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Factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers

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**FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE RETENTION OF
MEXICAN AMERICAN SPECIAL
EDUCATION TEACHERS**

A Thesis

By

MICHELLE R. KOYAMA

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas – Pan American
In fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF EDUCATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION
FOR THE CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE
EXCEPTIONAL LEARNER**

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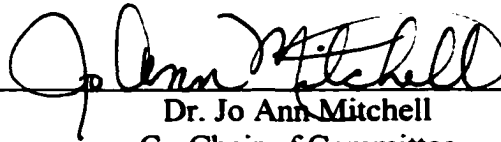
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**A Thesis
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MICHELLE R. KOYAMA**

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August 2003

ABSTRACT

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Every school year there are reports of the large number of teaching vacancies in the nation, particularly in the field of special education. Currently there are numerous studies addressing the factors that cause special education teachers to leave the classroom, however, there are few studies that suggest variables that contribute to teachers remaining for five years or longer. Further, there are no published studies to date that address the retention of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) teachers, particularly, Mexican American special education teachers. Grounded surveys were constructed through guided interviews that were distributed to 114 participants in two urban school districts to examine the factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers in the Rio Grande Valley. Trends were examined to begin to consider strategies to retain experienced special education teachers and impact student achievement for individuals with disabilities.

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As a primarily Mexican American woman with a Japanese last name, I have been surrounded my whole life by individuals who have cared about me and my success as an individual. These people not only include my immediate family, but the extended family I have acquired throughout my life's journey. The individuals in this extended family, or *La Familia*, are the individuals who have made my determination to finish this study possible. I wish to thank...

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1997 I was accepted to a competitive non-profit organization that recruits, selects, and trains recent college graduates to teach in under-resourced areas in the United States and was selected to teach special education in the Rio Grande Valley. I was sent to this region of South Texas where I was hired as an elementary resource and self-contained special education teacher. I initially committed to teach for two years; however, I became very invested in my students' lives and in my new community. The new attachment significantly impacted me and I remained in that same position for five years. Within that time I was challenged like I had never been before and often thought about leaving the classroom for another teaching position in the general education setting. In my fifth year of teaching I started graduate school and knew that my time had come. I had become officially "burned out" with the paperwork and politics of the position and I would be leaving at the end of the school year. However, I did not want to switch to teaching in the general education setting, rather, I wanted to finish my degree and escape the frustrations experienced in the school system for a short while. It is said that a special education teacher typically lasts for about five years before s/he becomes "burned out" and quits the field of education or switches positions within the education system. My decision validated this statistic. In fact, the idea for this study emerged from personal

experiences in public education over five years of teaching in South Texas in a special education setting. As a graduate student, I became interested in discovering more about teacher retention in the special education field. Specifically, I wanted to learn about special education teachers living and teaching in deep South Texas. This is the context for my inquiry.

Every year as the academic school year approaches, there are numerous reports about the national teacher shortage and the number of vacant teaching positions available especially in the areas of math, science, and special education. As the population increases, so do student enrollments and the number of teaching vacancies (Grissmer and Kirby, 1997). Lucksinger (2000) cited a study compiled by the Texas State Board for Educator Certification from 1998 that stated in 1995, 19% of novice teachers typically leave after the first year of teaching, 12% after the second year of teaching, and 50% after the fifth year of teaching. Although this statistic does not address special education teachers specifically, they are still embedded within these numbers. Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) stress that with continued high levels of poverty, drug and alcohol dependency, abuse and neglect, and the basic population boom, these factors continue to influence the increase in the enrollment for students identified as qualifying for special education services. As this number of individuals who qualify for special education services increases, the availability of teachers to support the needs of these students is decreasing. Though recruitment of special education teachers remains an issue, the retention of quality teachers is perhaps a more essential element in solving the current problem of supply and demand (Wrobel, 1993).

There are some known variables as to why the shortage in the number of teachers does not meet the demand. First, few prospective teachers are graduating from university programs with special education experience and certification (Westling and Whitten, 1996). There are numerous studies that have reported teachers leaving the field of special education for reasons such as salary, stress/burnout, and lack of administrative support (Breton and Donaldson, 1991; Billingsley, 1993; Singer 1993). Singer (1992), reports that despite the many reasons special education teachers leave, many elect to remain in the field of special education. Singer (1992) attributes his findings to the “costs” of continuing to teach. Stress from job assignment which includes grade level and setting, as well as salary, predict variation in special education teachers’ career paths. If the “costs” are not too high, they remain in the field. Despite knowing about some factors that contribute to teacher retention, there is an absence of research-based retention strategies designed to enhance schools’ abilities to support and retain their special education personnel (Cooley and Yovanoff, 1996).

