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WHAT KEEPS TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER
TEACHING?

By

Kimberley Rodriguez

THESIS

Submitted to
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

WHAT KEEPS TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER
TEACHING?

This thesis by Kimberley Rodriguez is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service and by the Dean of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

WHAT KEEPS TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER TEACHING?

By

Kimberley Rodriguez

Currently, staff shortages exist in all areas of education. In the field of special education, there are sub-groups of teachers and classrooms, each with unique challenges. This study explores the experiences of teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) disability in order to identify important retention factors specific to them. In this qualitative, phenomenological study, the researcher conducted four, one-on-one interviews to discover the district-related factors shared by teachers of students with ASD when considering staying or leaving their current position. Interview responses were categorized into the four themes critical to teacher retention according to the four capital theory (Mason & Matas, 2015): human capital, social capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital. While findings from this study revealed teachers of students with ASD experienced a lack of relevant district provided professional development, leadership presence and support, and various other supports needed to meet job expectations, the findings also revealed the positive factors of the participants' relationships among students and TEAMS as well as the job reward and job motivation provided by their students. This data suggests the retention factors for teachers of students with ASD are strong, positive relationships between themselves and their students and TEAMS as well as the success of their students. It is also noted that the lack of necessary identified supports for this research group could ultimately have a negative impact on those positive relationships and student successes.

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2022

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all teachers who are *unselfishly* devoted
to the education of students with disabilities.

You are amazing.

I see you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I thank God, who has given me the knowledge, strength, and endurance to accomplish this thesis.

I would like to express an enormous appreciation to Dr. Bethney Bergh, my professor, advisor, and thesis chair for providing professional and academic guidance from the beginning of the program unto the end with my final research thesis. It is my firm belief I would not have completed the thesis without her knowledge, encouragement, and example. Thank you.

I offer my sincere gratitude to my family including my parents, Richard and Judith Woods, and my children, Ashley, Eden, Victoria, and Victor. Thank you for encouraging me along this path.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (Seventh Edition) and the Department of Education, Leadership, and Public Service.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables.....vii

List of Abbreviations.....viii

Chapter 1: Introduction.....1

Chapter 2: Literature Review.....3

Chapter 3: Methods.....13

Chapter 4: Results.....20

Chapter 5: Discussion and Summary.....41

References.....48

Appendix A: Participant Invitation Letter.....57

Appendix B: Consent Form.....58

Appendix C: Pre-Interview Survey Questions.....61

Appendix D: Interview Questions.....62

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter.....64

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Themes from Participants' Responses for Question 1.....	22
Table 2: Themes from Participants' Responses for Question 2.....	23
Table 3: Human Capital: Themes from Participants' Responses Aligned.....	24
Table 4: Social Capital: Themes from Participants' Responses Aligned.....	26
Table 5: Structural Capital: Themes from Participants' Responses Aligned.....	31
Table 6: Positive Psychological Capital: Themes from Participants' Responses Aligned.....	35
Table 7: Themes from Participants' Responses for Question 14.....	37
Table 8: Themes from Participants' Responses for Question 15.....	38

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
PD	Professional Development
PsyCat	Positive Psychological Capital, one of the four categories of the four capital theory by Mason and Matas (2015)
SETs	Special Education Teachers
TEAM	The team of special educators working with the participant toward student goals as written in the Individualized Education Program (IEP)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Teacher turn-over has been steadily increasing over the past several years and possibly decades. Additional teaching demands and changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 further exasperated many teachers already struggling with the demands of teaching. Special education teachers faced additional challenges with providing instruction to students with physical health, mental health, and learning challenges in a virtual environment. Numerous teachers made the decision to leave the teaching profession through early retirement or for a career outside of teaching resulting in a reduction of available qualified instructional staff (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Peyton, et al., 2021). Understanding the positive impact teacher retention has on education, it is imperative for school districts to investigate factors important to retaining teachers in their districts (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Martinez-Garcia & Slate, 2009; Young, 2018). While a great deal of research has been conducted to identify factors related to general education and special education teacher attrition, minimal research into the retention factors specific to teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been undertaken. This study explores district-controlled factors that encourage teachers of students with ASD to stay teaching in their same positions. It is also hoped that the findings of this research will aid and guide decisions of school districts aimed at increasing the retention of teachers of students with ASD and ultimately improve the education of our most vulnerable students (Billingsley, 2004; Ruble & McGrew, 2013; White, et al., 2011).

Definition of Terms

Teacher Retention: The occurrence of a teacher teaching in the same school the next school year.

Teacher Turnover: “The broad phenomenon of a teacher teaching in a school one year and not teaching in that same school the next year. This encompasses teachers who move to a different school (mobility), or who leave the teaching workforce entirely (attrition)” (Robinson & Lloyd, 2017, p. 4).

Teacher Attrition: “The phenomenon of a teacher teaching in a public school in one year, but not teaching in a public school the following year” (Robinson & Lloyd, 2017, p. 4).

It is noted for this study, teacher attrition and teacher turnover will be used interchangeably considering the purpose of this study is to contribute information to keep teachers in their current position.

Research Question

What are the district-based factors considered by teachers of students with ASD when deciding whether to leave or stay in their current positions as identified through the experiences shared by them? Furthermore, what are the district-controlled factors necessary to keep teachers of students with ASD teaching?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to uncover the key factors shared by teachers of students with ASD which influence their decisions to stay teaching in their current teaching positions within their current district. More specifically, this study seeks to closely explore the district-controlled factors which influence these teachers’ retention in the hope of providing school leaders with useful information to guide decisions toward increasing the retention of teachers of students with ASD.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Building a team of effective educators is one of the most vital responsibilities of education administrators (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Teacher turnover has been an increasing national concern over the past few decades (Billingsley, 2004; Garcia & Weiss, 2019) making team-building an even greater challenge for administrators on all levels. Carroll and Foster (2010) reported a 40% increase in teacher attrition during teachers' beginning years. Through their research, Redding and Henry (2019) found only 38% of third year teachers were still teaching at the same school in which they started their careers. Additional research has shown that 50% of teachers abandon their careers within the first five years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2003; Martinez-Garcia & Slate, 2009, Loewus, 2021). A considerable amount of this turnover occurs during the school year, as opposed to the end of the school year, which has an even greater negative impact on student achievement (Redding & Henry, 2019). Furthermore, a recent survey by the National Education Association (NEA) (Walker, 2022) reported that 55% of teachers are considering leaving the teaching profession earlier than first planned. Education may be on the precipice of a vast number of teachers leaving which demands education administrators to take action. Much research has explored the factors of teacher retention and even special education teacher retention, yet a focus on the retention factors of teachers of students with ASD is lacking. Teachers of students with ASD face unique challenges with meeting the multiple needs of their students (Ryan & Matthews, 2022). With the looming teacher shortage and steady increase of students with ASD, it is beneficial to look more closely at the unique retention factors specific to teachers of ASD students.

Teacher Experience Increases Teacher Effectiveness

A teacher's effectiveness develops with time and experience, yet many teachers leave teaching before school districts are able to reap the benefits of this growth. Studies show that a teacher's effectiveness often dramatically increases during the first few years of teaching (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Podolsky, et al., 2019). Carroll and Foster (2010) claim teachers improve their effectiveness extending through their first seven years of teaching. These are troublesome findings given that this is the timeframe during which a high percentage of teachers decide to leave the profession. Research has found effective teachers to be the most critical factor leading to student success (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Covert, 2018). Kini and Podolsky (2016) examined 30 studies which investigated the effects of teacher turnover and found a 93% significant positive effect between teacher experience and student achievement. Their findings also showed a 100% significant positive effect between teachers with 7+ years of experience and student achievement. While hiring qualified teachers is a vital component of student success, efforts also need to be directed towards understanding teacher turnover and attrition in order to increase teacher retention (Kini & Podolsky, 2016).

Acknowledging that teaching experience increases a teacher's effectiveness resulting in higher student achievement, the reverse is also true. Teacher turnover results in lower student achievement. Ronfeldt, et al. (2013) found that teacher turnover had a significant negative effect on student achievement in math and ELA across multiple educational settings. Redding and Henry (2019) reported students who experienced teacher turnover during the year, as opposed to the end of the year, had a 7.5% of a standard deviation lower score on average than students with a teacher who stayed. Teachers are leaving in the critical time frame when they have the greatest impact on student achievement.

