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# The Secondary Shuffle: Special Educators As Tutors, Teachers, Or Both

Amy L. Jacobson

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THE SECONDARY SHUFFLE: SPECIAL EDUCATORS  
AS TUTORS, TEACHERS, OR BOTH

by

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Bachelor of Science, Mayville State University, 1999  
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

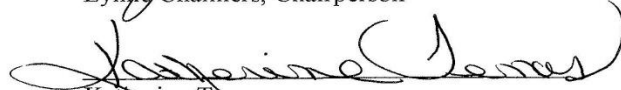
Doctor of Education

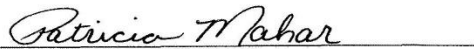
Grand Forks, North Dakota  
December  
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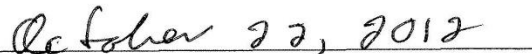
  
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Title           The Secondary Shuffle: Special Educators as Tutors, Teachers, or Both  
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Amy L. Jacobson  
October 4, 2012

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To Reina, Evy, and Maggie

## ABSTRACT

This study explored the perspectives and practices of six secondary special education teachers regarding role conflicts within their profession. Ideally, special education teachers are expected to work with students with disabilities in ways that promote the students' progress on individual learning goals as stated in their IEPs. In reality, special education teachers often spend the time set aside for working on IEP goals assisting the students with homework and tests that will allow the students to "pass" their required classes. Thus, students' IEP goals are often neglected. Three overarching assertions emerged from the data. The first assertion was providing support and building positive relationships with students are critical to special education teachers' ability to maximize student success. Next, secondary special education teachers believe the use of research-based strategies is effective and important. Teacher-developed strategies, which either come with special education training and/or come instinctively, must be implemented as well. Finally, in order to pass classes and make progress towards IEP goals, a special education teacher must maintain a balance. Recommendations for teacher preparation programs, secondary schools, and future research were presented.

*Keywords:* Least Restrictive Environment, Individualized Education Program, Resource Room, Secondary Special Education

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When working in a secondary special education resource room, Mrs. Hunter implemented many instructional methods, ideas, and skills. At times, specific skills were taught. For example, she taught a reading comprehension skill using a brief story followed by comprehension questions that were both literal and inferential. She led a discussion about the differences in the types of questions, how to attack a story, and how to answer comprehension questions. This skill was taught to all students regardless of their disability or academic deficits. Other times, a specific research-based strategy was taught. An example of this was incorporating *Spelling Through Morphographs* (Dixon & Engelmann, 2006) into the resource room content. All students were taught this strategy as well.

Oftentimes, assignments were completed; folders, backpacks, or lockers were organized; tests were studied for; and tests, quizzes, or books were read to a student or a group of students. The resource room activities varied from day to day and hour to hour.

When Mrs. Hunter first began teaching at the secondary level, she did what all special education teachers were doing. It appeared resource rooms were designed for homework completion. Yet, the longer she was in the field, the savvier she became. Mrs. Hunter continued to work on assignment completion and organization, but she began to incorporate strategies and interventions she had been taught, or tips she used

when she was a student. Mrs. Hunter and her students were no longer just reading a chapter out of the world history book and completing the study guide. They were looking in the book for bold-faced words and using the index to assist in finding answers. They were using the glossary to assist in the understanding of vocabulary. They were jotting notes in the margins or on a sticky-note to assist in comprehension. They were talking about time management and pacing to stay on track and complete the assignment in a given time. They were talking about how the student's disability impacted his/her performance on this particular assignment, and what they could learn by that for future assignments. Finally, they were building solid relationships. To the naked eye, they were completing homework, but there was much, much more going on.

Secondary special education teachers' roles and responsibilities vary from state to state, school to school, and classroom to classroom. In addition to working on strategies and interventions, Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives, and transition services, oftentimes, secondary special education teachers spend copious amounts of time and energy assisting students with disabilities with homework completion, test preparation, and organization of assignments and materials in order to meet graduation requirements. Ideally, special education teachers are expected to work with students with disabilities in ways that will promote the students' progress on their individual learning goals as stated in their IEPs. In reality, special education teachers often spend the time set aside for working on IEP goals assisting the students with homework and tests that will allow the students to "pass" their required classes. Thus, students' IEP goals are often neglected.

## **Special Education in the Age of Education Reform**

Due to legislative reforms, including the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and 2004 (IDEA 1997 and IDEA 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), special education instruction must be linked to the general education curriculum, and students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Conderman & Pedersen, 2007; Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, & McGinley, 2010; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009). These relatively new laws impact students with mild/moderate and high-incidence disabilities in particular due to the fact they are most often educated within the general education classroom.

### **Students With Disabilities at the Secondary Level**

Sabornie and deBettencourt (2009) identified mild/moderate and high-incidence disabilities as learning disabilities (LD), intellectual disability (ID), emotionally disturbed (ED), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD). According to Vaughn and Bos (2012), secondary students with mild/moderate learning and behavior problems display one or more of the following characteristics: poor academic performance, attention problems, hyperactivity, memory problems, poor language abilities, aggressive behavior, withdrawn behavior, and bizarre behavior. When students manifest one or more of these characteristics, he/she could qualify for special education services.

Once a student qualifies for special education services, an IEP is developed. Pierangelo and Giuliani (2007) suggested an IEP serves many purposes, one of which is to be a vehicle used by parents and school personnel to effectively communicate with one another. It enables them to “decide what the student’s needs are, what services will be

provided to meet those needs, and what outcomes may be anticipated” (p. 4).

Additionally, the IEP is designed as a tool to ensure a student is receiving appropriate special education services and other related services as well as working towards annual goals and objectives.

A final component of the IEP, which has been instrumental in special education, is LRE. Least restrictive environment, defined as “an educational setting for exceptional students and students with disabilities that minimizes their exclusion from students without disabilities” (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2007, p. 151), was initially mandated in 1975, in Public Law 94-142, also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and further emphasized in IDEA 1997 and IDEA 2004. In addition to the increased expectation that students with disabilities be included in the general education curriculum, IDEA 2004 placed “emphasis on academic performance goals and measures of accountability for students with disabilities that are consistent with standards for students without disabilities” (Vaughn & Bos, 2012, p. 7). These recent mandates have further challenged general and special education teachers.

Both general and special education teachers encounter numerous difficulties when fully including students with disabilities into the general education curriculum. General education teachers are challenged with meeting the needs of a variety of different learners within one classroom. They must differentiate their instruction to reach all learners, including gifted and talented, average, students with disabilities, and English language learners. This task alone can be overwhelming. Providing appropriate accommodations and modifications of course assignments and materials can also be challenging. Finally, teachers are forced to deal with problematic behaviors that are often associated with



students with disabilities (Schloss, Schloss, & Schloss, 2007). Not only do general education teachers face challenges, but special education teachers face challenges as well.

Special education teachers, especially at the secondary level, must be familiar with almost all content areas because their students often need assistance with assignments. This can pose many challenges for special education teachers because, most often, they are not an expert in all content areas. Oftentimes, students' needs are met in a resource room setting, which is a setting designed to assist students with disabilities with the general education curriculum and to work on IEP goals (Wasburn-Moses, 2005).

Another challenge for special education teachers is collaboration with general educators (Vaughn & Bos, 2012). Collaboration between teachers is crucial for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities; however, at the secondary level, students often have six to seven teachers a day. If a special education case manager has 25 students on his/her caseload, he/she may have to collaborate with 50+ teachers, a task which may be insurmountable. A final challenge faced by special education teachers is the copious amount of paperwork required by state and federal laws and regulations and the numerous academic and non-academic duties associated with special education including co-teaching, supervision duties, and committee work.

Students with disabilities face challenges as well. These include exposure to a number of different teachers and teaching styles throughout the day due to the departmentalized nature of high schools. Unlike the instructional methods of elementary and middle schools, high school students are expected to complete a wide variety of reading assignments in a short amount of time, take class notes, write various types of

papers, and organize and maintain numerous course materials. Furthermore, high school students must work independently to complete assigned tasks. Finally, secondary students are expected to have prerequisite content knowledge and skills (Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009). A lack of any of these skills could potentially pose difficulties for all learners; however, students challenged most significantly are those with disabilities.

### **The Changing Role of Special Education Teachers**

Secondary special education teachers are facing an “identity crisis” (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010, p. 126). Are they co-teachers where they teach a content area subject, assist small groups of struggling learners, and/or provide administrative assistance to their general education colleagues? Are they self-contained classroom teachers primarily responsible for teaching content areas in which they are unqualified? Are they responsible for intervention and strategy instruction, progress monitoring, and data collection? Or, finally, are they tutors assisting students with homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization (Conderman & Pedersen, 2007; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010)? Wasburn-Moses (2005) described in her article, titled “Roles and Responsibilities of Secondary Special Education Teachers in an Age of Reform,” that special education teachers must be the “jack of all trades and master of none” (p. 151).

Oftentimes, special education teachers at the secondary level experience an increased pressure to pre-teach and re-teach content area subjects and assist students with homework completion, test preparation, and overall class organization, thus neglecting their students’ needs as stated on their IEPs. This is frequently referred to as “assignment-assistance tutoring” (Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2000). Conderman and Pedersen (2007) offered suggestions to avoid the “tutoring trap,” which can be

detrimental to student success. The most important tip they offer is “instead of using resource time primarily as a study hall, directly teach research-based skills and strategies such as mnemonics, specific reading strategies, and cognitive behavior management skills” and write IEP goals that focus on learning skills rather than passing courses (p. 234). Although the authors admit some students require assistance with general education assignments, students should be encouraged to implement cognitive learning strategies to do so.

An effective way to accomplish this task is to incorporate “Strategic Tutoring” developed by Hock et al. (2000) at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. The developers of Strategic Tutoring contend that tutors are faced with the challenge of “helping students keep up with their daily assignments and teaching them the skills and strategies they need to become self-sufficient, independent learners” (p. 1). They go on to state,

Faced with the choice of either helping students complete immediate assignments or teaching them the more complicated skills needed to complete future assignments on their own, tutors often reluctantly choose to help students complete the assignment at hand. (p. 1)

Hock et al. (2000) stated, “In Strategic Tutoring, tutors teach strategies using proven instructional methods while helping students complete their assignments” (p. 2). Specific strategies can be taught for a variety of purposes. For example, tutors can teach students strategies to assist them in answering questions on a worksheet, study guide, quiz, or test. Other strategies can be implemented when a student is learning vocabulary

terms, reading a textbook or novel, or writing a term paper. There are also strategies to assist students in completing math problems and studying for tests.

The ultimate goal of Strategic Tutoring is to assist students in completing and understanding their assignments by implementing specific strategies that will help them complete their current assignments and future assignments as well. In addition to homework completion and strategy mastery, the tutor and student build a strong relationship which is beneficial to the student's overall academic success (Hock et al., 2000).

Another important tip Conderman and Pedersen (2007) recommended is to ensure general education teachers are aware of, understand the rationale for, and can provide necessary accommodations and modifications of their curriculum. They go on to stress the importance of getting general education teachers to understand why accommodations and modifications are necessary, and how they impact the student's learning.

Chalmers and Wasson (1993) suggested accommodations and modifications enable students with mild/moderate and high-incidence disabilities to experience successful inclusion in the general education setting. They recommended modifying class assignments, chapter questions, study guides, and tests to meet students' individual needs. Additionally, adjustments can be made to class materials creating less clutter which leads to a more manageable organizational system. Finally, they suggested teachers implement differentiated instruction to meet the needs of a variety of learners.

Tomlinson (2000) described differentiated instruction as a system where "classroom teachers make vigorous attempts to meet students where they are in the learning process and move them along as quickly and as far as possible in the context of a

mixed-ability classroom” (p. 25). When differentiating instruction, a teacher can vary the task demands, the level of instructional support given, and the length of completion time. Differentiated instruction is a crucial component of LRE and inclusion.

Last but not least, Conderman and Pedersen (2007) suggested providing instruction to students on how to become self-advocates so they are better able to understand and explain their strengths and areas of deficits to teachers and other professionals. This will increase the student’s autonomy and self-sufficiency. According to Chalmers and Wasson (1993), “students need to be taught to speak up about their disabilities and learning problems” in order to be successful students (p. 56).

### **Tutoring Versus Special Education Instruction**

Although the term “tutoring” has a negative connotation for many experts in the field of special education, there is a school of thought that tutoring provides high-quality and necessary instruction to some students. An organization called Carbrini Connections, located in Chicago, provides tutoring assistance to students at-risk from elementary school through high school (Gordon, Morgan, Ponticell, & O'Malley, 2004). The tutoring program assists students with their basic skills, daily homework, and the process of learning how to learn. The tutors also act as coaches and role models for their tutees. On the heels of NCLB (2001) more and more tutoring programs are appearing across the nation. There appears to be a link between tutoring and student achievement, but continued research is necessary to substantiate its effectiveness.

Gordon et al. (2004) listed 10 key factors that make an effective tutoring program. These include:

1. Tutors be effective regardless of their training and education by giving students more personal attention; however, teacher education and specialized training can be helpful.
2. Tutors need to use a diagnostic/developmental template to organize and implement each student's program.
3. Tutors must track the session-to-session progress of each student.
4. Principles drawn from cognitive and constructivist thinking provide for the strongest tutoring methods.
5. Tutors need to use continuous feedback to help students develop positive self-images as learners.
6. Formal/informal assessment procedures need to be implemented throughout the tutoring process.
7. Mentoring/coaching students on "learning how to learn" through providing guidance on study habits, test taking, attention to school, and learning in general is a significant informal aspect of successful tutoring.
8. Parent involvement in the tutoring process is essential.
9. Mentoring/coaching parents in their comfort zone is important.
10. Tutors must collaborate with general education teachers to measure achievement or lack thereof.

Bender (2008) described four major curricular-content approaches found in special education. These include a remedial approach consisting of teaching basic skills and social skills. Next is an approach comprised of tutorial subject matter where students work with special education teachers on general education curriculum. The third

approach is a functional skills method which includes vocational and adult outcomes. The final approach involves teaching cognitive learning strategies. The tutorial subject matter and the cognitive learning strategies approaches fit well into this discussion.

There are several reasons why the tutorial subject matter approach is, and has been, popular in special education. First, students with disabilities are able to be included within the general education curriculum with support. Next, general education teachers like this approach because they are relieved from having to spend additional time and energy assisting struggling students. Finally, parents of students with disabilities support the tutorial approach because their children are able to participate in general education courses and primary academic support is provided at school (Bender, 2008).

Yet, experts are concerned with the long-term benefits of this approach (McKenzie, 1991). The short-term benefits, homework completion and test preparation, are clear. If a student completes his/her homework on time or prepares for a test, he/she will earn higher scores thus resulting in higher grades; however, the long-term effects are limited. Limitations include the concern for whether the content area being studied is relevant to students with disabilities. Another concern is whether special education teachers are qualified to teach such content. The final concern is that tutoring does not necessarily require training; therefore, it could be provided by a paraprofessional rather than a special education teacher (Bender, 2008).

Similarly to Hock et al. (2000) and Gordon et al. (2004), Bender (2008) suggested providing students with cognitive learning strategies to complete an academic task (e.g., assessment procedures to determine current functioning, instruction of a particular strategy, continuous monitoring and feedback, generalization into other academic areas,

and communication with other teachers and parents) is most beneficial for students with disabilities. As with any approach, the cognitive learning strategies approach does not come without disadvantages. Teaching cognitive learning strategies is time consuming and could result in students falling behind in their general education courses. In addition, continued professional development needs to be provided for teachers to ensure effective instructional practices. Finally, there is a concern that general education teachers will not follow up on cognitive learning strategies (Bender, 2008).

