that’s not the case.

Many veteran and novice teachers acquired curriculum and materials through informal connections with other teachers. One veteran teacher shared, “I have a friend that has some really good stuff on comprehension. It's all about hunting it out – beg, borrow, or steal it.” Finally, one novice teacher reported making copies of a curriculum from another teacher: “I couldn’t have another five hundred dollars to get my own math curriculum. I’ve gotten some of the levels of it through another teacher. She allowed me to make copies of it.”

Of the 19 teachers interviewed, only two veterans and one novice teacher reported access to formal, high quality curriculum. All three worked in large urban districts and reported that the curriculum materials addressed the unique needs of special education students. The only novice teacher with formal curriculum reported piloting a curriculum to address the transition needs of high school students. She reported, “This year we’re actually piloting Why Try in the special services department through their study hall class, and I love it. I think it is the best program ever.” One of the veteran teachers reported strong involvement in the adoption and commitment to the implementation of the curriculum. She reported initial skepticism, but enthusiastically embraced the curriculum after implementation: “I had never heard of Read 180 because we’re so busy in the trenches. Our leader had. We had people come in as speakers and we did some research. He didn’t force it; it was all volunteer.” Teacher reports suggest that curriculum
designed specifically for students with disabilities reduces stress and workload. A veteran teacher stated,

When I first started, I was given a box of random things and I tried to come up with something to teach my students. Last year, I was given a curriculum and taught how to use it. Before that, I had no curriculum. I had to find it all. I was flying by the seat of my pants.

Finally, the two veteran teachers with high quality curriculum also reported access to specialized materials for the disabled, such as books on tape or brailled materials. One reported, “We’ve got people to help us. Our vision specialist is going to be contacting books on tape.”

In summary, most special education teachers work in classrooms with no formal curriculum or classroom resources. They often work with students from a wide range of grade and ability levels with self-made curriculum and materials. Most novice and veteran teachers spend a great deal of time outside of their workday creating or buying their own curriculum and classroom resources. Often this creates heightened levels of stress and long workdays. As one veteran teacher put it, “You have to kind of fly by the seat of your pants. You do your own thing. You better know what you want otherwise you’re not going to get it.”

_Bridging the Cultural Gap – Understanding Dual Culture Workplace_

Special education teachers work in a unique environment that often requires extensive networking, technical knowledge, and exemplary interpersonal skills to bridge cultural gaps between the special education and the general education (Falk, 2002; Frith, 1981; & Pugach, 1992). In this study, both novice and veteran teachers reported it was important to understand the differing perspectives, boundaries, and hierarchies associated with this dual culture workplace. Most novice teachers reported that the experience was frustrating, confusing, and isolating.
Both veteran and novice teachers reported it was important to assess and understand the perspectives of administrators and teachers. One veteran teacher reflected on her relationship with building administrators:

You know I've had to push that [participant was whispering], really manipulate that, because administrators come and go. So I have to learn the politics of each new one and the communication style. So I guess throughout my years here I have a very supportive principal and that’s who I go to and that’s who I deal with and that’s where the buck stops. At other times, the principals not there because of their learning style and I rely on the superintendent and I just go right there.

In addition, most teachers emphasized the importance of understanding different teacher perspectives, including their attitude toward special education. One veteran teacher said, “You need to know which teachers do really well with special ed kids and which ones to keep your special ed kids out of their classroom.” Another veteran teacher reported change came slowly and required careful assessment of each teacher’s perspective, “The old guard was here when I came in at 23 years old. They had a certain mind set. This is how it was done and that’s how I did it, but that has changed as I’ve gotten older.”

Novice teachers were more likely to express difficulty and dissatisfaction with assessing the different perspectives and boundaries than veteran teachers. One novice teacher, reflecting upon the ambiguity of her work place, reported, “I can’t tell you what the expectations were because there weren’t any.” For some of the novice teachers, learning the perspectives and boundaries was a painful and embarrassing experience. One novice teacher provided a painful reflection, “I think the intolerance of differences; I never suspected that coming from a school. I lost my self. It was humiliating.” At times, novice teachers conclude the special education and
general education philosophies and perspectives were too large to bridge. One novice teacher reflected upon her lack of involvement with the general education teachers, “There’s a lot of difference in opinions and philosophies between special ed and regular ed. They don’t intentionally try to include special ed. I guess at some point I’m going to have to collaborate with the general ed teacher.”

Administrative and general education philosophies and perspectives partially establish hierarchies and informal rules; however, often the hierarchies in the school are ambiguous and do not reflect formal authority lines. One novice teacher shared her assessment of the informal rules: “It’s a very tight knit building here, and as horrible as it sounds, there’s a few teachers that kind of run the building and oversee everything.” Most teachers reported it was important to identify and target the power brokers within the school. Many times those power brokers were not administrators. One said it this way,

You have to smooze and know who likes dark chocolate and who likes milk chocolate and kiss a little bit of butt to get what you need. That’s not taught, that’s something you have or don’t, and if you don’t have those things you’re not going to go very far.

Other teachers talk about this issue in terms of boundaries and unstated “rules.” One veteran teacher commented, “You have to work within the boundaries given, whether or not you like them that’s not the point.” Another veteran teacher stated, “I don’t buck the system. It’s easier to follow the rules and be happy. I don’t like conflict. I will do anything to avoid conflict.” Often this dynamic makes the relationships one sided: “It’s like you work for the teachers, as well as the parents, and the kids, where it should be more collaborative. That has changed some as we had some retirement in the old guard.” Another veteran teacher reported it was important to gauge the rate of change carefully and to understand when to challenge the informal rules: “You
need to be able to read how far can you push; it’s more of a negotiating thing. There’s no magic potion, but you’ve got to know.” The inability to assess the informal rules creates ambiguity and fosters anxiety and frustration in novice teachers. One novice teacher stated, “There are no teachers outside of special education. In college they teach you it's state law, but general education teachers do not come to meetings and refuse to give accommodations.” Another novice teacher explained how the informal rules fostered anxiety, “Learning the lay of the land, learning what’s acceptable and what’s not, how to approach certain things, there’s a lot of anxiety behind those issues.” Learning the lay of the land requires novice teachers to assess different perspectives, identify the schools informal authority figure, and determine how to build relationships within the boundaries created by the different perspectives.

