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Compassion Fatigue among Secondary Special Education Teachers:

A case study about job stress and burnout

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Abstract

In an age with increased teacher preparation requirements, and ever-growing student populations, a great need exists to adequately train and retain highly qualified special education teachers. Special Education is a profession that has long been plagued by shortages of qualified personnel. Many factors contribute to the shortfall of educators in this field. One of the most significant contributing factors to teacher attrition is “burnout” or excessive stresses that can cause a teacher to leave the field. Although literature exists about the phenomenon, discussions within it have not included in-depth analyses from a compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995) perspective. Within the human service professions, compassion fatigue relates to job training, stress, job requirements, and professional support. The four constructs were explored with six secondary special education teachers through qualitative interviews, each reported in vignette format. The selection and format provides the reader awareness about the outplay of compassion fatigue among a specific subgroup of teachers. The present report concludes with recommendations for future studies that could expand the exploration of compassion fatigue reported here.

A shortage of special education teachers exists throughout the nation. Bornfield, Hall, and Hall (1997) conducted a quantitative study of rural special education teachers' motivation to remain or relinquish their special education positions. The authors stated "the shortage is expected to continue due to increasing identification of children needing special education services, decreasing numbers of graduates in special education, and significant attrition of special educators" (p. 30). In order to be a "highly qualified special education teacher" preservice teachers encounter increased requirements to graduate, specifically with a special education teaching certificate as part of their degree. It is imperative to identify the essential factors associated with special education teacher retention in school districts across the country.

In order to identify factors attributed to special education teacher retention, Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) conducted a qualitative study of the existing research about occupational stress and burnout among special educators. The authors defined:

Burnout as a catchall term used to describe a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs in response to the stressors and strains of personal and professional life. As burnout relates to teaching, it is a condition in which, the stressors underlying emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment occur in such frequency and intensity that they seem insurmountable. (p. 329)

Furthermore, the authors found that teachers who experience burnout are, "At a loss of concern for and loss of positive feelings or respect for his/her students. A reduced professional commitment and a desire to level the profession, the stress impairs health, leads to a deterioration in the quality of educational services and eventually leads to unpredictable staffing patterns" (p. 340). Bornfield, Hall, and Hall (1997) found that 41% of all special educators stated they

considered “burnout” as a significant cause of attrition in their profession. The authors also found that 39% of special educators who had left the field attributed the cause to burnout.

Burnout is one of the leading factors in special education teacher attrition. To understand better special education teacher retention strategies and causes of attrition Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley, and Sea (2002) conducted a qualitative study about two policy initiatives, *No Child Left Behind* and the *National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future Policy Blueprint*. The authors stated “the field of special education is facing the daunting challenge of increasing the supply of teachers, while simultaneously upgrading its’ quality” (p. 1). In order to understand the severity of the situation facing special educators, we need to understand the basic numbers. Russ, Chiang, Tylance, and Bongers (2001) conducted a qualitative study about the links between instructional group size and student engagement, caseload and academic achievement, and caseload and special education teacher attrition. The authors found the number of students identified as special education had increased 47% between 1977 and 1995, as compared to a 2% increase in the general education population. Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) reported that almost half of all special education teachers would leave the teaching field within seven years of entering, with attrition rates for general education teachers at 6-8%: “On the average, special educators remain in the classroom for six years” (p. 325). Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) conducted a quantitative study of special educators and related service providers and evaluated the effects of stress-management workshops and peer-collaboration programs correlation on teacher turnover. The authors stated that there had been a 37% reduction in graduates between 1984 and 1988 with special education degrees. Within the authors, sample as many as 30% of the special education workforce had worked with emergency certifications. Finally, Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) conducted a qualitative study of factors

that led to special educator teacher attrition and turnover in three large urban school districts. The authors made note of the numerous teachers, general and special education, who ‘retire on the job’ or continue to be a body that shows up, but perform only minimally, adding stresses to co-workers.

In addition to teachers performing at low standards, within the special education profession there is also a marked difference in retention rates for teachers of students with various disability needs. Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) noted that attrition rates are higher for special educators who engage students with hearing and vision certifications at both elementary and secondary levels, mental impairment and developmental disabilities at the secondary level, behavioral and emotional impairments at the secondary level, and speech and language impairments at the secondary level. Furthermore, the authors also stated that at both the secondary and elementary levels, special educators who engage in support or team teaching situations have higher attrition rates. Finally, the authors stated that teachers of students with behavior and emotional impairments: “Are at the highest risk of leaving the classroom, with attrition rates approximating six times that of other special educators” (p. 326).

In summary, the special education profession has reached critical staff shortages among its’ teaching force. Many factors have contributed to this situation. Lower graduation rates for special education certified teachers and high attrition rates have both contributed to the necessity for unqualified individuals with emergency certifications to fill vacancies. These unqualified, untrained individuals may not necessarily have the skills needed to work effectively with and for the students they are required to teach and engage. An unresolved question manifests, how do we train and retain individuals with the attributes to be successful and maintain long-term commitments in the field of special education?

Special Education: Negative Factors

Stress is a main indicator of attrition, and it can be seen in several areas of a special educators' professional interactions. Gerstan, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) noted that stresses found in "role dissonance" or the difference between the beliefs of the special educator's role in education and the actual day-to-day school district requirements. Furthermore, the authors reported that the design of the special education job can cause stress: "Expectations, goals and directives; the severity of student needs; student behavior and discipline problems; and bureaucratic requirements – rules, regulations, and paperwork" (p. 555). All of these areas may cause stress for a special educator and can eventually lead to special education teacher attrition.

Emich (2001) conducted a qualitative study about the existing research of the factors that contribute to secondary teacher burnout, and facilitated the understanding of stresses caused by special education job design. The author stated special educators placed in team-teaching positions with general educators are at a higher risk for attrition. This phenomenon results from the fact that the role of the special educator is undefined. The expectations of general education classroom teachers may not be in harmony with the expectations of the special educator. In addition, the general educator may attempt to relegate the special educator to the role of teacher assistant. Finally, the general educator may place sole responsibility for classroom discipline and management on the shoulders of the special educator. Emich stated these factors might lead to teacher disillusionment and a feeling of an unsupportive work environment.

Emich (2001) found that on top of disillusionment and an unsupportive work environment, another significant factor that can lead a special education teacher to leave the teaching field is, "A teacher's lack of a sense of personal accomplishment contributing to emotional exhaustion and feelings of depersonalization" (p. 59). Special education is a

profession that requires emotional investment. Special educators are required to work for extended periods with students who may show little progress. Emich found that unless school administrators understand this phenomenon, special education professionals might develop factors attributed to the outcomes of “emotional exhaustion and feelings of depersonalization” (p. 59).

It should be noted when ensuring teacher retention and avoiding special education teachers’ experiencing emotional exhaustion when looking for sources of special education teacher attrition. Special education teacher preparation programs must take into consideration, teacher age, work experience, and the personal factors in the life of a teacher. All of these factors may adversely affect the ability to remain employed in the special education field. Bornfield, Hall, and Hall (1997) found that within the field of teaching women are more likely to consider leaving the field than men are. Experience in the workforce is also a significant indicator of attrition in special educators, with less experienced teachers being at most risk. Emich (2001) stated, “As years of special education experience decreased, feelings of personal accomplishment also decreased” (p. 66). Emich also found that age was a factor that could predict higher feelings of emotional exhaustion in team-teaching situations for younger teachers.

Brownell and McNeillis (1997) conducted a quantitative study to understand the causes of teacher attrition. The study noted additional factors that contributed to special education teachers who left the field. The authors found several other factors that might lead to teacher attrition including significant student discipline issues, a high diversification of student needs, high caseload numbers, excessive paperwork, and inadequate preservice preparation. Furthermore, the authors stated that larger class size and insufficient input in the decision making

process are also factors that can lead to a special education teacher experiencing levels of burnout or deciding to leave the teaching field entirely.

Special Education: Positive Factors

Zabel and Zabel (2001) conducted a qualitative study of special education teacher burnout to examine the changes that may have occurred due to evolution in the field of special education over a 20-year interval. The authors stated that the average age of special educators' having the ability to maintain employment in the field of special education is more than forty years and most have more than eleven years of teaching experience. These special educators are fully endorsed teachers and many have a master's degree. The authors also found that the educators who were able to overcome the negative factors affecting special education have been able to survive and even thrive in school environments. They acknowledged that this pool of highly qualified, highly educated, mature, and knowledgeable personnel could serve as mentors and advisors that can provide formal and informal support systems to new and younger teachers entering the special education field.

Implications: Training, Educators, Administrators, and School Districts

Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) found one strategy necessary to help minimize stress in the teaching environment is to establish a peer support system. Peer support could provide not only professional interactions with collaboration, but also influence personal interactions with colleagues as well. Diamond (2001) conducted a qualitative study of urban special educators and investigated the factors that lead to attrition and retention. The author reported: "The combination of assistance from a mentor who has expertise in the beginning teacher's field and the involvement of a committee of educators who provide guidance during the first year of

teaching is likely to prove especially effective in refining teachers' skills and supporting his/her commitment to the teaching field" (p. 150).

Providing an experienced mentor was an effective teacher retention strategy. Bornfield, Hall, and Hall (1997), Diamond (2001), and Gerstan, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (1997) noted administrative support as being an essential factor to minimizing teacher burnout and increasing retention rates. Yet, administrators may place newer teachers in more stressful environments. This strategy may only increase the stresses already inherent to entering the profession, as well as increase stressors that an inexperienced teacher may be unable to ascertain. Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) determined that doing so amplifies the likelihood that a teacher may choose to leave the field of teaching. Diamond (2001) presented data that suggested administrative support in all settings is imperative to the retention of special education teachers. This support includes; wages, benefits, and working conditions, as well as, the special educators' interactions with students and their families. Cesarone (1999) conducted a review of scholarship that discusses factors related to teacher stressors. The author reported, "Principals must give positive feedback, maintain high standards, encourage professional growth, and promote support systems" (p. 317).

Cavin (1998) conducted further investigation of teacher stressors through a qualitative study of educators' achievement of tenured teaching positions in classrooms for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. The author described several strategies new teachers could employ in order to achieve similar tenure. The author suggested that new teachers should be prepared, have more planned instruction than necessary, and be able to adapt to situations as they present themselves. Cavin reminded new teachers to "not sweat the small stuff" and remember

that much of what occurs in a special education classroom is part of the “small stuff, each teacher must find a level of tolerance with which to live” (p. 372).