The similarities between the roles and responsibilities of an effective special education teacher and the roles and responsibilities of an effective tutor are glaringly similar (Conderman & Pedersen, 2007; Gordon et al., 2004; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). First, diagnostic tools are used in both situations to assess an individual student's strengths and areas of deficit. In addition, both formal and informal techniques are implemented to progress monitor student achievement with continuous feedback provided. Second, in both tutoring and special education, the inclusion of cognitive learning strategies is used to assist the students in overcoming academic deficits. Next, parent involvement in both processes is paramount. Finally, both tutors and special education teachers are responsible for coaching students to "learn how to learn" (Gordon et al., 2004). Although there is much controversy regarding tutoring in special education, when making comparisons between the roles and responsibilities of an effective tutor and an effective special education teacher, it appears, when implemented appropriately and correctly, these two instructional models might not be so different after all.



### **Purpose of the Study**

This phenomenological research study explored the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers regarding their professional role as they assist students with disabilities to be successful in classes and at the same time increase the student's progress in individual learning needs as specified in the student's IEP. This study explored the extent to which these teaching practices exist and if there are ways to address working on students' IEP goals and assist them in being successful in their classes at the same time.

### **Research Question**

This study focused on the conflicting roles of secondary special education teachers when assisting students with disabilities. The general question that guided this qualitative research study was: What are the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers in regards to working on student IEP goals while also working on homework completion, test preparation, and organization?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a conceptual framework:

A conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, constructs, or variables – and the presumed relationships among them. Frameworks can be rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven or commonsensical, descriptive or casual. (p. 18)

A clearly defined conceptual framework allows the researcher to determine meaningful and important interrelationships of their data. Additionally, it can act as a road map assisting to make sense of the research data.

This study was based on the conceptual framework of role conflict. Since special education teachers have multiple roles and expectations from multiple groups, role conflict is a common issue. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest professional group for special education teachers, has developed a continuum which describes the three stages of professional growth in special education teachers; in addition, they have developed 10 standards to define the roles and responsibilities of a beginning special education teacher. The continuum included initial preparation, induction and mentoring, and continuous professional growth. The 10 standards defining the roles and responsibilities of an effective, beginning special education teacher include:

1. Foundations: Special education teachers have an understanding of special education in regards to students with disabilities, the policies, laws, theories, principles, families, schools and their practices, and outside agencies.
2. Development and Characteristics of Learners: Special education teachers know and demonstrate respect for their students.
3. Individual Learning Differences: Special education teachers understand the unique learning needs of individual students; they also demonstrate effective practice when meeting these needs.
4. Instructional Strategies: Special education teachers implement specific research-based cognitive learning strategies to individualize instruction.
5. Learning Environments and Social Interactions: Special education teachers actively create learning environments that foster cultural understanding, safety and emotional well-being, and positive social interactions.

6. Communication: Special education teachers understand typical and atypical language development and can assist students with disabilities in the process of communication.
7. Instructional Planning: Special education teachers individualize instruction for all learners.
8. Assessment: Special education teachers are familiar with various assessment procedures to assist in the identification of disabilities.
9. Professional and Ethical Practices: Special education teachers are guided by the profession's ethical and professional standards.
10. Collaboration: Special education teachers must collaborate with general education teachers, parents, outside agencies, and related service providers frequently (Council for Exceptional Children, 2004).

Clearly, there are numerous roles and responsibilities of a special education teacher which can cause them to feel overwhelmed and exhausted. Special education teachers face conflict daily because they are “often overburdened with multiple and sometimes competing responsibilities” (Wasburn-Moses, 2005, p. 151). This is known as “role conflict” which is an organizational work condition that “occurs when formal roles and responsibilities clash with the reality of the teacher’s work life” (Wasburn-Moses, 2005, p. 151). Edmonson and Thompson (2001) suggested that special education teachers’ multiple roles are often in conflict with one another. They further suggested conflict can occur because a special education teacher can be conflicted regarding their own professional role expectations and the reality of their professional role.

Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) supported the notion that special education teachers often encounter role conflict. Special education teachers' primary role, which is teaching, conflicts with the expectations of their administrators, immediate supervisors, and students' parents. School administrators frequently assign additional non-teaching duties to teachers including supervision, committee work, and extracurricular activities. Oftentimes, immediate supervisors, such as special education coordinators, place extra non-teaching duties on special education teachers including additional students onto their caseload and paperwork required to be in compliance with state and federal regulations. Finally, parents add further non-teaching duties by requesting schedule changes and frequent communication. These authors proposed that special education teachers experience role conflict significantly more than their general education teacher counterparts.

Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) referred to role theory and inconsistent expectations. They stated, "When the behaviors expected of an individual are inconsistent, he will experience stress, become dissatisfied, and perform less effectively than if the expectations imposed on him did not conflict" (p. 151). Secondary special education teachers are faced with conflict in regards to their professional role on a daily basis which can be detrimental to both them and their students' success.

### **Significance of the Study**

All special education teachers face a number of challenges on a daily basis. Those who work at the secondary level face unique challenges in their conflicting roles between tutor and special education teacher. Do they work on IEP goals? Do they assist students with assignments so they meet the graduation requirements? Are they able to

complete both tasks effectively? The anticipated outcome of this study was that the perspectives of special education teachers teaching at the secondary level might lead to recommendations for best practice when meeting the unique needs of secondary students with disabilities. A second anticipated outcome was that, upon reflection, participants in the study would first describe and then affirm or reject their current practices.

### **Researcher's Background**

Marshall and Rossman (2006) argued that it is the qualitative researcher's obligation to demonstrate that his personal interests, otherwise known as positionality, will not bias the study. It is imperative that I remain neutral and open to findings when conducting this research as the field of secondary special education is near and dear to my heart. I accomplished this task by asking open-ended questions about the participants' perspectives and practices. Additionally, I asked numerous follow-up inquiries upon the participants' initial responses which helped to clarify their specific perceptions. I taught special education at the secondary level for nine years primarily working with students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. During these years, I spent ample time in a resource room setting. Students were scheduled into the resource room for a 50 minute period. Typically, there were between 8-16 students assigned to one resource class. Most often, there was one special education teacher and one paraprofessional to work with all of the students.

I became passionate about this topic during those years. I often felt inadequate in my job performance. We were beginning to hear more and more about Response to Intervention (RTI) and progress monitoring. Secondary special education teachers were

being scrutinized for “tutoring” students rather than providing necessary individualized instruction to meet students’ IEP goals.

I believed then, and continue to believe, the most effective special education teachers can successfully accomplish the tasks of improving academic deficits as stated on IEP goals, and, at the same time, assisting students with homework completion, test preparation, and organization. It is my belief that secondary special education teachers can provide “it all” for students with mild/moderate and high-incidence disabilities.

### **Definitions of Terminology**

The following terms are used throughout this study. They are defined here to assist in the understanding of the content of this dissertation. They are as follows:

*Least restrictive environment:* An educational setting for exceptional students and students with disabilities that minimizes their exclusion from students without disabilities.

*Individualized education program:* A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting and must include a statement of the student’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance. Additionally, a statement of measureable annual goals including academic and functional goals designed to meet the student’s needs that result from his/her disability to enable him/her to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum and to meet the student’s other educational needs that result from his/her disability must also be included (“Definitions,” n.d.).

*Resource room:* A resource room is a separate special education classroom in a regular school where some students with educational disabilities, such as specific

learning disabilities, receive direct, specialized instruction and academic remediation and assistance with homework and related assignments as individuals or in small groups. Special education teachers in a resource room focus on particular goals as mandated by an IEP and remediate general education curriculum (“Definitions,” n.d.).

*Tutoring:* The process of providing academic and behavioral support to a student or a group of students who require remedial work in some or all areas.

*Graduation requirements:* Students must pass a minimum set of required courses and/or an exit examination set by the local school district. These requirements vary among school districts and should be viewed as minimums.

*Students at-risk:* Students who perform lower, face numerous disadvantages, and have a higher probability of making poor choices that will adversely affect their future.

*Research-based strategies:* A powerful student-centered approach backed by years of quality research that supplies students with disabilities the same tools and techniques that efficient learners use to understand and learn new material or skills (Luke, 2006, p. 1).

*Learning disabilities:* A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (*Federal Disability Definitions*, 2007).

*Emotional disturbances:* A condition that adversely affects a child’s educational performance in one or more of the following areas: an inability to learn that cannot be

explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; an inability to build or maintain interpersonal relationships with peers and/or teachers; inappropriate behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and a tendency to develop physical symptoms in association with a fear of school (*Federal Disability Definitions, 2007*).

*Intellectual disabilities:* Significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, which adversely affects a child's educational performance (*Federal Disability Definitions, 2007*).

*Autism spectrum disorder:* A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, usually evident before age 3 that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences (*Federal Disability Definitions, 2007*).

*Other health impaired:* Means having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment. Chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, and sickle cell anemia are possible conditions covered under other health impairments (*Federal Disability Definitions, 2007*).



*Adequate yearly progress*: A measurement defined by NCLB (2001) that determines how students in every school district in the United States are performing academically according to results on standardized tests (“Definitions,” n.d.).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

There are several approaches that are used while conducting qualitative research including ethnography, case study, grounded theory, critical studies, and phenomenology (Glesne, 2011; Kvale, 1996; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). I chose to implement a phenomenological research study that explored the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers regarding their professional role as they assist students with disabilities to be successful in classes and, at the same time, increase the student's progress in individual learning needs as specified in the student's IEP.

A phenomenological study involves a specific phenomenon; the research focuses on the participants' experiences, perspectives of their experiences, and their perspectives on the particular phenomenon (Glesne, 2011; Kvale, 1996). Additionally, it is believed that "field research involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 1). This study explored the "everyday lives" of special education teachers, specifically the extent to which specific teaching practices exist and if there are ways to address working on students' IEP goals while assisting them in being successful in their classes.

This chapter contains a description of the qualitative methods and procedures that were used to conduct the study: (a) descriptions of the participants, participant selection criteria, and how participants' privacy was protected; (b) the design of the study

including the guiding research question, the data collection methods, and the data analysis; and (c) the procedures for ensuring validity in the data analysis process.

### **Participant Selection**

Six special education teachers participated in this qualitative study. I contacted school administrators, explained the purpose of the study, and asked for a list of possible participants based on criteria that I provided. Participants were then randomly chosen from that list. The selection criteria given to the school administrators were (a) the special education teacher must have at least two years working at the secondary level, and (b) the special education teacher must spend at least one class period a day in a resource room setting.

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and the participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. A study information form (see Appendix A) was drafted detailing the purpose of the study along with the risks, benefits, and time commitments required by the participants. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used to identify interview and focus group individuals as well as the schools in which the special educators were teaching.

Four of the special education teachers were employed at larger schools within an urban community bordering two Midwestern rural states. Five of the participants lived and worked in Midwestern state one and one of the participants lived and worked in Midwestern state two. Two special education teachers were employed at smaller, rural schools located within 70 miles of the larger, urban community in Midwestern state one. Within each rural community, there was one elementary school and one middle/high school; in both communities there were separate elementary and secondary buildings.

Within the urban community, three different secondary schools were used: two of them being in Midwestern state one and one in Midwestern state two. One of the secondary schools in Midwestern state one contained grades 10 through 12; the other two secondary schools contained grades 9 through 12.

### **Description of the Participants**

The participants in the study consisted of six secondary special education teachers. Five of the participants were female and one was male; they were in different stages of their teaching careers and held various special education endorsements and/or degrees.

#### **Beth**

Beth, a speech-language pathologist (SLP), worked in the secondary setting for 22 years. In addition to providing speech-language services, she also worked as a building level coordinator assisting both building and district level administrators with scheduling, caseload management, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) compliance. Beth taught at Lincoln High School located in Midwestern state one which included grades 10 through 12; the speech-language services were provided in the same classroom as the learning disability (LD) program and functioned using the same classroom policies and procedures. Beth holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences and a Master of Science degree in Speech-Language Pathology.

Beth explained that she used to spend at least one or two periods of the day co-teaching in developmental classes until three years ago. She described developmental classes:

Developmental classes are basically watered-down English, social studies, and science classes that are co-taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Our math department never offered developmental classes.

The majority of the students in these classes are on IEPs or are English language learners (ELL).

Beth co-taught senior developmental English every year until three years ago when she began working as a building level coordinator. At the time of the interview, she was scheduled for administrative duties two class periods a day instead of co-teaching developmental classes. Beth explained the newly hired head principal at Lincoln High School was beginning to phase out the developmental program and was slowly introducing a new program including more students with disabilities and ELLs within the general education curriculum with academic and behavioral support provided by special education teachers or ELL teachers.

In addition to the two class periods when Beth had administrative duties, she co-taught a skill builder class with another special education teacher. Sophomore students with LD, speech-language disabilities, and mild intellectual disabilities (ID) were placed in this class. Various skills were addressed including self-advocacy and self-determination, study skills, functional life skills such as resume writing and completing job applications, and social skills. Additionally, Beth supervised a study hall in the resource room one class period daily. She described the resource room setting in her building: "It is basically a study hall. We mostly work on homework completion. I guess it's a tutoring model." Beth spent another period of the day providing individual

speech-language services to students with ID. The final two periods of the day were used as preparation periods.

Beth made a number of references to her own three children during the interview session and made connections between them and the students with whom she worked. Beth claimed she often viewed her students like her own children. It appeared that she was kind, caring, and compassionate and played a motherly role in Lincoln High School. She stated, “A lot of my students do not think they are smart enough. I try to motivate them and give them a purpose for why they are doing what they are doing. I really try to build their confidence.”

### **Jill**

Jill taught special education for nine years. She taught at Jefferson High School located in the urban setting in Midwestern state one. Jefferson housed grades 9 through 12. She also had experience teaching at the middle school level as well as a ninth grade academy within the same school district. Jill holds endorsements in the areas of Emotional Disturbance (ED) and LD, a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education, and a Master of Science degree in Special Education.

It was apparent that Jill was professional and focused on her students’ disabilities first and foremost. She told me, “I don’t want to know if my students have gotten into trouble. That doesn’t concern me. It only concerns me if the trouble is disability-related. Then, as their case manager, I need to get involved.” It was clear from the onset that Jill was kind, caring, and a no-nonsense teacher. Her matter of fact approach of focusing on the disability was unique in comparison to the other participants; the other five participants made reference to building relationships with students and assisting them

with numerous facets in their lives beyond their disabilities. Jill's matter of fact approach was further evidenced by her statement, "I try to stay out of their grade business. I used to kill myself keeping up with homework. Now, I only concern myself with homework that's related to their disability."

Jill's typical day consisted of co-teaching in three general education classes. She explained these classes included students with varying abilities; she further explained she provided instructional assistance to all students regardless of their ability level. She believed her participation in these classes was beneficial for several reasons including the provision of assistance to all students, especially those with disabilities; the inclusion of both her students with disabilities and herself within general education classes which allowed for a greater understanding of learning differences and the acceptance of those with differences; and, finally, the wealth of information she gathered regarding the general education curriculum.

In addition to co-teaching in three general education classes and two preparation periods, Jill taught three "choices" classes in the resource room setting. She described choices while laughing: "Actually, it should be called no choices because the students do not get a choice to be in there. If they are on an IEP, it's mandatory." She further explained the layout of these classes stating, "We work on research-based strategies for the first 15 minutes. On Mondays, we also address planner completion and plan for upcoming tests." She stated Monday preparation was necessary in order to assist students in maintaining organization and assist the resource room personnel in planning for upcoming tests. Jill then described the various research-based strategies that were implemented in the choices classes. She commented:

We use Corrective Reading and Read Naturally to work on reading comprehension and reading fluency. We also use Fast Math for a handful of students with needs in math. I spend a lot of time working on vocabulary with all of my students too. I love using technology such as iPods to help with this.