The U. S. Department of Education (2022) reported shortages of special education teachers in Michigan from the school years 2013-14 through 2021-22. Students receiving special education services risk a significant decline in achievement and possibly even regression when denied instruction from qualified service providers. Often, students with disabilities receive support in multiple areas such as social-emotional, speech and language, motor therapy, behavioral, and specialized academic instruction. According to the Michigan Department of Education's Student Growth Report for the 2020-2021 school year, 40.4% of students with disabilities scored below average growth compared to 34% of students without disabilities (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.). This significantly lower learning growth among students with disabilities further widens the achievement gap.

In addition to its short-term negative effect, teacher turnover also has severe long-term negative effects on students with disabilities. Peyton et al. (2021) reported districts with low teacher shortages have higher graduation rates of students with disabilities which suggests that districts with significant teacher shortages have lower graduation rates of students with disabilities. Administrators have an ethical and legal responsibility to ensure students with disabilities are provided qualified teachers to support academic areas affected by their disabilities as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Financial Impact of Teacher Turnover

Teacher turnover not only has a substantial effect on student achievement, it also costs districts money. Costs which are incurred when hiring new teachers include, but are not limited to, costs related to the hiring process, new teacher training, and hiring substitute teachers. Using the Teacher Turnover Cost Calculator from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), Carroll (2007) reported that it can cost a district between \$4,366

and \$17,872 to replace a teacher that leaves, and that national teacher turnover costs could be over \$7.3 billion per year. Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond (2017) report that a district could spend up to \$20,000 per each new teacher hired. In Texas, teacher turnover costs a district with a 15% turnover rate (40% turnover rate for teachers in their first three years of teaching) \$329 million (Darling-Hammond, 2003), while noting only 17% of the attrition of the 15% turnover rate was due to retirement. The report also stated turnover costs could total as high as \$2.1 billion a year when adding up all expense factors involved. Financially, schools are investing time and money in new teachers and not reaping the benefits of their investment and, as a consequence, students are not being afforded an appropriate education.

Teacher Shortage

Prior to the recent upsurge in teacher turnover, teacher resignations would commonly occur at the end of the school year allowing administrators the necessary time to sift through the candidate pool to fill positions with qualified teachers. Presently, teachers are resigning throughout the school year which, in turn, places additional burdens on staff, students, and the school community (Redding & Henry, 2019). Administrators have to fill positions quickly with fewer, and in some cases, no candidates to choose from. Hale (2015) found these administrators often have to sacrifice teacher quality to meet the immediate need to fill a position. Sutchter et al. (2019) reported almost every state has had to hire teachers unqualified for the positions they were hired for.

As teachers have been reflecting on their career choice and exploring their options, the K-12 student population has been increasing (Ackley, 2022), further magnifying the demand for qualified teachers. In addition to increasing student numbers, the number of college students entering the teaching profession has been decreasing which exacerbates the reality of a potential

nationwide teacher shortage (Passy, 2018; Sutchter, et al., 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), the number of Michigan college students enrolled in teacher preparatory programs (traditional and nontraditional) fell from 23,372 students in the 2008-09 school year to 12,018 students in the 2019-20 school year. This equates to a 47% drop in student enrollment in educator preparatory programs from 2008-09 to 2019-20.

While these shortages affect each school and district differently, as a whole, schools in Michigan are facing multiple staff shortages including, but not limited to, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, substitute teachers, administrators, and certified teachers (Michigan Department of Education, 2022). Prior to the COVID 19 school shutdown, French (2019) reported, only 20% of Michigan teachers would recommend teaching as a career choice, which means that 80% of Michigan teachers would not recommend teaching as a career choice. In 2022, the Michigan Education Association (MEA) (2022) found through their survey of nearly 2,600 teachers and staff that 20% of teachers plan on leaving education for a career outside of education within two to three years. Additionally, 14% of teachers plan on retiring resulting in Michigan conceivably facing 34% of its educators leaving within the next two to three years. The combination of these three elements, the decrease in teacher preparatory program enrollment, the increase in student enrollment numbers, and the number of dissatisfied teachers leaving the profession, may very likely result in schools facing a shortage of qualified educators.

State and national initiatives have been established to mitigate the effects of these shortages. A less onerous path to teacher certification has been in place since 2010 (Michigan Department of Education, 2021). In December of 2021, Governor Whitmer passed legislation allowing non-teaching staff to fill in as substitute teachers (Michigan.gov, 2021). In January 2022, the Michigan State Board of Education made a number of recommendations to address the

teacher shortage including loan forgiveness, scholarships, tuition reimbursement, stipends, grants, and incentives to recruit out of state teachers (Michigan Department of Education, 2022). On April 27, 2021, to “reduce the use of substitute teachers in special education programs”, the Michigan Department of Education (2021) allowed waivers for special education teachers to teach outside their endorsement area. Even with multiple incentives for teachers to remain in teaching, many teachers are still making the decision to leave.

Special Education Teachers

Special education teachers (SETs) are not unaffected by the increasing teacher turnover rate. In fact, the shortage among SETs is higher than that among general education teachers (Andrews & Brown, 2015; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Nguyen, 2021) which leaves our most vulnerable students at risk of receiving an inadequate educational experience which violates the IDEA. McLeskey and Billingsley (2008) found that SETs are 2.5 times more likely than other teachers to leave teaching after their first year. Sutchter et al. (2019) noted that special education is the area in which schools are reporting as having the greatest teacher shortage. This shortage, in turn, forces administrators to place unqualified candidates into special education teaching roles. Mason-Williams et al. (2017) found that only 60% of SETs held both a degree and a special education certification. Similar to general education teachers, the number of special education teachers has been declining (Peyton et al., 2021). Looking at federal data, Samuels and Harwin (2018) found a 1% decrease in students receiving special education services, yet a 17% decrease in special educators in the past decade. Subsequently, numerous students with disabilities were not provided an appropriate education as outlined in the IDEA.

Abby Cypher, the executive director of the Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education, stated, as reported in an interview by Gordon (2021), ““We had a critical

shortage of special education teachers before COVID, but now we have an even more significant shortage'" (para. 6). Under IDEA, students may qualify for special education services under 13 categories of disability one of which is autism spectrum disorder. In Michigan, the number of students with an ASD disability receiving special education services has steadily risen for the past nine years. According to MI School Data (2020), in 2011-2012, the first year for which data is available, 7.3% (15,976) of students who received special education services in Michigan qualified with an ASD disability. In 2020-2021, the percentage rose to 10.9% (22,165). This equates to an increase of 6,189 students with an ASD disability receiving special education services. Schools in Oakland County, Michigan experienced the same increase. There between the school years 2011-2012 and 2020-2021, the percentage of students with an ASD disability receiving special education services rose from 8.7% (2,042) to 12.3% (2,860). In student numbers this equates to an increase of 818 students. It is noteworthy to mention that while the number of students with an ASD disability has steadily increased, the total special education student population has decreased. In the 2011-2012 school year, a total of 217,911 students received special education services while in the 2020-2021 school year, that number had dropped to 202,475.

Within the various disability categories of students receiving special education, students with an ASD disability are one of the most challenging class of students to teach (White, et al., 2011). In fact, teachers of students with autism experience more stress than teachers of students suffering from emotional impairment, behavioral issues, and intellectual disabilities (Ruble & McGrew, 2013). These stresses occur when encountering difficulties with reaching academic goals, managing behavior, and managing the classroom routine (Busby et al., 2012). According to the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), to meet the criteria of an ASD

eligibility, a student must have persistent deficits in all three areas of social communication and interaction (i.e. social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors, and developing, maintaining and understanding relationships) in addition to at least two of the four types of restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviors (i.e. stereo-typed, repetitive movements, insistence on sameness, highly restricted, fixated interests, hyper- or hyperreactivity to sensory input). Furthermore, students with ASD may also present with neurodevelopmental, behavioral or mental conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, disruptive behavior, anxiety, or conduct disorders among others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The IDEA (2004), which notes ASD disability as a separate disability category, defines autism as:

Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, 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. (Sec. 300.8 (c) (1))

Considering ASD is a spectrum disorder, students with this disability pose multiple challenges in multiple severities in all aspects of functioning within a school environment and thus require significant support to meet their needs. In addition to meeting these unique student needs, teachers of students with ASD must also deal with the same work-related challenges as all special education teachers such as an overabundance of paperwork, low salaries, school climate issues, significant caseloads, the lack of administrative and colleague support, insufficient professional development, and unrealistic role expectations (Billingsley, 2004; Hagaman &

Casey, 2018). Through their research, Hagaman and Casey (2018) further identified the additional challenges of schedules, stress, lack of recognition, planning obligations, managing behaviors, and “teaching, managing IEPs, crisis intervention, [and] managing challenging caseloads” (p. 288). Acknowledging the unique role teachers of students with ASD face, it would be beneficial to explore retention factors specifically related to their work to address their needs more specifically.

