How Can Schools Retain Secondary Emotional Support Teachers? Ask Them

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Abstract

The population of certified special education teachers working and remaining in secondary emotional support classrooms continues to dwindle across the nation. This causes more and more students with Emotional Disturbance to work with a frequent turnover of educators or emergency-certified educators with possibly no prior experience. High school students who receive emotional support services are a vulnerable population that requires a supportive and well-trained special education teacher to help them make academic, emotional, and behavioral progress in the school setting and in achieving their post-secondary goals. This qualitative study explored five veteran schoolteachers' experiences to identify the factors that have helped them remain in their careers and which ones discourage them from staying. The individual and focus group interviews identified several job-related factors that are consistent with previous literature (diverse student needs), evolution in some (administrator and colleague support), and different or newly identified factors (willingness to take risks, advocating for secondary student's needs, educator's personality) that require additional exploration.

KEYWORDS: Emotional disturbance, emotional support, special education teachers, veteran teachers, retention

High school students who receive special education services under the disability category of Emotional Disturbance (ED) require trained and supportive Emotional Support Teachers (ESTs) who can remain in their role and help this at-risk population transition to adulthood (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien, Brunsting, Ragunathan, & Chopra, 2020). However, finding and retaining secondary ESTs is becoming a greater challenge for school districts across the United States. One factor preventing schools from finding qualified candidates is the overall teacher shortage. Lesh et al. (2017) state that nearly 98% of U.S. schools lack secondary special education teachers and struggle to find highly qualified applicants. Specifically, the demand for special education teachers for students with ED greatly outweighs the available supply (Henderson et al., 2005), thus increasing the likelihood of students with ED having an inexperienced special education teacher.

This causes school districts to get creative in filling vacant positions, leading to hiring teachers with inadequate or no experience to fill ESTs' roles (Billingsley et al., 2006). In fact, the shortage of qualified applicants has become so rampant that an emergency certification, referred to as a permit in Pennsylvania, can be issued if a public school district advertises an available position

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and receives no fully qualified or properly qualified applicants (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024). The emergency permit allows an individual with a bachelor's degree not specific to special education and lacking the relevant certification to assume a teaching position or caseload management for the duration of that school year (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024). While this provision fulfills the need to have an adult in the role, it impacts the education of all children; most significantly, it affects students with ED because ESTs have the highest percentage of being hired with these emergency certificates (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2005).

School districts may also move around their current special education staff or combine classes and caseloads to accommodate the secondary special education shortage. While this option may seem viable for addressing the needs of students with ED, current literature highlights challenges such as unmanageable workloads and responsibilities that eventually lead to burnout of ESTs (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Bettini, Jones, Cumming et al., 2018; Brown, 2018; Brunsting, Stark, Bettini, Lane, Royer, Common, & Rock, 2023; Smith, 2018). Adding more to an EST's role may be a temporary fix for a school district but adds to the long-term attrition issue.

Literature Review

There are limited research studies available that explore the voices of special education teachers who work with students with ED at the high school level regarding job satisfaction. Most studies include elementary to high school teachers' views lumped together, even though there are significant differences among different age groups of students with ED (Billingsley et al., 2006). This problem is alarming since most students do not get identified with emotional disturbance until high school, as their issues become more pronounced (Samuels, 2018, p. 15). Students with ED exhibit significant behavioral, social, and emotional challenges, which makes the experiences of ESTs more challenging than other special education teachers (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019; Mihalas et al., 2009). These needs cause students with ED to have difficulty with reading, writing, and math skills despite exhibiting average intelligence (Ennis & Jolivette, 2014; Rice & Yen, 2010; Wiley et al., 2008). These deficits tend to remain stable or worsen over time, causing the most significant challenge for students at the secondary level (Wiley et al., 2008).