Another interesting issue is the rise of minority students in our nation’s schools and how this increase in students is unmatched by a proportional increase in minority teachers. Ford, Grantham, and Harris (1997) point out how an inverse relationship exists between the percentage of minority students and minority teachers. It is important to address the absence of minority teachers in education as they serve as role models and advocates for minority students. Data indicate that minority teachers integrate the realities of students’ backgrounds and cultures, while simultaneously validating and affirming their identities (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Racially and culturally diverse teachers can also help smooth the transition from home to school for minority students by

servicing as cultural translators who build upon the communication and cultural style of minority students (Boykin, 1994). Minority teachers are needed so that all students see that teachers of color exist, but also because of their other beneficial roles, perspectives, and practices (King, 1993). Some studies have addressed African-American as well as White teacher attrition and have found that African-American teachers stay longer in the field of special education (Billingsley, 1993). Singer (1992) addressed race by comparing the paths of Black teachers with White teachers and found that the differential also varied by gender; White women left sooner than Black women, and Black men left sooner than White men. However, this researcher has not come across a published study that specifically addresses the Mexican American population or the more broad classifications of Hispanic or Latino/a. By examining trends in retention, administrators and supervisors in the field of education with high minority populations can begin to be proactive in retaining good special education teachers instead of being reactive to the teacher shortage.

Need for the Study

Past studies have reported why special education teachers are not staying in the classroom (e.g. Billingsley, 1993; Singh and Billingsley, 1996; Boe, Bobbit, Cook, Whitener, and Weber, 1997; Breton and Donaldson, 1991; Connolly, 2000; Whitaker, 2000; Hall, Pearson, and Carroll, 1992); however, the focus needs to be on what positive practices are occurring for those individuals who are remaining in the classroom to teach this special population of students. Therefore, instead of focusing on why teachers are leaving the field of special education, this study focused on the factors that contribute to those teachers who remain in the special education classroom for five years or longer.

Particularly, this study focused on Mexican American/Hispanic/Latino/a teachers. At this time there is not a published study that addresses this population of teachers. With minority students on the rise, and with the knowledge that minority teachers play a significant role in the lives of minority students, retaining the few minority teachers in the field seems by default an important educational priority (Ford, Grantham, and Harris, 1997). For example, in the 1996-97 school year the Texas Education Agency (TEA) reported that 37% of the total student enrollment was Hispanic, while in the 2002-03 school year the enrollment increased by 400,000 Hispanic students and raised the total to 43%. Further, the 1999 report from TEA indicated that 36% of the special education student population from ages 6 – 12 was Hispanic. To put this number in perspective, 45% were identified as White, and 18% were African-American/Black, and the remaining groups were significantly lower. The teacher statistic in the 2002 report showed that in 1999, 16.2% of both general and special education teachers were Hispanic. The figure for specifically identifying special education teachers is not available at this time.

Statement of the Problem

Since 1975 and the passage of public law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA, now IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) many districts have reported difficulties finding adequate numbers of special education teachers to staff classrooms (Singer, 1993). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education, reported in the 23rd Annual Report to Congress on the implementation of IDEA that since 1990-91, students served under the law from ages 6 through 21 has grown significantly over the past ten years by a little over 30

percent (2002). Not only is there a need to supply teachers to these special education classrooms, there is also a need to replace teachers to the classrooms where teachers are leaving.

Special education is a broad field in education that requires educators to have an abundance of knowledge as well as the patience and flexibility to handle the complex expectations placed upon them. Not only do they have the same challenges as their general education colleagues, there are additional tasks such as knowing all curricula to differentiate for multiple grade levels, being able to teach multiple subjects and grade levels – sometimes simultaneously, to having the knowledge to handle paperwork that is constantly being revised by new legislation. With these already challenging factors, add to it large classroom sizes, large caseloads, constantly being removed from class for Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and finally interacting with students to address their needs, meeting them at their ability levels and actually teaching them. For some teachers, after a few years of attempting to manage this mayhem, they leave the field of special education for either a general education position or another field of employment (Boyer and Gillespie, 2000; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss, 2001). Districts have to replace these teachers, and too often these positions are filled by non-certified personnel (Breton and Donaldson, 1991). The impact is that unqualified teachers then lead to a substandard quality of education for our children with disabilities.

Substantial research evidence suggests that well-prepared, capable teachers have the largest impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). However, there are qualified teachers who remain in the special education environment, often for many years, who positively impact our students with disabilities. The problem is, until

recently, few studies are being conducted documenting the factors that are keeping effective special education teachers in the classroom. The retention of quality teachers is crucial if we are truly going to offer all students an excellent education, much less be in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which states all students with disabilities have the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as well as the creed of the *No Child Left Behind Act* that says schools will staff classrooms with “highly qualified teachers.”

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican-American special education teachers who have been teaching for five years or more in the Rio Grande Valley.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was trifold. First, at a basic level, it was necessary to find the factors that are intrinsically and extrinsically motivating and encouraging professionals to stay in this specialized field of education. Local education agencies need to know strategies to maintain the best teachers for our students who require more individualized attention and instruction. But perhaps even more significant is the ability to address students’ needs appropriately to truly provide a “Free and Appropriate Public Education” as required by IDEA to all students with disabilities regardless of race and language. Therefore, it is also necessary to know how to keep committed special education personnel for our students who have both a disability and who are also identified as limited English proficient (LEP). It is common practice, although probably not admittedly, that some schools do not refer students who are Spanish speaking for

special education services because there is not a Spanish speaking special education professional available to meet the student's academic needs. The administration must make the difficult decision to maintain the student in the general education Spanish speaking classroom, because the language needs of the student will be met, and hopefully, better served academically (Baca and Cervantes, 1998). By finding factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American (Spanish speaking) special educators, we can more appropriately address the needs of English language learners who are being serviced by the special education system.