Conclusion

Teacher turnover will never be completely erased and, in fact, can be favorable as ineffective teachers leave and effective teachers find their niche (Carroll, 2007). However, teacher turnover has been steadily increasing, moving towards a shortage of qualified teachers with student achievement and school financial resources paying the costs. Recruiting teachers will not solve the problem if new teachers continue the trend of leaving during their early years of teaching. While hiring highly qualified teaching candidates is an important factor of teacher retention, investing in our current teaching staff is just as vitally important. Efforts to recruit new teachers must continue, yet efforts also need to focus on retaining the teachers we already have (Sutcher et al., 2019) since retention is the present problem. Substantial research is available identifying the reasons why teachers leave, yet districts continue to face high teacher turnover.

Moreover, the identified shortage of qualified SETs, including teachers of students with ASD, may undermine the legal obligation created by the IDEA, including the requirement that eligible students receive a free and appropriate education. Peyton et al. (2021) question whether the special education services currently being provided to eligible students meet the IDEA standards when the students are being taught by unqualified SETs. It is of great concern if students with disabilities are not being appropriately instructed by teachers trained to meet their

unique needs. The academic, social, and emotional growth of students with disabilities are at risk and, in the worst scenario they may suffer regression if highly qualified staff are not hired and retained. More specifically, with the increasing population of students with ASD coupled with the teacher shortage, it is imperative for administrators to understand the factors that keep teachers of students with ASD teaching in their district in order to build an effective team of instructors to improve the students' educational experiences and to fulfill the law set forth in the IDEA.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Participants

Securing the minimum number of four to seven participants for this study proved challenging. The original intent of the researcher was to recruit participants from one school district in Oakland County, Michigan to explore factors specific to that district; yet, due to a lack of available and willing participants in that district, the researcher needed to expand the research setting to include all school districts in Oakland County, Michigan. It is noteworthy to mention during the time of securing participants in the original district of intent, one participant declined participation after reading the consent form while additional potential participants recently left the district.

The sample for this study consists of four public school teachers who teach students with ASD. They were hired during the 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020 school years and were employed during the time of the study in school districts located in Oakland County, Michigan. Participants with three to five years teaching time in their current district were selected given this is the period when a high percentage of teachers leave teaching (Carroll & Foster, 2010; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Loewus, 2021; Martinez & Slate, 2009). According to MISchool Data (2022), the total student population for the 2021-22 school year in Oakland Schools was 202,671 students including 23,116 students reported having a disability and 2,937 students with an ASD disability.

Participant Recruitment

Communication occurred between the researcher and the Director of Human Resources and Human Relations of the district of original focus to determine potential candidates.

However, because the minimum number of participants could not be secured in that district, the researcher contacted Oakland Schools, the Intermediate School District. A special education consultant with Oakland Schools sent an email to a pool of special education teachers in Oakland County describing the need of participants for the research study with the researcher's contact information. Snowball sampling was also used as a method to recruit participants for the study (Creswell, 2015). It is interesting to note, several teachers of students with ASD with six or more years of experience volunteered to participate in the study.

Potential participants were emailed a Research Study Participation Invitation Letter (Appendix A) which explained the purpose of the study, and provided details of the interview, a list of next steps, the pre-interview survey link, and a copy of the Consent Form (Appendix B). Consent Forms were also sent separately via email through DocuSign to obtain electronic signatures. Four participants were secured through this process. Once the signed consent forms were received, interviews were scheduled. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained throughout the research study. Participants' names, district names, and building names were not disclosed, with only the location identification of *within the Oakland Schools Intermediate School District* being used. Pseudonyms were also not used to further increase anonymity.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a pre-interview survey (Appendix C) and a one-on-one interview (Appendix D). Pre-interview survey questions sought information about the subject's experience in education, experience as a teacher of students with ASD, teaching certifications, professional journey, and reasons for staying in their positions. Three of the four participants completed the pre-interview survey in entirety. All four participants participated in a one-on-one interview conducted virtually through Google Meet. Two of the four participants consented to

have both audio and video recordings of the meeting made. One participant consented to audio recording but declined video recording. One participant declined both audio and video recording. To improve interview questions, a pilot interview was conducted with two teachers of students with ASD. The interview consisted of 15 questions, 11 which explored the themes of the four-capital theoretical framework (Mason & Matas, 2015) and the remaining four solicited the participants' personal thoughts and suggestions. Interviews were transcribed through a transcription service within Google Meet. Google Meet was able to be utilized with and without recording consent due to the phone option which allowed for the transcription service. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 90 minutes depending on the amount of information each participant shared. Participants were not provided a copy of the interview questions prior to the interviews. Preceding each interview, the researcher read a statement explaining the risks, benefits, and the option to decline to answer any questions or end the interview at any time. Each interview consisted of 15 questions with discretionary follow-up questions as determined by the researcher. Following the interviews, a copy of the interview transcript was emailed to its respective participant for the purpose of member checking (Creswell, 2015).

Methodological Design

Prior to taking any steps to secure participants or gather data, approval for this research study was obtained through the Internal Review Board (IRB) process within Northern Michigan University (NMU).

The methodological framework for this study is qualitative and phenomenological. "Phenomenological studies examine human experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved. These shared experiences are called lived experiences. The goal of phenomenological studies is to describe the meaning that experiences hold for each subject" (Nieswiadomy, 2012, p. 172). Using a phenomenological design for this research study allowed

the researcher to deeply explore the essence of the experiences and perceptions of teachers of students with ASD. Sauro (2015) adds, “You rely on the participants’ own perspectives to provide insight into their motivations” (section 3). Interview questions were designed to gain an understanding of what it is like to be a teacher of students with ASD in hopes to uncover the district decision-making factors of importance to them when deciding whether to leave or stay in their current position.

Recorded responses were transcribed and then analyzed using thematic coding design and phenomenological analysis. Using the horizontalization approach of Moustakas (1994), transcripts were closely analyzed to identify significant responses related to each participant’s experience with the phenomenon. First, responses from each research question were analyzed individually to eliminate redundancy, overlapping, and nonrelevant information and to reveal the overarching themes of the phenomenon within each answer. Next, those identified themes were categorized according to the themes within the four capital theory (Mason & Matas, 2015) while continuing to remove repetitive and overlapping information. This process uncovered the horizons, or the important portions of the phenomenon. All main themes that emerged from this process aligned with the four capital theoretical framework used for this research.

Theoretical Framework: Four-Capital Theoretical Model

The theoretical lens chosen for this research is *the four capital theoretical model*, a theoretical framework recently proposed by Mason and Matas (2015). Much research has been undertaken on teacher retention, turnover, and attrition. To fully understand this research, Mason and Matas analyzed the data from 20 research studies in Australia from 1995-2014. The number, nature, and priorities of the participants varied across the studies chosen. Through their analysis, Mason and Matas identified four themes critical to teacher retention: human capital, social capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital. “This new conceptualisation

suggests that in order to retain teachers, they need to have, have supported, and have opportunities to further develop their human capital, social capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital” (Mason & Matas, 2015, p. 46).

Human Capital

Best (2010) defines human capital as “the talents, competencies, and knowledge of teachers and school leaders” (p. 1). Recognizing that a teacher’s talents, skills, and abilities have a direct effect on teacher attrition, Mason and Matas (2015) identified three themes related to human capital. The first is the quality of a teacher’s pre-service education in preparation to adequately meet the demands of their job. The second theme focused on the development of a teacher’s professional knowledge and skills, including but not limited to classroom management skills, behavior management skills, and content knowledge. The third theme is ongoing professional development which was identified in one of the studies analyzed as the most dominant factor of teacher retention.