The remaining 25 minutes of choices were then used for homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization. Jill also reported assisting students with disabilities to prepare their student-led IEPs during choices time. She explained this process helped students to better understand their disabilities, their needs, and their future plans.

### **Kyle**

Kyle, the only male participant, was completing his third year teaching at Kennedy High School. Kennedy is a small community located 60 miles north of the urban community in Midwestern state one. Kyle worked with students with LD, ED, ID, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in grades 7 through 12. At the time of the interview, Kyle was completing his Master of Science degree in Special Education and obtaining endorsements in the areas of LD, ED, and ID. His undergraduate degree was a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education focusing on Health and Physical Education.

Due to the small size of Kennedy High School, Kyle was the only special education teacher in the building, resulting in a very busy schedule. Kyle explained he typically did not take a full preparation period. He claimed, "I call it creative scheduling. I sneak in 5 or 10 minutes whenever I can to complete paperwork, make phone calls, or plan lessons for the next day." Most often, Kyle had students in his classroom seven out of seven periods of the day. He described a typical day: "Students are in and out of here



all day. Kids are scheduled in here for their functional classes. Otherwise, they drop in and out as necessary.” Kyle taught four functional classes daily. He defined functional classes:

Functional classes are designed to assist students who are unable to pass general education classes or require additional instruction using research-based strategies. There are about three students in each section I teach. I teach three functional English classes and one functional math. The students who are enrolled in these courses receive their English and math credits towards graduation. They also take the alternative assessment on the state assessment.

The remaining three periods of the day were resource classes where students could access the resource room when they had homework to complete, required assistance on an assignment or project, when they needed a test or quiz read aloud to them, or a quiet place to work. Students were not scheduled into the resource room; rather, they accessed it when necessary.

### **Autumn**

Autumn was completing her ninth year as a special education teacher at Lincoln High School, which was located within an urban community in Midwestern state one. It is important to note, although both Autumn and Beth taught at the same school, they worked in separate educational environments and in different parts of the building with different academic and behavioral support provided to the students. Autumn held endorsements in the areas of LD, ED, and ID; however, she primarily worked with students with ED. Additionally, she instructed students with LD and ID in co-teaching

settings. Autumn completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education in the area of Social Studies and a Master of Education degree in Special Education.

Unlike Kyle, Autumn had two scheduled preparation periods a day. Additionally, she taught three periods of study hall in the resource room setting; the remaining two periods of the day were spent supporting students with disabilities, other students at-risk, and general education teachers in a newly developed Seed program. The Seed program included 38 students who had previously been included in the developmental classes at Lincoln High School; these students were then placed in the general education curriculum, and Autumn provided support to them and the general education teachers in five science classes and four social studies classes. She modified tests and assignments, read tests and quizzes aloud, and provided small group instruction when necessary.

During her two study hall class periods, Autumn spent the first 15 minutes of class on Mondays assisting the students in goal setting. The students were expected to review their current grades in each class as well as upcoming assignments and tests. Then, they set goals to achieve that week. Autumn supported this practice stating, “It’s getting kids to be more accountable. It’s very helpful. It’s making them more independent and aware of their grades.” As a special education teacher primarily working with students with ED, Autumn claimed to spend a great deal of time dealing with students’ emotional concerns. She stated:

I often have students process problems in the moment. I try to get all of the facts from them, so we can de-escalate a situation before it becomes out of control. I try to get them to process the reality of the situation and assist them in problem-solving. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.

Autumn made numerous positive comments regarding her students, administrators, and general education teachers. She stated, “I’m lucky. I don’t have anything to complain about. I like my job, my students, my administration, and my co-workers.”

### **Kathy**

Kathy taught special education for the past nine years. She worked at Clinton High School which was located 70 miles northwest of the urban community; similar in size to Kennedy, Clinton is a small, rural community located in Midwestern state one. She taught grades 9 through 12 in the disability areas of LD, ED, ID, and ASD. She held endorsements in the areas of LD, ED, and ID. She completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and a Master of Education degree in Special Education.

Like Kyle, Kathy worked in a rural community; however, there were two special education teachers in her building, and Kathy dealt with the high school students while the other special education teacher dealt with the middle school students. Kathy’s day was comprised of co-teaching in one general education class, teaching both functional math and English, one period of preparation, and two class periods of study hall.

Kathy co-taught in a computer class where she provided support to a number of students with various disabilities. She stated, “I am mostly there to keep them on track. So many of them get lost with the verbal directions, so I stand close to them and offer additional support.” Again, similar to Kyle’s functional classes, Kathy also taught functional math and English to students who were unable to be successful in the general education class. She taught two class periods of functional math and one period of functional English to a variety of students with disabilities including LD, ED, ID, and

ASD. During the study hall periods, Kathy contended she “assists students with homework completion and provides academic and behavior support.”

Kathy appeared to instinctively understand students’ needs and implemented a tough-love approach in her teaching. She commented, “Kids have excuses for so many things. I tell them they have to buck up and figure it out. No one’s going to do it for you.” Kathy shared she was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and a learning disability in written expression and reading as a child so she understood the struggles students with disabilities experience.

### **Christi**

Christi taught at Washington High School in grades 9 through 12; Washington High was located in the same urban community in Midwestern state two. She had been teaching for 15 years and holds endorsements in LD and ED; however, she taught students with a number of disabilities including LD, ED, ID, ASD, other health impaired (OHI), and deaf and hard of hearing. Christi earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Special Education and her Master of Science degree in Curriculum and Instruction.

Christi’s daily schedule was similar to other secondary special education teachers working in larger, urban high schools. Christi co-taught three different English classes with three different general education teachers. She stated this proved to be difficult as each general education teacher had different classroom policies, procedures, and expectations. Additionally, Christi received two preparation periods daily where she was able to complete paperwork, schedule meetings, prepare upcoming lessons, and correct submitted assignments.

One major difference between Christi's schedule and the other participants' schedules was that of the resource room periods. Christi spent two class periods a day in the resource room teaching study skills. The students worked on their reading and writing goals based on their IEPs. They also worked on organization, self-advocacy, and transition skills. The students were not given any time to complete homework during this time.

Christi shared in the past there were class periods where students with disabilities were able to work on homework during specialized classes in the resource room setting; however, the district administrators decided several years ago to omit this time and instead provide additional time to work on IEP goals. The administrators recently decided that some school time should be dedicated to assisting students with disabilities with homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization; as a result of this decision, the special education services will be revamped for the 2012-2013 school year giving some time for the aforementioned tasks.

### **Guiding Research Question**

This study focused on the conflicting roles of secondary special education teachers when assisting students with disabilities. The general question that guided this qualitative research study was: What are the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers in regards to working on student IEP goals while also working on homework completion, test preparation, and organization?

### **Data Collection**

Glesne (2011) suggested the importance of triangulation: the practice of incorporating various data collection methods when completing a qualitative research

study. When triangulation is achieved, the data are rich and valid. Thus, I chose to implement multiple data collection techniques which included individual interviews, self-reports, and a focus group interview.

According to Seidman (1998), interviewing “is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives constitute education” (p. 7). The interview guide (see Appendix B) included open-ended, semi-structured questions. The interview guide helped maintain consistency during the individual interviews, and allowed the interviewees to respond based on their specific situations.

For the most part, individual interviews were held at a location outside of the school grounds and after school hours unless the participant specifically asked for the interview to be held in the school during a preparation time or a similar planning period. One interview was conducted on school grounds during the school day. Two interviews were conducted on school grounds after school hours. Three of the interviews were conducted off school grounds in nearby restaurants; two of these interviews were conducted after school hours and one was conducted during school hours. The purpose for holding the majority of interviews outside of the school grounds and after the school day was to avoid interfering with and disrupting the participants’ work schedules.

### **Individual Interviews**

The first interview I completed was with Beth. She requested I meet her in her office at Lincoln High during her preparation period in the afternoon. When I entered her office, I immediately took note of her surroundings. In addition to her desk, there were three other desks. The other three desks belonged to LD teachers within her department.

The speech-language services and the LD services were provided in the same classroom at Lincoln High School. At the time we began the interview, a male LD teacher, Steve, was working at his desk. I introduced myself to Beth and Steve. Beth found a chair for me to use, and I sat down and prepared for the interview. As I was preparing, we informally chatted which created a more relaxed atmosphere. Roulston (2010) believed the interview process should begin by "sharing similarities with friendly conversation" (p. 19).

As I began to ask Beth the interview questions, Steve responded as well. In addition to Beth's comments, I noted Steve's statements in my research journal. After 25 minutes of interviewing, the school bell rang. Steve prepared for class and immediately left the office. At the same time, two other LD teachers, Andi and Heidi, entered. During the transition time between the two class periods, Beth introduced me to Andi and Heidi and explained why I was there. The four of us visited informally until the transition time came to an end. I then continued to ask Beth questions, and Andi and Heidi added commentary as well. Again, I noted their comments in my research journal.

Although Beth provided the majority of the data from this interview, the statements made by Steve, Andi, and Heidi added to the depth of the information gathered. Beth's interview lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes.

After leaving Lincoln High School, I immediately drove to Jefferson High School to interview Jill. I entered the building as the majority of the student body was leaving for the day. I was given directions to Jill's classroom from the security guard at the front door. Walking towards her classroom, the halls were deserted. When I entered Jill's classroom, she was completing paperwork sitting alone at a round table. Upon seeing

me, she greeted me warmly and invited me to sit down with her. We chatted casually about our personal lives to build rapport prior to beginning the interview.

Jill had a lot of energy and a number of descriptive stories. She spoke rapidly, and it was difficult to keep detailed notes during the interview; however, she offered great insight into differing priorities of secondary special education teachers. She stated, “I don’t feel pressure to help kids complete homework. Perhaps it’s because I work with an affluent population where the students’ parents are very supportive. I really focus on the disability.” Jill’s interview lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes and the time passed quickly. It was ended abruptly when Jill noticed it was after 5:00 p.m. She needed to get home to her children because her husband had another engagement at 5:45 p.m.

The third interview was also held on school grounds after school hours. As I entered Kennedy High School, the halls were deserted with the exception of the custodian sweeping the floor. I entered Kyle’s classroom and, like Jill, he was sitting alone at a table completing paperwork. I joined him at the table, and we spoke informally about the school, the weather, and our families. It was obvious from the beginning that Kyle was devoted to his profession and students as he made a number of comments alluding to this. He spoke with admiration and respect for his administrators, general education teachers, parents of the students and, most importantly, the students themselves. He stated, “I’m fortunate that I can go to my special education director and my building administration with any question.” Later in the interview, he commented, “My students and their parents are great. I have awesome relationships with all of them.”



Although Kyle was the youngest and least experienced of all the interviewees, he seemed to understand the nuances of secondary special education well. Kyle's interview lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes.

The fourth interview, with Autumn, was held over her preparation periods and lunch break at a restaurant near her school. Permission to leave school grounds during the school day was granted from her building principal. Like Beth, Autumn taught at Lincoln High School; however, she worked with students with ED in a separate program and separate location within the school. Due to the large number of special education teachers at Lincoln High School, there are five different special education offices dedicated to special education teachers. Various classrooms around the building are utilized as well. Autumn offered extensive detail when describing her roles and responsibilities as a special education teacher. She described her typical day and how she handles the various daily tasks. Additionally, she explained the pressure she encounters regarding graduation requirements. She stated, "Parents, students, general education teachers, and building administration place pressure on special education teachers to get kids to graduate." This fourth interview lasted two hours. It had to be cut short due to her schedule at school.

The fifth interview, with Kathy, was scheduled at a restaurant at 4:00 p.m. in Clinton. Kathy has four children ages eight, twins age six, and three. Her husband was scheduled to pick the children up from school and daycare but was delayed so the children were at the interview for the first 45 minutes. Little was accomplished during that time other than building rapport with one another. Once Kathy's husband picked the children up, we officially began our interview. She offered insight into the struggles she

encounters when working with general education teachers as well as students and parents who lack engagement in the special education process. One of her goals was to work on relationships between home and school. The interview with Kathy lasted one hour before she had to leave.

The sixth and final interview was with Christi. Christi worked in Midwestern state two within the same urban community at Washington High School. We met at a fast food restaurant at 4:00 p.m. When setting up the interview, Christi stated she typically worked until about 5:30 p.m. She thought it would be adequate to meet at 4:00 p.m.; however, upon her arrival, she made a comment regarding all of the items she left unfinished at the end of the day. Initially, we visited about the differences in special education regulations between the two neighboring states, Midwestern state one and Midwestern state two. As a 15 year veteran, Christi was knowledgeable in the field of secondary special education; she had primarily worked in the same high school throughout her tenure. She commented:

I've been around long enough to see the pendulum swing back and forth. It seems the rules in special education are constantly changing. I feel like we are now moving back to what I was expected to do when I first began teaching special education. I think there needs to be a balance between everything.

This final interview lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes.

### **Self-Report Data**

A second method of data collection was utilized after the completion of the individual teacher interviews. The participants were asked to self-report on their roles and responsibilities while working with students in a resource room for a one week

period. A self-report form (see Appendix C) was provided to each participant along with detailed instructions on how to complete it. I created the form based on my experience as a secondary special education teacher. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was provided to each participant so the self-reports could be returned easily to me.

In the self-report, the participants were asked to report specific activities performed when working with students based on several of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) ethical standards (2010). Information to be reported included time spent assisting students with homework completion, test preparation, and/or overall organization. The participants were asked to describe what activities were completed, assistance they provided, and how activities and assistance were completed. They were also asked to note what research-based strategies they implemented or if no research-based strategies were implemented. This provided additional data for the researcher which was useful in determining how actual time was spent and what type of instruction was completed.

### **Focus Group Interview**

The six interview participants were invited to participate in a focus group interview session. The focus group interview questions were based on the participants' responses to the individual interview questions. Additionally, the CEC ethical standard pertaining to "practicing collegially with others who are providing services to individuals with exceptionalities" was used as a guide when designing the focus group interview questions. The focus group session was held in a restaurant in the large, urban community in Midwestern state one. Prior to the focus group interview, I reserved a private meeting room in the back of the restaurant. The meeting room was small, yet

quiet. Due to inclement weather, only four participants were able to attend the focus group interview: Autumn, Kyle, Beth, and Jill. The purpose of the focus group interview was to create a comfortable social environment where participants were “stimulated by one another’s perspectives and ideas” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 360).

The four participants and I met at the restaurant at 6:00 p.m. After everyone arrived, we ordered off the menu. After placing our order, I began to ask the focus group questions which I had previously prepared (see Appendix D). Similar to the individual interviews, I took numerous notes in my research journal throughout the course of the conversation. Once I asked my initial question (What are the positive aspects of secondary special education?), the discussion continued at a rapid pace. All participants offered information and insight which proved helpful in understanding the unique situations within the different school settings; additionally, the successes and benefits, as well as the conflicts and frustrations of each setting, were discussed at length. The focus group interview lasted two and a half hours; although we ate our meals during the interview, the conversation continued throughout, and I took continuous notes.

### **Data Analysis**

Glesne (2011) contended data analysis and data collection should be completed simultaneously. Upon completion of the individual interviews, I immediately began to analyze the data as suggested by Glesne. I continued to analyze data directly following data collection throughout the entire study.

An imperative aspect of analysis was to consider the data gleaned from each data collection method. For example, as participants answered my semi-structured interview questions, additional follow-up inquiries were made to clarify and/or expand on their

responses. Another example was data garnered from the self-reports. Although the participants were given detailed instructions on how to complete the self-reports, they were given leeway in their responses due to their unique and varying resource room settings. Again, this led to a large amount of raw data. Finally, I was able to gather copious amounts of data through the focus group interview. The special education teachers freely and openly shared anecdotes, opinions, and advice with one another.