Additionally, high school students exhibit challenging behaviors that can be more difficult for teachers to handle than younger students, including both elementary and middle school students (Bettini, Cumming, and Merrill, et al., 2017). These behaviors can include both internalizing and externalizing responses (Brown, 2018; Gettys, 2020). Externalizing behaviors can include classroom disruptions and aggression, which can be dangerous for secondary ESTs to manage since students are physically larger and stronger than younger students (Brown, 2018). Behaviors can also be sexualized in the secondary setting since students with ED are continuing to go through puberty, which can place secondary ESTs in inappropriate and uncomfortable situations (Bettini, Cumming, and Merrill, et al., 2017).

Internalizing behaviors can also be more complex for secondary ESTs to support since the sources of anxiety can stem from additional pressures that younger students do not have to face (Bettini, Cumming, and Merrill, et al., 2017). High school students must balance the pressures of passing classes, maintaining appropriate relationships, and displaying appropriate behaviors in the school and community setting (O'Brien et al., 2019). These demands are difficult for high school students with ED to manage as they have difficulty regulating their emotions and problem-solving and tend to have more trouble with academics (Bettini, Cumming, and Merrill, et al., 2017; Bosco, 2018). Therefore, students with ED may react to stressors through physical aggression, negative

communication, and an overall lack of respect for authority (Brown, 2017; Smith, 2018). High school students with ED are at an elevated risk of experiencing negative consequences such as disciplinary referrals, dropping out of school, and criminal offenses (Bettini, Cumming, and Merrill, et al., 2017; Freeman et al., 2019). The challenges for students with ED do not stop in high school but are persistent throughout their lives. Since students with ED are not getting the support they need in high school, it sets them up for failure in life. These students encounter poor post-school outcomes as evidenced by chronic unemployment, a revolving cycle of contact with the juridical system, and disconnection from their communities (Lane & Carter, 2016).

Billingsley (2004) conducted a literature review comparing 20 published studies from 1992 to 2002 that explored job-related factors impacting special education teachers, including ESTs, in transferring positions or leaving the field. Most of the researchers focused on quantitative data analysis using surveys or questionnaires to acquire information. Hagaman and Casey (2018) conducted an updated literature review, in which the results aligned with Billingsley's (2004) findings that most research on attrition and retention of special education teachers, including those focused on EST used quantitative research designs. Quantitative research designs are valuable in identifying the different factors that lead to shortages and attrition of ESTs. However, research utilizing qualitative research designs to explore secondary ESTs' retention factors is needed to understand what helps or discourages this population of teachers from remaining in the field.

Scholars (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Bettini, Jones, Brownell, et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Prather-Jones, 2011b) emphasize the need for educational decision-makers to focus their efforts on retention instead of continually rehiring unqualified teachers to fill the secondary EST openings due to the frequent turnover. To determine how schools can retain secondary ESTs, the researcher of this study spoke with the sources themselves. Secondary ESTs working for public high schools located in two counties in southeastern Pennsylvania had the opportunity to discuss what motivates them to remain in their positions. All participants were identified as veteran ESTs, as defined by having at least six years of teaching experience (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019). The goal of this study was for their voices to help shed light on what job-related factors have helped retain this valuable population of teachers and, specifically, their experiences at the high school level, which previous literature does not adequately address.

Theoretical Framework

This study's research questions are designed based on Billingsley's (1993) framework regarding attrition and retention. Billingsley's (1993) framework includes three categories of job-related factors that influence special education teachers' career decisions: external, employment, and personal. External job-related factors are based on government policies and societal views. Employment job-related factors are items controlled by school districts or individual schools. Personal job-related factors are the items that each special education teacher can control. These factors influence special education teachers to either stay, transfer, or exit the field (Billingsley, 1993, p. 147). The majority of research on this topic has found employment and external job-related factors (Billingsley et al., 2006; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Cancio, Larsen, Mathur, Estes, Johns, & Chang, 2018; Grant, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Lesh et al., 2017) to have the greatest impact on educator's career decisions. This study will explore if that holds true for the secondary ESTs interviewed.

Research Questions

1. What job-related factors do veteran secondary emotional support teachers perceive as supportive or increase their job satisfaction?
2. What job-related factors do veteran secondary emotional support teachers perceive as challenges or decrease their job satisfaction?