Social Capital

Social capital “involves the potential of individuals to secure benefits and invent solutions to problems through membership in social networks” (Poteyeva, 2018, para. 1). In a school environment social capital occurs “when the relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high trust and frequent interaction” (Leana, 2011, p. 31). Mason and Matas (2015) identified five themes within the social capital theme. The first theme is the quality of relationships among colleagues, students, school leaders, and the community. The second theme is the culture of the school which is often linked to the third theme, school leadership. The fourth theme is teacher support which, when absent, often leads to teacher isolation. Lastly, the lack of perceived value as teaching professionals was noted as a fifth theme influencing teacher attrition.

Structural Capital

Structural Capital is defined by LaFayette et al. (2019) as “the aggregate and collective knowledge assets of communities and organizations” (p. 115). Within a school environment, structural capital includes the buildings and all physical resources as well as all procedures, processes, and curriculum frameworks. Specific examples noted as significant factors in teacher attrition were work conditions, increased workload and responsibilities, teacher assignment methods, salary, employment conditions, government legislation and condition of school buildings (Mason & Matas, 2015).

Positive Psychological Capital

Positive psychological capital (PsyCat), “has now become the widely recognized core construct consisting of the positive psychological resources of hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism” according to Wang et al. (2014, p. 6). Within the theme of PsyCat, psychological frames correlated to teacher attrition were examined including motivation, satisfaction, commitment and the implementation of coping strategies. Mason and Matas (2015) thought it necessary to include the PsyCat themes in their teacher attrition model “because it acknowledges the fact variables that are internal to the teacher also play a part in their career path choice” (p. 58). The researchers also noted that these internal variables are often omitted from most research involving teacher attrition and further research concerning how these variables affect teacher attrition should be conducted.

Conclusion

This purpose of this research was to identify and develop a better understanding of the district-controlled factors teachers of students with ASD consider when deciding whether or not to stay teaching. It is recognized that non-district-controlled factors may arise during the data

collection process, however, for this study, focus will remain on district-controlled factors.

Teacher attrition in its entirety is multifaceted and cannot be fully analyzed through one single theoretical lens. Using the *four capital theoretical model* from Mason and Matas (2015) as a lens allows a deeper exploration into the factors within the themes of human capital, social capital, structural capital, and PsyCat capital among teachers of students with ASD when deciding to stay or leave their current position.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Pre-Interview Survey

Three of the four participants chose to answer the pre-interview survey questions.

Questions 1 - 3: Participants' Training and Experience

Responses from Pre-Interview Survey Questions 1, 2, and 3 revealed: three participants had teaching experience prior to their current roles, three participants possessed a degree or endorsement in elementary education, three participants possessed an ASD endorsement, one participant reported earning a master's degree in special education, and various subject endorsements were noted by two participants. This does not indicate that one participant does or does not possess these certificates, endorsements, degrees, or experiences. It only indicates one participant did not choose to answer the pre-interview questions. Due to the research focus of district-controlled retention factors, additional questions regarding the quality of participants' pre-service training were not included in this research study.

Question 4: Professional Journey

Pre-Interview Survey Question 4 revealed two of the three responding participants were working in their current district as either a long-term substitute teacher or as a student teacher when a position for an ASD classroom teacher opened up in their districts. After applying for and completing the interviews, each participant was offered and accepted the position. The third responding participant indicated she had a family member with special needs which led her to her second career in special education.

Question 5: What keeps you teaching?

Pre-Interview Survey Question 5 identified *their students* and *their special education TEAMS* as factors which keep the participants teaching. TEAM members identified in participants' responses included para-educators, other ASD teachers, social workers, speech pathologists, special education teams, and administrative teams. Participants' responses included the following, "Without the help...from each of them [TEAM members] I would not be able to function or be successful in this position," "The special education and administrative teams at the building have been key factors in my decision to stay," and "I have two consistent, intelligent and dedicated paraprofessionals...teachers who are sensitive to my students' needs and administrators who understand (or are willing to learn about) autism." Additionally, participants identified safety supports, administration that understands their job, and general education teachers that are sensitive to their students' needs as factors of staying.

Interview Questions

Ten of the 15 interview questions were designed to target each of the four themes of the four-capital theory model (Mason & Matas, 2015) used as the theoretical framework for the study. Questions 1, 2, 14, and 15 were designed to explore participants' personal experiences and views concerning their positions and careers. Participant responses to these questions were also compared and analyzed using data gathered from the interview questions regarding the four capital theory themes. For this purpose, Interview Questions 1, 2, 14, and 15 will be analyzed separately and then collectively.

Interview Question 1

Table 1

Themes from Participant Responses for Question 1: What is it like being a teacher of students with autism spectrum disorder?

Theme	No. of participants with comments within theme
1. Lack of adult support	3/4
2. Day-to-day	3/4
3. Workload	3/4
4. Student behavior	2/4
5. Rewards	2/4

Table 1 includes the five main themes for Interview Question 1. The top three themes identified were lack of support, the unpredictable day-to-day with students, and workload. Three of the four participants spoke about lacking necessary staff supports when describing what it is like being a teacher of students with autism. Specific phrases of participants included, “It’s more the adult problems that come along with adequately supporting my students,” “a challenge is support from administrators,” and “short staffed.” The second theme noted by three of the participants is the irregularity of the days in an ASD classroom. Participants’ comments included: “every day is a new adventure,” “Even though there’s always consistency within our schedule, the students really don’t remain too consistent,” “they [administrators] don’t really know what the day-to-day is like,” and “no two days are ever the same.” Participants shared comments about the workload responsibilities of taking care of general education students not on their caseloads, increasing paperwork, insufficient time to meet the demands of their job, and having to complete tasks just to check the boxes. Student behavior was mentioned by two participants. Participant comments included “...you’re constantly on your toes and having to think and kind of change your instruction...based on...how they’re [the students are] feeling that

day” and “The biggest challenge and I didn’t expect it and no one tells you about - the violence.”

Two participants noted the job rewards of witnessing students’ growth in independence and academics, equipping the “whole child”, inclusion of their students with general education students, and students’ learning to speak for themselves and function more independently.

Interview Question 2

Table 2

Themes from Participant Responses for Question 2: How does your job compare to what you thought being an ASD teacher to be? What was expected, not expected?

Theme	No. of participants with comments within theme
Not Expected	
1. Teacher exhaustion	2/4
2. Student behavior	2/4
3. Insufficient time available for academics	2/4
Expected	
1. Classroom management and systems	2/4

Table 2 displays the themes from participant responses to Interview Question 2 within the categories of *was expected* and *was not expected* job responsibilities. All participants identified job requirements that were not expected. Two participants mentioned exhaustion, student behaviors, and not enough time allowed for academics as not expected. Participants’ comments included, “day-to-day exhaustion, physically, emotionally, and mentally draining wasn’t expected,” “so many academics and less time for needed social, living, and independent skills,” and the level of “personal hygiene needs, behavioral then academic - once behavioral is taken care of then we can get to academics.” Additionally, one participant noted the number of people required to meet students’ needs was more than expected. Low academic levels of students with autism were noted as expected. Two participants identified job responsibilities related to the implementation of classroom management and behavior management systems as expected.

Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 display the themes of the four-capital theory of teacher retention identified by Mason and Matas (2015) along with participant responses within those four themes. Keeping with the focus of this research study, *What Keeps Teachers of Students with ASD Teaching?*, identification of district-controlled, positive experiences shared by participants may be considered as retention factors.

Human Capital

Table 3

Human capital: Themes from Participants’ Responses Aligned with Emerging Themes

Themes used to categorize data	Emerging themes; No. of participants’ responses supporting theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-service education • Professional knowledge and skills • Ongoing professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-service education - appropriate certifications; 3/4 (1/4 no response) • Lacking opportunities of collaboration; 3/4 • Lacking relevant and applicable professional development; 4/4

Interview Question 3: District Provided Professional Development

Themes revealed from participant responses to Interview Question 3 included a lack of district provided professional development opportunities beneficial to their roles as teachers of students with ASD and a lack of opportunity for collaboration. One participant who was apprehensive to share, noted, “some professional developments are great and some are not applicable to my role.” Another participant stated, “I very rarely attend a professional development that is beneficial to me.” Participants noted that during professional development days, they are often placed in professional development trainings designed for general education teachers pertaining to curriculum not used in their ASD classrooms. One participant shared “[The] district will have you sit through a math or reading PD in case your kids may go into the Gen Ed classroom for a little bit and you could modify, but that’s far and few between.”