In regards to data analysis, Roulston (2010) stated, “Perhaps one of the most commonly used is that of thematic analysis, given that ‘themes’ can be generated in a variety of ways. This approach generally entails some form of data reduction, through applying codes to the data” (p. 150). I coded the responses of the participants’ individual interviews, self-reports, and focus group interview. I then combined those codes into groups which were analyzed further. The next step taken was to create a code book (see Appendix E) for the individual codes, clarifying information, and various examples of each code.

Once the code book was finalized, I organized the groups of codes into structured categories and sub-categories. When creating categories and sub-categories, I systematically determined phrases that encapsulated the meanings of the groups of codes. This process proved to be challenging. After multiple failed attempts at organizing my codes into numerous categories, it occurred to me to use my overarching research question as a way to organize my data. At that time, I decided to use two major categories: special education teachers’ perspectives and special education teachers’ practices. Next, eight sub-categories were developed. During my initial failed attempts at creating categories, these eight sub-categories were developed. Once I decided to use

the two categories from the research question, my initial categories became sub-categories. The decision to use both categories and sub-categories allowed me to effectively analyze my data and make sense of it.

The next step was to determine themes. Again, this process proved to be challenging. To accomplish this task, I created two flow charts with the category at the top of the chart. Under the category, I wrote the sub-categories. I then included all of the codes making up each sub-category. Once all of the information had been entered, I reviewed the code book, the categories, and the sub-categories. Eight themes emerged from this process. Two data analysis charts (Figure 1 and Figure 2) were developed to describe the emergence of the overall themes of the data.

### **Ensuring Validity**

Glesne (2011) cited Creswell's work (1998) describing eight verification procedures. Of those eight procedures, I included six in my research study to augment its validity. First, I used multiple data collection techniques, also known as triangulation, throughout the research process. These techniques included individual interviews, self-reports, and a focus group interview. Along with these techniques, I made sure to include descriptions of the research participants, the individual interview sessions and focus group interview session, and the participants' responses that were both rich and thick (see Chapter III); the highly narrative research accounts added to the trustworthiness of my research. Next, I incorporated peer review. I consistently utilized others, including a professional colleague who recently wrote her dissertation and a former colleague who currently taught secondary special education, to review my data analysis process, as well as the codes, categories, and themes. Additionally, I

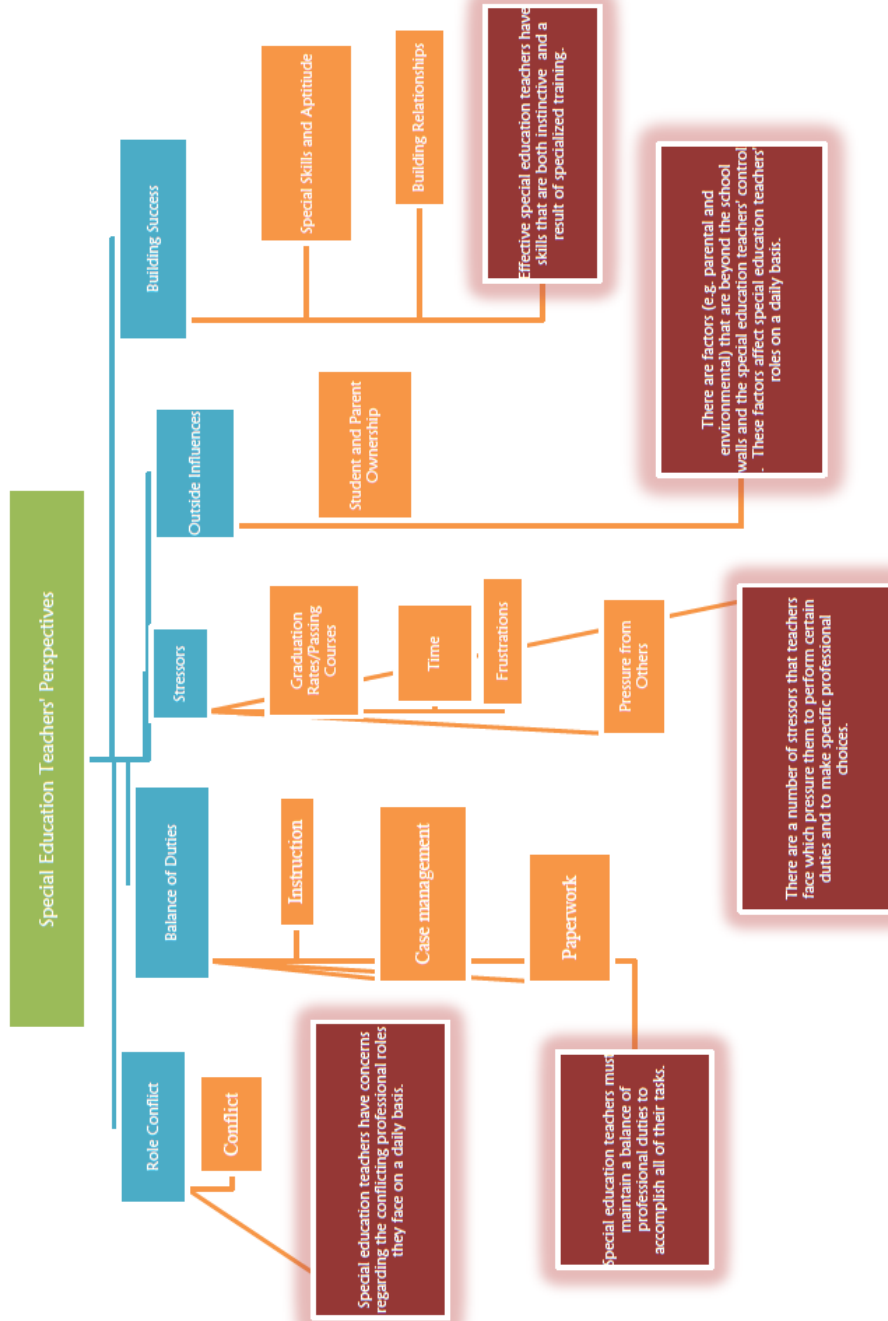


Figure 1. Data Analysis Chart for the Category of Special Education Teachers' Perspectives.

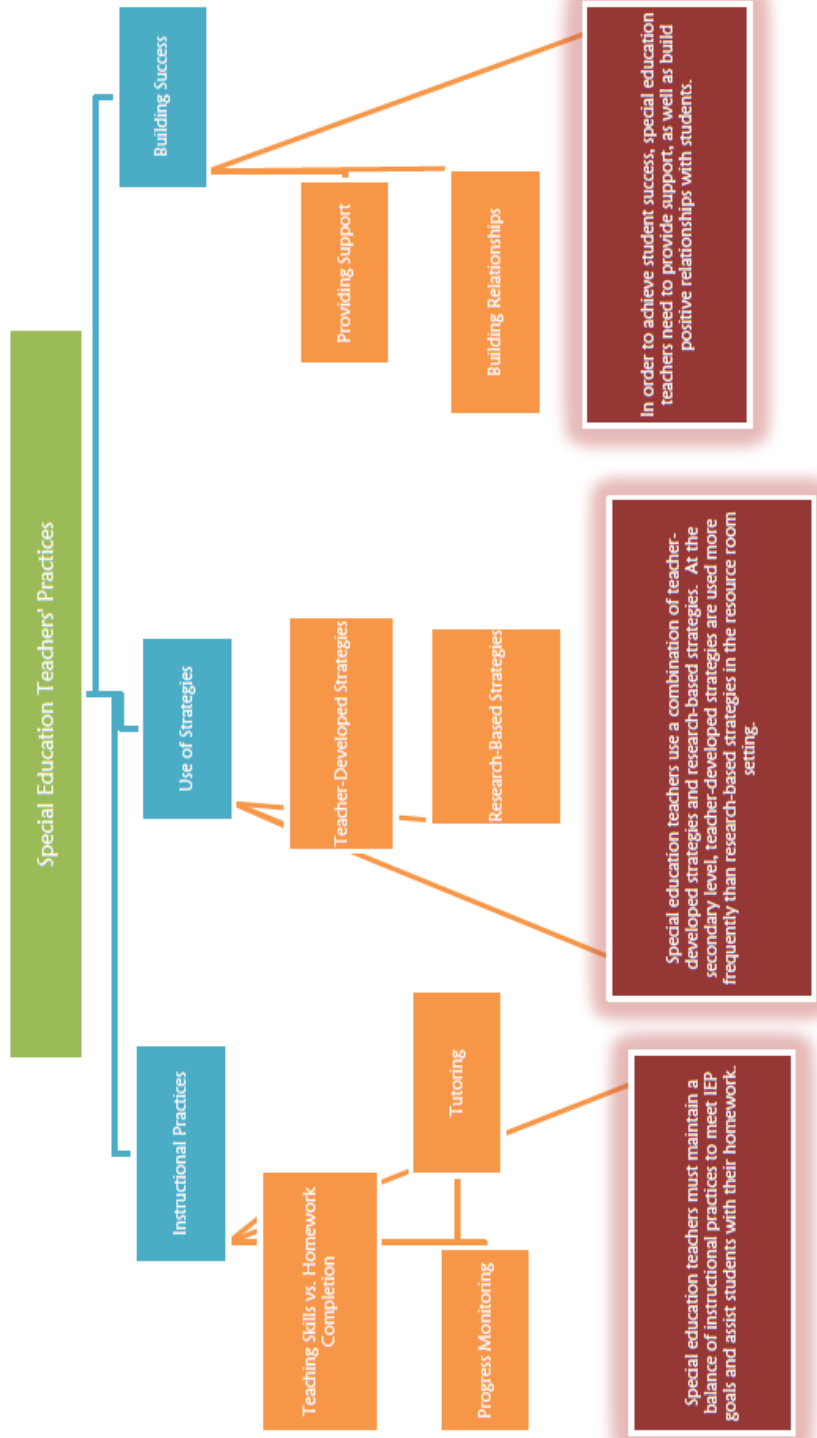


Figure 2. Data Analysis Chart for the Category of Special Education Teachers' Practices.



incorporated member-checking, a step where the research participants were asked to review the data to ensure I conveyed their thoughts and actions accurately. The fifth verification procedure I used was to reflect on my own bias because of my personal experience with secondary special education. This was essential to ensure I did not discredit those who had differing opinions from mine. Finally, I implemented an external audit. A member of my committee audited my research journal as well as my system of data analysis to provide feedback on whether the codes, categories, and themes made sense to them as it did to me. A combination of these six verification procedures ensured both the research process and the research product were valid.

### **Summary**

Chapter II provided a detailed description of the qualitative research methods and procedures that were implemented when exploring the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers. The chapter began with descriptions of the participants and their settings. Additionally, information gleaned from data collection measures was included. Techniques to ensure validity were discussed, and the data analysis process was explained. The themes, categories, sub-categories, and codes that emerged from the data were also introduced.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **PRESENTATION OF THE DATA WITH SUPPORTING LITERATURE**

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers regarding their professional role as they assist students with disabilities to be successful in classes and, at the same time, increase the students' progress in individual learning needs as specified in the students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This study explored the extent to which these teaching practices exist and if there are ways to address working on students' IEP goals while assisting them in being successful in their classes. The six participants of this study reflected on and shared their individual experiences. They made recommendations that may be used by other special education teachers when meeting the unique needs of secondary students with disabilities. Additionally, the participants were able to affirm or reject their beliefs regarding their current practices.

The categories, sub-categories, and themes that emerged while analyzing the research data, supporting quotes from the participants, and detailed narratives were included in this chapter. In addition, literature supporting the results, as well as literature contrary to the results, was provided.

#### **Categories, Sub-Categories, and Themes**

There were two categories that emerged while analyzing the research data: special education teachers' perspectives and special education teachers' practices. Under the

first category, special education teachers' perspectives, five sub-categories surfaced which included role conflict, balance of duties, stressors, influential factors, and building success. Five themes emerged from the five sub-categories.

### **Special Education Teachers' Perspectives**

**Theme one.** Special education teachers have concerns regarding the conflicting professional roles they face on a daily basis.

There are so many “supposed to dos” in special education. You can only get to the top priorities which is frustrating. – Christi, Secondary Special Education Teacher

All six of the participants made reference to the numerous roles they are required to perform on a regular basis, and, oftentimes, these conflicting roles become daunting and overwhelming. The participants conveyed differing expectations between the special education administrators and the building level administrators, the lack of understanding between different school entities as well as the pressures to provide assistance with homework and the pressures to work on IEP goals, all of which caused the participants tension, confusion, and left them with a feeling that they had little or no professional accomplishments.

Kathy, Beth, and Kyle talked about the conflicts they encountered when dealing with differing expectations from special education administrators and building level administrators. Although they felt supported by the special education and building level administrators, they felt the administrators had contradictory expectations concerning special education teachers. All of the participants believed the task of the utmost importance to the special education director was working towards goals on the student's

IEP through the use of research-based strategies and data collection; however, Kathy, Beth, and Kyle believed the most important task of the building level administrator was assisting students to pass courses and to meet graduation requirements. Kathy felt the pull between the two different sets of expectations as she noted:

I feel supported by both my principal and (special education) director, but you can tell they have different priorities. I feel pressured to help students pass classes so they can graduate from the principal and pressure to work on IEP goals from my director. You have to do both, I guess, but it's really hard.

Beth felt the pressure to complete all tasks and added:

My (special education) director wants me to teach research-based strategies, but when can I fit that in? I have to help them complete homework, read tests, organize folders, backpacks, and lockers so they will pass their classes. If they don't pass their classes, we will not meet AYP (adequate yearly progress) which is such a big deal to our principal.

In addition to receiving conflicting messages from administrators, the participants expressed concern regarding colleagues' misconceptions of their roles as special education teachers which led to additional professional conflicts. Beth felt that her general education colleagues had misconceptions about her role as a special education teacher:

The general education teachers in my building believe my job is to assist students with homework completion. They (students) are often sent down to me during class for this purpose. We have tried to explain to (general education) teachers

we have more things going on in the resource room, but a majority of them don't seem to understand or care.

Christi agreed with Beth and was frustrated about being expected to know all of the content in all of the classes. Christi contended, "Many teachers assume we should know how to complete every assignment. How are we supposed to know how to complete all English, algebra, geometry, biology, physical science, and history assignments? It's impossible!" These misconceptions held by general education teachers caused additional conflict for the participants.

The situation that caused the most prevalent role conflict for all the participants was the quandary whether to assist students with homework completion or to assist students with their IEP goals. All six participants made reference to this conflict in some manner. Autumn expressed frustration with the difficulty in scheduling and grouping students by similar needs and how this made it difficult to implement research-based strategies on a consistent basis:

It's difficult because we are expected to use research-based strategies within our resource rooms. It's hard because it's not a one size fits all system. The master schedule dictates when our kids are scheduled into our rooms. It's hard to group them with similar areas of need. Their instruction needs to be individualized. The manageability of scheduling and grouping the kids into similar groups to teach research-based strategies according to needs is difficult to fathom.

Christi referred to the frustration she felt regarding standardized tests and meeting AYP:

I like to work on their IEP goals, but they (IEP goals) don't get you to pass AYP and the state assessment. Those measure skills way above their IEP goals. The

things our students need aren't always measured on those assessments. Their reading and writing skills are oftentimes too low. These assessments ignore what our kids truly need such as self-advocacy, social skills, and basic academic and functional skills. Also, the standards are rarely based on their needs. There's a huge conflict between the kids' needs and the state requirements which is very frustrating.

Two research studies agreed with the finding of role conflict and its resulting frustration for the participants. Embich (2001) revealed role conflict was a major contributor to secondary special education teachers' risk for professional burnout. The author further exposed the current trends in special education including co-teaching situations where special education teachers' roles are not clearly defined, a continual increased workload, and a lack of administrative support as causing further conflict within secondary special education teachers. Additionally, Wasburn- Moses (2005) supported the notion of role conflict for secondary special educators by stating, "Many special education teachers believe that their role of teaching students conflicts with the expectations of others" (p. 152).