Methodology

Design

This study is part of a larger study conducted by the research that originally utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The first phase included a 34-item questionnaire based on external, employment, and personal job-related factors (Billingsley, 1993) that was completed by 23 secondary ESTs who work within eight different public high schools in southeastern Pennsylvania. The second phase interviewed five participants to further understand why they responded to specific questions in certain ways. The researcher developed five semi-structured questions (Table 1) based on the participant's responses to certain job-related factors being supportive or challenging. This study will focus solely on the qualitative data collected through open-ended discussions with five veteran secondary ESTs. This is vital because there is limited research available on this topic, including qualitative research designs, with most of the research in the past 30 years utilizing quantitative research designs (Billingsley, 2004; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

The goal was to have participants engage in focus groups to discuss the topic. A focus group allows the researcher to understand the factors that impact participants' opinions or motivation as participants can reflect and debate on the ideas discussed (Xerri, 2018). Originally, ten participants identified an interest in participating in the study. Three focus groups were scheduled to be held via Zoom with three to four participants in each. The researcher requested the availability of each participant via a Qualtrics survey. However, only five participants attended the scheduled date and time.

The first focus group had all three participants attend and was conducted as planned. The second and third focus group sessions only had one participant attend, turning them into an interview. The focus groups were designed in a semi-structured format to help guide participants, but flexibility allowed participants to voice their opinions (Xerri, 2018). The researcher was able to ask the same five questions to the focus group and two interviews. The procedures did not change for the interviews except for the participants discussing directly with the researcher versus fellow secondary ESTs. Interviews are still a form of data collection that allows for greater depth of discussion (Xerri, 2018).

Table 1

Focus Group and Interview Questions

Items
1. Describe how you think society views education as a career option.
2. Describe the support you receive from coworkers, including teachers and administrators.
3. Describe the relationship that you have with your students.
4. Tell me about your journey to becoming an emotional support teacher.
5. Discuss the nature of working with secondary students.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher's place of employment approved this expedited study in Fall 2021. The researcher received approval from each of the participant's school districts of employment to send out an email for recruitment. All participants provided consent for participation in this voluntary study, and potential risks were reviewed. At the start of each focus group or interview, the researcher reiterated that participation was voluntary and that audio was recorded. Participants were reminded that they could refrain from answering any questions or request to be removed from the study at any time. Identifiable information was removed from the data, and all data was stored in a password-protected computer in a locked filing cabinet. Participants engaged in member checking to review and provide the opportunity for revision of their transcripts. All five participants approved their transcripts and did not request any changes.

Participants

All five participants were identified as veteran teachers with at least six years of teaching experience (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019). The participants worked at public high schools in southeastern Pennsylvania. The inclusion criteria required participants to work with students on their caseload who qualify for special education services under the disability category of Emotional Disturbance (ED). Table 2 displays the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 2
Veteran Secondary ESTs Demographics

Variable	Participant #1	Participant #2	Participant #3	Participant #4	Participant #5
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	50-59	40-49	30-39	30-39	30-39
Ethnicity	White	White	White	White	White
Family Structure	Relationship, Children	Relationship, Children	Relationship, No Children	Relationship, No Children	Relationship, Children
Teaching Experience	More than 10 years	6-10 years	6-10 years	6-10 years	6-10 years
EST Experience	More than 10 years	6-10 years	1-5 years	1-5 years	1-5 years
Certification Route	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Post-Bac. or Master's Degree	Post-Bac. or Master's Degree	Post-Bac. or Master's Degree
School Setting	Suburban	Suburban	Suburban	Suburban	Suburban

Data Analysis

The focus group and interviews were recorded with the participant's permission using Zoom, and the audio files were saved on the researcher's password-protected computer. The researcher is the only individual who had access to and reviewed these files. The participants' transcripts were transcribed verbatim and reviewed using member checking before being analyzed by the researcher. The transcripts were reviewed several times using provisional coding to align with the research questions, including supportive job-related factors and challenging job-related factors. A total of 137 excerpts were coded from the transcripts and categorized into four different themes.