Another significant factor of this study is at the opposite spectrum – that of being identified as having a learning disability because of limited English proficiency. Ortiz and Yates (1983) found that Hispanic students in Texas were underrepresented in all special education categories except learning disabilities. In that category, Hispanic students were significantly overidentified. Often, the students who are immigrants, or whose parents are immigrants and have a first language other than English, have not had time to acquire the language skills needed to be successful in the American education system, yet they are still referred for special education services. This over and underrepresentation issue can be fairly complex, especially with researchers finding different patterns (Baca and Cervantes, 1998). However, what is certain is that having a special educator with similar cultural experiences as these students in the classroom, there is potential for intervention to occur that may otherwise not be recognizable to someone from outside the culture. The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) address this issue as well by stating in the findings to Congress:

[s]tudies have documented apparent discrepancies in the levels of referral and placement of LEP children in special education. The Department of Education has found that services provided to LEP students often do not respond primarily to the pupil's academic needs. (p. 5)

This study examined factors that lay the foundation for further research to better retain our Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) special education teachers who can better address the needs of our students who meet eligibility for special education services, although possibly not due to academic needs.

Research Question

The main question that drove this study was to determine what factors contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers who have been teaching for five years or more in the Rio Grande Valley. Other related questions include whether there was a relationship between cultural characteristics and the intention to remain in the special education classroom, and finally, how these factors compare to those in previous research.

Definition of Terms

The terms that are used in this study are presented in the following subsections.

AS/400 information system. Application System 400 is the server for the Operating System 400 (OS/400) that provides flexible workload management options for rapid deployment of high performance applications. This is the technology school districts in the local area utilize to manage all of their student and personnel data.

Cultural experiences. There are many definitions of culture, however for this study cultural experiences will be defined as shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors

and language that the community of the Rio Grande Valley experience and pass from generation to generation.

Limited English Proficient (LEP). As defined in *Title VII of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994* (IASA; P.L. 103-382), a student is limited English Proficient if s/he "has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language and whose difficulties may deny such individual the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or to participate fully in our society due to one or more of the following reasons:

- was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English and comes from an environment where language other than English is dominant;
- is a Native American or Alaska Native or who is a native resident of the Outlying Areas and comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on such individual's level of English language proficiency;
- is migratory and whose native language is other than English and comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant" (§7501).

Mexican American. The Mexican-American term was used due to the area in which this study was conducted. People in this region also self identify as Hispanic and Latino/a therefore all three "groups" of people were included in the data analysis. According to the United States Census Bureau (2000) Hispanic or Latinos are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the 2000 questionnaire – "Mexican, Mexican American", "Chicano,"

“Puerto Rican,” or “Cuban,” as well as those who indicate that they are “other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” and so on.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In reviewing the literature, there have been many studies conducted on the attrition of both general and special educators, with minimal information available on the factors that retain special education personnel. In fact, about one-third of new teachers leave the teaching profession within five years (Darling-Hammond, 2003). However, the literature that is available on teacher persistence suggests teachers' reactions to their work environment and the attitudes and perceptions that they form about their profession can be important indicators of their long- range teaching plans (Hall, Pearson, and Carroll, 1997). Many variables such as gender, race, certification status, and age are common indicators in the literature that impact teacher attrition. However, Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) also point out the inconsistencies in the literature and depending on the study, determines the degree to which these variables are truly a factor in teacher attrition.

When the studies address race, White and African American teacher attrition/retention rates continue to be the focus (e.g. Singer, 1993). However, Adams and Dial (1993) conducted a study in a large school district in the Southwestern United States that looked at the influence of sex, age, and ethnicity as important factors to teacher survival. In their 6 ½ year study they found that Whites were 57% more likely to

leave than Hispanic teachers. They chose these factors based on previous research conducted with teachers in Michigan and North Carolina that revealed sex, age, and ethnicity as important determiners of the length of teaching careers. These studies do not distinguish between general and special education professionals and this researcher has not come in contact with other data that specifically addresses the retention of Mexican American Special Educators. The geographic areas of the previously mentioned studies can also be a factor where the prevalence of the samples used were predominantly Black and White.

Researchers have also reported that success in early teaching experiences has an influence on teacher attrition. That is, teachers who remain in the field report positive initial teaching experiences whereas negative experience often prompt plans to exit (Westling and Whitten, 1996; Billingsley, 1993). The question that needs to be addressed is what constitutes a positive experience? Up to 30% of special educators, compared to 10% of general educators are on emergency certification (Cooley and Yovanoff, 1996). Therefore, a good number of teachers come to the job lacking the training required to adequately prepare and equip them for the challenges they will encounter which ultimately impact this positive initial teaching experience. Additionally, teachers with emergency certification tend to leave the field at a higher rate than their traditional route colleague (Miller, Brownell, and Smith, 1999; Billingsley, 1993). Huling (1999), examined teacher programs that provided hands-on field experiences prior to becoming a teacher of record. She cited a study by Fleener (1998) that recognized candidates who received increased amounts of field experience in their teacher preparation programs remain in the profession at significantly higher rates than those prepared through

traditional campus based programs. Research suggests there may be a relationship between teacher perceptions of preparedness to teach special education and a decision to stay in or leave the classroom.