**Theme two.** Special education teachers must maintain a balance of professional duties to accomplish all of their tasks.

You must have a balance with everything. You better be able to do it all because that's the job. – Kyle, Secondary Special Education Teacher

The participants reported facing a diversity of duties including teaching, co-teaching, paperwork completion, strategy instruction, facilitating meetings, conducting assessments, collaborating and consulting with general education teachers,

communicating between home and school, as well as communicating between school and outside agencies, assisting with transition to postsecondary life, providing accommodations and modifications, and providing homework assistance.

All six participants referred to maintaining a realistic balance of these duties in order to meet the needs of their students. In reference to creating a balance between the tasks of homework completion and working on IEP goals, Jill stated, “You have to find a balance between tutoring and teaching. It has to be individualized. How do you find two kids that are alike?” Christi commented about the pressure she felt to implement research-based strategies adding, “My special education director would like to see more research-based strategies being used. In fact, that’s all she’d like to see; however, you can’t neglect their homework. You have to maintain a balance between both.” Beth remarked, “Sometimes it just has to be good enough,” when discussing the completion of special education paperwork. She added, “Although I work hard to meet all of the requirements in my paperwork, I can’t spend too much time on it because I’d miss time teaching the kids which is my priority.” Autumn learned early on “to maintain a balance” of all of the duties involved in her job. Like Beth, Autumn stated her priority is the students so she spends most of her time and energy meeting their needs, but she also realized “paperwork, co-teaching, meetings, assessments, and committee work are all important tasks and must be completed.”

Recent research supported the notion of maintaining a balance of duties. Wasburn-Moses (2005) suggested reformation in special education. She stated, “As a field, special education needs to prioritize goals for students with disabilities and design programs and teacher roles and responsibilities around these goals” (p. 156). Although

there has not been a systemic change in special education, the participants all made reference to their own personal and professional choices when prioritizing goals and designing practical programs to meet those goals. This helped them to maintain a balance of professional duties.

**Theme three.** There are a number of stressors that secondary special education teachers face which pressure them to perform certain duties and make specific professional choices.

Graduation trumps everything. Even when we get a chance to work on IEP goals, we have to get it done quickly because the pressure to complete daily work is so great. – Beth, Speech-Language Pathologist at the Secondary Level

The stressors that the participants discussed included graduation rates, time constraints, pressure from others, and additional frustrations (i.e., lack of appropriate curriculum and paperwork). Students must pass their courses in order to graduate from high school. Oftentimes, the students require assistance in homework completion, test preparation, background knowledge, pacing, and skill building in order to pass their classes. Additionally, a major contributor of stress for building administrators and special education teachers is the pressure to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP); graduation rates greatly impact AYP results. Graduation is closely linked with homework completion because the completion of assignments leads to passing courses which leads to graduation. Kyle noted the pressure he felt regarding homework completion stating, “There’s a ton of pressure for kids to graduate, especially with seniors. If they don’t get their work done, they don’t graduate. Plus we are always working on transition issues.” Autumn affirmed the pressure regarding homework



completion by stating, “The main concern of parents and general education teachers is passing classes and graduation. That puts a lot of pressure on us to complete assignments.”

Research supported the idea of the pressure felt by the participants. Vernon, Baytops, McMahon, Padden, and Walther-Thomas (2003) stated there are several states within the United States implementing alternative graduation requirements and/or high school completion requirements (e.g., course completion, proficiency exams, or credit hours) for students with disabilities; however, most states are not implementing alternatives. The increased rigor of the curriculum and the increased graduation requirements place additional pressure on secondary students with disabilities, secondary special education teachers, secondary general education teachers, and secondary administrators.

In addition to the pressure for students to pass courses and to meet graduation requirements, the concern of time constraints is another major factor contributing to special education teachers’ stress levels. Simply stated, there is not enough time to do everything that needs to get accomplished. Veteran special education teacher, Christi, shared her frustration regarding time constraints contending, “I would like to incorporate both research-based strategies and homework assistance, but it takes too much time. There’s only so much you can do in 45 minutes.” Jill also felt pressure due to a lack of time, but focused her energy on the student’s individual needs. She noted:

In my professional opinion, you have to work on deficit areas. Students can’t graduate from high school unable to read and write. We can’t be conditioned to

work on the short-term goals only (homework completion). We need to help them grow as learners. It takes a lot of time, but it's very important.

Jill was the only participant who felt working on homework completion was secondary to working on IEP goals. She attributed this to several factors including the demographics of her students and the guidelines set forth by her special education and district level administrators. Jill taught in a brand new school in an affluent part of town. She claimed, "The majority of my students have very supportive parents. They (the parents) help students complete assignments at home." Jill admitted she did not always have this mindset. In previous school settings where she taught, many students were not supported at home, and she felt more pressure to assist students with homework completion.

Kyle's perspective was similar to the rest of the research participants regarding time restraints. He found it difficult to find the time to work on both homework and IEP goals:

My major frustration is the lack of time. I try to work with students on the IEP goals and charting their progress. I also try to get to all students at least once during the week if not more. One of the biggest parts of my job is helping kids complete homework and stay on top of assignments. I also try to teach KU (University of Kansas) strategies, but we can't get to them very often because we are too busy working on assignments.

Additionally, Kathy was pressured by the lack of time and the insurmountable number of required duties. She noted, "I try to do it all, but it's never enough. There's never enough time."

Vannest and Parker (2010) agreed that the factor of time is influential in special education. They listed 10 responsibilities of special education teachers; in addition, they provided specific evidence gleaned from their research regarding how special education teachers spend their time. The three responsibilities consuming the majority of special education teachers' time were providing instructional support to students and general education teachers, providing academic instruction to students, and completing mandatory paperwork. Vannest and Parker further expressed, "Instructional time use is an intervention without equal" (p. 94); therefore, the majority of special education teachers' time should be spent on instructional time, but due to the copious amounts of other tasks, this is not always possible.

Pressures from others also caused stress for the participants. For example, they reported that parents expected special education teachers to provide assistance with homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization. Autumn explained this expectation placed further burden on the participants by stating, "Most often, parents assume I'm going to help their child on homework. At IEP meetings, they (the parents) are mostly concerned about grades and homework. That is what they typically focus on." Christi commented, "There is a lot of pressure from parents and general education teachers to complete homework in the resource room. It's their perception that we're a study hall."

Additionally, general education teachers had the same expectation and sent students to the resource room frequently and without notification. Inconsistencies in students dropping in and out of the resource room throughout the day produced further stress. Kyle supported this notion by stating:

General education teachers send students down to my room all of the time. I like that they do this, but it does add to the commotion of my room. Often, I'm the only adult in the room, and I'm teaching functional math or English, and there are several other students working on different assignments from class. It's hard to stay on top of each student and their assignments.

Kathy added, "Most of the (general education) teachers I work with think I can help all students with every assignment. I'm not an expert in all content areas." To assist with these difficulties, one research study recommended collaborating and consulting with other professionals to define the guidelines of the resource room and to determine policies and practices (Heacox, 2002).

Finally, the participants noted frustrations associated with their role as special educators including lack of appropriate curriculum materials and paperwork. Kyle shared his frustration with the lack of age-appropriate materials available for secondary students. He stated, "It's very frustrating. There are not many ready-made programs for the secondary level. There are many for elementary school, but it's hard to find a lower level program that is age appropriate for high schoolers." Kyle mentioned another frustration regarding available materials. He noted:

It's hard to make a junior (in high school) work on strategies he's had since he was in elementary school. Sometimes, their reading level hasn't increased enough over the years so they often have to keep doing the same things they've been doing forever.

Schloss et al. (2007) supported Kyle's statements regarding secondary instructional materials. They reported two types of problems concerning materials for secondary special education programs which included:

First, the instructional materials may have been intended for elementary students with special needs. Whether such materials are appropriate for older students is highly questionable. In any case, secondary learners will have already been exposed to these materials. Second, some material may have been originally designed for regular secondary education students. Therefore, it may not address relevant concepts, be written at an appropriate reading level, or provide the amount of practice required by secondary students with special needs. (pp. 19-20)

Additionally, Conderman and Katsiyannas (2002) supported the need for age-appropriate curricula and materials at the secondary level for students with disabilities referring to Meese's work (1992) suggesting students require specialized reading materials aimed to meet their needs and interests.

Another frustration mentioned by a majority of the participants was special education paperwork. While discussing special education paperwork, Jill contended, "Paperwork is so frustrating. It's ever-changing which makes it difficult to stay on top of it to help kids." Christi shared a similar comment about paperwork stating, "Special education paperwork is always changing. It's like hitting a moving target."

After surveying secondary special educators, Conderman and Katsiyannas (2002) found that paperwork was a source of stress and frustration for secondary special education teachers. They reported, "Nearly 80% of the respondents indicated that they

developed IEPs, wrote lesson plans, conducted assessments, and scheduled and attended IEP meetings” (p. 172).

**Theme four.** There are factors (e.g., parental and environmental) that are beyond the school walls and the special education teachers’ control. These factors affect special education teachers’ roles on a daily basis.

The student’s home environment definitely impacts their school performance. If a student has parents that are involved, they get support at home to complete homework, study for tests, and stay organized. So many of my students do not have this support, and it has to be given somewhere and by someone. Oftentimes, this falls on me. – Christi, Secondary Special Education Teacher

The participants stated there were outside influences including students’ home lives, work, friends, and extracurricular activities that affected their roles as special education teachers. Kathy commented on her frustration with parents adding, “A major frustration I have is a lack of accountability parents have for their kids. So many of the parents don’t encourage their kids to do their homework. This makes my job much tougher.” Kyle noted the importance of a supportive home life for students:

So many of my students come from single parent homes. I would guess about 90% of my students do. Not that it’s bad to be a single parent, but often there are many things that go on behind the scenes that lead to it. A student’s home life is so important. The more structure there is at home, the better it is for a student.

The notion of a structured home life positively impacting students’ performance was supported by Heacox (2002) and Mitra (2006). Mitra (2006) claimed that supportive parents and a structured home life benefit children, teachers, and the overall functioning

of a school. Similarly, Heacox found “students’ backgrounds and home lives have a profound impact on their school performance. You can’t assume that all students have similar home environments or the same opportunities outside of the classroom” (p. 8).

Additionally, three of the participants relayed the importance of student and/or parent(s) ownership on learning. In order to successfully accomplish their jobs, four of the participants stated they would like to place more ownership of student learning and success back on the student and/or parent(s). This would free up time to work on academic and behavioral goals. Christi shared a conflict regarding student ownership of homework she encounters regularly by stating, “There’s a fine line when helping students with homework. I never want to work harder than they do, but oftentimes that’s their expectation.” Heacox (2002) reinforced the contention of student and/or parent(s) ownership on learning. She claimed that students are highly influenced by family values and attitudes towards learning which is often carried over into the school setting.

**Theme five.** Effective special education teachers have skills that are both instinctive and a result of specialized training.

I believe it takes special skills to work in the resource room. We incorporate so many things into our instruction in addition to academics that not every teacher can do. – Autumn, Secondary Special Education Teacher

Two of the participants believed they instinctively possess a special skill set or aptitude for working with students who struggle academically and behaviorally. One of them believed they obtained their skills through undergraduate and graduate coursework, yet three believed it is a combination of the two. Five of the participants believed not all educators possess the skills to work in a resource room setting. When thinking about

general education teachers' skills for working with students who struggle academically or behaviorally, Kathy surmised:

I don't think most teachers would understand the needs of these students. I think most would teach it once or twice and would assume that all students get it. A lot of my kids need it at least three different ways and sometimes more. These kids need more assistance.

Malikow (2005-2006) supported this statement by claiming, "Exceptional teachers are born with personality characteristics that are developed by experience and enhanced by specific information that only education can provide" (p. 1). Malikow's statement supported the thoughts of five of the participants: Teaching students with disabilities came naturally to them.

All of the participants stated one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of their job was the relationships built with students. The participants shared stories about getting students to do things no other teachers could. The ability to build a positive relationship with students was critical when helping them not only pass their classes, but also when working on academic and behavioral goals. However, four of the participants stated that no teacher can reach all children no matter how talented. Beth supported the importance of building positive relationships. She laughingly stated:

Yes, I have gotten certain students to do things no other teacher could get them to do. I got one of my "tough guys" to act in a one-act play for English class. I don't think anyone else could've talked him into that! It's all because we had a solid relationship.



Marzano (2007) supported the importance of building relationships with students by stating, “The quality of relationships teachers have with students is the key-stone of effective management and perhaps even the entirety of teaching” (p. 149).

When analyzing the data from the individual interviews, the completed self-reports, and the focus group interview, the category of perspectives of secondary special education teachers regarding their profession emerged. A majority of the participants referred to conflicting professional roles, balancing the number of professional duties they were required to perform, the tasks contributing to occupational stress, and methods for building professional success such as building relationships, providing support, and special skills and aptitude. In addition to these factors regarding their professional role, a second category emerged identifying actual practices of secondary special education teachers. Three themes emerged under the category of special education teachers’ practices from the sub-categories of instructional practices, the use of strategies, and building success.

### **Special Education Teachers’ Practices**

**Theme one.** Special education teachers must maintain a balance of instructional practices to meet IEP goals and assist students with their homework.

I do so much more than *just* completing homework. I’m teaching them how to be students within themselves. I teach them self-advocacy and self-determination along with many other skills while completing homework. Things that are so important but aren’t measured on a test. – Kyle, Secondary Special Education Teacher

There are a number of instructional practices in which secondary special education teachers must demonstrate expertise including the implementation of interventions while working on IEP goals using both research-based and teacher-developed strategies, assisting students with various assignments from all academic areas, monitoring and charting student progress toward IEP goals, and providing accommodations and modifications to general education classes and coursework to meet students' individual needs.

As previously stated when discussing role conflict, the participants faced professional conflict on a daily basis. Do they work on goals as stated in the student's IEP or complete assignments required to pass classes? These two instructional practices are a major source of conflict. Kathy contended she does far more than homework when assisting students with assignments. She stated:

I wish I had more time to work on research-based strategies. Most days, I help kids with homework. It goes deeper than filling in answers though. I spend a lot of time pre-teaching or re-teaching. I have to be really flexible because kids are dropping in and out of my room all day.

Hock et al. (2000) realized secondary special education teachers encounter many conflicts within their professional roles. They found that secondary special education teachers struggle to help students with disabilities keep up with their homework and improve academic and behavioral skills through the use of strategy instruction.

Additionally, Marzano (2007) recommended homework should be carefully considered and structured to ensure high completion rates, have a well-articulated purpose, relate directly to overall learning goals, appropriately involve parents and/or

guardians, and most importantly to students with disabilities, be designed so that students can perform the assignments independently.

Marzano's recommendations offered great insight into the dilemmas secondary students with disabilities face in regards to homework. Frequently, these factors are not considered by general education teachers when assigning homework to students with disabilities; therefore, the students with disabilities and secondary special education teachers must deal with the fallout from incomplete assignments, disorganization, a lack of adequate academic skills, and failure to pass courses and meet graduation requirements.

Tutoring is historically a controversial topic in the field of secondary special education. The question is, "Are special education teachers 'teachers' or 'tutors'?" The six research participants all stated they are far more than a tutor. When considering tutoring in secondary special education, Kyle surmised, "I feel badly for those who think they are just tutors. That is not what it should be! I would quit teaching if I ever got to that point." Kathy agreed with Kyle's statements regarding tutoring stating, "What I do goes way deeper than tutoring. I am a counselor, a therapist, a mom, a teacher, and a confidant. I guess the biggest part of it is building the relationships with my kids." Christi further supported the notion of a special education teacher's job being more than tutoring adding:

I suppose I feel like a tutor sometimes, but what I do goes way deeper than that. I am always using some type of strategy like pointing out bold-faced words, showing them how to use the index and the glossary, or using a comprehension strategy. I was a tutor in college. What I do isn't much different than that. As a

tutor, I had to help students with all of these things too. Again, you need to teach them “how to learn.”