Findings

Four significant themes were discovered after reviewing the qualitative data collected by focus groups and interviews with the five veteran secondary ESTs. These themes are unique as they include job-related factors that supported the participants in remaining in their positions yet posed challenges for them as well. The themes include (a) a relationship possibly too strong with students, (b) supportive working relationships but not perfect, (c) the pros and cons of secondary special education, and (d) the ideal yet overworked personality.

A Relationship Possibly Too Strong with Students

The ESTs were exuberant when discussing the relationships they built with their students. These relationships were the most motivating factor for ESTs to wake up daily and report to their job as they enjoyed interacting with their students personally through daily conversations. All five participants identified the importance of not only being a teacher to students with ED but also creating almost a friendship that allows students to feel comfortable and connected. They perceived that students with ED would then trust their EST for academic support and assistance in navigating daily stressors. Participant 5 described this relationship:

> I think the relationship is to be a teacher first and supportive like a friend,
> so they can come to you and discuss any concerns without feeling like
> they're going to be told on necessarily but to feel that comfort.

All five ESTs identified creating this friendly relationship by getting to know their students' interests, frequently checking in with students to ask how they are feeling, and engaging in bonding activities like playing games.

This rapport helped them create a safe space for students with ED to feel comfortable and accept their support. The ESTs also reported the relationship with students can be too strong, causing certain students not to want to be anywhere else in the school building except for their classroom. Participant 5 smiled when sharing a student comment, "You're my favorite teacher; can't I just do all my classes in here, all day?" This is a response that any teacher should be proud to hear, especially ESTs working with students who are historically unmotivated to be in the school setting (Bettini, Wang, Cumming, Kimerling, & Schutz, 2019).

Furthermore, the ESTs described how their connection with their students was unique and different than what most general education teachers develop. Participant 3 noted the difference, "We are the people who spend the most time with our students and make these connections to know our students in different ways, a lot different than other teachers can experience." Throughout the focus group and interview transcripts, participants described their students saying, "my students" or even "my kids," exemplifying how personal this connection can get, almost like ESTs taking a parental role. This connection can also be a heavyweight for ESTs who may take on their students' challenges as personal defeats and have difficulty understanding that they cannot solve all their students' problems. Participant 1 described this frustration as "I'm not a doctor; I can't prescribe medication. I'm not a therapist. I can't go into the home and change things. That's hard."

Supportive Working Relationships but Not Perfect

Participants noted a change in perspective of what educators think when working with a student with ED in their classroom. All five participants discussed having greater support from their colleagues because they are more knowledgeable about ED, which helps remove negative stigmas associated with their behaviors and abilities. Participant 1 described this stigma as

"changing the perspective of the quote-unquote "bad kids," yelling and throwing a fit and needing to be restrained." Specifically, three participants noted their general education colleagues as increasing their awareness of mental health disorders, attributed to societal changes and professional development opportunities offered at each participant's employing school district in the past five years. Based on professional development opportunities, ESTs' support from their colleagues can help increase retention. Participant 3 further described this change as "The perception of kids with ED has evolved to students that are highly functioning and intelligent, but struggle with stress, anxiety, and executive functioning skills that impact the daily expectations placed on them."

However, the participants did not always feel like their colleagues, including administrators, always fully understood the complexity of their student's needs. The priority of the school setting is grades since high school students need to pass their classes to graduate. However, this is not the top priority for secondary ESTs who see other stressors, both inside and outside the school setting, as more important. Participant 3 identified hesitancy before stating, "Academics come secondary. I know that's not a great answer, but the bottom line is, if I can keep a kid alive and not drop out of high school, then that comes first." This discrepancy among priorities in education can cause conflict among ESTs and their general education counterparts. Participant 2 described this battle as "You find you're in the middle. You're trying to help the student, but you're also trying to maintain a positive relationship with your colleagues. However, if we don't see eye to eye, I will fight for my student."

