

## Research Brief

### A Phenomenological Study of Rural Special Educator Longevity in the Classroom

Written By: Karen L. Haberberger, EdD Student

Supervising Professor: Dr. Amanda Lannie, PhD

#### Abstract:

There is a shortage of special education teachers, particularly in rural locations. Increasing and improving special education teacher longevity is a need in most rural school districts. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of veteran special educators in rural Pennsylvania. The three research questions investigated factors that influenced teachers to enter the field of special education and factors that influenced them to remain in the field of special education for over 10 years. This study also researched factors that caused rural special educators to leave the field after earning tenure in Pennsylvania. The results of the study can be used to inform rural school districts' policies and procedures for recruiting and maintaining special educators, including informing onboarding processes for beginning teachers and planning decisions about professional development.

#### Aim:

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of veteran special educators in rural Pennsylvania. The study investigated internal and external factors that influenced teachers to enter the field of special education and factors that influenced them to remain in the field for over ten years. The questions that guided this research were the following:

- (1) How do veteran special education teachers in rural school districts explain the internal and external factors that influenced their decision to enter the field of special education?
- (2) How do veteran special education teachers in rural school districts explain the internal and external factors that influenced their decision to remain in the field of special education for 10 years or more?
- (3) What factors cause special education teachers in rural school districts to leave the special education classroom?

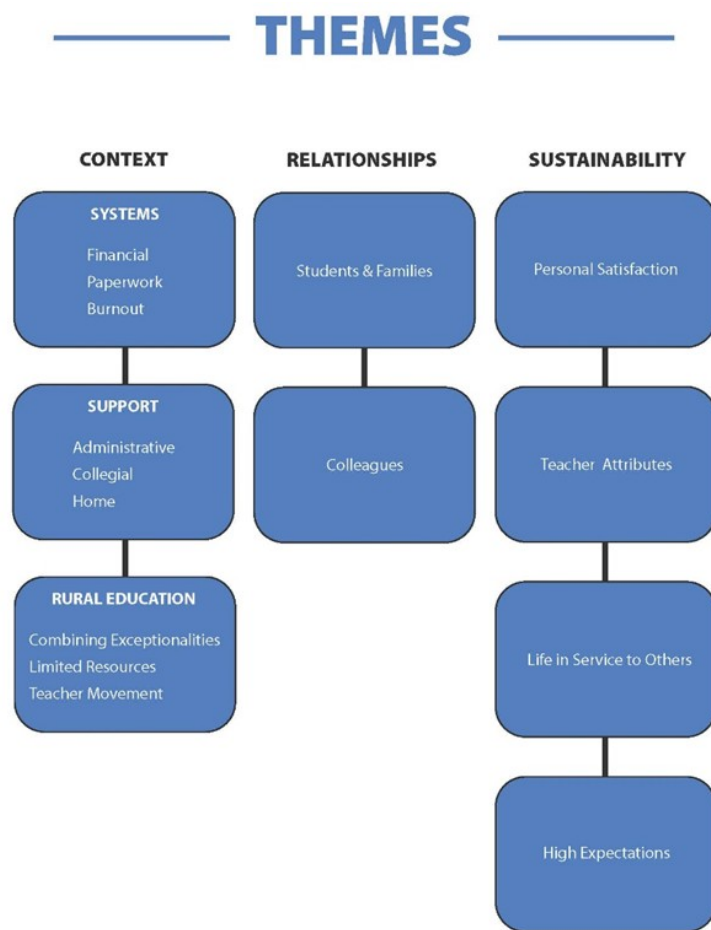
#### Problem:

The revolving door of special educators is a burden on district taxpayers, administrators, and students in need of special programming. The need to attract and retain rural special educators has reached a critical level (Zost, 2010). Rural administrators are also faced with a dwindling supply of special education personnel (Viadero, 2018). Many administrators state that they have difficulties filling vacant special education positions or are unable to fill positions at all (Rude & Miller, 2018). Without an understanding of the internal and external factors that influence special educators' decisions to enter and remain in the field, school districts cannot adequately plan ways to recruit and retain special educators.

## Research Findings/Results:

Research questions focused on the experiences of veteran special educators in rural school districts and the factors surrounding their reasons to enter into special education and remain in the field or leave the field. Individual interviews as well as a focus group were conducted to identify themes and develop a description of the essence of the lived experiences of the veteran special educators in rural districts.

The analysis of the quantitative data enabled three major themes to emerge with additional subthemes to complement each of the major themes. The three major themes that inform the findings are (a) context, (b) relationships, and (c) sustainability. These themes and subthemes emerged through the voices of the participants as they described their lived experiences in the special education classroom. The diagram below depicts the subthemes in each category.



Three distinct results emerged from the findings and were consistent to the purpose of this study. The results concern the distinct challenges found within special education, the importance of relationships for special educators, and characteristics that promote special educators' longevity in the classroom.

The results suggested that when strong administrative support is given to special educators, they will remain in the special education classroom. In this study, those educators who left the special education classroom cited a lack of administrative support as the main reason they departed. Results also suggest that building meaningful relationships with colleagues and students improved teachers' longevity in the special education arena. The special educators in this study exhibited internal characteristics such as resiliency, humor, and flexibility. Possessing these characteristics may increase special educator longevity in the classroom.

#### Conclusion/Discussion:

Conclusions from this study were provided as responses to the overarching research questions on which this study was based. The first question aimed to understand the reasons why participants entered the special education profession, the data showed that there are internal and external factors why teachers enter the special education profession. However, Fish and Stevens (2010) report that the research is limited on why individuals initially enter the field of special education. The lived experiences of the participants in this study revealed that they entered the field for diverse reasons.

The second question sought to understand the factors that influenced veteran teachers to remain in the field for 10 years or more. The majority of the participants in this study who had remained in the classroom had never thought about leaving the field. Internal factors such as self-satisfaction and love of teaching students with special needs were apparent in those that remained in the special education classroom. External factors such as job security, monetary, and administrative support were mentioned as other reasons for staying.

The third question investigated the reasons special educators in rural districts left the classroom after earning tenure. The participants' overwhelming explanation for leaving the special education classroom concerned a lack of administrative support and the demands of special education (e.g., paperwork, and meetings).

#### Research Implications:

Information from this study provided insight into why special educators in rural school districts enter into and remain in, the special education classroom. First, a strong program for providing administrative support should be implemented at the intermediate unit (IU) level and disseminated to districts within the IU. Administrators with special education knowledge and experience should lead these programs. It is critical for administrators to design creative pathways for programming (e.g. transportation, schedules, no duties, extra time for parent meetings) for special educators in their buildings. Second, pre-tenure special education teachers in rural districts would benefit from a strong, collaborative mentoring program during their first three years of teaching. Third, providing curriculum to special educators so they do not have to create their own. Fourth, building resiliency in new teachers would improve special educator longevity in rural school districts.

## References:

- Fish, W., & Stephens, T. (2010). Special education: A career of choice. *Remedial and Special Education*, 31(5), 400–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932509355961>
- Rude, H., & Miller, K. (2018). Policy challenges and opportunities for rural special education. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 37(1), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870517748662>
- Viadero, D. (2018, January 23). Teacher recruitment and retention: It's complicated. *Education Week*, 37(18), 1–4. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-its-complicated/2018/01>
- Zost, G. C. (2010). An examination of resiliency in rural special education. *Rural Educator*, 31(2), 10–14. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v31i2.938>