Finally, Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) conducted a qualitative study of Florida special education teachers to examine the factors that contributed to the propensity to leave or stay in the classroom. The authors determined that one of the major factors in reducing burnout and increasing special education teacher retention is for school districts to hire adequately certified and properly trained special educators. They stated that additional resources needed for teacher education institutions across the country to, “Increase the supply of certified special educators so that emergency certifications are not needed” (p. 217). The authors found it is also necessary to better prepare preservice and in-service teachers with strategies to mediate stress and better manage stress through coping strategies and collaborative skills. Preparing new teachers to manage stress, and educating them in realistic expectations for the first few years of teaching may help to increase teacher retention, as Cesarone (1999) found: “Self-assessment, stress reduction, proper diet, rest and exercise are essential, teachers must learn to physically and psychologically deal with stress” (p. 317).

Luckner (1996) conducted a qualitative study of special educators’ stressors and coping strategies in order to meet the challenges physically and psychologically of the profession. The author stated that special educators must understand that teaching at any level can never be “Devoid of stressful conditions or interactions. We need to take proactive approaches, steps and find ways to continue to grow so that we can stay vibrant, effective and productive, coping effectively with the pressures intrinsic to the field of education” (p. 27). Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) acknowledged, “Simply put, we train teachers poorly and then we treat them badly – and so they leave in droves” (p. 549).

Special Education Challenges

The special education community faces many challenges, training teachers poorly is only one of the many issues to consider. In order to better understand the increased training needs required for special educators more in-depth studies need to be conducted, as well as the strategies necessary for them to successfully adjust and cope with the stressful environment of working with students with special needs. Further studies should also incorporate suggested training for administrators in order to support special educators and their interactions with students and parents. Luckner (1996) acknowledged “children are this country’s most precious resource, and schools are the second most important place for helping each child reach his/her true potential” (p. 27). With student enrollment increasing in special education, and the number of special educators decreasing, teachers are not meeting the students’ needs . We are failing to train students to understand and fulfill educational needs, as well as how to adapt to an ever-changing world. These students are facing the future lacking skills they might have gained through the instruction of an adequately trained and knowledgeable special education teacher.

Compassion Fatigue

In order to understand compassion fatigue, or the gradual desensitization of special education teachers to compassion over time, it is necessary to conduct a practical study. A study that will investigate the real life struggles of trained, knowledgeable special education teachers and their efforts in the profession. This quest is imperative in order to ensure the profession recruits and retains highly motivated individuals to address the challenges that students with special education needs may present. In order to guarantee that we provide the best resources for special education students, we must investigate the situations that special educators encounter on

a daily basis and develop a course of education or plan for ensuring the longevity of our most precious resource, the special education teacher.

Method

The present research is a starting point for understanding the challenges facing the tenured secondary special education teacher to overcome compassion fatigue and remain involved and engaged with a long-term commitment to the field of special education. A qualitative study, conducted for a six-month period. The study proposed the idea of special education teacher compassion fatigue, which is most readily associated with medical professions such as trauma, mental illnesses and emergency medicine. Compassion fatigue as related to special educators, defined as, the gradual desensitization to compassion, sympathy, or empathy over an extended period. Compassion fatigue is an essential contributing factor affecting the retention and longevity of special education teachers.

Joinson (1992) first identified compassion fatigue as a unique form of burnout directly linked to care-giving professions, particularly nursing. Building on Joinson's foundation, Figley (1995) contended compassion fatigue is a natural outcome of working with people who have experienced extreme stressful events in their lives. As such, professionals who have an enormous capacity "for feeling and expressing empathy tend to be more at risk of compassion stress" (p. 1). Professionals who do not actually experience a client's trauma firsthand may manifest symptoms of it via the client's endurance of it. Discussions in the literature refer to this cost of caring as secondary traumatic stress (STS), secondary stress disorder (STSD), or compassion fatigue. Figley (1995) summed: "It is the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p. 7).

Figley (1995) differentiated between burnout and compassion fatigue. Burnout is a process, rather than a fixed condition. The progression includes repeated exposures to job strain of excessive demands, along with diminished optimism and lack of achievement. Burnout develops throughout a prolonged timeframe and progressively becomes worse. Stamm (2002) defined compassion fatigue's harmful effects: "The theory of secondary or vicarious traumatization records the deleterious effects of being in harm's way as an act of compassion. We have come to know that this saga can be heroic, tragic, or even dangerous" (p. 107).

The present study investigated the training, stresses, job requirements and supports provided for special educators. Teachers from rural and urban school districts from Southeast Michigan were included in the study. The teachers involved in the study worked with a variety of students with disabilities at the secondary level.

The studies developer chose a qualitative methodology to study the teachers' experiences in the special education field with a focus on tenured secondary special education teachers. Teacher preparation program for secondary special education teachers differ significantly from the preparation program of elementary teachers. The added factor of tenure aided in the understanding of teachers' experiences over time and the impact it has on the wellbeing of a secondary special education teacher. When deciding the concentration for this study daily experiences, in-service/professional development time, and student caseload concerns significantly differed from the secondary to the elementary level.

Participants

Each participant volunteered for the present qualitative research study to better understand how compassion fatigue factors might relate to the retention of highly qualified teachers in the special education field (see table 1). Among those individuals who volunteered to

participate, the study's coordinator chose six special education teachers at random, from three different school districts, to participate in a qualitative interview study. The participants discussed typical situations faced on a daily basis with special education students, administrators, and peer teachers during the interview process. The responses were open ended and the participants had knowledge prior to the interview that the questions discussed might cause anxiety or stress in recounting particularly difficult students or situations.

Table 1: Participants and Related Service Delivery Models

*Participant's Name	Service Delivery Model
Anna	Anna team-teaches science in a high school of 950 students. Included in each class are students with disabilities and without disabilities. Each basic section of science includes 20-30% students with learning or behavioral disabilities.
Alfonso	Alfonso teaches in a high school of 1000 students. He teaches in a resource room and consults with general education teachers. Fifty students serviced for a full class period on a daily basis, with an additional 30-40 students who drop-in. He mainly serves students with moderate to severe emotional disabilities.
Bart	Bart teaches at the same high school as Anna. He team-teaches math in a high school of 950 students. Included in each class are student with disabilities and without disabilities. Each basic section of math includes 20% students with learning or behavioral disabilities.
Carol	Carol teaches in a poverty district high school of 1200 students. Carol teaches in special math and special social studies to sixty students primarily with learning, cognitive and behavioral disabilities.
Mary	Mary team-teaches English in an upper-middle class district of 900 students. Mary team-teaches in an English class to students with disabilities and without disabilities. Each section includes 15% students with learning, behavioral, cognitive, or hearing impaired disabilities.
Nicole	Nicole is a teacher consultant through an Intermediate School District [Local Area Agency]. Nicole consults with 21 local school districts and center-based programs. She serves 20-45 students

with visual impairments. She conducts services through pull out strategies and consultation with mobility and classroom instructors.
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* Note: Assurance of confidentiality of each participant included use of pseudonym for each participant and non-disclosure of the city where the study occurred.
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Data Collection

The questions posed to each tenured secondary special education teacher were designed on previous researchers had established to explore the concept of compassion fatigue. The study designed the question to understand how a special education teacher professionally and personally responds to the demands inherent to the profession of special education. The interview posed questions based on several areas of concern. The areas included in the interview were a stressful work situation, caseload/work, symptoms, and professional development/support opportunities. Face-to-face, guided interviews conducted by the study's coordinator with each participant. The investigator was able to follow-up with additional questions to further clarify and gain an in-depth, detailed understanding of the experiences faced by each participant in the qualitative study.

The interviews took less than one hour per participant to complete. The studies participants chose a time and location that suited them best to conduct the interview. All participants were tenured secondary special education teachers. The confidentiality of all participants was assured in order to ensure respondents felt confident in their ability to make statements honestly and openly about the issues the educators faced in their professional life, as well as, how those issues might affect their personal relationships.

Data Analysis and Implications

The studies coordinator asked teachers to consider specific students with severe emotional or behavioral problems. In addition, students who have faced considerable hardships such as foster care placements, bullying, or domestic violence were discussed. The teachers also

reflected on their professional preparation, available professional development, and their case or workload requirements. The participants reflected on the students they are engaging with and the professional preparation available to them to further the understanding of causes of stress.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed into a hard copy transcript. Data presented in this study follows the direction of the questioning performed during the interview. The investigator noted discussion items that supported or contradicted the theory about compassion fatigue in tenured secondary special education teachers. The investigator emphasized an open and concise response from the participants. Implications were referenced to discussion in the literature when available and supported topics in need of further investigation.

Results

Anna

In order to understand the stresses that Anna faces on a daily basis Anna described a student with severe emotional and behavioral problems. Anna's student was a sophomore in foster care. The student had experienced abuse and neglect prior to her foster care placement. The student had a diagnosis of depression and mild bi-polar disorder. The student struggles with appropriate classroom behaviors and understanding social situations. The student frequently "melts" down in classes, which causes "chaos" and disruptions in general education classes, specifically in Anna's case, a team-taught science class.

Anna further described a particular incident in which her student Sue had a significant behavioral outburst in science. Anna described the situation as one in which she was alone in the classroom as the content teacher had left the room temporarily. Sue engaged in a personal conflict between herself and other students in the classroom. Sue began screaming, crying and eventually began hyperventilating. These behaviors of course gained the attention of the entire

classroom. Eventually Sue made a show of passing out, this was fabricated and happened often in an attempt to draw attention to herself. Anna struggled to remove Sue from the situation, but found moving her was difficult as she is a large in stature student. The remaining students in the room focused on the situation. The students were very concerned and wanted to call 9-1-1.

Anna's hope was just to remove Sue from the classroom and take the student to the social worker for some mental health discussions.

Anna felt that there were several reasons why this particular situation was stressful for her. She noted that, although the classroom was usually a team-teaching situation, she was in the classroom alone, with no other support staff. Sue had a significant behavioral break in the middle of the classroom and the remaining students could not focus on the lesson but her actions. Sue did suffer from asthma and although she frequently fainted for attention, the behavior may have been a symptom of her breathing condition. Anna was unsure what behavior to focus on, she was unsure whether to focus on the asthma, the physical ailment, and the behavior issues or simply try to remove her from the classroom and eventually gain control. The latter of which Anna stated, does not often happen. Anna expressed that if she had been in a supported environment, she would have been able to remove Sue before the incident escalated as it did.

Anna stated that her proactive approach to Sue's situation was to remove her from the general education setting. Anna stated often times when students escalate, she temporarily "takes on whatever their (the students') anxiety is. So it takes me a little while to decompress after that." The situation with Sue was resolved; the school social worker was able to make it to the classroom and get the student out of the room and eventually calmed down. Sue even made it to the class that followed science and was able to function, "acting like nothing happened."