The participants also noted that some of their colleagues possibly had unrealistic expectations of students' abilities. Four participants identified how difficult it is to pressure high school students as if they are adults but also understand they are still children. Participant 3 describes this challenge as "I've noticed, probably the most working with the teenage population, is how young they still can seem, yet the things they have to deal with are very adult." Additionally, three participants identified how fellow educators or administrators assume that once a student reaches high school, they should no longer exhibit the same needs or require the same level of support that they once did. Participant 4 describes this view as:

> I guess the idea is once they get to us, it's kind of like, "Oh, we fixed you,
> you've already had all these supports, you've already had all these services,
> so you shouldn't have to do this by now." So that's a fight that I fight a lot
> because they're still working on this. This need is still a goal for them. This
> skill is still something we need to support them with.

All five participants identified that educators can overestimate a high school student's executive functioning skills. High school teachers, including ESTs, can assume that students should understand school basics like coming to class on time, having the necessary materials, and turning in work by the designated due dates. This view can cause teachers to think that if a student is not doing these things, they are being lazy versus identifying that executive functioning skills are a skill deficit for them. Participant 1 describes this view as "Sometimes even I assume that they can do it. When actually they can't do this, they haven't mastered the organizational skills yet to get it done. So even if I think it is simple, it doesn't mean it is simple for them."

Additionally, ESTs were willing to disagree not only with their colleagues but also with their administrators or school board. Participant 3 describes taking this risk as far as losing their job by stating, "If it goes against what I think might be a more important choice for our kids... it would be a calculated risk I'd be willing to take." This risk included issues related to grades, disciplinary referrals, and communicating with students outside of school. Participant 5 noted, "If I notice a disciplinary referral for one of my students, and I think the administrator doesn't have the full context, I will try to explain the variables involved even if they disagree with me." It is

important to note that veteran teachers' voices were exemplified in this study, explaining why the participants were more willing to take risks since they have job security with tenure status. Novice teachers may feel pressure to follow the rules, even if they disagree, to maintain their position.

The Pros and Cons of Secondary Special Education

The participants identified specific advantages to working with high school-aged students with ED versus younger students. All five participants identified how high school students are more mature and develop their own identities or personalities. Additionally, four participants enjoy helping to support high school students with ED to prepare for life after graduation or transition planning. Four participants in this study identified this responsibility as a positive aspect of their job that they immensely enjoyed. Participant 4 described this strength as "I love working at the secondary level. It's such a transition period for them; like, we're building these steps to get you to real life. What do you want to do? What do you need to get there?"

However, working specifically with high school-aged students also presented challenges for the participants. Each participant had a diverse caseload of students receiving emotional support services in terms of age (14-21 years old), grade (9th to 12th), and areas of academic, emotional, social, or behavioral needs. The participants discussed the difficulty of supporting the high number of students on a caseload in terms of not feeling like they are adequately addressing each need and how this impacts the relationship they can build with each student. Participant 4 described this challenge as "Sometimes we refer to it as whack a mole. It's like you just hit, you're constantly hitting the moles down, and new ones are popping up, and we go with it. So that's hard, we try, but it's definitely hard." Four participants identified that if they had fewer students, they would feel like they were making the most significant impact on student's lives and managing their job responsibilities appropriately. Participant 2 describes this goal as:

> I always feel like if I had one kid and all the time in the world, then I'd be
> able to help them be the best kid ever, but it's always like you kind of pick
> and choose your battles.

Additionally, three participants identified feeling this pressure placed on them to fix the needs of secondary students with ED. Participant 3 describes this pressure as:

> We do our best to have kids remain in their classes, and if they come out,
> we try to do a Humpty Dumpty by helping them work through it and put
> them back together as quickly as we can, which is difficult.

This challenge of addressing diverse needs had three participants feeling unprepared or unable to do multiple roles in one. Participant 1 further describes this frustration as:

> We can't get students to pass classes when they have such serious
> psychiatric needs that they're not able to function. I grapple with that the
> most because that's why we all went into education to help kids and to be
> at a point when it feels like we can't.

The Ideal Yet Overworked Personality

The ESTs described feeling they had the best personality for their current position. Three participants identified that keeping a work-life balance is crucial and not taking students' behaviors or words personally. Participant 5 described this ability as:

> If a student comes in who had a bad day, it's not your fault, but they can
> take it out on you. I've learned not to let it affect me personally and try to
> support them the best I can.