Many novice and veteran special education teachers reported the the different philosophies, boundaries, and hierarchies tends to isolate them from the larger school context. One veteran reflected upon the isolation of his position, “I’m really an island. A one man show.” Isolation tends to foster anxiety and increase stress. One novice teacher reflected upon the anxiety and isolation created by her position, “It’s really nerve racking knowing you’re the only one who knows anything about special education. There’s really no one else to talk to out here.” Often novice and veteran teachers find it difficult to find the necessary supports to complete their work. One veteran teacher reported, “I don’t have anybody else to fall back on about questions.”

In summary, special education teachers work in an ambiguous, contentious, and challenging environment. The novice and veteran teachers in this study underscored the importance of understanding the different perspectives, boundaries, and hierarchies unique to dual culture workplaces. Novice teachers were much more likely to report anxiety associated with understanding what is acceptable and to distance themselves from the larger school context.
On the other hand, veteran teachers underscored the importance of accurately assessing different perspectives to identify the school's informal authority figure. Identifying the informal authority figure reduces anxiety, conflict, and fosters integration into the larger school context.

*Keeping Peace in the Family – Supervising Paraeducators*

Special education teachers work closely and frequently with paraeducators. Both novice and veteran teachers reported directly supervising multiple paraeducators. Often they describe paraeducator relationships as the most intimate, complex, and challenging relationships to build and manage. Paraeducator supervision is one of the unique special education teacher challenges (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992).

The comments of veteran teachers in this study indicate paraeducator supervision approximates the dynamics and challenges of a family. One veteran teacher explained,

> Last year was a very stressful year. We have people who have been in this classroom as long as I have and people that are new coming in and eager to do stuff and stepping on toes. Everybody comes to me with their problems. You can only take so much. Last year the family kind of broke apart.

Veteran teachers reported poor relationships with or between paraeducators reduce the effectiveness of instructional activities. Another veteran teacher echoed the importance of strong relationships with paraeducators:

> I respect and admire tremendously all my paras. I try to talk to the para and if it doesn’t work, then we move em. The students will sense dissension and they will feast on it like maggots on rotting flesh.

Paraeducator relationships often represent long-term relationships. A veteran commented, “We were a wonderful team. We started during the diaper changing days, and then I convinced her
that she could teach academics. We worked for 22 years together until she passed away with cancer.” Veteran teachers report paraeducators are instrumental to their work and a fundamental member of the team. Another veteran teacher expressed the importance of paraeducators, “I work with three wonderful paraeducators. They are irreplaceable.”

While all novice teachers reported supervising paraeducators, a few novice teachers reported their age and experience made supervising paraeducators difficult. One novice teacher described her experience,

I didn’t realize coming straight out of college I would be in charge of paraeducators. Sometimes that’s draining to me, cause especially as a first year teacher, I’m 24 years old, I’m going to a woman who has a daughter my age, going to another one that has grand kids and I am directing them. That’s a very awkward stance to take. I take the bull by the horns and I do it, but it’s weird to me.

The turnover of special education teachers often exacerbates the experience. Another novice teacher reported,

This particular para, she’d been here for a long time, and you know, there’d been a lot of turn-over. I think that she had kind of, you know, been in charge and been the one who was pretty much running the classroom with these other teachers. And so for me to come in, I’m new, and it’s another new teacher to her. This year it’s just easier for me to be more assertive; just because now I’m a little more confident.

Despite these concerns, most novice teachers expressed appreciation for paraeducators.

In summary, novice and veteran teachers report appreciation for paraeducators. Most veteran teachers describe paraeducators as a vital aspect of their work that can be challenging at times. Veteran teachers were more likely to report difficulties managing relationships between
paraeducators, while a few novice teachers reported their age and experience made it difficult to establish directive, supervisory relationships.

**Summary**

Special education teachers report several challenging aspects of their work that limit their ability to bridge the cultural gap between special education and general education. These challenges often prevent them from balancing their instructional and non-instructional duties. Challenges include completing paperwork; finding curriculum materials; bridging the gap – understanding dual culture workplaces; and supervising paraeducators. Often these challenges are contentious, ambiguous, and emotionally draining.

**Special Education Teachers Responses to Work Challenges**

Novice and veteran special education teachers use different strategies to bridge the gap between dual workplace cultures. The strategies teachers use to accomplish their work is critical to their success and an under reported aspect of their work (Kilgore & Griffin, 1998). Research from (Billingsley, 2004) highlights the importance of administrative and collegial support to special education teachers. In this study, veteran teachers underscored the need to build relationships by networking to get their work accomplished; whereas, novice teachers were much more inclined to use confrontational or coercive strategies to accomplish their work. Novice teachers often referred to their work as a game, fight, or battle. In this section, I will present the analysis of veteran and novice teacher’s responses to their work challenges. I will focus first on veteran teachers, then novice teachers. I will finish this section by presenting veteran and novice contrasting experiences.
Veteran Teacher’s Responses to Work Challenges

Many of the veteran teachers reported building relationships was critical to counter the isolation, contention, and ambiguity unique to their position. Some of the relationships veteran teachers considered important included the principal, general education teachers, other special educators, and students. In this section, I will present the relationships veteran teachers consider critical to their work and strategies they used to create them.

Self reports by most of the veteran special education teacher’s in this study underscores the importance of building relationships to accomplish their work. One veteran teacher underscored the magnitude of building relationships, “That is a huge issue. “My job is all about building relationships - student to teacher, teacher to teacher, teacher to principal, and teacher to superintendent. Leadership is a huge. A mousy person could not do this well.” Many veteran teachers were quick to identify the principal or superintendent as a key relationship. Administrative support often fosters school wide expectations and collegial interactions. Another veteran teacher highlighted the importance of building administrative relationships, “Having administrative backing sets the mood of the school.” Another veteran described divergent experiences with administrative relationships, “Two years ago my principal was a stumbling block. He didn’t know anything about special ed. Now I have a principal who comes to IEP meetings and says you will accommodate.” Administrative support seems to reduce ambiguity and stress.