Two participants shared their experience attending professional development designed specifically for teachers of students with ASD provided by Oakland Schools, the Intermediate School District. One participant pursued these professional development offerings on her own while another participant stated her district arranges for teachers to attend professional development with Oakland Schools. A challenge shared by one participant with attending applicable professional development was a lack of available substitute teachers when attending during the workday. All participants incorporate behavior management and classroom management systems within their classrooms.

Additionally noted was the inability to collaborate with other teachers of students with ASD. One participant stated, “I’ve never met some of the other elementary ASD teachers because it’s been probably three years since we’ve all been in a room together.” This participant also shared that teachers of students with ASD did not meet to collaborate virtually during the COVID-19 school closure. Regarding collaborating, another participant shared the following.

I love getting to hear from others – what’s working...that is super helpful to me. I love getting to hear how other people are doing it. What’s working well in their classrooms.

It’s really challenging trying to hit every student at their level.

One key finding from this data is that the districts represented by participants are not providing relevant professional development for teachers of students with autism. This is causing the participants to look outside their districts to find the training needed to support their students with autism.

Social Capital

Table 4

Social capital: Themes from Participants' Responses Aligned with Emerging Themes

Themes used to categorize data	Emerging themes; No. of participants' responses supporting theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship among colleagues, students, education leaders, and parents • School culture • School leadership • Professional support • Value of participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive relationships with students; 4/4 • Positive relationships with special education team; 4/4 • Positive relationship with general education teachers; 2/4 • Positive relationships among parents; 4/4 • Disconnected from leadership; 3/4 • Leaders do not understand their classrooms; 4/4 • Supported by a person in leadership; 2/4 • Inequitable salary; 3/4 • Lack of necessary supports; 4/4 • Lack of para-educators; 4/4 • Lack of feeling valued; 4/4 • Lack of presence of leadership; 4/4

Interview Question 4: Relationships

All participants felt they had positive relationships with their students although those relationships are challenging to develop. Participants used the following phrases when describing relationships with their students, “find common interest to gain rapport,” “verbal communication does nothing for them,” “it takes a long time to build,” and “diverse needs.” One participant noted she had difficulty with only one student’s behavior but further remarked that the trouble was due to a lack of parental support.

All participants noted a highly positive relationship among their special education TEAM members stating, “our team is absolutely amazing” and “very supportive.” Relationships among participants and general education teachers were mixed mostly due to the difficulty in providing

a smooth transition into inclusion time in the general education classroom. Comments regarding inclusion included, “my students disrupt the flow that the teacher has going because they are not quiet,” “a lot of Gen. Ed. teachers are supportive with trying to be more inclusive and then it’s more challenging for some teachers,” and “styles and expectations are very, very far apart at times.” One participant stated the following.

There’s been more of a push for students [with autism] to be included in their specials or the general ed. classrooms. And I feel like we don’t do a very good job of setting that up so students can be successful.

When asked further about what is needed to successfully include students with autism in the general education classroom, she responded that staffing is needed. Participants reported general education teachers want what is best for all students, but it is sometimes difficult without adequate support.

All participants noted a positive relationship with the parents of their students. Communication was noted as a necessary component of positive relationships with parents. One participant noted that many students with ASD are not able to go home and tell their parents how their day went or what they did which makes communication between home and school very important. Participants shared the following communication methods: daily home-school communication binders to communicate how their child slept, whether they ate breakfast, and how the morning was going, texting apps, sending daily emails, and making phone calls. Setting communication boundaries was noted by one participant when parents would “text at all hours.” One participant commented that while disagreements arise with parents, she is always able to “talk through them and figure out how to address their concerns and meet student needs.”

Interview Question 5: Quality of Leadership

Titles of persons in leadership roles identified by participants included, but were not limited to, building principals, learning consultants, teacher consultants, building leaders, and district leaders. Three of the four participants expressed feeling disconnected from their leaders. One participant stated, “I feel pretty disconnected from most of my - the leadership we have right now.” Two participants shared that they feel appreciated by their leaders for simply showing up to work. One participant stated, “I have found that mostly they’re [leaders are] just grateful...that I come to work and do my best at my job every day.” Two participants admitted feeling that their leaders did not understand what it is like to be in their classrooms. Throughout the interviews there was a general desire expressed for leadership to visit the classrooms, ask about their day, and seek their input regarding decisions affecting their roles. One participant said:

I don’t even know if she [school leader] even knows - like what the classrooms look like...she doesn’t know any of the students. She doesn’t really know those things so, to me, I picture that being a challenge for her because it would be hard to make decisions and plan for scenarios without really understanding what the classrooms are like building wide.

Two participants expressed feeling supported by a building administrator and a teacher consultant. Participants noted that they felt supported by leaders who had prior special education experience or leaders who demonstrated a willingness to learn about autism and the work of the participants.

Interview Question 6: District-Provided Supports

The two top themes identified in responses to Interview Question 6 were financial supports and system supports. Three participants discussed spending their own funds on items

for their students including organizational materials, sensory items, teaching materials, and personal items such as classroom tissues. One participant noted that teaching at the elementary level required more out-of-pocket spending on classroom needs than at the high school level. She explained, “I was still buying a lot of my own materials in elementary, but I’m not buying my own stuff [in high school].”

Three participants identified the need for organizational materials such as color bins, binders, items for check-in systems, social stories, and visuals. One participant explained:

When you first start out in an ASD classroom, you, like any teacher, you don’t really have anything to set up like your systems and routines. But I think that it’s 10 times more in an ASD classroom...the amount of items that you need to purchase on your own to set up a functioning system for the students.

Staffing support was extensively discussed by one participant. She spoke about the need for substitute teachers, staff as a whole, leaders who provide support to address the very escalated student behaviors, and leaders who would advocate for what teachers need. She expounded, “when it [behavior] gets to a point where - like really serious and we’re having big issues every day...it could feel like nobody’s wanting to help or find a solution. We can’t live every day in crisis.”

The need for curriculum supports was noted by one participant and included as a separate theme due to its overlap with other themes and also due to the amount of information shared.

This participant stated that while a curriculum is provided, not all of the pieces needed are included with the curriculum. This, in turn, requires teachers to spend time and money on supplementing those curriculums or creating the resources needed to effectively reach the students. She explained:

So, they just give you that one book...to read with the kids, but to make it accessible to our students, you really have to add in the visual pieces for them to be able to interact with the book and give output of what they're thinking about.

In response to a follow-up question, she explained that these additional areas are necessary for student success and also for her students to become independent which is a lagging skill for students with autism.

Interview Question 7: Value Communicated by District

Participants shared the following methods by which districts are able to help teachers feel valued: increasing financial compensation, providing needed supports, trusting, through recognition of their work, and communication. All participants shared that financial compensation is a way the district can communicate value. One participant commented how another school offered additional compensation to their educators in challenging teaching environments, "They [teachers] get extra stipends for being in a volatile classroom. We should get the same." Another participant stated, "I know we do the job because we love kids. The pay is definitely, I feel like the number one thing that makes – like it would make anyone – feel valued to make more money." Three participants expressed they do not feel adequately paid for the level of work they perform.

Two participants identified feeling valued when provided with the necessary supports including: supports to successfully manage their classrooms, knowledgeable para-educators, leaders who stand up for teachers with challenging parents (which also demonstrates trust), leaders who visit their classrooms, and strong TEAM support. The theme of trust was identified by two participants who expressed the desire for leaders to seek out and value their input in decision making processes including what professional development is needed and for leaders

who do not micromanage. Value through recognition was identified by two participants in the actions of leadership “acknowledging [their] efforts – even the little ones” and through receiving positive feedback from parents. One participant mentioned she feels valued when leadership communicates with her.

Structural Capital

Table 5

Structural capital: Themes from Participants’ Responses Aligned with Emerging Themes

Themes used to categorize data	Emerging themes; No. of participants’ responses supporting theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload • Curriculum • Para-educator support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching of multiple skills in addition to academics; 4/4 • Increasing amount of paperwork; 3/4 • Unable to complete work demands during contractual hours; 4/4 • Student behavior; 2/4 • Lack of necessary supports; 4/4 • Inaccessible curriculum for students; 4/4 • Lacking para-educators to support students; 4/4 • Inadequate training of para-educators; 4/4

Interview Question 8: Workload

Five themes were identified from participants’ responses to Interview Question 8 including teaching academics, teaching independent skills, paperwork, staffing, and communication. Participants shared that they not only teach all areas of academics (mentioned academic areas: literacy, math, science, social studies, writing, reading, careers, life skills, and health) to all students at all levels, but also modify all lessons for each student. Participants expounded on their personal experiences in the following statements.