Teacher attrition rates are also reported highest for retirement eligible teachers and for young teachers (Grissmer and Kirby, 1997). Singer (1993) also found that young teachers – under the age of 35 – were significantly more likely to leave teaching than their older counterparts. The reasons tend to be for family or school, and many of these teachers return at a later date. Researchers also report that individuals who have high scores on standardized tests also leave teaching at a higher rate (Billingsley, 1993; Singer, 1992). Another question to then address is, if the score is a predictor of competence and knowledge, then why are we not addressing systems of retaining these knowledgeable people in the field of education?

Additional factors reported to be influential in leaving the field of education are administrative support, classroom assignment, and teacher salary (Westling and Witten, 1996) along with collegial isolation that special education teachers commonly experience (Cooley and Yovanoff, 1996). Breton and Donaldson (1991) suggest another factor in addition to lack of administrative support is lack of supervision. General educators receive it and it contributes to teacher efficacy, whereas resource room teachers receive little to none at all in their field.

Another study by Cross and Billingsley (1994) suggests that teachers who were more committed to the field of education are those with fewer role problems, greater principal support and lower levels of stress. Billingsley and Cross (1992) explored the correlates of commitment and job satisfaction and found that job satisfaction is associated

with greater leadership support and lower levels of role conflict and stress. Additionally, they found that race contributed to the prediction of job satisfaction, with lower satisfaction among non-whites. However, they also point out that the results of any of the published studies addressing race and job satisfaction need to be interpreted with caution because minority teachers are more likely to teach in inner-city settings where there are often other challenging factors with which to deal with. Therefore in these studies “job factors may be related to job related conditions, not the teachers” (p. 467).

Grissmer and Kirby (1997) cite six factors that will influence the demand for teachers between 1998 and 2013: rising enrollments, lower pupil/teacher ratios, rising teacher attrition rates, early teacher retirement plans, a decline in the teacher “reserve pool”, and the current queue of teacher entrants. Further, while minorities become a much larger proportion of students in the next ten years, the proportion of teachers that are minority has not been increasing. The proportion of Black teachers fell from 8% to 7% between 1990-1991 and 1993-1994, while the proportion of Hispanics has risen from 3% to over 4%. However, these proportions are far below the projected 37% of students expected to be black or Hispanic in future years (Grissmer and Kirby, 1997). Further, the number of special education teachers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) backgrounds is small, declining, and by 2009 is predicted to be a small percentage compared to the number of CLD students serviced by the special education system (Olson, 2000). With these projections, school systems clearly need strategies to retain quality minority teachers in order to meet the demand, and provide an excellent education to all students.

Shen (1997) discusses different theories such as the Human Capital Theory, the Social Learning Theory, and the Theory of Teachers as Economically Rational Decision Makers, as a foundation to address the variables of why teachers stay or leave teaching. She suggests that teachers who feel they have influence over school and teaching policies are more likely to stay. To empower teachers is one way to improve teacher retention.

The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) summary on recruiting and retaining quality teachers (2002) suggests that teaching experience is strongly associated with special education teacher quality. Additionally, the SPeNSE summary sheet on the local administrator's role in promoting teacher quality states that teaching experience is an important component of teacher quality, and high teacher turnover is detrimental to student learning. Further this report addressed the nations' changing school demographics and that almost one fourth of special education teachers' students are from a cultural or linguistic group different from their own, and 7% are English Language Learners (ELL). Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, and Saunders (2002) discuss the impact diversity in personnel can have in teaching. They provide information on studies that have examined how teachers who reflect the racial or cultural makeup of a community also act as liaisons between that community and the school; the presence of personnel who speak the language of ELL students in the schools is an obvious necessity given the multilingual make-up of many schools; CLD teachers can increase academic achievement for students of color; and the presence of teachers from diverse backgrounds modifies existing biases and racial attitudes of school children.

Perhaps the document with the most significant to this study is P.L. 105-17, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 which states in section 7 A through F that:

[t]he Federal Government must be responsive to the growing needs of an increasingly more diverse society. By the year 2000, this nation will have 275,000,000 people, nearly one of every three of whom will be either African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, or American Indian. Taken together as a group, minority children are compromising an ever larger percentage of public school students. Recruitment efforts within special education must focus on the bringing larger numbers of minorities into the profession in order to provide appropriate practitioner knowledge, role models, and sufficient manpower to address the clearly changing demography of special education. Finally, the limited English proficient (LEP) population is the fastest growing in our Nation...Studies have documented apparent discrepancies in the levels of referral and placement of LEP children in special education. The Department of Education has found that services provided to LEP students often do not respond primarily to the pupil's academic needs. (p.5)

This study addresses the factors and discrepancies found throughout the review of literature. The approach of this study however, was to examine factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers; investigating reasons why the high concentration of Mexican American special education teachers in the Region One Education Service Area of South Texas remain in the special education classroom.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers who have been teaching for five years or more. This section describes the methodology that was used to conduct the study. It is divided into the following subsections: (1) research design, (2) sample, (3) research questions, (4) data collection procedures, (5) data analysis procedures, and (6) limitations of the study.