Many veteran teachers described building relationships with other teachers was a critical and enriching aspect to completing their work. One veteran teacher reported on the fundamental necessity of building relationships with other teachers, “I’ve learned I can’t do it all. Teaching is a team sport. You’ve got to collaborate and tap into your resources. It’s survival.” A few veteran
teachers retrospectively reported specific strategies for building relationships as novice teachers. One veteran teacher reported using the team teaching concept to connect and leverage her personal power as a novice teacher with the general education teachers. She reflected upon her experience as a novice teacher, “I team taught with the teacher who was most resistant to change in one of the hardest subject areas. If you can convince him and have him say something at a staff meeting or in passing what's working about that, then you’ve got the middle of the road people. It got me in the door and so that was huge.” Another veteran teacher reported using the team teaching concept to connect to general education teachers. She reported, “The science teacher didn’t want a special ed kid in his room. I told him I’ll come in and teach study skills the first couple of weeks of school if you let this kid in. He said okay, but he still didn’t want to deal with him. I never left his class for two years. He loved it.” Many veteran teachers reported it was important to avoid confrontational communication styles to bridge the cultural gap between special education and general education. One veteran teacher reported, “I have a lot of patience and I have found that you need it. Just, you know, not being aggressive, not being confrontational, just, you know, talk.” Special education teachers often find themselves intervening in a community of diverse perspectives. Their ability to assess the diverse perspectives and bridge the cultural gap depends upon the strategies and interpersonal skills they bring to bear upon the school environment. One veteran teacher reported, “I am a compromiser. I get myself involved or try to do something that will make everybody happy.”

Many teachers described building relationships with a variety of groups and people to extend their knowledge of additional resources and expertise. These groups included the IEP team, related service providers, and the student assistance team. One veteran teacher highlighted how relationships helped her address difficult students, “Congress in their wisdom built in the
MDT [multidisciplinary team]. That’s what’s so lovely about the law; it’s all about collaboration. So I just call in the reinforcements and we trouble shoot.” Often times, the IEP team is the context for making decisions about students with disabilities. Another veteran teacher described how the IEP team provides a context for making decisions, “The IEP team is very powerful here. The administrators are always willing to be involved and help us make decisions. They trust that we know what we need and they’ll do whatever they can to get that for us.” Special education teachers build relationships with many groups and people to extend their knowledge of resources and expertise to reduce the contention and isolation of their work.

Many veteran special education teachers reported building relationships with all students within the building as a strategy to integrate into the general education culture. One veteran teacher recalled her how she built relationships with students beyond special education, “I worked very hard in going into as many classrooms as possible to talk to everybody and being in the hallway and calling everybody by name. Because again if you’re only walking around saying hello to the special ed kids then they know, but if your saying hi to everybody they don't know.” Another veteran teacher reported volunteering as advisors outside of special education to connect to the general education culture. She reported, “I am the advisor for the National Honor Society and the junior class. I've got the best and brightest. They see me as someone who is approachable and not just the special education teacher. They see me in another light and available to more people.” These relationships create a social space for them in the larger school context and reduces their isolation.

Some of the veteran special education teachers also discussed using school reform initiatives to their advantage. One veteran teacher reported working closely with the superintendent and principal to implement response to intervention strategies. She shared, “I had
Novice Teacher’s Responses to Work Challenges

Novice teachers were much more likely to express frustration, dissatisfaction, and isolation. Novice teachers were more likely to refer to their work as a game, fight, or battle. They were much more likely to use confrontation and coercive strategies to accomplish their work. In this section, I will present the novice teacher’s responses to their work and strategies for completing their work.

In this study, novice teachers were much more likely to refer to their work as a game, fight, or battle. Unfortunately, this analogy fosters competition, suppresses working relationships, and increases feelings of isolation, frustration, and dissatisfaction. One novice teacher referred to her school as a battleground, “I would say the building that I work in has been challenging. Just the different rules – special ed and general ed – and people’s views and
administration views. It’s something that’s hard and it’s kind of a battleground.” Unlike most veteran teachers, novice teachers are much more likely to report adversarial relationships with others and turn to administrator’s for conflict resolution. One novice teacher shared her first experience with administrative support:

Last year when I got here, the administration said you won’t be teaching; you’ll be doing the paperwork. I thought that was odd. The para pro’s did all the lesson planning and taught. There was no connection between what I was writing on their IEP’s and what was actually being taught. I was appalled; so that’s a change I made this year. They didn’t like that I was going to be in the classroom and knew what I was doing. There was a pretty big uproar, but the administration sided with me. I should be teaching. Two of the para pro’s refused to change so they were basically switched to Title One para’s.

Adversarial relationships often increase the novice teacher’s reliance upon coercive administrative support. One novice teacher reported heavy reliance upon interpretations of the law by her administrator:

If it’s in the IEP, you are required by law to provide that service. We have big meetings with the general ed teachers and say you are not following the IEP and this is not okay. I have a phenomenal special ed coordinator. She fights for us until the death.

Adversarial relationships increase conflict and ambiguity. Another novice teacher reflected upon her difficulty developing relationships at school:

They just want to start picking at me for any little thing and it’s hard to take. It makes you want to stand up. I feel like I am constantly defending myself. I’m on the defensive team and you’re on the offensive team.
Confrontational strategies and adversarial relationships inhibit a teacher’s ability to assimilate into the special education culture and general education culture.

Novice teachers often limit their involvement in the general education culture to reduce conflict, ambiguity, and anxiety. A novice teacher reflected upon her decision to limit her involvement in the general education culture: “I’m not always a player. Sometimes I’m on the sidelines just wanting to get my time in. I was kind of sitting in the back seat.” Most novice teachers report feeling unable to effect change. Another novice teacher reflected upon her difficulty creating change: “I am trying to work with the teachers and show his available accommodations without making the teacher feel awkward. I don’t want to butt heads, but expand their view.” Most novice teachers struggle to bridge the philosophies between special education and general education. One teacher said, “I am always feeling in competition, unsupported, unheard, just sort of blown off.” Most novice teachers reported the different philosophies increase their use of coercive strategies. A novice teacher recounted her attempts to make teachers see a different perspective: “It’s kind of old school here. I’m trying to make them understand or help them understand the IEP. This kid can have special ed and they don’t have to be in my room all day.”