Caseload/work. Anna has an extensive and diverse teaching background. Anna began substituting for three years while she attended graduate school. After her experiences as a substitute teacher, she began teaching adults in an institutional setting and continued in that capacity for five years. She then moved on to become a rehabilitation counselor for several years. While employed as a counselor, Anna worked for a private rehabilitation company, in this role she evaluated clients who were injured and needed assistance in job placement. She then worked for 12 years as an assistance principal for a prison program. Now, Anna current employment is as a high school special education teacher, in a team-teaching position. Her school district has been her employer four years.

Anna's educational background includes an elementary teaching certificate for all subjects, K-8 grades. Moreover, she has certification to teach social sciences through grade nine. Finally, she has a K-12 special education endorsement in teaching students with emotional impairments. Anna has no specific teaching endorsements for her team-teaching position in science.

Anna's current caseload consists of 25 students, fully included in the general education curriculum, both males and females, grades 9-12, primarily certified with learning or behavior disabilities. In addition to the certified students' Anna works with, she also team-teaches in a general education science classroom. Therefore, she may notice an additional 15-20 more students who have some factor(s) indicating the student is "at-risk." These student(s) can also require individual attention in the general education classroom. The high school in which Anna teaches is not a racially or economically diverse community. In addition, less than 4% of the student population receives free or reduced lunch. The high school is in an upper middle class, rural community with a wide range of careers, from farm families to executives. Anna is required

to be at work from 7:30 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. She states she typically works an additional 10 hours per week and frequently takes work home to complete.

Anna described her workload as changing only slightly over four years. She stated that her role as a team teacher in the science curriculum has taken on a larger role than she expected. Since her district tries to schedule common planning periods with the curriculum teacher who she teams with, much of Anna's planning time is devoted to the science curriculum. This leaves less time for her to focus on her caseload responsibilities, a situation which, at times, forces her to take work home. Anna stated that in comparison to other jobs she has had in such a varied career path, with a range of hours and work expectations, her current schedule is realistic. She reasoned that as she has matured she has been able to "contain the work a lot better than before." Anna stated that at her previous places of employment the work never ended. She stated that she felt slightly the same about education, "but that there are artificial beginnings and endings." Anna gave the example "like we are coming to our summer end, and so we know that all this paperwork has to be finalized and everything has to be put away in June. I mean it is really a relief when you finish that last Individual Education Program Team meeting of the year and you can wrap all that up. It is a great feeling, maybe it is not real but you at least have that feeling that something is complete." Anna also stated, "I feel like I am working harder than I've ever worked, and am certainly busier." Anna reasoned that although her job is stressful, "we are helping people every day and we are helping them manage their education. It is stressful, but it is kind of a happy kind of stress, you can see people doing well, and learning things."

Anna considered her workload compared to other special education teachers in her building as at an acceptable level. She stated that each team member shares equal portions and that they work well as a group. Anna did not express that she had the knowledge to compare her

workload to other districts or to other buildings in her own district. She is in touch with fellow special educators who state that her caseload is a large one, but reasoned that it was manageable. Anna felt that “No Child Left Behind” had only affected her slightly. Because she was “grandfathered” in, the new law did not require a great deal of additional work for her. Anna was merely required to take and pass the State of Michigan Certification test to meet the guidelines.

Anna’s special education role is one of full inclusion, as well as a resource room. She did not state that she experienced a great deal of conflict between the demands of her special education role and her home life demands. Anna expressed that she was able to remove herself enough from her professional role and maintain a consistent home life. She reasoned that she could be as involved or not in the after school activities that her school provides for the students. Anna did not express that she suffered any physical symptoms due to stress related to her special education position.

Symptoms. Anna has not experienced any physical ailments such as headaches or fatigue directly related to her position as a special educator. Anna has experienced some increased level of frustration and anger due to job related stressors, but she stated this was nothing out of the realm of normal work stress. She has not had to request extra personal days or time off in order to deal with the job demands she faces and has not requested a job or building transfer from her current position as a secondary special education teacher. Anna stated that she could continue in her current role for quite some time, eventually reaching the age of retirement.

Professional development. In order to stay up to date and maintain awareness about the risks and costs of working with the special education student population, Anna reads journals, newspaper articles, and books. In addition, she attends conferences at her local Intermediate School District, as funds are available. She admits this is not as often as she would like. Anna

has many supports at her local district and building. She meets weekly with her peers in the secondary special education department. This weekly meeting includes her special education director, school social worker, school psychologist, and all special education teachers. The meeting is an opportunity to discuss students who need additional attention, changes in the law, changes in forms, and any other topic that might affect the group. Furthermore, Anna's school has meetings once a week to discuss students of concern; these students do not always have an Individualized Education Program. This additional meeting consists of building administrators, special education teachers, counselors, social worker, and psychologist. All individuals equally participate in this meeting and all bring students of concern to the table.

Anna stated that the superintendent of her school district was not often involved in discipline matters, but that the principals and assistant principals were heavily involved in this aspect of student relations. The directors at her school were not involved in the discipline of students. Anna stated that the avenue of communication was quite open. She reasoned that she would be able to discuss student issues with her administrators and seek their guidance and advice when it was necessary. In addition, Anna stated that she was comfortable discussing student issues with her peer teachers, while remaining within the confidentiality laws.

Anna stated that she was open with students' families' about discussion regarding concerns. The only consideration she stated she would have to take into account is the relationship the student has with his or her family. Some families who Anna works with can be violent. They may react with physical and verbal aggression in the home towards a student if negative statements made regarding the students' academic performances. Families are, for the most part, easy to contact and concerned with the well-being of their student in the academic setting. Anna's only expressed regret was when she did not "stand up for herself better." She

stated that often parents blamed her as the special education teacher consultant for their student's poor academic achievement, when the student had clearly chosen not to engage in activities that would enhance their performance.

Support opportunities. Anna completed her student teaching in the 1970's and said that she had very little recollection of her time as a student teacher. It was difficult, therefore, for her to determine if her preservice student teaching properly prepared her or benefited her professional experiences. Anna reasoned that American society at this time does not view our nation's teachers as leaders for the future, but deems them part of the problem. She expressed this is a drastic change in societal beliefs and not for the better. Anna did have recommendations for better preparing teachers for the demands placed on them as special educators, such as a program that involved the potential of going to school for six months and then working in the classroom for six months while getting paid for working. She reasoned that this would give the potential teacher a firmer understanding of the actualities of teaching in a special education setting, as well as, better equipping the new teacher with skills to meet the demands of the job. She stated that teachers would be able to make the transition from student to teacher.

Anna is a unique special education teacher; she has had jobs prior to getting involved in the areas of education and special education. She has been able to balance her job stresses and her family life quite well. In addition, Anna teaches in a building with a supportive administrative staff. All of these are factors that assist Anna in management of her day-to-day activities and stresses of working in the field of special education.

Alfonso

Alfonso began by describing a student who has provided or created a stressful situation. Alfonso provided this insight into his special education responsibilities in order to understand the

professional stressors he faces. Alfonso described John, a 14-year-old freshman; he has a long history of substance abuse in his family and currently is diagnosed with an emotional impairment. John's family also includes individuals certified with severe learning disabilities and mild to moderate cognitive impairments. John lives in a single parent home, and in the last two years his old brother was involved in a near fatal car accident that left him a quadriplegic. John arrives to class every day with "some type of drama" going on in his life. He needs to discuss what is going on in his life and even reaches out for assistance at times.

John many times escalates conflicts with female teachers because of his struggles with respecting women authority figures. As the conflicts escalate, John expresses his need to defend himself and his perceived peer identity. John has worked hard "to establish his street identity and gang related respect" among his peer group. Because Alfonso works in a relatively small district, he has known John for most of his life. Therefore, Alfonso can see the potential for success if John can return to the "right track." Alfonso expressed a great commitment to John as a student and in attempting to help him successfully understand his emotional impairment.

Alfonso has taken some proactive approaches with John. Alfonso has talked with John often, in what he refers to as "street mentality, where (Alfonso) uses a lot of 'street language' so that (John) will be comfortable enough to want to relate." These types of discussions can usually deescalate John and he is able to attempt to search for the cause of the conflict, both internal and external. John exhibits a pattern of behavior, when he reaches the point of explosion. He "feels like he has been put in a corner or on the spot, where he then has to come out and defend himself and this is usually through acting out." Alfonso then tries to mediate the conflict between John and the classroom teacher. He attempts to help the general educator gain insight into John's personality thus understanding how to manage difficult situations in the classroom.

Caseload/work. Alfonso has an extensive and diverse employment background working with children with special needs. Alfonso began his career working for the foster care system with the State of Michigan. He then worked in detective services, both for the State of Michigan and private agencies. He spent several years working for the Department of Corrections and as a substance abuse counselor. Alfonso has worked as a teaching professional for 13 years. He taught for several years at an alternative high school, but after the school closed due to the highly qualified requirements of *No Child Left Behind*, he joined the larger main high school in his current position. Alfonso currently holds a secondary social studies certification and a K-12 special education, emotional impairment certification.

Alfonso currently serves 50 students through a one class period per day resource room. In addition, 30-40 students drop in for extra assistance, to complete classroom tasks or take a test or a quiz. Alfonso serves special education students certified with emotional impairments or learning disabilities, as well as, at-risk general education students. These students are “at-risk” for many factors, such as socio-economic status, home life, academic standing, behavior issues, and peer group influences. Alfonso also has students who are certified otherwise health impaired, much of this is due to the implications of attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

In addition to the responsibilities Alfonso has during the school day, he often “goes out in to the community, to students’ homes and talks to their families and parents” for an additional 20 hours per week. Alfonso stated that he works 60-70 hours per week. He reasoned that his current workload is realistic and “very doable” compared to his previous employment with the State. He expressed that his previous job was more demanding “emotionally, physically and mentally” with more hours and more paperwork. He stated his current caseload was “not as intense” his

colleagues. Some of his peers, he stated, had an excessive amount of involvement and only a very small percentage has chosen to have less of a commitment.

Symptoms. Alfonso does not express that his special education workload causes any conflict with his home life. He reasoned that the amount of time and energy he puts forth with the students who receive his services is much less “fatiguing than when I worked in detective services or the gay task force or even in the prison setting.” In addition, Alfonso stated that the “risk factor” is much lower in his current special education teaching position than in previous employment areas. Alfonso expressed that his workload was “in the middle” of his colleagues. His workload was neither more nor less than the peers with whom he works; therefore, he reasoned it was average. He stated that there is a “very small percentage of his colleagues who have less commitment” to the job of special education professional. Alfonso stated that he has not experienced any increase in any health related symptoms such as jumpiness, concentration problems, nightmares or cardiovascular problems. He stated that he may have a small, 5%, increase in irritability due to job related factors. He has not taken any sick or personal days in order to avoid or cope with the stresses of his special education position. Alfonso does work with two paraprofessionals in his classroom. He has delegated responsibilities to them, as both are certified teachers but unable to find positions in their highly qualified fields. Thus, each paraprofessional brought different expertise into the classroom and was able to assist students in their particular area of strength.