- One of the things that makes that [planning lessons] more complicated in my job is that I'm planning different lessons for different students. Within the classroom I have students that can read and students that don't know their letters yet. So that is a challenge definitely and takes a lot of time to figure out how to best teach what everyone needs.
- All of the academic areas I teach every day. So that also includes all the lesson prep for all of the classes for all of the individualized levels that each of my kiddos are at. For instance, this past year...we had six levels of math going. We have five levels of language arts that we teach, so that's a lot of lesson prep from that component.
- I have a home-school binder – a binder sheet that tells the parents hourly what their student did. So, me and the paras are writing after every hour in their binder and it says...were they paying attention, did they participate, were they able to keep their hands off of people...and again, those are even individualized...so the parents are aware of how they were doing on their own goals...notes, what homework they have...if there was any kind of issue...if they ate or didn't eat. So that binder is a big thing.

Three participants spoke of the responsibilities of teaching independent skills to their students. Regarding skills outside of academics, participants shared, “the day starts with getting kids off the bus or [when] a parent hands off a child to me then getting them safely to my classroom” and “teaching independent skills takes a little longer – walking in line, staying with your teacher, hanging up your coat, finding your seat, sitting down.” Additional responsibilities identified by participants included assisting with toileting, assisting students with navigating the

hall, helping students to get their food, and creating multiple visuals to support student independence.

Three participants noted paperwork as a part of their responsibilities pointing to their obligations with respect to documentation, IEPs, amendments to IEPs, progress monitoring, reading plans, report cards, data collection, behavior plans, and daily documentation in the home/school communication binder. One participant described the amount of paperwork needing to be done, “can’t really be put into words.” Another participant explained, “All of the paperwork components are usually done before and after school and on weekends [which] makes the days kind of long sometimes...then the tweaking and retweaking and rewriting everything on a continual basis to meet student needs.”

A fourth theme identified by the participants was staffing responsibilities, which includes supervising para-educators, coordinating with providers, filling-in for absent teachers which, in turn, affects their own students’ services and education, and “chasing people down.”

Communication, the fifth theme, was mentioned by two participants. Participants identified communication responsibilities in reference to behavioral management systems and behavior plan systems, daily documentation, daily emails to parents, and communication with the [special education] TEAM. One participant expounded, “I am constantly in communication with parents because their children...typically aren’t able to come home and share about what happens at school or what the day was like.”

Interview Question 9: District-Provided Curriculum

In response to Interview Question 9, all participants shared positive and challenging experiences related to the district provided curriculum for ASD classrooms. Three participants noted the literacy curriculum is accessible and beneficial to their students. One participant stated

“the science and social studies is a really good program that’s visually based and kids can access it.” Another participant stated she is given many curriculum options to best meet her students’ needs and levels. Challenges shared by participants included the need to modify or supplement the math and writing curriculums, the need to create visuals to go with the general education curriculum, and an inadequate number of para-educators to support students’ needs and learning. One participant explained, “a struggle is managing behavior during lessons and finding time to make up the lost time due to behavior.”

Interview Question 10: Quality of Para-Educators

All participants noted a lack of training to prepare para-educators to work with students with autism. Para-educators, according to participants, are provided little if any training. One participant explained, “it’s definitely a learning curve because we have some of the most severely impacted students in our classrooms so we see the most behaviors...that definitely can be an adjustment.” Participants noted the following: a desire for para-educators to obtain training during professional development days similar to the teaching staff, time for hands-on-training in the classroom, and one to two days prior to the start of school to be able to personally train para-educators. One participant described her experience with new para-educators as follows:

When I have para-educators who are new and haven’t worked in an ASD classroom, it’s a lot of trial and error and a lot of me modeling. Okay, I’ve modeled it, now you try it.

Okay, let’s try it a little differently...When they’re brand new, it is pretty challenging.

Although not directly related to the focus of Interview Question 10, all four participants identified the need of para-educators’ assistance for them to effectively teach students.

Participant comments include: “I could not do my job that I do without my paras,” “our paras are vital to being able to run a categorical classroom,” “We can’t run my classroom without them,”

and “I couldn’t do what I do without the support of para-educators.” A shortage of para-educators was also noted by all participants. One participant stated there had been a 50% turnover rate among para-educators. Participants noted that this shortage of para-educators not only affects how they run their classrooms, but it also affects the educational experience of their students.

Positive Psychological Capital

Table 6

Positive psychological capital: *Themes from Participants’ Responses Aligned with Emerging Themes*

Themes used to categorize data	Emerging themes; No. of participants’ responses supporting theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation • Job satisfaction factors • Commitment • Coping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main motivation - students; 4/4 • Top job reward - students; 4/4 • “till physically able,” “till I burn-out,” “till I’m no longer effective,” “five more years” • Supportive TEAM – 4/4 • Leadership that listens – 3/4

Interview Question 11: Motivation to Continue Teaching

Three themes of participant motivation were identified in Interview Question 11 responses, these being: their students, their TEAMS, and negative factors influencing motivation. Participants’ comments included, “I work for those a-ha moments,” “I genuinely enjoy working with the students,” and “I enjoy being able to support them [students] and provide stability and opportunities to learn and grow and reach their potential.” One participant mentioned her TEAM is also a motivation for her to continue in her current position. Two participants shared factors that negatively affect motivation which included not feeling supported, feeling that leadership

did not understand what teachers of students with ASD do, lack of presence from administration, and staffing shortages including ancillary and para-educators.

Interview Question 12: Job Rewards

The main theme identified by all participants in responses to Interview Question 12 regarding job rewards was *their students*. Rewards mentioned by participants included, “[it’s] all about the kids,” “witnessing changes and growth in learning and behaviors [in students],” “student successes, student smiles, and seeing their growth.” One participant stated the following.

They [the students] may make very little or slow progress academically, but they’re potty trained, they said a word verbally, more independence with different routines – those are the important things for their future and getting a job.

One participant noted the additional rewards of working with “good people” and helping parents.

Interview Question 13: Commitment

Only one participant responded with a specific time frame in number of years when asked how long she planned on staying in her current position. This participant plans on working for another five years as she will be able to retire with 10 years of service. She also noted if she would have remained at the elementary level as opposed to her current high school level position, “staying would not have been possible.” All participants mentioned that various job factors will affect how long they stay in their current position. Job factors shared were staff shortages, physical violence, lack of support, and as stated by one participant, “till I burn out from it.” One participant voiced, “Till it doesn’t feel like I am making the difference that I wanted to make when I first started.”

Two participants stated that while they thought about leaving education, they didn't know what other jobs they could perform with their teaching degrees. Another participant, for whom teaching is her second career, is looking at returning to her first career or creating an online business from home. Two participants mentioned the additional factors of having a convenient schedule, while physically able, and until they are no longer effective when considering staying or leaving.

Table 7

Themes from Participant Responses for Question 14: What are the most pressing factors when considering staying or leaving teaching students with ASD?

Themes used to categorize data	Emerging themes; No. of participants' responses supporting theme
1. Supports	3/4
2. Safety	2/4
3. Familiarity	1/4

Interview Question 14: Pressing Factors When Considering Staying or Leaving

Table 7 displays the three themes identified in answers to Interview Question 14 regarding the most pressing factors identified by participants when considering staying or leaving their current position. The two factors, supports and safety, overlap as safety factors could also be categorized within the theme of supports. Support factors identified included supports for student needs, TEAM support, and staffing support. One participant stated, "If I didn't have them [my TEAM] there's a good chance that I wouldn't teach as long as I have or will in the future." Safety factors shared include a need to keep everyone safe, physical violence toward adult staff, walkie-talkies for all staff, and the "need to be staffed appropriately." One participant mentioned "fear of the unknown" and familiarity with her current position are factors

when considering leaving or staying, explaining, “I’ve got my ship running tight in my classroom, like I know what I am doing each day.”

Interview Question 15: What participants would like education leaders to know about the position of teachers of students with ASD.

Table 8

Themes from Participant Responses for Question 15: What would you like education leaders to know about your position?