Often novice teachers reduce the scope of their decisions to avoid working with general education teachers. One novice teacher reasoned,

I think to myself this would be in the best interest to have these accommodations, but I know the gen ed teachers aren’t going to give them. Why would I write them into the IEP? I’m going to have to go and fight and battle and I don’t want to fight and battle. It’s tiring and draining and I don’t have the time.
These interactions create ambiguity, conflict, and increase their isolation. Novice special education teacher’s inability to bridge the cultural gaps fosters confrontational strategies or withdrawal from the general education culture. One novice teacher concluded separation from general education teachers was the norm:

There’s a few teachers who are great and I talk to them and get along with them, but we kind of stick to, stick to ourselves. I mean that’s sad and it’s hard, but it’s the way of the building.

Confrontational strategies foster increased isolation, dissatisfaction, anxiety, frustration, and a reduced sense of accomplishment.

Many of the novice teachers reported being young inhibited their work and created anxiety. One novice teacher reflected upon the impact of her age: “I am the youngest in this building probably by ten years if not more.” Novice teachers report feeling pressured to intervene and make decisions in the school’s best interest. Another novice teacher spoke to the anxiety created by disagreement among teachers: “You have to be really careful how you intervene and be consistent with what you’re saying. Especially as a young person, I see that as very, very overwhelming.” Many novice teachers reported their age decreased their credibility among more experienced teachers. One novice teacher said,

It’s been hard even working with some of the regular ed teachers. They’ve all been in their position for years and so I come in and I have these ideas or things that need to be implemented for our kids and they just kind of look at me like, yeah, I’m sure you know what you’re talking about.

Finally, novice teachers reported their age obligated them to duties veteran teachers did not want. One teacher reported the veteran teachers expected her to take a coaching position:
I think they see it as you’re the young one it’s your turn to step up and do it. It’s kind of an obligation thing. We did it when we were young, your brand new it’s your turn. It’s my duty to do it basically.

A Minority Report

Not all novice and veteran teachers reported similar experiences as their peers. One novice teacher reported a strong connection to both the special education and general education cultures; whereas, one veteran teacher did not. The novice teacher shared an atypical experience from other novice teachers. She was the only novice teacher to describe a strong, supportive school culture were all teachers and students are valued. She commented on her integration into the general education culture, “I have a general education teacher here. We have lunch together and just kind of bounce ideas back and forth. It’s really nice to have that.” The same teacher shared the emotional support the general education teacher provided to her, “Like you may be having the worst day ever, you just complain you’re done. It’s amazing how much a decompress can make you feel so much better.” Even more so, she described a deliberate integration into the general education culture by general education teachers. She reported,

We have PE four days a week. It was originally five, but I wanted my kids to have library time. She [the librarian] was definitely okay to do that for my kids. So we trimmed our PE to four periods a week and library one. I have another teacher who says my kids know your kids from elementary school, like they want to come do stuff. So, the last day before Halloween she sent the kids that wanted to come and we did stuff. The home and family consumer sciences teacher is like we want to do a buddy read.

Beyond that, she described a robust support system developed by the district and school:
They sent me to workshops. I have almost wrapped up 140 clock hours to date on their dime. They also got me a brand new fridge. They have been very supportive. We meet about students informally a lot of times. We kind of hammer out problems together.

In contrast to the novice teacher, one veteran teacher articulated a strong sense of isolation, disillusionment, and dissatisfaction. She clearly described two distinct cultures within her school and articulated how her position isolated her from the rest of the school:

I was really, you know, bending over backwards and making myself into a pretzel trying to, uhh, be kind and be accommodating to the teacher, but that’s probably why I feel like they treat me as a special ed kid too (laughing). You know - not really part of the community, school community. It’s interesting because in this building there’s several ex-special ed teachers here, but because they are regular ed teachers now their part of the group. It’s weird. So I don’t care if they like me or if they don’t. I really don’t care.

Both cases illustrated in this section represent the exception from the typical experiences of novice and veteran teachers.

In summary, self reports from most veteran special education teachers indicate they used their formal and informal learning to work within the local school norms to assimilate into dual workplace cultures. Veteran special education teachers are much more likely to use exemplary interpersonal skills to initiate professional interactions to carve out a space for themselves within the dual workplace cultures. They are also much more likely to use administrative support to build relationships to capitalize upon new initiatives to integrate into the general education culture. Unlike veteran teachers, novice teachers are much more likely to struggle to bridge the cultural gaps between special education and general education. They are much more likely to use confrontational and coercive strategies and to use administrative support to resolve conflict.
Affective Responses to Work Challenges

Novice and veteran special education teachers’ background experiences foster values, motives, and expectations. Often they approach their work with strong aspirations and hope. Their work challenges and responses to their work challenges tend to create strong affective responses. In this study, the majority of novice teachers were more likely to report feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction, and emotional fatigue; whereas, veteran teachers were more likely to report feeling connected, satisfied, and engaged. In this section, I present the analysis of novice and veteran teacher’s affective responses to their work. I will begin with the novice teachers.

In this study, the majority of novice teachers were more likely to consider a career outside of special education and to report feelings of disengagement, frustration, and emotional fatigue. Many of the novice teachers reported strong feelings of dissatisfaction and were likely to consider leaving public education. One novice teacher reflected upon her experience:

I think if I was moved to a different building I would be all for kind of staying, but it really is just such a negative attitude that it kind of makes you want to leave. If I didn’t have a great team that I work with and a special ed director, I would have quit last year.

Some of the novice teachers reported feelings of disillusionment and unfair treatment. Another novice teacher described her feelings of discontent: “I think that I’ve been kind of railroaded, basically, with all the stuff that they’ve put on me as a first year teacher that I kind of got a sour taste in my mouth about special ed.” Other novice teachers shared doubts about whether they had the energy to continue in special education. One novice teacher said, “I don’t feel like I could keep up this pace probably for more than another five to ten years. I just don’t feel that I would be on top of everything I need to be on top of.” Many novice teachers described strong feelings
of emotional fatigue and struggled to find balance between their personal and professional lives.

Another novice teacher tearfully described her feelings:

I am to the max! I’m going to keep dealing with it, because I think it can’t be like this for all of my teaching career. I got to have a life. I am so out of balance. I’m exhausted and saying please come on!