Alfonso has not requested a building or placement change within his district nor was he considering applying for another job in a different district. He was not contemplating leaving the field of special education, as he stated, “this is too much fun.” Alfonso stated that the

connections that he has made at the high school with the students and the greater community have made him understand where the need is the greatest.

Professional development. Alfonso uses his background from various careers to understand the stresses that the students he works with face. He states that he is “careful with my actions and with what I say.” He does attend conferences or workshops offered by his local Intermediate School District to help him remain up-to-date on the most current law or strategies to work with his caseload. He meets on a weekly basis with his special education team in order to remain informed of any law changes or best practices when introduced. In addition, they discuss student concerns when the team meets and any other building concerns, such as teacher or administrative concerns.

Alfonso expressed that his “district itself is really aware of the population” of students who he works with. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team in his district works “together for the equal betterment of the student, the student’s family, the school environment, which at times includes other students not on caseload, and their learning outcomes.” Alfonso’s district has a team-based approach “and everyone is focused on the same goal, there is a lot of support and a lot of communication.” Alfonso has no issues discussing students’ or their issues with team members, administrators or peer teachers. Although Alfonso did state that, some general education teachers “just do not get it. They do not understand special educated, and special education certified students, they are in the mindset that ‘one size fits all’ and we, as special educators, know that it does not.” Alfonso expressed that “being open and honest with the students’ family is critical to building trust and a solid relationship with the families.” Alfonso attempts to interact or speak with families of students who are a concern at least once a month, noting that at times he may interact more or less frequently depending on the situation

with the student. Alfonso does not have any regrets after speaking with a student's family, with the exception of "things that I missed, or would have liked to have brought up. But, I am also able to resolve it with good two way communication."

Alfonso states, "He is really fortunate" to work in a building in which "the administrators are keenly aware of special education. The administrators are actively involved in providing quality education and support in the day-to-day services. The administrators work hard to stay abreast of the current changes in laws and procedural outcomes that are expected and they provide a lot of input." The building that Alfonso works in, he stated, "Has really stepped up their efforts to make sure that the Individualized Education Program's that we put together meet or exceed national standards."

The superintendant in Alfonso's district is not involved much in his day-to-day activities as a special educator. Although, he stated there are two "superintendant designees" who are frequently involved, the special education director, and the assistant superintendant. Both of these individuals work closely with the superintendant to ensure the highest standards in the special education department and that the district is up-to-date on the most current changes in special education law.

Support opportunities. Alfonso suggested change that might benefit teachers who work with the special education population. He stated it would be beneficial for "general educators to have more training or a better understanding of the needs of special education students." He reasoned that it would be helpful if "universities would teach new, incoming teacher candidates how to address special education certified students." Alfonso did state that his preservice training was very beneficial to his knowledge and understanding of working with students with special needs. However, he also noted that it was not a typical preservice situation, as he was involved in

many aspects of the correctional system. He stated his preservice training “was realistic, beneficial, life-threatening, eye opening, exciting, and dangerous.” He stated it did prepare him, “every single day.” Alfonso has tried to reach out to the student teachers and preservice teachers who are involved in his district. He has done so by “having the preservice supervising teacher send the student teacher to the resource room for at least an hour a couple of times a week to work with our special education population, to get them prepared to have them in their future classrooms.” Alfonso reasoned that more field experience in working with students with special needs is necessary for future teachers to be more successful in the teaching field. He further stated that future teachers need increased “course content.” Future teachers need to understand the foundations and laws behind special education, why they were established, and what benefit they have. More importantly, because inclusion in general education is the law, teachers who want to teach in school need to know what they are getting into.” Alfonso stated that he “absolutely, no doubt about it” was sure that student teaching requirements should state that incoming teachers be required to spend time working in a special education or resource room program before obtaining their teaching certifications.

Bart

Bart considered a student on his current caseload that might have severe emotional or behavioral problems, a student who has endured hardships such as placements in foster care, domestic violence, or bullying. Bart began by discussing Jane, a student with a severe learning disability. Her biggest struggle throughout her academic career, Bart stated, was that her “reading level has been very low.” She also lost her father when she was young. In addition, she has been a victim of sexual abuse. She has had many struggles in life. Bart stated that he chose this student to discuss because she has made many poor choices “and when I think about my own

work with her, and the interventions that I have tried to help her. It has never been easy, it has always been stressful.” Bart noted that there were several stressful incidents that Jane has been involved in or started. Nevertheless, he noted that the most stressful time was in her eleventh grade year when she became pregnant. Bart stated that the student had to struggle with the decision “to keep or abort the baby, as well as, whether to stay in school, pass her classes and deal with the relationship issues that inevitably arise with a pregnancy.” Bart stated that it was a stressful time for the student and for her family. He stated that this student shared her situation with everyone, “Students, social workers, teachers, mom, step-dad, friends, everyone knew about it.” This was a struggle for Bart, as at the time he had no experience in dealing with this type of situation. Jane would come to Bart for advice and looking for understanding about her current situation. Bart stated that this caused him much stress because:

I had no background knowledge, information, or experience (in dealing with teenage pregnancy.) Yet Jane was on my caseload, I was the individual who had a relationship with her, and she felt comfortable talking to me about it. I needed to find a way to help her come to terms with an intense issue, without any prior training or knowledge base to work with.

Bart, when asked if he could have taken some additional proactive steps to help work with the situation Jane found herself in, was unsure what more he would have been able to do. Bart often discussed Jane’s relationships and even the topic of birth control. This included what the process was to obtain the proper medications and where she could procure the medication. Bart reasoned he might have worked more diligently to ensure Jane was “better educated and knew how to get what she needed, if I knew she was going to be sexually active.” Bart discussed much of this

with Jane; there was just “no follow through on her part.” Jane did end up terminating the pregnancy and went on to graduate high school.

Caseload/work. Bart worked in the field of education for over 15 years. He stated he began his career as a paraprofessional in a vocational assistance program in Oregon. His responsibilities in that career included working with a teacher to design a school to work program and working with students who were in eleventh and twelfth grade. Although a significant number of the students were actual dropouts, they were trying to “recapture some of these students, trying to bring them back into the education system and get better outcomes for them.” The teacher and Bart developed “individual transition plans and merged them with the students’ Individualized Education Program, as well as, a lot of community based education.” This paraprofessional experience is what led Bart to seek his teacher certification. Bart received his special education teaching certification with a specialization in the area of transition. He then worked in a middle school classroom for students with emotional impairments, and then proceeded to work in two school districts in different special education capacities. Furthermore, Bart worked in a cognitively impaired program that focused on life skills training. He stated that this was an excellent experience as he worked with a team of two teachers including him, as well as five or six paraprofessionals. The students “actually ran a business. They got all kinds of life skills experience. It was really successful.” For the past seven years, Bart has worked as a teacher consultant in which most of the students are in mainstream classrooms, although some of his students also have some “pull-out” services.

Bart’s role as a teacher consultant allows him to have a caseload of 25-27 students. Many of the students Bart works with are certified with one of the following, specific learning disability, emotional impairment or otherwise health impaired due to attention deficit

disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Bart also works with students with mild autism, and speech and language impairment certifications. Bart interacts with an average of 60 students a day. He is involved in a team-teaching situation as well that allows him a greater range of student contact.

Bart stated that his required contractual workweek is 35 hours. In addition, Bart spends on average another 10 hours per week at work. He stated that his workload has changed over his years of experience in the education field: "I have learned to be more efficient with my time. I made a vow to myself many years ago that I was never going to spend more time on other people's students than I would on my own and I have stayed true to that." Bart stated that he does not do "a lot of the extra stuff, like coaching, but he is involved in committees." He really "tries to separate my time." Bart reasoned that his workload has changed because:

There is more demands to have students in mainstreamed classrooms, which for the most part is good. But as a result it means we have more work to do to educate teachers, we have more work to do to come up with accommodations and we have to educate the students on how to use the accommodations.

Bart also reasoned that the "intensity of (working in the field of special education) has picked up over the years."

He further stated that he deems his current workload is a realistic one. He reasoned that it is in balance with other teachers and thinks, "If I taught an English class I would have to go home and grade 150 papers on the weekend and I do not have to do that." It keeps my job in perspective. Bart does reason, "Some of what we are being asked to do in special education is increasingly taking (teachers) away from working with the students. It is just to satisfy a government requirement, government need, regulations or mandates. It can be very frustrating."

Bart restated, “as far as working with the student’s part goes, it is pretty realistic. It is all the other stuff that is where it is frustrating.” Bart further added that he has been lucky to “work in districts where the focus has been on students, and they have sometimes forgiven if we do not cross every ‘T’ and dot every ‘I’.” He reasons that there are “people who work really hard, in the building, and I know there are other people who kind of just do their job and go home.”

Bart continued to discuss his workload situation. He stated that he deemed his workload “on average (was) probably a little heavier than most of the other special education teachers in my building.” He thought that he had the same workload as other individuals throughout his district. Bart is part of a countywide transition committee. Therefore, when asked how his work level compared to other districts, he reasoned that he knowledgeable regarding the surrounding districts in responding to the question. He expressed that he was “fortunate because I know there are some people in districts where there is a lot less resources and a lot less opportunity involved.” Even though the individuals in the other districts may have a caseload half his size, he expressed that he “just could not deal with that.” Bart stated that his district provided a great amount of resources and opportunity to the special education staff and that he was, therefore, in a better position even with the increased caseload size.

Bart, in analyzing his caseload, looked at the *No Child Left Behind* law. He struggled to provide an answer as to the impact it has had on his workload. Bart stated *No Child Left Behind* has “made it much harder for districts to hire, and to be flexible on how they assign teachers. So as a result, sometimes we get teachers who pulled a certification and so they have to teach that subject, even though they may not teach our students as well as another teacher whom does not happen to have, whatever little endorsement that they need to have.” Bart further added that this teacher restriction in placement has further added to his workload because it is necessary for the

special education teachers to “do more with that teacher to get them up to speed or to teach them how to work with our students.” Bart expressed that *No Child Left Behind* has not exactly directly affected him, but he stated that it was “a ripple effect.” He reasoned that the shift in ideology to focus on standardized testing was “a sham, especially for our students, because they do not test well, and they never will test well.” He did express some frustration with the frequency and amount of changes made to special education law. Concerning the paperwork issue Bart said, “They come out with what they want, then they change it a year later, and then they change it again another year later, again and again. We just kind of roll with it, do the best we can.” Bart further clarified his frustrations with the changes in paperwork. He stated that:

When I first started out I really wanted to do this the right way, I am going to get every Individualized Education Program just perfect. There is still a part of me who wants to do it the right way, but, more of me says, oh, let’s just do what is best for the students, and figure out how to document it later.