Additionally, they can connect with and understand their students. They can also learn how to handle job-related stressors, described as "not to let it affect me personally" by Participant 5.

However, this ideal personality for their role also comes with its setbacks. All five ESTs noted that working in the ES classroom was not their desired career choice. The participants obtained their current positions through a full-time contract available at the district, where they were completing long-term substitution. Participant 1 describes this as "So I actually ended up here, not intentionally at first. I started out doing different subbing positions within the district and wanted a contract. One came up in emotional support, and I wanted a full-time job, so I applied." Two participants completed a dual certification with their general education degree in Early Childhood Education, anticipating working at the elementary level. Participant 5 describes this as follows: "However, there was an opportunity for me to move to high school for a contract job in emotional support, leading me to where I am now. Honestly, I never expected or imagined being a high school emotional support teacher." Three of the participants previously worked in the learning support setting, and one of the participants worked in a life skills support classroom. One participant was transferred to the emotional support classroom after being hired for a learning support position. Participant 3 describes this change as "I was the low man on the totem pole, who's going to take those kids, so I was moved."

Furthermore, their flexible personality causes administrators and colleagues to take advantage of their support and role. ESTs reported having additional students added to their caseload or ES classroom due to the students exhibiting overwhelming challenging behaviors for their special education colleagues. Administrators also place students in the ES classroom who are not identified for special education services but need somewhere to go in the building. These students may be in trouble based on disciplinary referrals, or the guidance office is filled. Some students, both on ESTs caseloads and not, can remain in the ES classroom all day, not allowing the ES teacher to have a break from their responsibilities. Participant 4 described this challenge as "I'm a pretty easygoing, yes kind of girl. So, when they have those kids that don't really fit or mold into the box they need them to, I'm the one that they kind of get dumped on." Similarly, Participant 5 described this challenge as "Sometimes it feels like my classroom is a dumping ground, which isn't fair; other teachers don't have the same responsibilities and should learn to support students with diverse needs."

Discussion

This study listened to the voices of five high school ESTs who have been working in the field for at least six years to have achieved veteran status. The goal was to determine what this valuable population has to say regarding what has helped them remain in the field versus adding to the statistics for teacher burnout and frequent turnover (Brunsting, Stark, Bettini, Lane, Royer, Common, & Rock, 2023). This study adds to the existing literature regarding the retention of ESTs by identifying some evolution in results and new factors for consideration.

Supportive Job-Related Factors

Several job-related strengths have been previously identified in the literature including salary and benefits (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley 2004), consistent and frequent access to paraprofessionals and related service providers (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), and mentoring and professional development (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley, 2009; Smith, 2018) were not brought up by the participants in this study. However, the participants noted intrinsic motivators having the most significant influence on remaining in their current positions.

Participants identified having a personal connection, feeling students with ED have the greatest support needs, and an overall passion for teaching.

These findings are similar to previous literature, as Brown (2018) found personal factors to be the greatest motivator for retention, described by his participants as a calling. Lesh et al. (2017) found ESTs reported empathy for their students, described as sticking up for the underdog (p. 16). However, the importance of intrinsic motivators for secondary EST retention is a relatively new finding in research, with the vast amount of research finding extrinsic motivators, such as employment factors, have the most significant influence on retention (Albrecht et al., 2009; Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013; Prather-Jones, 2011a, 2011b).

The participants identified greater administrator and colleague support in removing the stigma around secondary students with ED, which has changed from previous research perspectives (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013; Grant, 2017; Prather-Jones, 2011a). The participants noted this change due to increased professional development opportunities at their employing school districts around mental health and greater societal acceptance and knowledge. However, this support is still not at the level that secondary ESTs need for the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to understand the complex and unique needs of secondary students with ED.