A few novice teachers articulated comfort, but dissatisfaction in their work and stayed because of a lack of other opportunities. One novice teacher shared, “If I won the lottery tomorrow, I could tell you where I would be.” Finally, several teachers simply reported plans to leave education. One novice teacher commented, “I am currently working on a masters degree, but will not be in public education in 5 years.”

Veteran teachers were much more likely to report feeling connected, satisfied, and engaged. For many veteran teachers, special education had become a life-long vocation. One veteran teacher said, “I like the fact that I am a special ed teacher. I’m not sure I could see myself doing much of anything else. I am happy here.” Although many veteran teachers were satisfied and enjoyed their work, their career plans often hinged upon their family. Another veteran teacher expressed her satisfaction,

I don’t know where my family will be in five years, but I love being a special ed teacher. I don’t know if we’ll still be here. I would like to be. I really like it here. I like the kids. I like who I work with. Hopefully I will still be teaching special education.

Most veteran teachers spoke with confidence and conviction about their work. Another veteran teacher shared, “I’m not sure where I’ll be in five years, but I will be coming back next year that I can promise you. As long as my health allows and I can smile I’ll be here.” Finally, one veteran teacher simply stated, “I love what I am doing.”
Although novice teachers are more likely than veteran teachers to report conflict, isolation, and ambiguity, there were exceptions. One novice teacher felt connected to their school while some veterans do not. She reported, “I have been blown away with the support I’ve received. I wouldn’t mind staying here long term.” Conversely, one veteran teacher shared strong feelings of dissatisfaction and reported, “I paid my dues. I’ll have my 30 years in. I’m not planning to come back.”

In summary, novice special education teachers were much more likely to report dissatisfaction, disengagement, and emotional fatigue. Novice teachers were much more likely to consider leaving special education and public education. In contrast, veteran teachers were much more likely to report feeling satisfied, engaged, and connected to their schools. They were much more likely to consider special education a life-long vocation and reported a strong sense of personal accomplishment.

Summary

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to explore the K-12 special education teacher’s experiences and perceptions with work challenges and perceptions of stress and potential burnout; and (b) to explore the usefulness of the Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model to explain the their perceptions of stress and potential burnout. Based upon the qualitative data collected from 19 special education teacher interviews, novice and veteran teachers reported a variety of background experiences with the disabled community that shaped their values, beliefs, and expectations for their work. These experiences foster an empathetic understanding of the isolation and marginalization of the disabled and predispose them to appreciate the cultural gaps between special education and general education. Based upon the analysis described in Chapter 3, four subthemes emerged as work challenges. Those challenges
included the paperwork challenge, the lack of curriculum and resources, bridging the gap - dual culture workplaces, and keeping peace in the family - supervising paraeducators. Novice and veteran teachers responded to these challenges differently. Often novice teacher’s respond to work challenges with confrontational and adversarial strategies; whereas, veteran teachers are much more likely to use exemplary interpersonal skills to build relationships. These relationships enabled them to capitalize upon new initiatives to negotiate the cultural gaps and assimilate into dual workplace cultures. Teacher responses to work challenges created dramatically different affective responses. Novice teachers were much more likely to report feelings of dissatisfaction, isolation, conflict, and emotional fatigue. Unlike novice teachers, veteran teachers were much more likely to report feeling satisfied, connected, engaged, and committed to continue working as a special education teacher.

Previous special education attrition and burnout research has documented the many challenges of the special education teacher. Paperwork, conflict, ambiguity, and the lack of administrative and collegial support are significantly correlated to special education teacher’s intent to leave special education and public education (Billingsley, 2004). In addition, research from Fore, Martin, and Bender (2002) concluded paperwork, stress associated with job requirements, the lack of planning time, the lack of administrative support, and classroom instructional arrangements with mixed student disabilities was correlated to special education teacher burnout. Prolonged exposure to these working conditions tend to create negative teacher affective reactions and reduced organizational and professional commitment. Recommendations from these studies include the reduction of paperwork, class sizes, increased administrative support, and mentorship of first year teachers. In Chapter 5, I present the study conclusions of the data from Chapter 4 and implications of the study.
Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to explore K-12 special education teachers’ experiences with work challenges, and perceptions of stress and potential burnout; and (b) to explore the usefulness of the Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model to explain the their perceptions of stress and potential burnout. This study addressed four research questions: (a) How do special education teachers describe their core values in regard to special education and their work motives? (b) How do special education teachers describe and interpret the rewards and satisfactions of their work? (c) How do special education teachers describe the challenges and dissatisfaction of their work? (d) How do special education teachers cope with challenges and attempt to succeed in their work? Chapter 3 presented the methods used to collect qualitative data through interviews with 19 special education teachers, and Chapter 4 presented the analysis of the data organized into four themes: Who they are – Special education teachers’ values and motives; special education teachers work challenges; special education teacher’s responses to work challenges; and special education teacher’s affective responses to work challenges.

In this chapter, I will first present the conclusions of the study, including how each theme discussed in the analysis in Chapter 4 reflects one or more components of the Competing Interests Model. Then, I will discuss revisions to the Competing Interest Model based upon the analysis and the utility of the revised model for explaining special education teacher’s experiences. Finally, I will present the implications of the study for school district educators, policy makers, and researchers.
Conclusions

This conclusions section is organized into three parts: Review of the initial conceptualization of the Competing Interests Model; conclusions of the study based on the analysis in Chapter 4; and revisions to the Competing Interests Model based on this analysis. In the conclusions section, I discuss how each theme discussed in Chapter 4 reflects one or more components of the Competing Interests Model. Then, I discuss the necessary revisions to the Competing Interests Model based on the analysis and the utility of the revised model to explain the relationships among the themes and special education teachers’ experiences.