Symptoms. Bart deemed his workload and the students whom he worked with did not cause any conflict with his personal/home life. He restated that he attempts to keep his work life and personal life separate, but admits that he is a “pretty social person and a lot of what I do is quasi counseling for a lot of students. I feel like part of what we do in our job is to help students to learn how to problem solve and how to deal with issues that come up in their life, not just get through school.” Because of this view, Bart has had “students stop by my house. For the most part it has not been a problem. Most of the students are good, they are respectful. My own kids know what I do, I like having them exposed to the students who I work with because it helps them see all kinds of different people.” The biggest issue that Bart has faced is that both he and his wife work with special education students. It is a struggle at times to maintain focus on his

spouse's issues when they are so close to his own. He stated that "we both come home at night when we both have a bad day and we both want to just vent about it and I do not really want to listen to her, and she does not really want to listen to me." At times Bart states that he may not be "real supportive, but that does not happen very often."

Bart stated that he does not experience any physical symptoms such as anger or cardiovascular problems related to the stresses of working in the special education setting. He said he is more apt to get angry or frustrated with his peer teachers, rather than the students who he works with. Bart has not had nightmares that related to the job, but he has awakened in the middle of the night with thoughts about his job. He does not associate this with a negative situation and has used it as a learning time. He keeps a pad next to his bed to write down his ideas and then returns to sleep. Bart has not taken a personal day in order to avoid a situation or student at school, although he tries to take at least one personal day a year in order to do an activity with one of his own children. He has not delegated a responsibility to a paraprofessional in order to avoid working with a particular student or group of students. He has not asked for a building or placement change because of the students he works with. Bart has not considered leaving the teaching profession. Although, he did say "it would be nice to have a job where you get paid well and people appreciate you."

Professional development. Bart stated that he maintains awareness about the risks and costs of working with students in special education through journals, being involved in committees, and participating in conferences. Moreover, Bart stated that he attends several workshops each school year. He also subscribes to several newsletters including; *Disability Issues in the Middle East North Africa*, *Learning Disabilities Resources*, and *Learning Disabilities On-Line Journal*. Bart stated that there are community resources available for

helping the special education population. These resources include Michigan Rehabilitation Services, several adult agencies, Washtenaw Intermediate School District in terms of conferences and workshops, as well as, several local organizations including Faith in Action, and service groups who we can “go to if we need some help” for these students.

The district that employed Bart provides an in-service day every year structured by his special education director. Although, Bart did not express that the in-service information itself was informative, he reasoned it was a time for professionals in his field to get together and discuss common topics. Moreover, there is “a lot of support to attend conferences” in his district, although there is very little funding available. The administrative staff encourages attendance, but struggles to find funding to help pay for a teacher to be out of the building. When opportunities are available for an employee in Bart’s district to participate on a committee or attend a conference through grant money, it is highly encouraged. Bart stated that it would be beneficial to have a more open line of communication between his district’s high school building and the middle school building special education teachers. He reasoned it would be an important step because “it tends to be a disconnect between what is going on in eighth grade and what happens when they make the transition to the high school in ninth grade, the communication is not quite there.”

Bart considered how a typical Individualized Education Program Team supports his professional and personal needs of working with the special education student population. Bart stated that when he considers an Individualized Education Program Team, he stated, is made up of “the parent and the student, an administrator, himself, the general education teacher, often a school psychologist or social worker.” Bart stated the “purpose of the Individualized Education Program Team meeting is to develop a web of communication, a web of support” for the student.

He expressed that the teachers “are comfortable coming to me and I am comfortable going to the teachers in return.” Bart stated that the communication between teachers regarding the students is very important, but that parents are the most important in some ways. He stated that parents “are the link in the whole process, especially with the younger high school aged students.” No matter the students’ performance in the eighth grade, the students always move forward into ninth grade. Unfortunately, once in high school this situation no longer remains, and courses must be repeated until successful in order to continue to progress. “As a parent, if you are not on top of the student, things just do not get done” and if they do not do the work in high school, they do not graduate from high school. If the parents are involved and the student gets support, “it works out pretty well” and the student can, often times, continue their education in a post-secondary setting.

Bart does not state that he has any personal needs when working with the special education population. He does not have any issues with discussing any manner of information with regard to the student in special education with any member of the Individual Education Program Team in his building and does not avoid topics that require attention . He stated, “For the most part I have a pretty supportive administration.” One of the best examples Bart was able to provide of the support he experiences from the administrative level in his building is that the principal lets the special education teacher consultant schedule their caseload students into classes based on what he/she knows of the students’ learning styles. He stated he “knows that does not happen in other districts and it is a really rare and powerful tool.” Bart stated that his building has a weekly forum in which the administrators are present to discuss students “who are at risk or who are having trouble in school.”

Bart stated that the administrative staff in his building was “good about communicating discipline issues that come up” with students on his caseload. Bart stated that his building administrative staff did “a nice job of supporting” the special education staff. In Bart’s district, the school superintendent and the district special education director are not involved in the day-to-day activities of working with the special education population, although the building principals are involved daily. Bart stated that there “was not a whole lot that would prevent me from discussing my concerns about a student” with an administrator. In fact, he “cannot imagine a situation where I would not. I trust their judgment and they trust my judgment.” Although, when discussing student issues with other peer teachers, Bart “tries to keep things on a need to know basis. If it does not affect them directly, they do not need to know of it.” Bart further added that “teachers are famous for not knowing when to keep things to themselves and when not to.” Therefore, he stated that this further added to his keeping his peer teachers on “a need to know basis” with the students, he works with.

Bart considered any situation that would prevent him from discussing his concerns about a student with the student’s family members. Bart stated that the “only situation I could think of that might come up is a situation where there is maybe a divorce or there is a restraining order, which we had a copy of.” If it is something significant, as in an issue of great concern with regard to a student, Bart stated it “is probably not going to be me who makes that contact, it is probably going to be an administrator.” Bart recognizes that if he “knows a call home for something will earn that student a beating, or even if I suspected it will cause the student physical harm, then I will not make that phone call.” Bart reasoned that other than that type of situation there was really no reason that would prevent him from discussing a student with his/her family.

Bart frequently has discussions with administrators, teachers, and family members if there is a student on his caseload identified as a concern or at risk in some manner. Bart stated that he works in a very tight community in which many people interact with one another. Because of this reality he has to be assured that he is able to openly speak with all the necessary parties, if he does not, they may hear it from someone else second hand. Bart further makes sure that anything he “talks to a teacher about, or even an administrator, I want to make sure that it is something I can broach with the parents. I have a discussion first with the student and then the parent. Most parents would rather they hear it from me.” Bart reasoned that the relationship he has with many of the students on his caseload has developed throughout years of interactions and attempts to support the betterment of the student. Therefore, the intentions and motivations behind the discussions with parents are often open and frank.

Support opportunities. During the final part of the interview, Bart indicated he would make proposals to administrators, superintendants, or special education directors to help teachers like him work with students receiving special education services. Bart stated that in his role as a teacher consultant it would be very helpful for the administration to allow “common planning time, for the teacher consultants to work with the teachers they are teaming with.” Bart further added that it is “very hard to evaluate what we’ve done in the class, it is hard to support what the teacher is doing in the class, and it is hard without having time to talk.” Bart reasoned that establishing a “secondary special education group who I could work with, and meet maybe once a month just to discuss issues and things that are coming up” would be very beneficial.

Bart further discussed the need for additional support for paperwork or the requirements of paperwork. He stated that he did not need support with the actual completion of the paperwork required for students certified, but it would “be nice if, from the top down it was clear what

exactly we are supposed to do, what the expectations are for all of our paperwork. However, the paperwork keeps changing. I feel like we get information in the middle of the year but no training how to use it and that is frustrating.”

Bart had an alternative preservice experience. Bart that expressed that his training was very beneficial and realistic. Bart began his career as a paraprofessional. He worked with a student who had been “kicked out of every high school in two cities in Oregon and was very angry. The student was involved in drugs and Bart worked with the student in a one-on-one student/aid situation. He worked with a certified special education professional to develop a plan for the student, who would frequently throw things and endanger those in the room with him. Bart expressed that “quite possibly one of the most dangerous students I have ever worked with” was his first student. Bart thought that that experience was very beneficial, when he “actually got into the teaching program. I had already brought a whole wealth of experience, working in this field for years with all kinds of students.” Bart said with his unique combination of real world experiences and education, he “felt very well prepared” for the realities faced in the special education profession.

Bart, in reflecting about his own preservice teaching, and what is typical to graduating teachers today, had some recommendations for new teachers who are not exposed to the level he was. He reasoned, “People coming into the special education field are really good people, who have for the most part, really stable lives, and want to help the students who have difficulty learning.” However, often these new teaching graduates do not always understand “these are not just students who are having difficult times learning. They often come from lousy family lives, where they have had traumatic experiences happen to them. And I do not think (that the new teachers) often understand that.” Bart said many new teachers want generalized ideas about what

students to expect in their classroom. Nevertheless, Bart felt it was not as easy as placing a label on each student. “You are going to have students who are unable to focus, students who cannot retain classroom information, students who have all kinds of problems. Preservice programs center primarily on how to teach, they do not focus on the whole student.” Bart felt that a better diversity of college coursework for all teachers, general and special education would be a benefit. Bart proposed a “requirement that everyone should work or do something in a special education or basic classroom,” in order to have the new teacher exposed to the diversity of students and work in the reality of an inclusion classroom with a high number of special education students.

Nicole

Nicole began her interview by stating that the population of students that she works with does not usually cause her undue stress. She works in the highly specialized area of visual impairment in which the students are usually open to suggestions and assistance in learning due to a physical disability. She did say that many of the parents she worked with did cause a lot of stress. Nicole states that:

Parents’ often do not push their children to use the specialized equipment that we suggest in school. Mom and dad may say they do not want to use it or it is hard for them to use it. We encourage them to use assistive devices when the students really need it, but there are parents who always question your judgment.

Therefore it is stressful when they do not “trust your decisions.” We as certified special education teachers are the experts “and have had the training and have had other students in similar situations and have been able to see the accommodation has worked” for other students.

Nicole reasoned that there were a few proactive steps she could take to help her understand the parents' needs and to make sure her directions are understood and followed. The staff in which she works with routinely has parents in for a discussion group. They facilitate a meeting of parents with students who have similar disabilities and are of a similar age. They also create and present workshops on specialized technology to families and students "showing them new equipment and how to use it." In addition, she also organizes models of "successful students. We bring them in and they talk to (other students') parents and tell them how they are succeeding with this type" of technology, in order to help the parents' better understand the obstacles their student faces and what success they may see with various adaptive technology.