Theme	Participants
1. Desire for leaders’ presence	3/4
2. Supports needed	2/4
3. Trust	1/4

Table 8 displays the three themes identified in answers to Interview Question 15 which asked participants what they would like education leaders to know about their position. Three participants expressed a desire for education leaders to be present, seek to understand their specific roles and responsibilities as a teacher of students with ASD, and also to trust them. Participants voiced the following.

- I’m not just a teacher. I’m like any other teacher, but I’m a teacher, I am a personal care assistant. I am a social worker. I am a behavior tech. I am...a nurse. Sometimes I am like the kid’s advocate. There’s so many things other than just teaching I’m doing.
- For district leaders to really understand what it looks like in a classroom and what the day-to-day is in the classroom requires them to be in a classroom to see what that looks like and to really trust the teams that they’ve hired.

Two participants expressed a desire for education leaders to know they need the following supports: trained para-educators, time to collaborate with staff about students’ needs and plans,

extra behavior supports, and to know that the staff and substitute teacher shortage is getting worse.

Conclusion

The data gathered from the pre-interview survey questions, demonstrates that the participants possessed the pre-training service, certifications, and endorsements necessary for teachers of students with ASD.

Data gathered from the interview questions identified several positive and negative factors related to the retention of teachers of students with ASD. Looking at the theme of human capital, participants identified a lack of meaningful professional development provided by the district which leads participants to seek out professional development on their own time.

Collaboration among other teachers of students with ASD was noted as lacking, yet was needed and desired.

Within the social capital theme, positive relationships among TEAM members, students, and parents of students were strengths while a lack of a successful system of inclusion resulted in a mixed relationship with general education teachers. A feeling of disconnection from leadership was identified coupled with an expressed desire for the presence of leadership within the classrooms.

Within the theme of structural capital numerous supports were noted as being needed to meet job expectations including curriculum supports, financial supports, time to complete paperwork, and adequate para-educator support.

Within the positive psychological capital theme, positive factors supporting motivation included *their students* and *their TEAMS*. Negative factors identified within this theme were the lack of presence and support from leadership and staffing shortages.

Interview questions outside the four-capital theory (Mason & Matas, 2015) revealed participants' job rewards are *their students* which aligns with data gathered within the social capital and positive psychological themes as well as from the pre-interview survey responses.

Two district factors affecting participants' decisions to stay or leave teaching included student supports, TEAM support, staffing support, and safety. The gathered data reveals common factors across different themes including the lack of leadership support, lack of work-related supports, and positive relationships among students and TEAMS.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & SUMMARY

Teachers of students with ASD experience unique challenges compared to general education teachers and special education teachers serving students with other disabilities. This study explored the district-controlled factors affecting the decision of teachers of students with ASD regarding whether to stay or leave their current position. Four current teachers of self-contained classrooms of students with ASD in Oakland County, Michigan participated in this study. The four capital theory (Mason & Matas, 2015) and its themes of human capital, social capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital served as the underpinning of this study.

Human capital

Human capital involves the three themes of a teacher's pre-service education, the development of a teacher's professional knowledge and skills, and ongoing professional development (Mason & Matas, 2015). One key finding is a lack of relevant district-provided professional development for teachers of students with ASD causing participants to seek meaningful professional development outside of the district during their personal time. Professional development was identified as the most dominant factor of teacher retention in one study analyzed by Mason and Matas (2015). It is unknown what participants' experiences would have been had they not independently pursued professional development opportunities. Seeking out and attending meaningful professional development indicates professional development is a desire and necessity of teachers of students with ASD. In addition to a lack of district provided relevant professional development, districts also failed to provide opportunities for participants to collaborate with other teachers of students with ASD.

Understanding the positive impact of collaboration on the educational system as a whole (Senge 2013), district leaders could provide time for collaboration among teachers of students with ASD. Zepeda and Mayers (2013) found that a lack of collaboration when making a critical decision contributed to a breakdown of trust between leaders and teachers which was also identified as a theme in this study. Additionally, seeking input from teachers of students with ASD regarding professional development needs could improve leader-teacher relationships, communicate value, strengthen TEAM relationships, lessen the workload of teachers, and support a positive learning environment for students with ASD.

Social Capital

Mason and Matas (2015) identified five themes within the social capital theme: the quality of relationships among colleagues, students, school leaders, and the community; culture of the school; school leadership; teacher support; and a teacher's perceived value as a professional. Key findings reveal the presence of positive relationships among participants and their students, their students' parents, and their TEAMS. In fact, these relationships were the strongest positive themes identified within this study.

A lack of support from leadership was also identified. Building relationships with each staff member is critical for education leaders to gain a greater level of commitment from teachers (Pankake & Littleton, 2012). Previous studies have reported a direct connection between leadership support and teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2012).

Relationships among participants and general education teachers were mixed due to barriers to the successful inclusion of students with ASD in general education classrooms. Considering only 9% of general education teachers have received training specific to inclusion of

students with ASD (Ober, 2021), leaders could arrange for this training which may also foster better relationships between general education teachers and teachers of students with ASD.

To improve relationships among education leaders and teachers of students with ASD, leaders could undergo training regarding building relationships between school leaders and staff and read articles on different styles of leadership to develop strategies to build stronger connections with teachers of students with ASD. Recognizing the value of authentic dialogue (Starratt, 2013), leaders could hold focus groups with teachers of students with ASD to learn about their experiences, needs, and concerns, to strengthen trusting relationships, and to build teacher autonomy (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Structural Capital

Within a school environment, structural capital includes the buildings and all physical resources as well as all procedures, processes, and curriculum frameworks (Mason & Matas, 2015). Key findings reveal increasing paperwork, student behavior, lack of time to fulfill work demands, helping with students who do not receive special education services, modification and supplementation of curriculum, lack of support from administration, and lack of para-educators to support students are identified district-controlled factors that add to the job demands of participants. Participants agreed that the majority of their teaching obligations were expected but also expressed the need for support to meet those obligations. Given the ethical responsibility of the education leader to ensure their staff members have the necessary resources to successfully fulfill their job requirements (Starratt, 2009), leaders need to be present and in communication with their staff members in order to identify needed resources. Research shows that high performing schools are led by principals that set high student expectations and then also provide the support for teachers to meet those expectations (Leithwood, et al., 2013). Steps districts can

take to support teachers of students with ASD include ensuring needed para-educators are available, providing all of the necessary pieces for district-provided curriculums, providing curriculum accessible to students with ASD, reviewing and reducing unnecessary paperwork requirements, and scheduling leaders to be present in the ASD classrooms. Since needed resources vary by district and building, identification of needed supports for each ASD classroom should be obtained through leaders listening to the needs of the teachers.

Positive Psychological Capital

Within the theme of positive psychological capital, psychological frames correlated to teacher attrition include motivation, satisfaction, commitment and implementation of coping strategies (Mason & Matas, 2015). Key findings reveal *the students* and *making a difference* are both job motivations and job rewards of all participants. Also mentioned as a coping support were relationships with their TEAMS. Commitment to remain in their position was stated as dependent upon their ability to remain effective with students, until they burn out, and until able to retire with pension benefits. From these findings, participants' self-efficacy is directly connected to their motivation. Given this, if a participant's self-efficacy were to diminish, it is likely their motivation to stay teaching would also diminish. A teacher's self-efficacy levels also influence student-teacher relationships and teacher performance, which directly affect the academic achievement of students (Miller, et. al., 2017). Districts could increase the self-efficacy of their teachers of students with ASD by providing the recommendations set out in the discussion sections regarding human capital, social capital, and structural capital.

Additional Findings

Commonalities between data gathered from the answers to Interview Questions 3-13, which explored the themes within the four-capital theory and Interview Questions 1, 2, 14, and

15, which explored the participants' experiences outside the four-capital theory, included the lack of support, lack of para-educators, too numerous job demands, and a desire for the presence of leadership membership in the classroom. Numerous negative factors were shared by participants which have not resulted in their leaving the teaching profession. Identification of the positive factors shared by the participants may shine a light on the important factors that keep teachers of students with ASD teaching.