The Competing Interests Model – The Initial Conceptualization

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Special Education Teacher Competing Interests Model is a multi-dimensional conceptual framework. The nexus of the model is an amalgamation of the contentious social space created by national, state, and local legislation, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); the dimensions from Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) Job-Person Fit Model and the special education teacher burnout research of Wisniewski and Garguilo (1997); the stages of practitioner development (Skovholt, 2001); critical race theory; and a disability centric perspective. Special education teacher stress originates in the competing interests created by the contentious social space. As originally conceived in Chapter 1, the Competing Interests Model suggests that a cognitive appraisal of stressors accounts for individualized responses to stress (Lazarus, 1999). In other words, teachers assess and judge the impact of individual stressors through cognitive appraisals before developing responses to stressors. An erroneous appraisal may create teacher responses that increase the experience of stress, while an accurate appraisal may reduce or prevent stress. This initial conceptualization of the Competing Interests Model was a useful tool for guiding the
study’s design and research questions and for initial interpretation of the data; however, the outcomes of this study suggest changes in the conceptual framework. In this section, I will discuss the how each theme from the data analysis in Chapter 4 reflects components of the Competing Interest Model suggested by the analysis. Then, I discuss the necessary revisions to the model based upon the analysis of data in Chapter 4.

Thematic Connections to the Model

The four themes from the data analysis presented in Chapter 4 included: Who they are – Special education teacher’s values and motives; special education teachers’ work challenges; special education teachers’ responses to work challenges; and special education teachers’ affective responses to work. Each of these themes reflects various components of the Competing Interests Model.

Who they are – Special education teachers’ values and motives.

The theme “Who They Are – Special Education Teachers’ Values and Motives” explained that special education teachers’ have a strong experiential connection with the disabled. This connection seems to foster a disability centric perspective and creates specific values, beliefs, and a sense of purpose for their work. These values, beliefs, and sense of purpose create a unique ontological, disability centric perspective and differentiate them from most general education teachers. In terms of the Competing Interest Model, these conclusions reflect Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) Job-Person Fit Model and refer to the dimensions of values, community, and fairness. Special education teachers’ disability centric perspective often limits their inclusion in the broader school community by preventing positive connections to general education teachers. Maslach and Leiter (1997) concluded that political infighting in schools fosters alienation, conflicting values, and a strong sense of unfairness. The differences in values
held by special education and general education teachers can contribute to this alienation. As noted by Pugach (1992) little research has explored the relationship of special education teacher’s background experiences to their beliefs, values, and sense of purpose of their work. This study’s contribution is that special education teachers have a unique, disability centric perspective, based in their experiential backgrounds that contributes to cultural gaps between special and general educators.

*Special education teachers’ work challenges.*

In this study, special education teachers reported four challenging aspects to their work: the paperwork challenge, finding curriculum and resources, bridging the gap – understanding dual culture workplaces, and keeping peace in the family - supervising paraeducators.

The theme “The Paperwork Challenge” explained that paperwork is one of special education teachers’ non-instructional duties that requires extra time beyond the school day and delegation of instructional duties. Paperwork differentiates them from general education teachers and fosters anxiety, dissatisfaction, and fatigue. In terms of the Competing Interests Model, paperwork reflects the socio-political context and redistributive policy of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Redistributive policies shift power and resources from one group to another (Fowler, 2004). These shifts in power and resources are ideologically based; create sharp divisions among social groups; and foster contentious political arenas. Paperwork is a local manifestation of the this shift in power and requires special education teachers to navigate the contentious and litigious political arena created by IDEA to garner general education participation in special education. In addition, it reflects the workload and control dimensions of Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) Job-Person Fit Model. Paperwork represents the school district’s attempt to implement IDEA and to reduce litigation exposure; however, the school district’s
policies and procedures reduce special education teachers control over key workload issues that affect their instructional duties. As mentioned earlier, research has conclusively argued that paperwork contributes to the attrition and burnout of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002). In addition, because the paperwork challenge is not understood by general education teachers, it contributes to the cultural gap between general and special education teachers.

The theme “Finding Curriculum and Resources” explained that most special education teachers in this study work without adequate formal curriculum and classroom resources to address a wide range of student ability and skill levels. The lack of curriculum and classroom resources further differentiates special education teachers from general education teachers and requires extraordinary time beyond the school day to either create or find their own materials. In terms of the Competing Interests Model, this theme reflects the socio-political dimensions of public education and the workload and control dimensions of Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) Job – Person Fit Model. In addition, the lack of curriculum and classroom resources are reflected in the organizational complexity and instructional arrangements conceived by Wisniewski and Garguilo (1997). Research by Banks and Necco (1990) confirmed correlations between instructional arrangements and rates of burnout. They concluded instructional arrangements for students with behavioral disorders and resource room settings were more ambiguous in nature and lead to higher rates of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Similarly, research addressing burnout in secondary special education teachers of students with learning disabilities confirms the correlation between instructional arrangements and role conflict, ambiguity, workload, and administrative support (Embich, 2001).
The theme “Bridging the Gap – Understanding Dual Culture Workplaces” explained that special education teachers work in a unique dual culture workplace that requires them to assimilate into a special education culture and a general education culture. In Derrick Bell’s (1995) words, the dual culture workplace requires special education teachers to serve “two masters.” In terms of the Competing Interests Model, this theme reflects the power dimension of the socio-political context, the values and community dimension of the Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) Job-Person Fit Model, and the organizational complexity and interpersonal interactions dimensions of Wisniewski and Garguilo (1997). Dual culture workplaces require special education teachers to implement federal, state, and local policies without the authority to direct the activities of general education teachers. The strategies special education teachers use to assess the various perspectives in the school will influence their ability to assimilate into the special education and general education cultures. Confrontational strategies tend to reduce the special education teachers ability to assimilate into dual cultures; whereas, relationship building strategies tend to increase their ability to assimilate into dual cultures.

Previous research confirms this conclusion. Research from Falk (2003) underscores the importance of special education teachers’ strategies and responses to their work challenges. She reported special education teachers who successfully assimilated into the dual culture workplaces did so with exceptional interpersonal intelligence. Successful special education teachers relied upon their formal and informal learning to initiate professional and social interactions with general education teachers. In addition, research confirms the stress moderating effect of administrative and peer support (Fimian, 1986; Cherniss, 1988; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996). Supportive, constructive dialogue focused on reflective-problem solving interactions between
teachers and administrators seems to reduce special education teacher’s isolation, ambiguity, and conflict.