Caseload/work. Nicole is a relatively young teacher consultant. Her employer is described as an Intermediate School District. This is her first teaching position, and the job she interviewed for directly after her student teaching experience. Nicole's title is one of a teacher consultant. Nicole has a caseload that consists of 20 to 45 students whom she is responsible for, located in several school districts. She must write all the students Individualized Education Program Team paperwork, provide specialized instruction for students who use Braille, as well as, suggest and train the students in various adaptive technology devices. The students on Nicole's caseload vary in disability from low vision, blind, all the way to severely multiply impaired in addition to having a visual disability. She sees students who are involved in inclusion settings and center based programs. Nicole works on average 55 hours per week, her contractual obligation to her Intermediate School District is 35 hours. She puts in several hours of overtime preparing for student interactions and completing paperwork. Nichole sees five to seven students in any given work day.

Nicole reflected on her workload, she reasoned that her current special education responsibilities were realistic. Nicole expressed that her current caseload responsibilities were realistic. However, she did say she was frustrated with the amount of paperwork. Nicole had a desire to “work with the students more, but the paperwork is what is overbearing.” Because Nicole is a teacher consultant, she travels to several different districts to consult with various students. Therefore, she is required to “journal about everything.” Nicole states she must write down:

Every contact I have with the students or the teachers. I write everything down every day I see them. Moreover, it is just so hard, it takes up most of my day and I even take it home and to complete the journaling, then add on writing Individualized Education Programs, it is just a lot of paperwork.

In addition to the overwhelming amount of paperwork, Nicole needs to spend several hours a day preparing, gathering equipment, and transporting supplies for student interactions. Nicole further added that “there is just a lot of paperwork and I just wish I could see the students more.”

Nicole compared her workload to other special education teachers in her building. She responded that she would “say it was the same.” She did not state that she “works any more or less than anyone else” in her building. Nicole stated that the professional group of teachers she works with “works together to get things done.”

Nicole works with a number of students with a variety of needs. She works with students who are involved in full inclusion, as well as, students with higher needs in center-based programs. Nicole considered if the variety of student needs was a cause of stress in her life. She stated:

The changes can cause stress, a little bit. Because I have to change my mind set. The full inclusion students are easy. I just go into the classroom and they tell me what they need, I just have to obtain it for them. The other students who are in the center based programs, they are a lot more demanding. I really have to prepare student specific lessons for each one of them. It is stressful.

Nicole stressed that it was crucial that she is fully prepared and brings all of the necessary aid and lesson plans when she is working with the students who are involved in the center based programs. She stated that “if I do not have something I need, I cannot change it; I have to have everything I need to get through the lesson.” In order for Nichole to ensure she is prepared for all types of lessons, she travels with many different pieces of equipment at all times. Nicole is then required to have a “whole trunk full of resources.” She stated that this at times can cause some physical stress. She is required to carry all of her own equipment in and out of many different buildings. In addition, Nicole said she needed to invest in a larger vehicle in order to accommodate all she needs to carry with her.

Symptoms. Nicole reflected on the extent that her role as a special education professional and the students she works with cause conflict between the demands of her work and the demand of her home life. Nicole stated that she is frequently doing work at home, especially the journaling of the interactions with the students each day. Nicole stated that this specific activity frequently required her personal time and did indeed interfere with home life activities.

Nicole discussed the frequency in which she experienced symptoms such as anger, irritability, jumpiness, concentration problems, nightmares, and other physiological issues caused by the demands of working with the special education student population. Nicole stated that she

did not experience any of the symptoms that might be caused or related to the students she works with. She did state at times she is irritable because of the students “home lives, and the parents coming in or not coming in and not caring (about the student) that is irritating to me, because I think the students should be (the focus).” Nicole travels often in highly populated areas, where the traffic is very congested. She stated that driving was a very stressful part of her job, and because she travels so much in any given day, it is very difficult on her.

Nicole has never taken a personal day in order to avoid working with special education students. She has never delegated responsibility to a paraprofessional, which were her tasks to complete. Nicole has never requested a teaching or building placement change. She is not contemplating applying for a job in another district and she is not contemplating leaving the teaching profession.

Professional development. Nicole maintains her awareness about the risks and cost of work with the special education population through attending workshops, reading journals, and discussing issues with her peer teachers. Nicole stated that there are some community resources that help her work in this student population, such as Seedlings (a local company who specializes in Braille books) and Leader Dogs for the Blind. At times, there are limited resources available for the students whom Nicole works with. She is required to be innovative and develop new ideas and ways of reaching her students. The typical Individualized Education Program Team does not address her personal issues. But her team is supportive in the requirements to develop a fully comprehensive Individualized Education Program for students, some of which have extensive needs. Nicole stated that her administrator is only involved in situations in which a parent or guardian has neglected to perform their role with regard to the Individualized Education Program process or if there is a concern regarding student safety.

Nicole considered if there was anything that would prevent her from discussing her concerns about working with a student with an administrator. Nicole stated, “She has an extremely supportive administrative staff, and if she had an issue with a student or parent the administrator is supportive and helpful in finding a resolution.” Nicole further considered if there was anything that might prevent her discussing student concerns with another teacher or family members of the student. Nicole felt that she does have a lot of knowledge about students and their home lives, since many of them have home visits often from a mobility specialist. She has more information about the students who she works with than a typical teacher does. Moreover, she reasoned that “certain information should be kept private and only shared if it is somehow impacting the student’s performance at school.” She stated unless this was the case it was better to allow the “teachers the students see on a daily basis to determine their own opinion about the student.” Nicole stated there have been several occasions where she had to redirect a teacher and even parents about the ability level of a student. Many people:

Have prejudices regarding students with physical impairments, especially, students who are blind. People just need a little bit of information and an open mind to understand these students better. They are capable of a lot, if they are just given the chance.”

Nicole has not had any regrets yet, in speaking to administrators, teachers, or family members regarding the progress or needs of a student with whom she works with.

Support opportunities. Nicole stated that if she were to give one piece of advice to administrators such as superintendents, special education directors and building principals, she would ask that they try to understand the variety of needs that the students she works with have. She further added that the administrators “need to be educated about the specific populations’ needs and abilities, as well as, the programs and resources that are available to this group of

individuals.” She stated that it is helpful to have administrators who were open-minded to the practices of working with a student population with varying degree of needs.

Nicole felt that her preservice training prepared her very little for the demands both personally and professionally to work with the “intense” students. She did not get a “complete picture of the everyday demands and stresses that are faced, or the high level of paperwork required and how to balance that with student interactions.” Nicole would recommend:

A more hands-on approach to student teaching; such as a paid internship that required a preservice teacher to directly document information on one or more students. In addition to writing all the required paperwork, and interact with the family, administrators, and other teachers as well.

Carol

Carol considered her current caseload of students and specifically reflected on students who have severe emotional or behavioral problems or students who have endured personal hardships. She then described one such student, in order to understand her teaching situation. Carol stated, “There are so many to choose from.” She further added, “Working in a poverty district, we have a significant number of students who have plenty of issues.” Carol chose one student to reflect on. Both of the students’ parents are deceased, and he has recently “been put under the guardianship of an aunt and uncle.” The student is certified cognitively impaired. He is supposed to be going into his junior year of high school, but does not yet have enough credits to achieve that standing. Carol works with this particular student in both a special math class and a special social studies class. It is often that the student, “we will call him Juan,” interrupts Carol. She stated she “cannot even finish one sentence without Juan interrupting.” Juan would frequently “say, even before I’d give directions, I cannot do it.” He is a student who “always has

to get the last word in, either in conflicts with other students, or with me. The interruption provided by Juan is a constant (occurrence) in her classroom.” Carol struggles with how to discipline the student. She does not know “if I should send him out, because he is not getting the amount of education or keep him, but then he will disrupt the remaining students’ learning.” Carol has tried to “connect with Juan on a personal level, but he is very distrustful.” Juan frequently “saying things in class like you do not like me.” In addition, Juan “says that he cannot do an assignment. I am trying still trying to see if it is it really that he does not know how to do it or is it just that he does not want to work?” Carol added, “That he is a really tough student to read and the data is very odd. His standards scores are all over, some are in the 40’s, 50’s, and some in the 70’s, so they are not consistent. That in itself is very stressful; he is not fitting into the forms. I really do not know where he is at.”

Caseload/work. Carol has taught for eight years. She “taught six years at the elementary level as a resource teacher and I transferred two years ago to the high school.” She stated, “She is still considered a resource room teacher.” Her special education endorsement is in hearing impaired theory. In addition, while she worked at the elementary level, she “was also a case study, or child study coordinator and I did all the evaluations. I average 75 child studies a year, and I average 35 evaluations a year.” Carol stated that her role has changed since she has moved to the high school level. Carol teaches two classes, special math and special social studies. All the students involved in these classes have an Individualized Education Programs. Carol added “that we are most likely going to go to a co-teaching model, and an inclusion model, but currently, we are departmentalized, and I only teach special education students.” In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Carol has a caseload average “between 20 and 23.”

Carol works mainly with students with learning disabilities or emotional impairments. The students Carol works with are primarily in special education classes “but, it is not self-contained they are still taking classes” with the general education population. In addition, Carol works with a few students who are “physically and otherwise health impaired with diagnosis’ like attention deficit disorder.” Carol works a five period school day; she “gets to work an additional hour and a half before the school day begins and typically brings stuff home, papers to correct and things like that.” Carol “is scheduled to work 30 hours” a week, but typically puts in an additional 15 to 20 hours per week.

Carol has an added responsibility of being the “testing accommodations coordinator” for her building. This role involves ensuring the students receive the necessary approvals for needed accommodations for the state mandated test, Michigan Merit Exam. This role is a supplementary responsibility for Carol over and above lesson planning, parent and teacher contacts, and paperwork for students with special needs.

Carol discussed her current workload, if it has changed over her years of employment and if she considers it is a realistic workload. Carol stated that since she has changed positions, from the elementary level to the high school level, it has changed drastically. Carol thinks her job is “too demanding.” Contractually Carol needs to be in her building from 7:15 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. She felt “there is no way I can do what I’m doing in that time, so obviously there are outside hours that you have to do.” Carol did state that she felt her job demands are actually less since she moved to the high school level, but still unrealistic. Carol expressed that “it can be overwhelming. Especially with budget cuts the way they are, they keep expecting me to do more with less, it is very frustrating.”

Carol's change from her elementary teaching position, to the secondary level was at her request. She had "a boss who was very inconsistent mentally." Carol said:

I could not take it anymore, so I called my special education director and said get me out, I do not care where you put me. I am done. I cannot do this anymore. Therefore, the only place was the high school. I never thought I would teach high school, but I actually really enjoy it.