Research Design

A predominantly qualitative approach was used as the design for this study. This type of inquiry was chosen because it allows the researcher to study issues in depth and in detail without perspectives and experiences being constrained by predetermined categories used in other types of research (Patton, 2002). “In qualitative research the researcher is the instrument, which means that the validity of the study depends upon the methods, competence, skill, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork” (p. 14). In contrast, in quantitative research the measuring instrument becomes the focus in that it must be carefully constructed to be sure it measures what it is supposed to measure (Gay and Airasian, 2000).

There are three major design strategies in qualitative research. The first is *naturalistic inquiry* which means that the research takes place in real-world settings and the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon such as in a laboratory or other controlled setting. There are no predetermined constraints to the findings that may be constrictive like in other research designs. The next type of qualitative design is that of the *emergent design flexibility*. Just as the name implies, the design is open and emerges as new discoveries are made. The researcher is not tied to any one theory and is able to adapt to inquiry as situations change. The final design used in this qualitative research was that of *purposeful sampling*. With this type of design, information rich samples were chosen to study in depth to learn about the issue(s) of central importance to the purpose of the research. The design of this study can primarily be categorized as purposeful sampling.

The review of literature cited 17 possible factors as to why some teachers may stay in the field of special education. However, the purpose of this study was to explore a specific group of teachers with a particular ethnic background and years of experience and discover similarities and differences expressed by this focus group of educators. Therefore, the design of this study was based on a *pragmatic approach* as not to “limit [one]self operating narrowly within a single paradigm” (Patton, 2002, p.71). A pragmatic stance “aims to supersede one-sided paradigm allegiance by increasing the concrete and practical methodological options available to researchers and evaluators” (Patton, 2002, p.71). A pragmatic study favors methodological appropriateness as a primary criterion for judging methodological quality; it recognizes that different methods are appropriate for different situations.

Therefore, I drew upon three theoretical orientations commonly utilized in qualitative research in education. The first theoretical orientation was *heuristics*, a form of inquiry that brings to the front the personal experience and insights of the researcher. I taught in the special education setting for five years, and I was interested in reflecting upon my own experiences as well as exploring the essential experiences of others who have been special education teachers. Specifically, I was interested in discovering why special education teachers continue to teach in the field despite the intense demands placed upon them insofar as they are commonly the least compensated in terms of support, especially with administration (Littrell, Billingsley, and Cross, 1994; Westling and Whitten, 1996). The use of a *heuristic perspective* enabled me to discover similarities and differences that I shared with these professionals who have remained in the field longer than I. As Clark Moustakas (1990) contends, “The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self awareness and self knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self discoveries” (p. 9).

The second theoretical tradition drawn upon was *social constructivism* which begins with the premise that because human beings have evolved the capacity to interpret and construct reality, the world of human perception is not real in the absolute sense, as the sun is real, but is “made up” and shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs (Patton, 2002, p. 96). According to Michael Patton (2002),

[s]ocial construction, or constructivist philosophy, is built on the thesis of ontological relativity, which holds that all tenable statements about existence depend on a world view, and no world view is uniquely determined by empirical

or sense data about the world. Hence, two people can live in the same empirical world, even though one's world is haunted by demons, and the other's, by subatomic particles. (p. 97)

As a social constructivist I attempted to give "voice" to a population of teachers that has not been addressed in the literature. As stated previously, there are no published studies that address the population of Mexican American special education teachers and the factors that contribute to them remaining in the field.

Finally, *grounded theory* was utilized as a third theoretical orientation. Because I was interested in generating theory that emerged from systematic comparative analysis and was grounded in my fieldwork, using a grounded theory approach enabled me to explain the phenomenon of teacher retention in special education among Mexican-American teachers in the lower Rio Grande Valley. The grounded theory methodology described below "emphasizes steps and procedures for connecting induction and deduction through the constant comparative method" (Patton, 2002, p.125).

First, a sample of five Mexican American special education teachers was interviewed following a guided set of questions regarding prior experiences and interaction with individuals with disabilities that might have impacted their desire to remain in the field of special education. These guided interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed by the researcher. The data from these interviews was then analyzed to create categories from the information obtained from the interviews. This analysis in qualitative research is referred to as *coding the data*. The process of *open coding* was used to initially label the phenomena divulged during the interviews, then *axial coding* was applied to make connections between the categories created that related in

meaningful ways. A constant comparative method of analysis was used during the coding process to verify the meaningfulness and the accuracy of the created categories and the placement of the data within the categories (Patton, 1990). Additionally, the researcher and her co-advisor first coded the data independently then compared the categories created as a form of triangulation. This process helped to eliminate bias the researcher may have had from her personal investment in the study. Strauss and Corbin (1990) also recommended memoing and diagramming as a way to move “away from the data to abstract thinking, then return to the data to ground these abstractions in reality” (p. 199). Although these memos will not be used in the publishing of the manuscript, they were in fact an important part to the finished product.