The theme “Keeping Peace in the Family – Supervising Paraeducators” explained that special education teachers’ relationships with paraeducator were the most intimate, complex, and challenging relationships to build and maintain. Subtle differences in power create disruptions in these relationships and foster conflict, ambiguity, anxiety, and emotional fatigue. In terms of the Competing Interests Model, paraeducator relationships reflects the socio-political context of public education and the values, workload, fairness, community, and control dimensions of Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) Job-Person Fit Model. In addition, this issue reflects the organizational complexity, interpersonal interactions, and instructional arrangement dimensions of Wisniewski and Garguilo (1997). Supervising paraeducators often is unique to special education teachers and is a work dimension that is not required of most general education teachers. This difference in responsibilities contributes to the cultural gap between general and special education teachers.

Very little research has explored the impact of paraeducator supervision on special education teachers. Billingsely and Tomchin (1992) found that novice special education teachers identified working with paraeducators as one of four challenges. Kilgore and Griffin’s (1998) interview research with novice special education teachers indicated the lack of well-trained paraeducators required intensive efforts on the part of the special education teacher to ensure paraeducators were prepared to work with students with disabilities.

Special Education Teachers’ Responses to Work Challenges

The theme “Special Education Teachers’ Responses to Work Challenges” explained that most veteran teachers used different strategies than novice teachers to accomplish their work.
Veteran teachers were more inclined to underscore the importance of building relationships that fostered administrative support, collegial support, and assimilation into dual culture workplaces. In contrast, novice teachers were more inclined to use confrontational and coercive strategies that fostered conflict, emotional exhaustion, and isolation. In terms of the Competing Interests Model, veteran and novice special education teachers’ responses to work challenges reflect the teacher’s attempts to navigate the contentious socio-political junction created by federal legislation, such as No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In addition, special education teachers’ responses to work challenges reflect Skovholt’s (2001) stages of practitioner development and the different veteran and novice teacher’s epistemological knowledge. The inexperience of novice teachers inhibits their application of the theory and cognitive maps developed from professors, supervisors, teachers, or mentors. Even more so, the theory and cognitive maps developed during pre-service training reflects a broad guide and not the context of the novice teacher’s current situation. Consequently, many novice teachers are unprepared to develop an applied theory of curriculum and instruction, while simultaneously navigating the complexities of dual culture workplaces and learning the special education processes, procedures, and paperwork. Nonetheless, success for novice teachers requires not just the development of an applied theory of curriculum and instruction, but also the development of collaborative, positive interactions with administrators and general education teachers (Kilgore & Griffin, 1998). Supportive administrators and colleagues assist novice teachers to solve the many problems and dilemmas they encounter (Cherniss, 1988).

Special Education Teachers’ Affective Responses to Work Challenges

The theme “Special Education Teachers’ Affective Responses to Work Challenges” explained that novice teachers were much more likely than veteran teachers to consider leaving
special education or public education. Novice teachers were more likely to report feelings of dissatisfaction, disengagement, and emotional fatigue. In contrast, veteran teachers were more likely to consider special education a life-long vocation and report feeling satisfied, engaged, and connected to their schools. In terms of the Competing Interests Model, the affective responses represent the interactive and combined effects of interpersonal interactions, instructional arrangements, organizational complexity, and training to the dual culture workplace, Person-Environment Fit, and the socio-political context of public education. The conditions that created positive affective responses, engagement, and satisfaction include positive interpersonal interactions, clear instructional arrangements, supportive organizational structures, and relevant training. In contrast, the combination of poor interpersonal interactions, ambiguous instructional arrangements, unsupported organizational structures, and irrelevant training leads to role conflict and ambiguity. Research has consistently demonstrated strong correlations between role conflict, ambiguity, and burnout (Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Edmonson & Thompson, 2002; Embich, 2001). Prolonged exposure to these dimensions leads to negative affective responses, increased stress, and reduced professional commitment (Billingsely, 2004).
The Utility of the Competing Interests Model

Taken together, the four themes presented in Chapter 4 reflect manifestations of bifurcated school-based cultures created by ideologically based political arenas at the local school level. This overall conclusion leads to a revision of the original conceptualization of the Competing Interests Model. The original conceptualization placed special education teachers at the nexus of many competing interests and hypothesized that their ability to manage those interests influenced their potential stress and burnout. (Refer to Appendix A for an illustration of the original conceptualization of the Competing Interests Model). Evidence from this study suggests a different way to view this landscape of competing interests. Special education teachers’ background experiences lead to disability centric values, beliefs, and motivations that differentiate them from general education teachers and creates a cultural gap at the local school level. In addition, unique aspects of special education teachers’ work, such as extraordinary amounts of paperwork and the lack of curricular and other resources, interfere with their instructional duties and further exacerbate the cultural gap between general and special education teachers. The separate cultures at the local school level require special education teachers to assimilate into dual culture workplaces to be successful. (Refer to Appendix E for an illustration of the reconceptualization of the Competing Interests Model).

Unlike veteran teachers, novice teachers are overwhelmed by the experience and have insufficient cognitive maps to navigate the contentious political environment and dual culture workplace in public education. Without the proper support and guidance, many novice teachers learn the ambiguous rules, boundaries, and hierarchies inherent to schools through trial and error. Unfortunately, many novice teachers adopt confrontational and coercive strategies to accomplish their duties that reduce their ability to assimilate into dual culture workplaces. Ironically, these
strategies further increase their sense of isolation, anxiety, dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion, while decreasing their sense of accomplishment. In contrast, veteran teachers have robust cognitive maps that enable them to utilize formal and informal learning to assimilate into dual culture workplaces. Veteran teachers are much more likely to use relationship-building strategies to accomplish their duties. These strategies increase their sense of connection to their school, satisfaction, engagement, and sense of accomplishment.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for school administrators, national policy makers, and educational researchers.

*Implications for School Administrators*

Evidence from this study and previous research underscores the importance of administrative support to both veteran and novice special education teachers. Considering the contentious nature of dual culture workplaces, principals and assistant principals should give careful attention to strategies to reduce conflict and ambiguity. Strategies may include creating clear communication and decision making protocols, establishing shared expectations and group norms, and emphasizing collaborative and integrated professional development. In addition, building principals and assistant principals should include special education teacher participation into building based curriculum adoptions and other processes typically dominated by general education teachers.

Additional evidence from this study underscores the importance of ensuring veteran and novice special education teachers have adequate access to supportive special education personnel, such as school psychologists, speech therapists, and motor therapists. In addition, special education directors should ensure novice special education teachers have access to a
veteran special education teacher mentor with similar duties and responsibilities, as well as content specialists, such as autism and behavior specialists.