Challenging Job-Related Factors

Most participants identified new challenges specific to working with secondary students with ED, such as taking risks to benefit their students and advocating for continued support for secondary students' needs and personalities, which causes administrators to take advantage of their work responsibilities. All three of these are linked to personal job-related factors, beliefs, and personality traits of the participants. Surprisingly, personal job-related factors, specific to intrinsic motivation, were also the most noted supportive aspect of allowing the participants to remain in their positions.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that must be addressed when discussing the findings. First, the focus was on a very particular population of teachers to have as many similarities among the participants as possible. However, this created a small sample size, and the specific characteristics of the participants limited the conclusions drawn and the generalizability of the findings. The goal of this study was to create three focus groups with ten total participants. However, only five participants showed up to engage in a focus group and two interviews. The challenges identified in this study by the participants possibly caused the five participants who did not show too much stress or did not have enough time to want to continue participating.

A second limitation includes potential researcher bias. The researcher obtained insider status with the sample of teachers who participated, which could have influenced the participants' responses. However, this factor was also considered an asset as it allowed the researcher to build rapport and trust with the participants. The researcher used several techniques to reduce potential limitations due to researcher bias, including ongoing reflection and appropriate questioning strategies.

Implications for Future Educational Practice

All five participants identified intrinsic motivators as having the most significant influence on their retention. This finding is important because extrinsic motivators are easier for educational

leaders to change versus intrinsic motivators that are personal and unique for each individual. This finding illustrates several recommendations for colleges and universities preparing pre-service special education teachers to help students identify if becoming an EST is the career path for them and possibly reduce attrition. These recommendations include field placement in ES classrooms, training in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and behavioral management techniques, courses with additional self-reflection opportunities, and administering assessment screeners to determine pre-service teachers' intrinsic motivation towards working with specific populations of students receiving special education services.

Several recommendations can be made to school districts to help retain current ESTs. The participants' personalities have been identified as a unique strength and challenge brought to light during the qualitative data analysis. Three participants identified how their ability to cope with job-related stressors appropriately allowed them to remain in the field and create a work-life balance. In contrast, three participants identified how their easy-going and flexible personality was a challenge as administrators would put more on their workload, including moving them to work primarily with students with ED. This study's findings illustrate how school districts can help support positive coping skills by providing ESTs with more opportunities for mental health or personal days, professional development focused on coping skills for staff and students, limiting caseload numbers, and counseling available for teachers when needed.

Implications for Future Educational Research

This study is one of the few that focuses specifically on high school ESTs' perceived supportive and challenging job-related factors that impact their career decisions. All five participants identified difficulties specific to working at the high school level, such as the adult-like challenges the students face (graduation, drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, law enforcement), administrators and colleagues overestimating or underestimating a student's abilities, and wanting to support and connect with students outside the school day if needed. Future research should compare ESTs' perceptions at different grade levels to determine if secondary ESTs may have a greater chance of attrition.

Summary

High school students with Emotional Disturbance (ED) experience frequent turnover in the Emotional Support Teachers (ESTs) that support their needs, which causes limited academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success for this population of students who are already at risk for adverse outcomes (Bettini, Cumming, O'Brien, Brunsting, Ragunathan, Sutton, & Chopra, 2020; O'Brien et al., 2019). Educational leaders need to be aware of what factors are causing secondary ESTs to leave the field and what factors can help alleviate the problem to increase retention. This study explored the voices of veteran ESTs who worked for public high schools in two designated counties within southeastern Pennsylvania to address retention. The voices of veteran ESTs are essential since less research is available on the factors that impact retention, an area that this population can shed light on (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

The five secondary ESTs interviewed in this study identified personal factors specific to their personality, beliefs, opinions, and intrinsic motivation as having the greatest impact on their intent to remain in their current positions but also the greatest challenge. Four out of the five participants in this study planned on remaining in their current position. However, one decided to leave the field of education altogether. The intrinsic motivation they exhibited to work with secondary students with ED was not enough, as Participant 4 shared,

> I'm just feeling a little jaded. Our current administration or political
> environment doesn't support the idea of education and students' needs. So,
> I feel like we're just here pedaling on a bike, and we're not going anywhere,
> and it's frustrating.

The solution to the shortage of qualified candidates to fill secondary emotional support positions is not a simple one; however, educational decision-makers need to listen to the voices of those who can do the job successfully to figure out how it can be improved. When you need answers to make a change, you ask the source!

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Notes on Contributor

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