The process described up to this point in acquiring this initial data was then used for the construction of a survey that was disseminated to a larger sample of special education teachers. In qualitative research this process is also known as the *grounded theory approach*. “Through this methodology, the concepts and relationships among them are not only generated but they are also provisionally tested” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 24). By interviewing a small sample of teachers and then surveying a larger sample of teachers, I was able to examine the experiences of teachers currently in the field from the particulars expressed from the small group of educators and compare their responses to a larger population of teachers. In contrast to other types of research, the intention of the grounded theory approach is that theory will emerge from the findings in the data and new knowledge will be constructed that can promote further studies in this area of research.

The final step in the qualitative portion of this design was to conduct a *member check* once the data from the surveys had been analyzed. The information was compared to the original responses from the interviews and then a member check was conducted where I returned to the original five participants to inquire if they also agreed with the responses from the new data. The Likert scale items were analyzed using a descriptive approach.

Sample

The sample of teachers for this study was taken from multiple school districts in the Rio Grande Valley, otherwise known as schools in the Region One Education Service Center area of South Texas. This area of South Texas has a high Mexican American population concentration from which the sample was drawn. For this study teachers were acquired from this population in two different ways using the concept of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Since this is a primarily qualitative study, qualitative sampling procedures were used. The difference between statistical probability sampling and qualitative purposeful sampling is that qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples to permit inquiry into and understand a phenomenon in depth. In quantitative methods the purpose of the sampling is to generalize with confidence from the sample to the population it represents (Patton, 2002).

The purpose of this initial study of Mexican American special education teachers was to study in depth the phenomenon of teachers who remain in the classroom despite the frustrations of the position. Therefore, my first sample of teachers was five Mexican American teachers of varying teaching experience obtained through recommendations and availability. The purpose is to ensure there is a representative sample of special

education teachers with differing experiences in grade level, years of experience, and special education setting. Purposeful sampling was used again to obtain the two school districts to be used for the dissemination of the survey. These districts were chosen based on preliminary information obtained from personnel directors about the number of special education teachers currently employed who had five or more years of experience. After the initial selection of districts, *intensity sampling* was used in order to acquire the greatest and yet most manageable number of Mexican American special education teacher participants as possible for the study. As it can be derived from the title, the intensity sample consisted of information rich cases that manifested the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 1990) which in this case was the number of teachers who had been teaching in special education for five years or more.

Research Question

The main research question used to guide this study was: “What factors contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers who have been teaching for five or more years in the Rio Grande Valley?” This main question was divided into further sub-questions after further review. The differences between the special education teachers in two urban school districts were examined as well as the responses from the type of routes to special education certification. Finally, the years of experience in the classroom was examined to determine if there was significant information from that data.

Data Collection Procedures

This study was conducted using a *grounded theory approach*. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) this “approach is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop and inductively derive grounded theory about a

phenomenon” (p. 24). Upon approval from the University of Texas – Pan American Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects (UTPA IRB) (Appendix A), five special education teachers who had been in the classroom for five years or longer, who had varied levels of experience, and who represented a variety of special education classroom settings were contacted. After acquiring permission to interview and audio tape the participants (Appendixes B and C), a guided interview (Appendix D) was conducted at the convenience of the participant. After each interview was conducted it was reviewed and transcribed by the researcher. Using the responses from the five interviews, the data was coded and then used to formulate a survey.

After a second approval from the UTPA IRB this survey was distributed to 114 experienced special education teachers between two school districts in the Rio Grande Valley. The grounded survey had eight demographic questions, 24 Likert scale questions, and four open ended questions (Appendix F). Additionally, the surveys were sent through inter-school mail from the special education departments in hopes of increasing the number of returned responses from participants. The teachers initially targeted were those who had been teaching for five years or more. Their names and schools were obtained through the personnel directors from each district. Then the data were examined more specifically for the teachers who identified themselves as Mexican American on the survey. The two districts chosen for this study in total had 114 teachers that fit this description based on preliminary data obtained through phone conversations with the district personnel directors. School District A accessed this information by running an Ad Hoc query from the AS400 information system. The procedure that School District B used to acquire this information was similar, however, had to be cross

referenced by hand with other records. According to the Texas Education Agency, based on the student enrollments, these two districts are also considered urban school districts.

Data Analysis Procedures

Statistical analysis follows formulas and rules, while qualitative analysis depends on the insights and conceptual capabilities of the analyst (Patton, 2002). Qualitative analysis depends from the beginning on astute pattern recognition; therefore, it was imperative that analysis occur throughout the study and there were several ways in which this happened. Using the interview transcriptions, the next step was to categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret the data collected (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). More specifically the data was coded by themes and concepts in the guided interview data that related to the guiding questions. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe this analysis procedure of *open coding* as fracturing the data and allowing one to identify some categories, their properties, and dimensional locations (p. 97). Next, *axial coding* was applied to put these data back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As mentioned earlier, a constant comparative method of analysis was used to ensure that information was used correctly and in the most meaningful way. This type of qualitative research analysis guided the study and the procedures that were used throughout.