In order to understand Carol's role as a special educator she discussed how her workload compares to other special education teachers in her building. Carol reasoned, "I do more, especially with the accommodations coordinator role. Nobody else would take it, I mean we have people who work really hard, and then we have people who just are not." Carol further added how her workload compares to other teachers in her districts. She responded:

It depends; I do think special education teachers have more (than general education teachers) do. Because general educators do not have to do all the child studies or student evaluations, progress reports towards their Individualized Education Program goals and stuff like that to do.

The lack of paperwork makes the general educator have less job demands overall than a special educator. Carol stated she was unaware how her workload compared with special educators in other districts. She stated she had no grounds for comparison, as she did not know any special educators in other districts to question.

Symptoms. Carol further described how her special education role and the students she works with cause conflict between her work demands and her home demands. Carol stated that during the school year:

Things like housework move to the back burner and my husband must definitely step up for that. But, I try to get to work early so that I can leave pretty much at the scheduled time. Granted I bring stuff home, but I get all my copies and things like that done before school, because nobody else is there that early.

Carol makes the effort to be at work at least an hour prior to her contractual start time in order to ensure that “I am done by 2:30 or 3:00 so I can be involved in the after school activities of my children.” Carol stated that she does do grading, correcting, and other paperwork in the evening “and that does take time away from my students and things like that.”

Carol considered if she experienced any symptoms such as anger, irritability, jumpiness, nightmares, or other physical ailments because of working with special education students. Carol responded:

I definitely see more of that during the school year than I do in the summer, especially like fatigue, headaches, and anger. I get frustrated with my students; a lot of them just do not care. They have failed so many times, they just do not care anymore so, and I care more about their grades and things like that, than they do. That is so frustrating to me because I do want more for them.

Carol stated that she does take personal days “for mental health reasons.” She clarified these are usually in order “to kind of get myself together when I have had enough.” Carol does not delegate responsibilities to paraprofessionals that she would otherwise do if she were teaching another population of students. She stated, “I do not have access” to paraprofessionals in her building. Carol has requested a building change, but stated it did not related to the students, more the “administrators.” Carol stated that she has thought about applying for a job in a different district, and has even applied, although “it was a \$25,000 pay cut.” Carol stated that there were

several reasons she could not take the job “financially I could not do it and where I am at the students really need me.” Carol stated that in the poverty district she is currently employed with “I really make a difference to them, though they do not tell me” whereas in a more affluent district Carol did not sense the students would value her as much. Carol stated that she has contemplated leaving the teaching profession. She says she has thought of leaving the profession because “the more demands we get, the less we have to do it with, and it gets frustrating.” She stated that she does not know what else she would do if she were not teaching, but she has thought about changing professions.

Professional development. Carol maintains awareness about the risks and cost of working with the special education population through “a guide on the web.” Carol aspires to become an advocate for special education; therefore, her focus is on the changing special education laws. Carol says that she:

Gets frustrated with the limits placed on us as special education teachers, because of money and financial restrictions. Students are entitled to certain accommodations, but, financially I cannot provide. I just would really like to be an advocate.

Carol stated that “there is not really (support) community-wise, there are clinics and things but not anything specific in the community.” Carol says that she is “pretty lucky in being able to go to conferences, we get at least one a year and professional development is definitely a priority in the district.” Carol felt that professional development was the most beneficial “because teachers kind of know what other teachers want.” Conferences and professional development are the only district wide school resources available to help Carol work with the special education student population.

Carol described how her typical Individualized Education Program Team supports her professional and personal needs when working with students with special needs. Carol stated that typically the Individualized Education Program Team consists of only herself, possibly a parent, and maybe a social worker. “And that is if the parent comes, where the majority of the time, the parent does not actually come.” Carol further added that “I would say that they do not necessarily support me professionally and personally.” Carol clarified this by stating she does not meet on regular basis with other Individualized Education Program Team members, with the exception of the actual yearly meeting. Carol says she has a very supportive special education director “but she (the director) has an entire district to deal with, so it is very hard to get specific stuff. We can look to our assistant principals, they do a lot of the disciplinary action, but they really are not involved in other areas.” Carol stated that administrative intervention does not manifest itself during her formal teaching evaluations. She further added that the only thing the school superintendent “did (for our department) was criticize us. The reason why our district did not meet annual yearly progress for the entire district was blamed on the high school special education program.” Carol stated that the superintendent and other administrators are not supportive of the role of special educators in her district.

Carol considered her student interactions, as well as, what would prevent her from talking with other teachers or family members about issues involving a student. Carol felt that it was best practice to advise other teachers on student issues on an “as needed basis.” Carol said, “As a department we talk about our students and to the administrators if the behavior warrants it. We also talk with parents I just tell them the situation, but I try to remain lighthearted” as much as possible. Carol gave the instance of a student writing profane language in a textbook, she had to discuss it with the parents, but tried to minimize the behavior. She stated she does this because

“it helps keep me sane.” Carol said she did have some regrets about having a conversation with an administrator, teacher or family. The situation that Carol was referencing happened in the elementary setting. She described the situation in which she documented a difficult parent to an administrator. The administrator took her documentation and gave it directly to the parent, who was quite agitated about the references to her behavior. Carol stated, “The situation was handled badly by the administrator, so I am leery about documenting those types of situations and I only do so if I am asked.”

Support opportunities. Carol considered if she had any recommendations for administrators such as superintendents and special education directors who could help special educators deal with the daily stressors that are inherent to their position. Carol said:

None of my preservice experiences prepared me for the reality of special education teaching. Writing units for imaginary students, and role-playing for pretend classrooms did not do anything for me. My preservice preparation definitely did not prepare me for what it was really like.

Carol contemplated if she had any recommendations that might help better prepare teachers for the actualities of the teaching profession. Carol felt that the:

Increasing the amount of more realistic encounters would be greatly more beneficial in preservice training experiences. Whereas the current preservice teaching activities they give you are just contrived.

Carol felt more field experiences, with a variety of students, would be helpful to potential new teachers. Carol closed by saying:

I love and I hate what I do. If I could just focus on the students I would be here another 18 years, no problem. But it is all the other stuff that distracts you from the students. It

keeps you from focusing on what the students need to be successful, and that makes it hard.

Mary

Mary considered a description of a student who has instigated a stressful situation for her. She reflected on a student with a severe emotional or behavioral problem or one who has endured hardships such as foster care placement. Mary described a student; she will call Kayla, who is in the foster care system. The student “has a tremendous number” of stressful interactions throughout the school day. Kayla has been “placed in a day treatment program, and then transitioned to the regular high school.” Kayla has found “life at the high school very stressful.” Mary stated:

There are always situations that involve Kayla, if she goes off her medicine, (she) stops coping and experiences tremendous anxiety. We have had to provide a tremendous amount of resources for her, to try to maintain her at the high school.

Kayla experiences many stresses in her life in addition to those at school. Kayla is:

No longer able to be with her family of origin and her foster mom regularly threatens to banish her from the foster house she resides in. When Kayla is emotionally struggling, she becomes very fearful of losing the only home she has.

This added anxiety just compounds the stress she is already experiencing. Mary stated that Kayla might even be undiagnosed, but experiencing symptoms of bipolar disorder. Mary stated that because of the staff’s awareness of Kayla and her many issues that “we are pretty proactive in many ways.” Kayla is normally in classrooms that have more than one teacher in the room at all times. Kayla has had to receive “special credit” in some classes to avoid a failure, and a total

emotional break. In addition, to better assist Kayla “we have food in the office that we can feed her when she needs a little mothering or she is having one of her semantic meltdowns.”

Caseload/workload. In order to understand Mary’s role as a special educator she described her work history. Mary stated, “I’m an old girl, so I’ve been a couple of places.” Mary graduated with a Masters degree in the 1970’s; her first position was as a speech pathologist and part-time learning disabilities teacher. Mary was “the first certified learning disability person the district had ever hired.” She spent four years in that position, and then moved to an inpatient psychiatric program in which her role was as a “teacher diagnostician.” In this role, she performed educational evaluations on inpatient adolescents. Mary performed this role for five years. Her next employment was with her current school district. She began as “a self-contained learning disabilities teacher on a part-time basis, and then over the years I moved to a teacher consultant.”

Mary stated that her current caseload ranges from 30 to 35 students per year. Mary was unsure how many students she interacted with on any given day. She stated that in addition to her caseload students, she also team-teaches, therefore, it is difficult to say exactly the number of students she works with. Mary added that students not scheduled to be in her classroom frequently stop in to see her for additional assistance. The students do so in order to have a test read, or additional instruction or just everyday help with homework. “We all basically are expected to know every student, and be able to work with any of the certified students at the high school” on any subject taught at the high school.

Mary further described her caseload as being primarily:

Certified as learning disabled, let us say half, some are emotionally impaired and a bunch of students are otherwise health impaired because of attention deficit hyper activity

disorder. The special education department is attempting to get those attention deficit disorder students moved to a 504 plan.

Mary added that she also has some low incident disabilities such as students with Aspergers and Autism. Mary stated that the typical number of hours that she worked during the school year is 40 hours per week. Mary stated, “The school week is around 30 hours. I usually stay after school hours for one and a half to two hours each day but, I do not do school work at home.” Mary further described her role as a special educator stating that:

I am kind of the team leader in her department, so I do some administrative things in addition to standard teacher consultant kinds of things. Any new student who comes to the high school, any new referral, I am involved in the initial intake and programming decisions.

Mary also works with the scheduling of the courses for students, as well as, working with all “the eighth graders coming up to the high school and assist them in the transition between buildings.” Mary participates “in an early intervention committee team where we look at students who might be struggling in school and try to design interventions so the students get services before” they are failing. These responsibilities are in addition to Mary’s normal caseload and Individualized Education Program preparation requirements.

Mary reflected on her caseload and if it has changed over the years. She felt that her workload has changed, along with staffing growth. Furthermore, in the past many responsibilities that were solely hers, now she shares with coworkers and “although I work really hard, I do not have to do every single little thing and keep track of every single little detail like I once did.” Mary considers her workload realistic overall, but says she does experience days that the workload is overwhelming. Mary reasoned that her workload is “pretty comparable” to others in

her building. Although, she added “at one time we had a big slacker on our team, but fortunately he retired and that reduced a lot of frustrations.” Mary considered the workload of other special educators in her district and stated that “it is pretty comparable. I think we all work really hard.” Mary was unsure of how her workload compared to educators in other districts. “I think by and large special educators have to work really hard. We work with a demanding group of students and the job demands a lot of time and energy from us.”