This analysis suggests the positive factors, and possibly the key retention factors, of teachers of students with ASD to be relationships with students, relationships among their TEAMS, relationships with their students' parents, making a difference with students, and having a supportive TEAM. It is unclear what contributes to the positive effects of the relationships between the participants and the TEAM. Perhaps it is the simple element of understanding each other's job responsibilities which was identified as lacking in their leaders. Interaction with TEAM members was also identified as a means of coping, which could imply that trust, support, and dialogue are active among TEAM members. Positive relationships with students and students' parents could be dependent on students' growth and success which was mentioned as a job motivation and job reward by participants. It is unclear if the participants' independent actions of attending professional development activities on personal time, accommodating and modifying district provided curriculum, and personally purchasing the needed resources to set up their classroom systems contributed to their students' growth. It may be that teachers of students with ASD are bridging the gap between the lack of district resources and students' successes by using their own personal resources.

Moreover, the strong relationships combined with the reward of making a difference may have a greater influence on the teachers' decisions to stay teaching than the negative impact of

the lack of leadership support. Different elements of relationships with students overlapped with the participants' job motivation and job rewards of student growth. It may be considered that if one of the positive factors were removed, teachers may decide to leave. An additional consideration is if teachers do not receive the necessary supports that have been reported as lacking, that student growth and development may not continue and thus the job reward and motivation would be removed. This may also cause stress on the current positive relationships which was also noted as a positive factor in staying as well as a coping mechanism.

Recommendation for School Leaders

- To be present to and seek input from teachers of students with ASD
 - Provide time for collaboration among teachers of students with ASD
 - Provide meaningful professional development for teachers of students with ASD
 - Strengthen the social capital system among their employees
 - Ensure teachers of students with ASD are provided with the necessary supports to effectively run their classrooms

Limitations

This study has potential limitations. First, only four participants were secured for this study. This limited number may limit generalization as experiences and needs differ among districts, counties, and states. Second, the participants' experiences occurred during the two-year COVID 19 pandemic, which may have added additional job challenges. It is possible participants' perceptions may have been different if not for the school changes that occurred due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Third, the researcher recognizes potential bias due to the

researcher's personal experiences as a special education teacher. While all effort was made to eliminate bias, it is recognized bias may have influenced the research process.

Conclusion

Teachers of students with ASD work with the most challenging group of students, and yet participants in this study did not complain about these challenges. Participants only expressed the need for supports to meet these challenges in order to provide a positive educational experience for their students with ASD. Looking at the positive influence various relationships have in this study, districts should take measures to promote a strong social capital system among its staff, students, and parents. It is recommended that education leaders make it a priority to be present in the ASD classrooms. It is also recommended for education leaders to participate in dialogue with their teachers of students with ASD to seek their input pertaining to professional development and support needs as well as to foster relationships.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Invitation Letter

Participation Invitation Letter

Dear Invitee,

My name is Kimberley Rodriguez. I am an Education Specialist student at Northern Michigan University. I am kindly requesting your participation in a research study that I am conducting titled: What Keeps Teachers of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Teaching? The intention is to explore and uncover the key factors shared by teachers of students with autism when deciding whether to stay or leave their current position.

The study involves completing a basic professional pre-interview survey and a one-on-one recorded interview.

Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is completely anonymous; therefore, it does not require you to provide your name or any other identifying information.

If you would like to participate in the study, please read the Informed Consent letter attached. To begin the study, click the survey link at the end.

Your participation in the research will be of great importance to assist district leaders in decision making around teacher retention.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Kimberley Rodriguez, M.S, Education Specialist Student, Northern Michigan University

APPENDIX B

Consent Form



Northern Michigan University
School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service
PROJECT TITLE: What keeps teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder teaching?
IRB Approval Number: HS22-1318

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to uncover key factors shared by teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) when deciding whether to leave or stay teaching in their current position.

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked to complete a Google pre-survey questionnaire. You will be asked to participate in an interview series of questions about your thoughts on your experience as a teacher of students with ASD.

Time required:

Approximately 30

minutes Risks and

Benefits:

Risk is minimal with this research study. Although participants are being asked to share experiences that have prompted them to stay in their teaching positions, they could suffer

professional consequences if their colleagues or supervisors became aware of their responses and objected to what they said. To help mitigate this risk, the co-research will provide participants with copies of the transcriptions for the purpose of member checking. To further share the potential risk of professional consequences, the co-researcher will verbally explain this risk to the participants prior to the start of the interview as well as provide participants with copies of the transcriptions for the purpose of member checking. Additionally, all reasonable efforts will be made to keep all responses confidential.

Participant names will not be revealed nor the school district of the participants in the research report. There is minor risk involved with identifying the roles of the participants roles and number of years in those roles as this reduces the level of anonymity. There is a risk of experiencing varying emotions to the participants dependent upon their past experiences related to their current role. There is a potential risk of discomfort with participating in an interview.

Incentive or Compensation:

There is no other incentive for participating; therefore, you will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be de-identified by an assigned number. Your name, school district name, and school building name will not be used in any report or publication.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

If you have any further questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research project you may contact Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert of the Human Subjects Research Review Committee of Northern Michigan University (906-227-2300), leckert@nmu.edu. Any questions you have regarding the nature of this research project will be answered by the principal researcher who can be contacted as follows: Dr. Bethney Bergh (906) 227-1864, bbergh@nmu.edu.

Agreement:

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the form below. A signature will

indicate agreement to participate.

Participant's Name: (Print) _____

Signature _____(Date) _____

I understand that I will be [*audio or video recorded digitally*] by the researcher(s). These files will be kept by the researcher(s) on a password-protected computer. I understand that only the researcher(s) will have access to these files.

Video recording of study activities

Interviews may be video recorded to assist with the accuracy of your responses. You have the right to refuse the recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to video recording: Yes _____ No _____

Audio Recording of Study Activities

Interviews may be using audio recorded to assist with the accuracy of your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording: Yes _____ No _____

APPENDIX C

Pre-Interview Survey Questions

Pre-Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long have you been teaching in your current position?
3. What professional journey has led you to your current position?
4. What keeps you teaching in your current position?

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What is it like being a teacher of students with autism spectrum disorder?
2. How does this compare with what you thought being an ASD classroom teacher to be?
3. Tell me about the district offered professional development? (human capital)
4. Describe your relationship among colleagues, students, and parents? (social capital)
5. Talk about your connection to leadership and how well you think leadership understands your role as an ASD classroom teacher.
6. What support/s are you given or lacking in your building to meet leadership expectations? (social capital)
7. What practices are in place (or not in place) in your building and district that make you feel valued? (social capital)
8. What are your personal workload and responsibilities as a teacher of ASD students in your building/district? (structural capital)
9. How does the provided curriculum meet the needs of your students with ASD? (structural capital)
10. Are support staff such as para-educators adequately trained and prepared to work with students with ASD?
11. What motivates you to continue in your current position? (positive psychological capital)
12. What are some things that bring you great satisfaction as a teacher of students with ASD (rewards)? (positive psychological capital)
13. How long do you see yourself in this position?

14. What would you say is the most pressing factor/s when considering staying or leaving your current position?
15. What would you want district leaders to know about your position?

APPENDIX E

IRB Approval



Graduate Studies and Research
Marquette, MI 49855-5301
906-227-2300
www.nmu.edu/graduatestudies/

Memorandum

TO: Bethney Bergh
Kimberley
Rodriguez
School of Education, Leadership and Public Service

DATE: July 15, 2022

FROM: Lisa Schade Eckert
Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

SUBJECT: **IRB Proposal HS22-1318**
IRB Approval Date 7/15/2022
Proposed Project Dates: **6/28/2022 – 6/28/2023**

“What Keeps Teachers of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Teaching?”

Your proposal “What Keeps Teachers of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Teaching?” has been approved by the NMU Institutional Review Board. Include your proposal number (HS22-1318) on all research materials and on any correspondence regarding this project.

- A. If a subject suffers an injury during research, or if there is an incident of non-compliance with IRB policies and procedures, you must take immediate action to assist the subject and notify the IRB chair (dereande@nmu.edu) and NMU’s IRB administrator (leckert@nmu.edu) within 48 hours. Additionally, you must complete an Unanticipated Problem or Adverse Event Form for Research Involving Human Subjects.

- B. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant.

- C. If you find that modifications of investigators, methods, or procedures are necessary, you must submit a Project Modification Form for Research Involving Human Subjects before collecting data. Any changes or revisions to your approved research plan must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Until further guidance, per CDC guidelines, the PI is responsible for obtaining signatures on the COVID-19 Researcher Agreement and Release and COVID-19 Research Participant Agreement and Release forms for any in person research and following any COVID guidelines in their research location.

All forms can be found at the NMU [Human Subjects Research webpage](#).