The aforementioned procedures were also a form of establishing the trustworthiness of this study. The types of triangulation that contributed to the verification and validation of the qualitative analysis of this study were triangulation by method, by source, and by analyst/researcher. The different data collection methods of the interview, the survey, and then the follow-up member check questions qualify

triangulation by method. Triangulation by source occurred through the cross-checking of information obtained from the five interviews with the information from the 114 surveys, and then finally through the review of literature. The last type of triangulation was mentioned earlier, and that was the process of analyst or investigator triangulation. Patton (1990) describes this as two or more persons independently analyzing the same qualitative data set and then comparing the findings. This process occurred throughout the study.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. To begin, only five participants were interviewed to create the grounded survey. There may have been other factors that were not obtained due to the experiences of a limited number of individuals. Next, only teachers from two school districts were surveyed, which is not representative of all Mexican American special education teachers. Additionally, the experiences of teachers in the lower Rio Grande Valley are unique to this area and further research of Mexican American teachers in other areas of the United States would be useful to compare with the data from this study.

CHAPTER IV

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

“The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of the massive amount of data. There are no formulas for determining significance. No ways exist of perfectly replicating the researcher’s analytical thought processes. No straightforward test can be applied for reliability and validity. In short, no absolute rules exist except perhaps this: Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 2002: 432-433).

Given Patton’s (2002) advice, this chapter will be my best attempt to represent the data and communicate what it reveals in regards to factors that contribute to the retention of special education teachers, and specifically Mexican American special education teachers in South Texas. As I begin to address the findings from the data collected, it is important to stress that analysis has been ongoing and preliminary findings have emerged throughout the course of this study. After the interviews were conducted with five experienced special education teachers, I transcribed the recorded interviews as a way to immerse myself in the data to give further insight into patterns that would emerge. The patterns that arose from this first analysis were coded into three categories: *experiences*, *individuals*, and *strongest factors* that impacted the desire or willingness to remain in the field of special education.

With further inspection, additional data emerged from these open codes and axial codes were created. These axial codes were then reflected upon and memos were written as a final step in this initial analysis process to ensure the meaning of each code was

investigated to be used later in the final analysis. For example, from the first open code of experiences, *exposure* was the theme from the interview data that could be described as events or situations in these teachers' lives where they worked with individuals with disabilities before they were teachers of record. This axial code of *exposure* occurred as young children or during their adolescent or young adult years. Some teachers reported working as an assistant or tutor which exposed them to the special education environment and provided them with the knowledge of what they would encounter in a special education classroom. This first hand experience prepared them by providing hands-on knowledge and a foundation for what to expect and how things should operate in this setting. The sense of possibility was established before they entered their own classrooms. They learned early how to maintain expectations for their students and establish a determination to "reach" each student. The previous experiences provided these teachers with a perspective to be advocates for students with special needs and it fostered a desire to teach children with disabilities - to work with this population of students that others sometimes easily give up on. Figure 1 displays the category "experiences" as an open code with axial coding and the patterns that emerged.

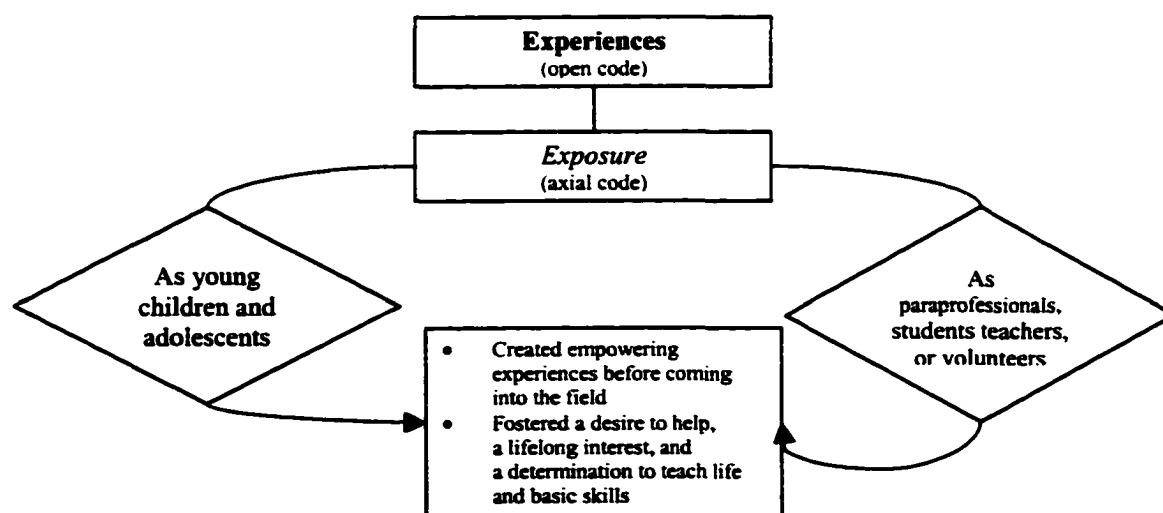


Figure 1 *Experiences that have influenced willingness to stay in special education.*

The next open code from the data was individuals which described all of the different people who had positively impacted the interviewees' desire to remain in special education. The categories of different people became the axial codes displayed in Figure 2. The memoing from the interview transcriptions gives insight to these six axial codes that were embedded in the data. *Parental influence* emerged as one of the axial codes. A major theme stemming from this code was parents instilling a sense of "there is no such thing as 'I can't'" and modeled perseverance for their children. As a result of this conviction, teachers applied the same philosophy in their special education classrooms. In one case, a teacher's mother exposed her children to individuals with special needs when they were young which gave this teacher a sense of perspective for people with needs outside of the "norm."