Kyle, Kathy, and Christi’s perspectives regarding tutoring are supported by Hock et al. (2000) in a tutoring process called Strategic Tutoring. The authors claimed that a tutor needs to assist students with homework completion while incorporating research-based strategies. They believe this will allow students to complete future assignments with automaticity due to the newly learned strategies.

**Theme two.** Special education teachers used a combination of teacher-developed strategies and research-based strategies with teacher-developed strategies being used more frequently than research-based strategies in the resource room setting.

I work hard to link strategies to assignments. I’ve really gotten away from canned lessons for the whole group. I try to individualize as much as I can. I am trying to get away from the kids being so dependent on me. – Jill, Secondary Special Education Teacher

Due to legislation such as NCLB (2001) and IDEA (1997 and 2004), students with disabilities are receiving more and more instruction within the general education curriculum (Conderman & Pedersen, 2007; Eisenman et al., 2010; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009). As a result, research-based strategies are recommended for secondary students with disabilities to assist them in building necessary skills to be successful in these environments.

Christi described her use of a combination of research-based strategies and teacher-developed strategies:

I use mnemonic devices such as HOMES (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior). I also use silly sentences, flashcards with pictures, and repetition. Some of the things I use, I made up. Others I was taught or things I use when learning and studying. You have to teach them “how to learn.”

Kyle described some of the strategies he used as “informal” and shared several specific examples:

I use informal strategies the most by far. I teach them things that they can generalize into all classes such as using the headings and subheadings in textbooks, comprehension strategies when completing assigned reading, bold-faced words, and help with completing sentences.

Autumn added a number of “informal” strategies she uses when she works with students; she claimed she always does many of the same things. First, she gets the facts about an assignment by asking who the teacher is and what his/her expectations are, by discussing due dates and time management with the student, and assisting the student with processing the reality of the assignment so they understand the teacher’s expectations. Additionally, she spends a lot of time de-escalating situations because her students have many emotional problems.

Kathy described her teacher-developed strategies by stating when she assists students with assignments she always does more than filling in answers. She commented, “We use cue words, hidden words in the questions, work on vocabulary, note-taking skills, and I’m always reminding, asking questions, and prompting them. It’s endless.”

All of the participants believed research-based strategies are crucial in secondary special education; however, all of them contended it is difficult to consistently include research-based strategies into a resource room setting. Jill, the only participant who successfully integrated research-based strategies into her resource room setting on a daily basis, explained how she was able to do this:

I get research-based strategies into a resource room every day for the first 15 minutes; however, it would be great to have a separate class for them. It would be great to have a study hall period and a skills course so students could get assistance with homework and tests plus work on their IEP goals. Then LRE (least restrictive environment) becomes a concern. Nothing is ever easy.

Smith, Gartin, and Murdick (2012) supported the idea of teaching students with disabilities to become more confident, independent learners. They noted the importance of teaching secondary students with disabilities strategies due to the greater academic demands placed on secondary students. The authors further suggested that schools are responsible to teach these strategies which can be beneficial to secondary students and their transition to adult life.

The other five participants reported inconsistently implementing research-based strategies into their resource classes, but in each of these school settings, there were either functional classes or specialized classes where research-based strategies could be implemented on a daily basis. In the rural communities, Clinton and Kennedy High Schools, students with disabilities who were unable to successfully complete general education courses in math and English were placed into functional math and functional English classes where various research-based strategies were implemented to meet the

needs of the students. In the more urban schools, Lincoln and Washington High Schools, students with needs in the areas of reading and writing were placed into specialized courses that included research-based strategies to improve the students' academic deficiencies. Lincoln High School's specialized courses were called Read and Write I, II, and III. The courses at Lincoln were leveled and students could move onto the next course when they mastered the skills at a lower leveled course. Washington High School called their specialized courses Academic Skills classes. Again, various strategies were used to increase the reading and writing skills of students with disabilities. Beth supported using both study hall type settings where students worked on homework and specialized classes where students worked on IEP goals to reach the needs of all students. She stated, "Research-based strategies are very important, but can be difficult to get into a resource room. They are best used in specialized classes."

Bender (2008) defined various special education placement models including self-contained classes, resource rooms, and inclusive classes. All of the participants described their specific settings as inclusive. Most of their students were scheduled into the resource room at least one period of the day. The resource room time had various names including tutorial, special education study hall, study hall, choices, and study skills. Yet, each participant defined their resource room class in a relatively similar manner. Four of the six participants primarily worked on homework assignments, test preparation, and overall organization. Jill reported teaching research-based strategies such as Read Naturally and Fast Math for the first 15 minutes of each 50 minute class; the remaining time was then spent on homework assignments, test preparation, and

overall organization, and Christi primarily worked on district level reading and writing activities designed to improve state test scores.

In addition to the resource room classes, five of the six participants reported having “pull-out” type classes. In the smaller schools, several students received their math and English instruction in functional type settings where research-based strategies were implemented. In the larger schools, students with disabilities unable to participate in the regular math and English curriculum were placed in lower level general education classes typically co-taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Two of the three larger schools offered specialized classes in reading, writing, and/or math in addition to the co-taught courses where research-based strategies were implemented to meet the students’ unique needs. All six participants reported having a class period, or a portion of a class period, in the resource room where students were able to receive assistance on homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization. All participants contended this time was essential for student success. Beth mentioned her administrators were thinking about removing special education study halls from the schedule for the 2012-2013 school year. She was very concerned about this because she was able to meet many different student needs during study hall. Additionally, Beth did not believe all of her students’ needs could be met within specialized classes and general education classes. Additionally, Kyle claimed he believed the combination of the functional classes and the drop-in resource time was invaluable to student success.

Chalmers and Wasson (1993) recommended empowering secondary students with disabilities by directly teaching them organizational, note-taking, and test-taking skills, appropriate general education classroom behaviors, and self-advocacy and



self-determination skills. The six research participants relayed anecdotes during the interview sessions detailing the instruction of these skills to their students. Autumn claimed using more informal, in the moment strategies were most effective for her. She reported, “I don’t use a set curriculum. I use ‘in the moment’ strategies.” Beth agreed with Autumn’s use of in the moment strategies by describing “kids don’t want to be taught specific strategies. You have to teach them these skills in a roundabout way.” Kyle agreed with both Beth and Autumn stating, “Students are afraid to fail, so they are afraid to try. It’s my job to get them to see some success. Once they see a little success it builds on it.”

Sabornie and deBettencourt (2009) referenced Polloway, Patton, and Serna (2008) and Deschler, Ellis, and Lenz (1996) by noting the usage of study skills at the secondary level. All of these authors recommended implementing research-based strategies to teach students with disabilities necessary study skills. Secondary students without disabilities are able to improve and build their study skills through experimentation; however, direct instruction is recommended for students with disabilities.

Although the participants believed implementing teacher-developed strategies was effective in their instructional practices with students, Conderman and Katsiyannis (2002) referred to Vaughn et al. (2000) disputing this belief and the use of teacher-developed strategies. The authors offered evidence to show that, at times, teachers implemented instructional practices that were more comfortable to them rather than implementing instructional practices that were scientifically-based. These teacher-developed instructional practices “may not be linked to practice” (p. 170) and are proven less effective.

The controversy over the implementation of teacher-developed strategies and research-based strategies caused the participants to feel a sense of a lack of accomplishment. The participants expressed the desire to meet all of the needs of secondary students with disabilities; however, there are a number of extenuating circumstances (e.g., completing the large amounts of required special education paperwork; facilitating and attending special education meetings; assisting students with homework, test preparation and organization; assisting general education teachers with modifying assignments and tests; and co-teaching) that serve as roadblocks on this journey.

**Theme three.** In order to achieve student success, special education teachers need to provide support, as well as build positive relationships with students.

I love what I do and the students notice it. It helps to build relationships with them. They'll do more for me than anyone else. – Kyle, Secondary Special Education Teacher

Building success for students was an important perspective of the participants' role as special education teachers, but the participants also stressed the importance of building success within their instructional practices. As mentioned previously by the participants, building positive relationships with students was of the utmost importance. Four of the participants stated that relationships often develop naturally; however, there were two participants who discussed putting forth effort to build these relationships. For example, Kathy mentioned spending free time on Fridays playing board games or visiting casually with students to get to know them more personally. Kyle shared that he often talked to students about their interests such as school dances, students' friends, racing

cars, sports, hunting, and fishing. This helped to “soften the edges of their relationship beyond school and school work.”

Marzano (2007) found that teachers need to think of teachers’ behaviors rather than teachers’ thoughts and/or feelings in order to build and maintain positive relationships with students. He also noted that this is especially important when teaching students with disabilities.

Providing support to the students was another major factor noted by all of the participants. Christi stated in regards to providing support, “There are so many things I do beyond academics. I help kids with their coping skills, home problems, problems with friends, and much, much more.” Kathy described her methods when providing support to students: “What I do goes way deeper than tutoring. I am a counselor, a therapist, a mom, a teacher, and a confidant. I guess the biggest part of it is building the relationships with my kids.”

Vaughn and Bos (2012) supported the idea that students with disabilities require additional academic support particularly in their area of disability. The authors went on to suggest this academic support can be implemented in a variety of settings including a resource room, a specialized class, or in the general education classroom.

Similar to the secondary special education teachers’ perspectives of their professional role that emerged while analyzing the data, secondary special education teachers’ perceptions regarding their practices emerged as well. The practices performed by the participants included the actions taken to build student success, the actual teaching methods implemented, and the use of research-based and teacher-developed strategies.

## **Summary**

Chapter III presented the data and corresponding literature regarding the perspectives of the participants regarding their professional roles and practices.

Chapter IV, the culminating chapter, will include a description of the three overall assertions gleaned from the data analysis. In addition, a summary, concluding comments, and recommendations will also be included in this final chapter.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Summary**

According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), qualitative research methods are “gratifying and serve as testimony to their value in the exploration and documentation of diverse social worlds and social practices” (p. 11). This study implemented a multitude of data collection methods including individual interviews, self-reports, and a focus group interview. The data were then analyzed; two categories and eight sub-categories materialized through this process. Corresponding themes were then developed to further explain the phenomena of this research study.

This study focused on the conflicting roles of secondary special education teachers when assisting students with disabilities. The general question that guided this qualitative research study was: What are the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers in regards to working on student (IEP) goals while also working on homework completion, test preparation, and organization? Chapter I provided an in depth introduction to the field of secondary special education, the changing role of special education teachers, and the role conflict secondary special education teachers experience. Additionally, the overall purpose and significance of the study, the overarching research question, the conceptual framework guiding the research

process, the bias of the researcher, and a clarification of terminology used throughout the study were included.

Chapter II was comprised of a description of the qualitative methods that were employed while researching the perspectives and practices of secondary special education teachers. The specific phenomenological data collection methods (i.e., individual interviews, self-reports, focus group interview) were discussed as well. A description of the research participants, along with the selection criteria, and the measures used to protect their anonymity were also included. Finally, the procedures used to maintain validity were described.

Chapter III presented the data collected from the individual interviews, the self-reports completed by the participants, and the focus group interview along with evidence from the literature that either supported or refuted the findings. Furthermore, narratives and specific quotes from the participants were used to detail the findings.

### **Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative research study consisted of six participants; five were secondary special education teachers and one was a secondary speech-language pathologist. Five of the participants were female and one was male; all were in varying stages of their career. Additionally, all had differing educational backgrounds, areas of endorsement, and taught in various educational environments.

An individual interview format was used to gather the data. In addition, further data were gleaned from the participants' self-reports and a focus group interview. The participants' responses were coded and grouped into clusters. Two categories appeared: special education teachers' perspectives and special education teachers' practices. Once

the categories were defined, eight sub-categories emerged: five under the first category of special education teachers' perspectives (i.e., role conflict, balance of duties, stressors, outside influences, and building successes) and three under the second category of special education teachers' practices (i.e., instructional practices, use of strategies, and building success). From the sub-categories, eight themes emerged that provided specific descriptions of the participants' experiences (see Chapter III). The eight themes developed into three overarching assertions.

### **Assertions**

#### **Assertion One: Providing Support and Building Positive Relationships With Students Are Critical to Special Education Teachers' Ability to Maximize Student Success**

The term support was used by the participants in a variety of contexts including assisting students with homework, test preparation, and overall organization. It was also used to describe the role of the participants in the general education classroom. The participants described opportunities to collaborate and consult with general education teachers as providing support to their general education counterparts; support was further described as assisting general education teachers with both general knowledge and specific questions concerning secondary students with disabilities. Finally, the participants used the term support to clarify how they build positive relationships with students with disabilities, which in turn offers additional support to their students.

The Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) is an innovative program established in 2008 in New York City which seeks to provide support to students with disabilities within the general education classroom. Additionally,

consultation with the students' general education teachers is also provided within this program. This program is specifically designed to provide both direct and indirect support. Direct services support is defined as:

Specially designed instruction and/or supplementary instruction delivered by a special education teacher through individual and/or small group instruction to provide the student with compensatory skill development and remediation activities. They address the areas of deficit that have been identified for that student and strengthen the student's cognitive skills. Direct Services are provided to address educational needs directly related to the student's disability and not to provide additional academic instruction. (*Special Education Teacher*, 2012, "Direct and Indirect Services," para. 2)

Whereas indirect services support is defined as:

Collaborative consultation between the special education teacher and the general education teacher which focuses on adjusting the learning environment and/or modifying and adapting instructional techniques and methods to meet the individual needs of the student in the general education classroom. Agreed-upon strategies are delivered by the special education teacher and/or the general education teacher. (*Special Education Teacher*, 2012, "Direct and Indirect Services," para. 3)

These definitions offer further clarification of the variety of means in which secondary special education teachers provide support within their professional roles.

All of the secondary special education teachers in this research study stated one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of their job was the relationships



built with students. The participants shared anecdotes regarding this important task. Some of the participants contended the relationships come naturally while others put forth effort to do so; yet others stressed the importance of both methods to build relationships with students due to the fact that not all students are easy to reach.

The participants stressed the importance of a positive relationship between them and their students with disabilities, the importance of which is supported by the 2010 Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Ethical Principles for Special Education Professionals. First, secondary students with disabilities frequently have not had positive school experiences; for example, school has often been difficult for them so it is viewed as a negative place. Next, students with disabilities commonly display inappropriate behaviors, so they often experience disciplinary actions from both the administration and teachers. Finally, a number of students with disabilities do not have the social skills necessary to build positive relationships with peers and adults; this leads to a lack of positive interactions with others. These experiences can lead to negative feelings and thoughts towards school. Lenz, Deshler, and Kissam (2004) referred to this concept as a filter. They described a filter as “a lens for viewing the world. This filter is influenced by our past experiences, our attitudes, our beliefs” (p. 141). If students with disabilities are able to build long lasting, positive relationships with their special education teachers, their attitudes and beliefs about school and their potential for success could be greatly impacted.