*Implications for Policy Makers*

Evidence from this study underscores the importance of carefully considering the impact of national policies upon public education. Policy makers should explore the impact of funding mechanisms, procedural mechanisms, and the interaction between policies upon local schools and teachers to reduce dual culture workplaces. In addition, policy makers should use care to foster incentives and rewards for the successful assimilation of students with disabilities and special education teachers into public education.

*Implications for Educational Researchers*

Evidence from this study underscores the importance of exploring the strategies used by veteran special education teachers to assimilate into dual culture workplaces. In addition, educational researchers should further explore the conditions that foster the enthusiasm and commitment of veteran teachers to a life-long career in special education. Finally, more research is needed to explore the mechanisms that foster and maintain dual culture workplaces, elucidate successful supports and strategies for novice special education teachers, and fully explore the novice special education teacher experience.

*Reflections*

This project has been a joyous, gratifying experience. I have walked away from many teacher interviews reenergized, hopeful, and moved by the dedication and passion of special education teachers. At other times, I have walked away from a few teacher interviews distraught, and saddened by the frustration, fatigue, and disappointment of special education teachers. Many teachers spoke in hushed tones, behind closed doors, or in discrete locations. We laughed, cried,
and commiserated about our experiences with students with disabilities and public education. While I have always been impressed by special education teachers, I have a much deeper respect for the sophistication and complexities of their work. I am grateful to the special education teachers who shared their candor, insights, and time.

As I reflect upon this project, I entertain thoughts, doubts, and questions about the efficacy of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). There is no question that IDEA has increased the access and due process rights of students with disabilities to public education, but has it done enough to improve the education of students with disabilities? Is it enough to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in their least restrictive environment (LRE)? Similar to Bell (1995), I question if that is enough. Do FAPE and LRE create a more humanizing experience for students with disabilities and prepare them to participate in a democratic society? At this point in my career, I’m not sure the do and I’m not sure if they should. While I do not believe that it is the responsibility of IDEA to create more humanizing experiences for students with disabilities, I do believe it should not hinder the possibility. Considering the procedural requirements and liability exposure of special education, I believe many special education teachers simply do not have the time to complete the numerous paperwork requirements, while create more humanizing experiences for students with disabilities. This in no way diminishes my respect for either their work or the value of students with disabilities.
References


Appendix A

The Special Education Teacher Competing Interest Model

- Peer Support
- Admin Support
- Conflict
- Isolation

Interpersonal Interactions

Training: Pre-Service & In-Service

Interpersonal Interactions

Strategies

Burnout

- Categorical Groupings: MR, SLD, EBD
- Arrangements: Inclusion, team teaching, etc..

Organizational Complexity

Instructional Arrangements

Stress and Strain

Strategies

Engagement & Satisfaction

Structure:
- Role Conflict
- Role Ambig.
- Organ. Goals

Working Conditions:
- Work/Caseload
- Supplies
- Facilities
- Paperwork

Political & Societal Context

IDEA

Work Load

Control

NCLB

Power

Reward

Gender

Race

Class

Fairness

Community

Special Education Teacher

Parents

Directors

Support Staff

General Ed Teachers

Students

Para Pro

SPED Teachers

Special Education Teacher
Appendix B

The Person-Environment Fit Model of stress as described by Edwards, Caplan, & Van Harrison (1998). Concepts in circles represent discrepancies between the two adjoining concepts. Solid lines represent causal effects; whereas, dotted lines represent contributions to person-environment fit.
Appendix C

Novice Special Education Teacher Interview Guide

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your district? How long you have been teaching special education and what type of degree’s you earned? What types of students do you work with? How would you describe your community?

What brought you to public education? Can you recall what motivated you to pursue a career in public education? Can you describe the moment you decided to pursue a special education endorsement?

What does IDEA mean to you? What does it mean to be a special education teacher? Can you describe an experience that exemplifies your experience?

What do you find particularly difficult or challenging? What drains your energy the most?

How does your district make decisions about the services available to students’ with disabilities? Whose interests do you represent while working as a special education teacher?

What do you find satisfying? What reenergizes you?

What do you consider the next step in your career?
Appendix D

Veteran Special Education Teachers Interview Guide

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your district? How long you have been teaching special education and what type of degree’s did you earn? What types of students do you work with and how would you describe your community?

Why did you go into special education? Can you recall what motivated you to pursue a career in special education? What does IDEA mean to you?

How does your district make decisions about the services available to students’ with disabilities? Whose interests do you represent while working as a special education teacher?

What do you find particularly difficult and how do you deal with these things? What drains your energy the most?

What do you find satisfying? What reenergizes you?

What do you consider key skills or strategies necessary for your position?

How do you feel about being a special education teacher and where do you see yourself in five years?
Appendix E

The Special Education Teacher Competing Interest Model - Reconceptualized

Political and Societal Context

IDEA

NCLB

Race

Class

Gender

Power

Values

Work Load

Control

Reward

Shared Social Space

Special Education Culture

General Education Culture

Dual Culture Workplace

Fairness

Community

Role Conflict

Role Ambiguity

Organizational Goals

Working Conditions:

Work/Caseload

Supplies

Facilities

Paperwork

Structure:

Engagement & Satisfaction

Interpersonal Interactions

Strategies

Stress

Strategies

Organizational Complexity

Instructional Arrangements

Inclusion, team teaching, etc.

Burnout

- Categorical Groupings:
  MR, SLD, EBD

- Peer Support
- Admin Support
- Conflict
- Isolation

Thoughts, i.e., Anxiety

Training:

Pre-Service & In-Service

Relevance vs. Irrelevance

Engagement & Satisfaction

Peers

- Admin Support
- Conflict
- Isolation

Work Load

Role Conflict

Role Ambiguity

Organizational Goals

Working Conditions:

Work/Caseload

Supplies

Facilities

Paperwork

- Categorical Groupings:
  MR, SLD, EBD

- Arrangements:
  Inclusion, team teaching, etc.

Engagement & Satisfaction

Interpersonal Interactions

Strategies

Stress

Strategies

Organizational Complexity

Instructional Arrangements

Inclusion, team teaching, etc.