Mary considered *No Child Left Behind* and the impact it has had on her workload. She contemplated if it has made it more difficult to perform her job as a special educator. Mary was very blunt with her response. She stated:

No Child Left Behind is just a piece of crap. I think we are expecting students who do not have the cognitive abilities for whatever reason to be tested repeatedly. This is just to show them continually how incompetent they are by not being able to meet some of these standards.

Mary went on to say, “I would like to see us provide better training for students so that they can become employable, productive members of society, rather than so much theoretical stuff.”

Mary’s special education role is one of full inclusion with resource room support. Her primary focus of the resource room support is on freshman students and a few select sophomores. In addition, Mary works in team-teaching situations, in which “two teachers are available for students who are ninth and tenth grade classes, so we try to provide a continuum of service.” Mary added:

I work in a district where we get lots of support from administration, and a good measure of success from them. When we need support, it tends to be there and the administration

who we have are excellent problem solvers. That administrative support makes the position realistic, without that support it would not be.

Symptoms. Mary, in reflecting on conflicts caused by working with the special education population between work and home life, stated that:

I do not do work at home and I have never really done so. My daughter is older now, so my time is my own. When my daughter was younger, I would have a stressful day and I would be too tired to deal with whatever it was she needed just then. So the job it did have an impact when my daughter was younger.”

Mary laughed when she was asked about experiencing any physical symptoms such as anger, irritability, or nightmares caused by working with students in special education. She stated she “has had physical symptoms over the years. I do not put them as being a direct result of my employment, I think there are other things in my life that may have cause them, I do not think my job has contributed to that.” Mary amended her statement, adding “anger and frustration maybe the exception” the students can contribute to those types reactions. Mary has never taken a personal day to avoid working with the special education students. She does not think she has ever delegated responsibilities to a paraprofessional that would otherwise be her responsibility if she were teaching another student population. Moreover, she has never requested a teacher or building placement change. Mary is not considering a job in another district and is considering leaving the teaching profession “when I get to retire in five to seven years.”

Professional development. Mary maintains awareness about the risk and cost of working with the special education population by relying on her training in psychotherapy. She states that the training “certainly contributed to my learning to deal with this special education population.” Mary stated that there are no community resources to help her work with the special education

student population and the only provided in-service training is by her school district. Mary stated:

If I wanted to go to a special education conference, I would need to find a way to justify by tying it to one of our school board goals for the high school. I just like working with the students, so I do not go to a lot of outside stuff.

Mary has a supportive Individualized Education Program Team, both professionally and personally. Mary's school social worker has "been a very instrumental member of our team, it is a really positive team process." Mary further added, "There are four teacher consultants, we also have a psychologist, a social worker and a special education supervisor. The special education supervisor is not terribly supportive, but the core team is supportive." Mary stated that her team approaches the discussion of students as a "team approach." Each teacher consultant on Mary's team is:

Free to bring up any student who they have concerns about and sometimes we even talk about students who are not certified with a specific disability. I think we have a good team that people are free to bring up students who they are concerned about and as a group, we work together.

Mary was very specific in her discussion of administrative support. She clarified that the special education supervisor in her district is not someone she expects support from, which she says, "I find very frustrating." However, her building administrators, including the principal and assistant principals "are very good about helping to come up with solutions to problems." If these individuals are requested to be at an Individualized Education Program Team meeting, "they will certainly make a point of being there and being supportive." Mary "never felt that" the administrative intervention or support manifested itself during her formal teaching evaluation.

Mary's superintendent is only involved in dealing with the special education population "at an appeal level" usually related to a parental concern. Mary said she is "one of those ones who says almost anything that crosses my mind" so there is very little that would prevent her from discussing a student concern with an administrator, teacher or family member. Although, she does try to address concerns with family members "kindly, I also attempt to demonstrate that it is only out of concern that I would bring these subjects up." Mary's only regrets when "I have said stupid things, and they have come back to bite me. So I have regrets when maybe a thought was not carefully and completely thought-out before it parted my lips."

Support opportunities. Mary stated that if, at the end of the study, she would suggestion way that administrators' such as superintendents and special education directors could better aid teachers working with students with special needs. She would "want to be sure that the administration, particularly regular education administration, makes a point of understanding special education, including the framework of the laws and the regulations that we deal with." In addition, she felt it was important that the administrators are "able to respect, what a special education teacher does, although different from their classroom teacher, is as important as any other professional teacher in the building."

Mary did not reason that her preservice training prepared her for the daily requirements of working with the special education population. Although she did have some employment training that assisted her, she "had the benefit of working summers at an in-patient psychiatric system. It was a long term treatment facility, run by the state for students with really serious emotional and behavioral problems." Moreover, Mary added what has helped her adjust to the demands of working with these students, "has been having a supportive team to work with. I would never want to be the only special education person in the building." Mary expressed that

adding a requirement of a full year of internships for preservice teaching experiences may benefit the prospective new teacher's understanding of the demands of working with intense students. Mary thinks that field experience of a greater depth and variety is "really, really important and really a good opportunity."

In closing, Mary wanted to add some thoughts about the teaching profession. She also wanted to express why her team has experienced a greater amount of success than some other teams:

I think part of the key to our success is the fact that we work in a team. Moreover, we do not have to fight battles all by ourselves. Because we have been there and we are highly experienced, we get enough respect from the administration and others, that people respect our perceptions. Therefore, that makes our job easier. It is a hard job, a master teacher does not look like they are working hard, but it is amazing what they do. Having a team allows us to meld our total caseload, and adjust things to make sure we are giving the best service to the students, peer teachers, and to ourselves. We can do this by working as a team and not putting anyone in an untenable situation.

Discussion and Implications

The present study provided a response to the question of the effect of compassion fatigue on secondary special education teachers. The study additionally considered how to ensure sustained employment of these teachers. The analysis that follows includes a summary of the account of behaviors investigated in this study. As well as, implications noted for further study.

Several themes emerged through the study's provided responses that support prior research on teacher retention strategies. Some of these themes included; administrative support, employment prior to entering the teaching profession, peer support, years of employment, and

the ability to separate work and home life. As well as, themes identified as obstacles to retention including, paperwork, both volume that is required, and the constantly changing regulations that govern the paperwork.

Compassion fatigue and teacher retention indicators. Anna, Alfonso, Bart, Carol and Mary each reported employment prior to entering into the teaching profession. Each of these secondary special education teachers noted that their prior employment aided them in their ability to cope and deal with the daily stresses of working with the special education population. Nicole did not report having the advantage of a career prior to entering the teaching field. Nicole also noted that that she struggles with many of the day-to-day activities of a special educator. It was clear those who reported employment prior to working in the education field helped the teachers' better cope with the changing demands of the special education population. In addition, the experiences gained in their various previous employment positions helped the educators to better able to separate work and home life demands. Further demonstrating employment prior to entering the special education teaching profession was an indicator of teacher retention and a decline in special education teacher compassion fatigue.

Anna, Alfonso, Bart and Mary reported experiencing a high level of support from their administrative staff. Nicole and Carol noted receiving very little administrative support. Those participants who experienced a high level of administrative support also reported a higher likelihood to remain in the teaching profession, as well as, not seeking a change in their position internally or district wide. Whereas, those participants who did not experience a high level of administrative support were more likely to seek building or district changes. Carol, who noted the least amount of administrative support, was the only participant who indicated consideration

of leaving the teaching profession completely and who noted a higher degree of teacher compassion fatigue.

Anna, Alfonso, Bart, Nicole and Mary reported experiencing a high level of support from their peer teachers. Conversely, Carol reported she did not have supportive peer teachers. Supportive peer teachers, both in general and special education areas, are an indicator of teacher retention and assist in the reduction of teacher compassion fatigue. The five participants that reported a high level of support from their peer teachers additionally worked in a supportive effective team situation. This collaborative environment further lowered levels of stress in their job as a secondary special educator. These collaborative teams met on a regular basis to discuss student and personal concerns. This additional collaborative team environment further strengthened the prospect of special education teacher retention and reduction in compassion fatigue.

Anna, Alfonso, Bart, Carol and Mary reported having the ability to separate work and home life stresses. The ability to separate school life and work life was also an indicator to the reduction in teacher compassion fatigue and an increase in teacher retention. Although, Anna, Alfonso, Bart, Nicole and Mary also reported needing to complete work from home on a regular basis in order to meet the demands of the job. The requirement of work completed at home is did not present itself as an indicator of teacher retention or compassion fatigue in this study.

All participants, Anna, Alfonso, Bart, Nicole, Carol, and Mary noted struggling with the amount of paperwork that is required as a secondary special educator. The educators specifically concentrated their concerns on their attempts to complete the required paperwork while continuing to maintain adequate contact time with secondary students with disabilities. Moreover, the changing requirements of the secondary special education paperwork significantly

added to the stress of all participants. The changing paperwork and the increased requirements that caused the secondary special educator to lose time focusing on the students, is an indicator of reduced teacher retention and increased teacher compassion fatigue.

Anna, Alfonso, Bart, Nicole, Carol and Mary all noted that their preservice teaching experiences did not adequately prepare them for the demands of secondary special education. Each of these secondary special education teachers had a suggestion to increase preservice teaching requirements. These educators felt that by exposing perspective secondary special education teacher to a wider variety of student and student needs would more effectively prepare new teachers.

None of the participants experienced any severe physical ailments that could directly relate to their secondary special education job responsibilities. Although Mary and Anna noted they had experienced times of heightened frustration and anger due to their teaching positions. However, they felt this was a normal part of work life and not directly attributed to their employment as a secondary special educator.

Conclusion

The present study contributed necessary discussion to the literature about secondary special education teacher compassion fatigue and teacher retention strategies. The study further provided insight into the diverse experiences secondary special educator are subjected to that might lead to attrition or retention in the field of secondary special education. Many of the teacher actions supported the current literature on retention strategies and reduction of teacher compassion fatigue.

Limitations. There are several limitations to the current study. The first limitation to the study was that the interviews with the teachers were accounted and provided through the point-

of-view of the participants. The study participants volunteered and offered their accounts based on memory. There was no official documentation available of the participants' recollections noted occurrences and may indicate some form of inaccuracy. Furthermore, the study occurred in one geographic location. This limitation may or may not be a fully representative segment of the secondary special education population across the country. It may exclude those educators with distinctive practices and policies.

Further study. The secondary special education teachers that provided insight into their daily activities provided valuable information when considering teacher compassion fatigue and teacher retention strategies. This study provided a basis for further research to understand the implications and experiences that may lead secondary special education teachers experiencing high levels of compassion fatigue. Additional resources are required for administrators and peer teachers to ensure secondary special education teacher retention. As well as, the development of tools to assist in the continued reduction of secondary special education teacher compassion fatigue. Further investigation into these issues is essential to ensure students with disabilities have highly qualified, dedicated and compassionate secondary special education teachers available and accessible to them and to ensure student success.

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