**Assertion Two: Secondary Special Education Teachers Believe the Use of Research-Based Strategies Is Effective and Important. Teacher-Developed Strategies, Which Either Come With Special Education Training and/or Come Instinctively, Must Be Implemented As Well**

Oftentimes, it is perceived in education that secondary special education teachers do not provide special education to their students; rather, they are perceived as providing tutoring to assist their students to pass required courses. All of the participants disputed this perception. They stressed that although a major aspect of their job is assisting students with homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization, they complete these tasks while implementing teacher-developed strategies. Gordon et al. (2004) defined tutoring as helping students with their basic skills, daily homework, and the process of “learning how to learn.” This definition is similar to that of a special education teacher which is defined as teachers who work with students with a wide range of disabilities. They ensure that lessons and teaching strategies are modified to meet the students’ needs (*Special Education Teachers*, 2012). Essentially, both tutors and special education teachers focus on their students’ unique needs, reinforcing areas of weakness through interventions such as research-based strategy instruction and informal teacher-developed strategies. Additionally, tutors and special education teachers focus on teaching students “how to learn.”

The secondary special education teachers in this study stressed the importance of assisting students with homework, test preparation, and overall organization for several reasons. First, five of the participants stated the majority of their students with disabilities do not receive academic support at home. Academic support must be

provided in order for the students to have success. Next, although some general education teachers attempt to meet the needs of a variety of learners within their classes, this task is oftentimes challenging, resulting in additional difficulties for students with disabilities. For example, instruction, assignments, and assessments provided in the general education classroom might not meet students with disabilities needs. Chalmers (2000) recommended students with disabilities can learn and be successful in the general education classroom if modifications are made; she further contended modifications can lead to student success which in turn leads to improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and improved behavior. A number of these modifications can originate with the general education teacher directly. Finally, secondary students with disabilities frequently do not possess the skills necessary to learn; hence, they need to be taught how to learn.

The participants felt as though this task falls on them. Students with disabilities often need to be taught how to use a textbook appropriately, how to complete writing tasks effectively, how to process an assignment in order to complete it correctly, how to comprehend the meaning and purpose of the assignment, and how to complete an assignment. Oftentimes, students without disabilities are able to understand and complete these tasks independently or with minimal support from general education teachers or parents; however, these tasks are considerable roadblocks for a number of secondary students with disabilities. The participants felt passionately about the provision of this type of support in order for their students with disabilities to successfully complete high school.

In addition to the implementation of teacher-developed strategies, all of the participants stressed the importance of using research-based strategies as well. CEC

supported this practice by stating special education should include “evidence, instructional data, research and professional knowledge to inform practice” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2010, para. 1). Jill, the only participant who felt she was able to successfully incorporate research-based strategies regularly, attributed it to several factors including the provision of parental support at home and the provision of administrative support at school. The remaining five participants stated that research-based strategies were being implemented in non-resource room settings such as functional or specialized classes.

Smith et al. (2012) stated, “With the ability to use strategies, many students with disabilities can become independent learners” (p. 185). Hock et al. (2000) recommended incorporating the process of Strategic Tutoring within a resource room setting. Strategic Tutoring is described as “the teaching of skills and strategies that support learner independence (Hock, 1998). That is, in Strategic Tutoring, tutors teach strategies using proven instructional methods *while* helping students complete their assignments” (p. 2). Smith et al. (2012) referenced Deshler’s (2005) claim that the use of research-based strategies is paramount to the overall success of students with disabilities and gives them the skills and strategies required to complete content area assignments. Research supported the notion that the implementation of research-based strategies is imperative to the success of students with disabilities.

**Assertion Three: In Order to Pass Classes and Make Progress Towards IEP Goals, a Special Education Teacher Must Maintain a Balance**

Secondary special education teachers must accomplish the tasks of working on IEP goals and assisting students with passing classes. They feel the pressure to meet the

expectations of students, parents, general education teachers, building administrators, and special education administrators. There are numerous roles that fall under a secondary special education teacher's job description. These include teaching students with disabilities, co-teaching, paperwork completion, strategy instruction, facilitating and attending meetings, conducting assessments, collaborating and consulting with general education teachers, communicating between home and school as well as communicating between school and outside agencies, assisting with transition to postsecondary life, providing accommodations and modifications, and providing homework assistance.

The participants upheld they must be able to complete all of these tasks effectively and efficiently; the best method to do so is to maintain a balance. They must systematically prioritize tasks and develop a personal system based on school policies, suggestions, and practices of other special education professionals, and their personal instructional style.

Wasburn-Moses (2005) contended, "Special education teachers are often overburdened with multiple and sometimes competing responsibilities" (p. 151). In order to successfully complete the myriad of responsibilities, special education teachers must maintain a healthy balance of their duties. To help accomplish this, reformation in the field of special education must occur. Wasburn-Moses further stipulated, "If special education programs do require teachers to be the jacks of all trades, they will indeed be the masters of none" (p. 157). The participants of this study developed personal and professional systems in order to accomplish the multitude of required tasks; however, a large number of them made reference to the fact that there is not enough time in the day to successfully accomplish all tasks which led to a sense of a lack of accomplishment.

## **Conclusions**

Examining the perspectives and practices of the six participants of this qualitative research study allowed me to affirm my beliefs regarding secondary special education while gaining additional insight into the field. First, secondary special education teachers have a multitude of conflicting roles and responsibilities to complete on a daily basis; however, they often develop coping mechanisms to accomplish these tasks. Second, working on IEP goals is an important task of secondary special education teachers. This can be accomplished in a variety of settings including functional or specialized classes, general education classrooms, and resource room study hall classes. Third, assisting students with homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization is a task imperative to the success of secondary students with disabilities.

Fourth, including a tiered approach when providing special education services is ideal. For example, in both smaller, rural schools and larger, urban schools, general education classes meet the needs of the majority of the students. Larger schools often times have lower level classes co-taught by both a general education teacher and a special education teacher to meet the needs of learners that require additional support. Typically, these classes meet graduation requirements. Often, smaller schools do not have the means to support these lower leveled classes leaving students with disabilities to participate in the general education classroom with modifications or to receive instruction from a special education teacher in a functional type class. Students with disabilities earn credit towards graduation through their participation in these functional classes which are based on individual needs identified in their IEP. Commonly, larger schools include specialized classes where students with disabilities receive additional instruction in

academic areas such as math, reading, and writing; frequently, students earn elective credits towards graduation in these classes. Research-based strategies are often utilized in both the functional classes and the specialized classes. In both the smaller, rural schools and larger, urban schools, a combination of functional or specialized classes and study hall type classes where students with disabilities receive assistance with homework, test preparation, and overall organization is most effective.

Fifth, although the term tutoring has a negative connotation in the field of special education, when closely examined effective tutoring and effective special education services are similar. In both tutoring and special education, instructional assistance is provided to a student or a group of students based on their individual learning needs. Frequent and ongoing assessment and progress monitoring is essential in the success of both tutoring and special education. Finally, effective tutors and effective special education teachers empower students by teaching them “how to learn.”

### **Recommendations**

Given the importance of the role of secondary special education teachers, recommendations are provided in four areas: recommendations for teacher education programs, recommendations for educational administration programs, recommendations for secondary level schools and secondary administrators, and recommendations for future research.

#### **Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs**

University programs must include specific content in their special education teacher preparation programs regarding secondary special education. It is imperative to

include specific research-based strategies and teacher-developed strategies in methods courses; additionally, the planning for and implementation of a well-designed secondary resource room should also be addressed. Data collection procedures, progress monitoring techniques, and assessment procedures to be used specifically with secondary students with disabilities should be emphasized within an assessment course. Finally, the numerous roles of a secondary special education teacher should be introduced and discussed throughout the pre-service teacher's entire program of study.

### **Recommendations for Educational Administration Programs**

Educational administration programs must do a better job of preparing future school administrators regarding special education issues. First, all educational administration candidates must be educated in special education law. They must clearly understand the law and be able to effectively use this knowledge as needed. In addition, administrator candidates must be taught that it is their responsibility to support special education teachers (e.g., providing prep time, providing support for paperwork completion, providing support in difficult situations with general education teachers and/or parents). Next, educational administration candidates must be trained in specific techniques to assist in de-escalating difficult behaviors. Finally, it must be stressed in educational administration programs that school administrators empower students with disabilities by expecting all teachers, including general education and special education, meet students' needs by making modifications and accommodations and differentiating their instruction.



## **Recommendations for Secondary Level Schools and Secondary Administrators**

Secondary level schools should provide time in a resource room setting where students with disabilities are able to work on homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization. Additional functional and/or specialized classes must also be implemented incorporating research-based strategies based on the individual needs and IEP goals of the students. A combination of this type of specialized programming would meet all the needs of secondary students with disabilities, while providing time to build crucial positive relationships with secondary special education teachers.

Secondary administrators should provide special education teachers sufficient preparation and planning time in addition to ample collaboration and consultation time with general education teachers and other educational team members; this preparation and planning time should be based on the severity of the students' academic and behavioral needs, number of students with disabilities on a special education teacher's caseload, and the number of additional duties a special education teacher must complete on a daily basis. This time must be carefully considered and thought of as a way to enhance education of students with disabilities rather than "down time" of special education teachers. Without adequate time to plan, prepare, collaborate, and consult, special education teachers cannot effectively meet students' individual and unique needs. Additionally, this time would allow special education teachers an opportunity to balance the numerous professional duties they face on a daily basis.

In addition to preparation and planning time, building administrators should provide staff support for assisting special education teachers with the large amounts of

required paperwork that must be completed on behalf of students with disabilities. Support staff could assist with prior notices to parents, scheduling meetings, taking minutes at meetings, and other duties that would assist the special education teacher.

Secondary administrators must also provide adequate faculty and staff to support the needs of students with disabilities. The number of special education teachers, paraprofessionals, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school psychologists, behavior specialists, as well as other professionals, must be carefully considered by building level principals and special education administrators to fully meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Finally, schools and school administrators should consider helping to educate parents on how to support their children in school. This should begin long before the student enters high school; however, it is imperative it continues at the secondary level. The expectations and requirements of high school students are more rigorous and vastly different than that of elementary and middle schools. Schools need to support parents in helping their children be successful at this level. Providing in-services and workshops for parents would be beneficial.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Due to the small group of research participants and the small geographical region of the study, there is a need for further research to gain insight into the challenges secondary special education teachers from other geographic areas face regarding the conflicting roles of homework completion and working on IEP goals. As clearly stated by several of the participants, special education is constantly evolving. Due to this

constant evolution, research should be ongoing to stay apprised of the current issues and trends regarding the roles of secondary special education teachers.

### **Personal Reflection**

Having taught secondary special education for nearly a decade, this topic is very important to me. Throughout my tenure as a special education teacher, I often felt the “pull” between what I should do, according to research and administrators, and what I believed my students needed from me. As I became more experienced, I began to work on IEP goals that allowed me to assist my students with homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization, based on their individual needs, while, at the same time, improving skills noted in their IEP goals. Through this qualitative research study, I set out to discover other secondary special education teachers’ perceptions regarding this topic. I was amazed to discover, no matter school size or location, all of the participants held similar beliefs as mine.

All of the participants developed their own strategies to assist students with various disabilities. It was interesting to me that none of these strategies were taught; the teachers learned these skills intuitively and/or instinctively. I was pleased to discover the most important factor to all of the participants, and to me, was the students and their success. The conclusions of this study confirmed my long-term belief. Secondary students with disabilities require a number of elements to be successful with the most important being a caring, passionate special education teacher who is willing to use a variety of techniques, some proven effective by research and others proven effective by special education teachers, to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A**  
**Study Information Sheet**

TITLE: The Secondary Shuffle: Special Educators as Tutors, Teachers, or Both  
PROJECT DIRECTOR: Amy Jacobson  
PHONE #: 701-212-9904  
DEPARTMENT: Teaching and Learning

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

You are invited to be in a research study about secondary special educators' perspectives and practices regarding resource rooms because you work at the secondary level as a special education teacher. The purpose of this research study is to shed light on the roles and responsibilities of a secondary special educator as well as the conflict they face on a daily basis when deciding to work on students' Individualized Education Program goals and objectives or homework completion, test preparation, and overall organization.

Approximately 4-6 people will take part in this study at the University of North Dakota. Public school special educators will participate in this study. Two of the special educators will be employed at a larger urban school in the Fargo, North Dakota area; two special education teachers will be employed at a small rural school located within 70 miles of Fargo. Interviews with the teachers will be completed on an individualized basis in a setting outside of the school in which the participants are employed. Focus groups involving the participants will also be implemented.

Your participation in the study will last 3 months. You will need to travel to the private interview location 1-2 times. The focus group will also be held in a private location outside of the schools one time. Each visit will take about 2 hours.

Individual interviews will be held at a location outside of the school grounds. This will occur after school hours or on the weekend. Upon completion of the interview, you will be asked to self-report on your roles and responsibilities while working with students for a two week period. This will provide additional data for the researcher which will be useful to determine how you are spending your actual instruction time and what activities you are actually working on. When all of the subjects have been interviewed, you will be invited to participate in a focus group consisting of all the participants that will be held in a private location off school grounds. When the initial interviews, self-reports, and focus groups are complete, a second, follow-up interview might be held if the researcher has

further questions. You are free to skip any question or activity you are uncomfortable with.

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this study. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants, pseudonyms will be utilized to identify interview and focus group individuals as well as the schools in which the special educators teach. Areas of licensure will also be generalized to further protect the participants.

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, potentially, other special education teachers could benefit from this study because information will be gleaned on the role conflict and role ambiguity secondary special educators face on a daily basis. Light will be shed on what is “best practice” in these situations.

You will not have any costs for being in this research study. You will not be paid for being in this research study. The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of interview notes and journals will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home. A coding system will be implemented to safeguard all data. No audio or video data will be collected. The researcher will take notes during all interviews. Paper data will be shredded, and electronic data will be deleted. All personal data will be destroyed three years after completion of this research project.

If a report or article is written about this study, the study results will be in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified. The goal is to maintain as much anonymity for participants as possible.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

The researcher conducting this study is Amy Jacobson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Amy Jacobson at 701-212-9904 or [amy.jacobson@email.und.edu](mailto:amy.jacobson@email.und.edu). Dr. Lynne

Chalmers, Amy Jacobson's academic advisor, can be reached at 701-777-3187 or [lynne.chalmers@email.und.edu](mailto:lynne.chalmers@email.und.edu).

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Questions**  
**Secondary Special Educators**

1. How do you spend a typical school day? Do you co-teach? Do you spend time in a resource room? Do you teach content areas to students with disabilities?
2. How big are your typical classes?
3. What types of disabilities areas do you work with?
4. Can students be successful in the general education classroom with support? How much support?
5. How do you handle keeping track of general education classes in your building? Is this important to your students' success?
6. Do you feel comfortable teaching all content areas? Most comfortable? Least comfortable?
7. What is the most frustrating aspect of your job?
8. How do you deal with it?
9. What role does your administration play in your job?
10. What support do general educators provide to students with disabilities?
11. What support do general educators provide to special educators?
12. What support does administration provide to students with disabilities?
13. How do you feel elementary and secondary special education differ?
14. Is there conflict between what you are "supposed" to do as a special education teacher and what you actually do on a daily basis?
15. Are there pressures associated with the role of the secondary special educator in regards to homework completion and graduation requirements?
16. Do you feel like you are a tutor? Do you feel you are using your special education degree and skills? Explain.
17. Are you able to incorporate research-based strategies into your instruction? Describe.



18. Are you able to incorporate other strategies into your instruction? Describe.
19. Are there limitations when focusing solely on IEP goals?
20. Are there benefits when focusing solely on IEP goals?
21. Are there limitations when focusing solely on assignment completion?
22. Are there benefits when focusing solely on assignment completion?
23. Is it possible for a secondary special education teacher complete both the roles of working on IEP goals and homework completion effectively?
24. Are there things you would like to change in secondary special education?
25. Do you feel like general education teachers accommodate their courses to enable students with disabilities to be successful? Describe.
26. If further accommodations could be made, how would it impact your job? Student success?
27. Does a student's home life impact your job? (i.e., parents, employment, child, etc.) Describe.
28. Can general educators improve their instruction to better meet the needs of students with disabilities?
29. What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?

**Appendix C**  
**Secondary Special Education Teacher Self-Report**

Resource Room Activity Log

Teacher's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please document activities you complete when working in a resource room setting for five days. Please include instruction/assistance with any students you work with during the class period. You only need to document activities for one class period per day; however, you can document additional periods if you choose to do so. Activities to record:

1. Teaching an individualized lesson (in a math, reading, English, social skills, etc. class) to a student or a group of students
2. Teaching a learning strategy to a student or group of students (Please note if you taught a strategy while assisting with an assignment or test.)
3. Assisting students with homework completion, test preparation, or organization (Please note if you included any learning strategies.)
4. Reading tests/quizzes
5. Providing assistance with behavior
6. Any other activities associated with students

Day 1

Day 2

Day 3

Day 4

Day 5



## Appendix E Code Book

Code	Clarifying Information	Examples
<p>-Role Conflict</p>	<p>-Differing expectations between SPED administrators and district level administrators                      -Lack of communication between different school entities such as SPED admin and district level admin or GENED and SPED teachers or teachers and counselors                      -Homework vs. IEP goals</p>	<p>"I would love to teach my kids to be better readers, but sometimes there are more pressing issues." Kyle                      "There are so many 'supposed to do's' in special education. You can only get to the top priorities, which is frustrating." Christ                      "I like to work on their IEP goals, but they (the IEP goals) don't get you to pass AYP and the state assessment. Those measure things way above their IEP goals. The things our students need aren't always measured on these things. Their reading and writing skills are oftentimes too low. These assessments ignore what our kids truly need such as self-advocacy. Also, the standards are rarely based on their needs. There's a huge conflict between the kid's needs and the state requirements." Christ                      "It's difficult because we are expected to use research-based strategies within our resource rooms. It's hard because it's not a one size fits all system. The master schedule dictates when our kids are scheduled into our rooms. It's hard to group them with similar areas of needs. Their instruction needs to be individualized. The manageability of scheduling and grouping the kids into similar groups to teach research-based strategies according to needs is difficult to fathom." Autumn                      "Kids want to complete their homework. They are not interested in improving their reading which makes it much more difficult to do. They have to buy into it for gains to be made." Autumn</p>
<p>-Teach Skills vs. Homework Completion</p>	<p>-The "pull" secondary SPED teachers face. Do they work on goals as stated students' IEP or complete assignments required to pass course. This is a major source of conflict.</p>	<p>"There's a fine line when helping students with homework. I never want to work harder than they do, but oftentimes that's their expectation." Christ                      "An equal balance between working on IEP goals and homework completion and organization would be great, but it doesn't happen. We work on homework far more than IEP goals out of necessity." Kyle                      "I do so much more than just completing homework. I'm teaching them how to be students within themselves. I teach them self-advocacy and self-determination along with many other skills while completing homework. Things that are so important but aren't measured on a test." Kyle                      When asked is it possible for a secondary special education teacher complete both the roles of working on IEP goals and homework completion effectively, Kyle responded, "Oh yeah, you better be able to."                      "I wish I had more time to work on research-based strategies. Most days, I help kids with homework. It goes deeper than filling in answers though. I spend a lot of time pre-teaching or re-teaching. I have to be really flexible because kids are dropping in and out of my room all day." Kathy</p>
<p>-Case Management and Caseload</p>	<p>-Case management and caseload is a major component of SPED. The term is rather vague and differs from school to school, and teacher to teacher. Can involve paperwork completion, communication between school and home, skill building, organization assistance, link between school and outside agencies, informal counseling, among other duties.</p>	

Code	Clarifying Information	Examples
-Duties	<p>-Secondary SPED teachers face a diversified number of duties throughout the school week including teaching, co-teaching, paperwork completion, strategy instruction, facilitating meetings, conducting assessments, collaboration and consultation with GENED teachers, communication between home and school as well as communication between school and outside agencies, transitioning students into adult life, providing accommodations and modifications, and homework assistance.</p>	
-Schedule	<p>-The schedule at the high school level can dictate a number of things and can cause a number of conflicts. Certain classes are only offered at certain times which impact a student's schedule significantly. It also affects when SPED teachers and students can work with one another. There are a number of scheduling conflicts daily.</p>	
-Inclusion	<p>-Most secondary students with mild/moderate disabilities are included within the regular education setting most of the day. This causes the conflict between homework completion and IEP goals.</p>	
-Progress Monitoring	<p>-Offers great insight to a student's progress on academic and behavioral goals; however, oftentimes secondary SPED teachers do not feel there are good measurements to use at this level.</p>	<p>"Progress monitoring is a pain. We have to create graphs for everything now; however, it makes me focus on my goals which is very important." Jill</p> <p>"Progress monitoring has placed more on us. Before, if we didn't get to work on reading, it wasn't a big deal. Now we have to." Christi</p> <p>"We have had to create a lot of our own assessments for progress monitoring because AimsWeb only goes to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We have created a PM tool kit using JamesTown Readers and mazes along with a charting and graphing system designed by our special education administration. This has been very helpful because it looks and feels like it's made for high school students." Christi</p> <p>"Even though I'm not using research-based strategies in my resource room, I am helping general education reading teachers. We have secondary reading courses in place for students that struggle with reading that are not currently in SPED. I help these teachers with the research-based strategies and monitoring their progress. I guess it's RTI at our school in a way." Autumn</p>
-Tutoring	<p>-Historically a controversial topic in secondary SPED ed. Are SPED teachers "teachers" or "tutors"?</p>	<p>"What I do goes way deeper than tutoring. I am a counselor, a therapist, a mom, a teacher, and a confidant. I guess the biggest part of it is building the relationships with my kids." Kathy</p> <p>"I suppose I feel like a tutor sometimes, but what I do goes way deeper than that. I am always using some type of strategy like pointing out bold-faced words, showing them how to use the index and the glossary, using a comprehension strategy. I was a tutor in college. What I do isn't much different than that. As a tutor, I had to help students with all of these things too. Again, you need to teach them "how to learn." Christi</p> <p>"I feel badly for those who think they are tutors. That's not what it should be. I would quit if I ever got to that point." Kyle</p> <p>"In some ways I am a tutor. I help a variety of kids with a variety of topics. But I am always using a strategy to help with the particular item whether it's taking a test or completing an assignment." Autumn</p>

Code	Clarifying Information	Examples
-Support	<p>-Ubiquitous term in special education. SPED teachers offer various support to students. They offer support in the GENED classroom, support with homework completion and test preparation, support in academic and behavioral deficits, support to GENED teachers in both academics and assistance with behaviors.</p>	<p>"There are so many things I do beyond academics. I help kids with their coping skills, home problems, problems with friends, and much, much more." Christ          "What I do goes way deeper than tutoring. I am a counselor, a therapist, a mom, a teacher, and a confidant. I guess the biggest part of it is building the relationships with my kids." Kathy</p>
-Special Skills/Aptitude	<p>-A number of the SPED teachers believed they instinctively possess a special skill set or aptitude for working with students who struggle academically and behaviorally. Others believe they learned it in their college/graduate coursework while others believe it's a combination. An overwhelming number of them believed not all educators possess these skills.</p>	<p>"I believe it takes special skills to work in the resource room. We incorporate so many things into our instruction in addition to academics that not every teacher can do." Autumn          "I don't think most general education teachers would understand the needs of these students. I think most would teach it once or twice and would assume that all students get it. A lot of my kids need it at least 3 different ways and sometimes more. These kids need more assistance." Kathy</p>
-Graduation Rates	<p>-Major source of pressure for building administrators and SPED teachers. Schools are pressured to meet AYP and graduation rates are included in this. Homework completion leads to passing courses which leads to graduation.</p>	<p>"Graduation trumps everything. Even when we get a chance to work on IEP goals, we have to get it done quickly because the pressure to complete daily work is so great." Beth          "There's a ton of pressure for kids to graduate especially with seniors. If they don't get their work done, they don't graduate. Plus we are always working on transition issues." Kyle          "The main concern of parents and general education teachers is passing classes and graduation. That puts a lot of pressure on us to complete assignments." Autumn          "There's a ton of pressure to complete assignments, pass classes, and graduate. The effort needs to come from the kids though." Kathy</p>
-Passing Courses	<p>-Students must pass their courses in order to graduate from high school. Oftentimes, they require assistance in homework completion, test preparation, background knowledge, pacing, and skill building to complete these assignments.</p>	<p>"There is a lot of pressure from parents and general education teachers to complete homework in the resource room. It's their perception that we're a study hall." Christ</p>
-Pressure from Parents	<p>-Oftentimes, parents expect/assume SPED teachers will provide assistance with homework completion, test preparation, etc. which places additional pressures on SPED teachers to do so.</p>	<p>"In some ways I am a tutor, but I am always helping a student with a variety of topics using a strategy to help with the particular item whether it's a test or an assignment. It's in the moment strategy which is applicable to them." Autumn          "Kids don't want to be taught strategies. You have to do it in a roundabout way." Beth</p>
-Pressures from General Ed Teachers	<p>-Oftentimes, GENED teachers believe it's the SPED teachers' jobs to assist with homework completion, test preparation, and organization and will send students for assistance causing pressures on SPED teachers.</p>	<p>"I use mnemonic devices such as HOMES. I also use silly sentences, flashcards with pictures, and repetition. Some of the things I use, I made up. Others I was taught or things I use when learning and studying. You have to teach them how to learn." Christ</p>
-Pressures from Administrations	<p>-SPED admin and district/building admin have varying expectations regarding SPED teachers. Essentially, SPED teachers have two different "bosses."</p>	<p>"I use informal strategies the most by far. I teach them things that they can generalize into all classes such as using the headings and subheadings, comprehension strategies when completing assigned reading, bold-faced words, and help with completing sentences." Kyle</p>
-Teacher-developed Strategies	<p>-Informal strategies developed by teachers out of necessity</p>	

Code	Clarifying Information	Examples
<p>-Research-based Strategies</p>	<p>-Connecting research to instructional practice</p>	<p>"Students are afraid to fail, so they are afraid to try. It's my job to get them to see some success. Once they see a little success it builds on it." Kyle          "I don't use a set curriculum. I use in the moment strategies." Autumn          "When working with students, I always do a lot of the same things. I get the facts about an assignment or class. I ask who the teacher is and what his/her expectations are, discuss due dates and time management, process the reality of the assignment so they understand the expectations, and I oftentimes have to de-escalate the situation because my students have so many emotional problems." Autumn          "When assisting students with assignments, I always do more. We use cue words, hidden words in the questions, work on vocabulary, note-taking skills, and I'm always reminding, asking questions, and prompting them. It's endless." Kathy          "I work hard to link strategies to assignments. I've really gotten away from canned lessons for the whole group. I try to individualize as much as I can. I am trying to get away from the kids being so dependent on me." Jill          "Research-based strategies are very important, but can be difficult to get into a resource room. They are best used in specialized classes." Beth          "I get research-based strategies into a resource room every day for the first 15 minutes; however, it would be great to have a separate class for them. It would be great to have a study hall period and a skills course. Then LRE becomes a concern." Jill          "The only time I get to research-based strategies consistently is during my functional classes. I use them as part of that curriculum. This is only for several of my lowest functioning students that take English and math with me." Kyle</p>
<p>-Time</p>	<p>-A lack of time was a major factor contributing to SPED teacher's stress level. There's not enough time to do everything that needs to get accomplished.</p>	<p>"In my professional opinion, you have to work on deficit areas. You cannot graduate students that can't read and write. We can't be conditioned to work on the short-term goals only (homework completion). We need to help them grow as learners. It takes a lot of time, but it's very important." Jill          "I would like to incorporate both research-based strategies and homework assistance using informal strategies, but it takes too much time. There's only so much you can get it in 45 minutes." Christi          "My major frustration is the lack of time. I try to work with students on the IEP goals and charting their progress. I also try to get to all students at least once during the week if not more. One of the biggest parts of my job is helping kids complete homework and stay on top of assignments. I also try to teach KU strategies, but we can't get to them very often because we are too busy working on assignments. Kyle          "I try to do it all, but it's never enough. There's never enough time." Kathy</p>
<p>-Student/Parent Ownership</p>	<p>-In order to successfully accomplish their jobs, a number of SPED teachers stated they'd like to place more ownership of student learning/success back on the student and/or parent. This would free up time to work on academic and behavioral deficits.</p>	

Code	Clarifying Information	Examples
-Building Relationships	-All SPED teachers stated one of the most, if not the most, important aspect of their job was the relationships built with the students. They all shared stories about getting students to do things no other teachers could. The ability to build a special relationship with the students is imperative when getting the students not only pass their classes, but also work on academic and behavioral deficits. However, they all stated that no teacher can reach all children.	"I use goal setting to get the kids to be more accountable. It is very helpful. It makes them more independent and aware of their grades and areas of weakness. They also understand what their strengths are too." Autumn "I love what I do and the students notice it. It helps to build relationships with them. They'll do more for me than anyone else." Kyle
-Balance of Duties	-The SPED teachers relayed that they must complete a variety of tasks on a daily basis, but it's imperative to maintain a balance between all of the duties children.	"You must have a balance with everything. You better be able to do it all because that's the job." Kyle  "You have to find a balance between tutoring and teaching. It has to be individualized. How do you find two kids that are alike?" Jill "Administration would like to see more research-based strategies being used. In fact, that's all they'd like to see; however, you can't neglect their homework. You have to maintain a balance between both." Christi "We don't have to provide the Cadillac program, but we can't provide a junker either. We must find a happy medium which can be hard." Christi "An equal balance between working on IEP goals and homework completion and organization would be great, but it doesn't happen. We work on homework far more than IEP goals out of necessity." Kyle "Even though I have many things to do throughout a day, I just know instinctively what they need to do. I almost have all of their schedules and assignments memorized. I also need what assignments they'll need more assistance with." Kathy
-Outside Influences	-So many of the issues secondary SPED deals with are outside influences with students such as their home lives, work, friends, and extracurricular activities.	"A major frustration I have is a lack of accountability parents have for their kids. Many of them don't care if their kid does their homework. This makes my job much tougher." Kathy "The students' home environment definitely impacts their school performance. If a student has parents that are involved, they get support at home to complete homework, study for tests, and stay organized. So many of my students do not have this support, and it has to be given somewhere and by someone. Oftentimes, this falls on me." Christi "So many of my students come from single parent homes. I would guess about 90% of them do. That's got to tell you something about their home lives. Not that it's bad to be a single parent, but there are many things that go on behind the scenes to lead to that many times. A student's home life is so important. The more structure there is at home, the better it is for a student." Kyle
-Frustrations	-As with any job, there are many frustrations associated with special education. They can be with the students, the school system, parents, colleagues, assignments, and administration.	"It's very frustrating. There are not many ready-made programs for high school. There are many for elementary school, but it's hard to find a lower level program that's age appropriate for high schoolers." Kyle "Paperwork is so frustrating. It's ever-changing which it makes it difficult to stay on top of it to help kids." Jill "Special education paperwork is always changing. It's like hitting a moving target." Christi



Code	Clarifying Information	Examples
		<p>"I would like to see a study hall type period and a skill instruction period. But then we face an LRE problem. It's so frustrating." Christi</p> <p>"It's hard to make a junior work on strategies he's had since he was in elementary school. Sometimes, their reading level hasn't increased enough over the years so they often have to keep doing the same things they've been doing forever." Kyle</p> <p>"It's difficult because we are expected to use research-based strategies within our resource rooms. It's hard because it's not a one size fits all system. The master schedule dictates when our kids are scheduled into our rooms. It's hard to group them with similar areas of needs. Their instruction needs to be individualized. The manageability of scheduling and grouping the kids into similar groups to teach research-based strategies according to needs is difficult to fathom." Autumn</p>

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