Another group of individuals that emerged as an axial code were *paraprofessionals* who were described as "colleagues", "part of the team", and a "support system" by the teachers who were interviewed. It appears that if there is collaboration and cooperation between the teacher and paraprofessional(s), the focus remains on the success of the students. A third group that came up as impacting desire to remain in the field was *administration*. This group includes not only the principal, but the other administrators on campus as well as off campus administration such as the director and supervisor from the special education office. This group of individuals was described as "backing up" the teachers and also providing the proper training in academic and administrative areas such as with the paperwork.

Colleagues were another axial code which included several groups of people. It not only referred to other special education teachers but to the general education teachers

as well if they were involved in collaborating for the benefit of the students' success. Paraprofessionals were also included in this group and were described as "part of the team" with no division between the teacher and the assistant.

Another group of individuals mentioned during the interviews were the *mentors*. Mentors modeled how to advocate for students with disabilities, the importance of relentless pursuit for students with disabilities, and persistence to teach individuals with special needs. However, the main group of individuals that had the biggest impact on these teachers desire to remain in the field were the *students*. The students were the primary reason for most interviewees as to why they were still teaching. Many teachers felt invested in their students' lives and did not want to give up on them. This included students with behavior issues - the challenge to reach these students because "others give up on them." Other teachers from the interviews felt a sense of determination to teach their students necessary skills to survive in the world.

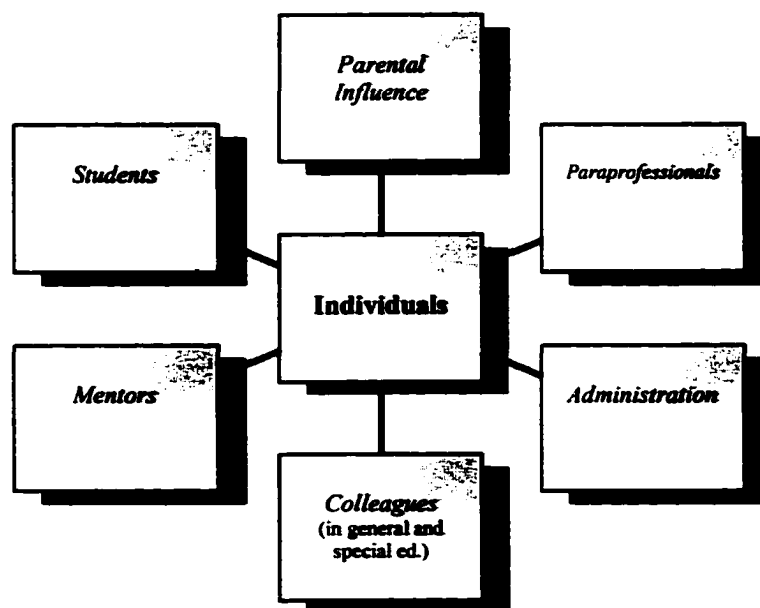


Figure 2 *Individuals* who have had an impact on your desire to remain in special education.

Figure 3 displays the axial coding from the open code strongest factors. Three axial codes emerged from strongest factors: *love working in special education*, *collegiality*, and *flexibility*. Each axial code generated common themes and patterns. For instance each interview expressed the statement “love working in special education” and also mentioned the “sense of family” several times because the teachers usually work with the same students for a number of years therefore the investment the teachers make is significant like in a family. Additionally, the working relationship with the assistants/paraprofessionals can develop into a close relationship as well and over time, everyone becomes invested in each other’s life. This investment of time naturally establishes a determination to “reach” each student. The skills needed to “reach” each individual are constantly being discovered and there is so much to know and learn in the field. The interviewees expressed that another reason they stay in the setting is professional development opportunities. Related is the notion of proper training. The interviewees expressed that when received from the very beginning in the career, it contributes to the love of the job because it sets teachers up for success. But in the end, the teachers said they “enjoy” working in special education which was ultimately a result of working with the students and working with great colleagues in both the general and special education settings.

The second theme naturally emerged as *collegiality*. Relationships with peers and administrators on campus were important to the teachers. Teachers felt that the ways in which administrators “support” the teachers contributed to their decision to remain in the field. Administration for some included the leadership at the district level; particularly persons who are responsible for the district special education programs. Other

collaborative relationships described included that of the special education teacher and her/his assistant, and that of the special and general education teachers. The “team” mentality was important to the teachers for the benefit of the students.

The final axial code was *flexibility*. Flexibility meant variety for one person in that she taught a variety of subjects so her schedule was never dull. For others flexibility meant that because of the teacher shortage, she knew she could remain teaching at the grade level of preference. Additionally, these teachers expressed that they knew in special education they could teach just about anywhere they wanted. They liked that they could just about choose what district they wanted to work for. Finally one person expressed she liked the flexibility in the schedule in that it was not rigid like in a corporate job. There were breaks throughout the year to regain a sense of perspective and rejuvenate to get back to the classroom and the students.

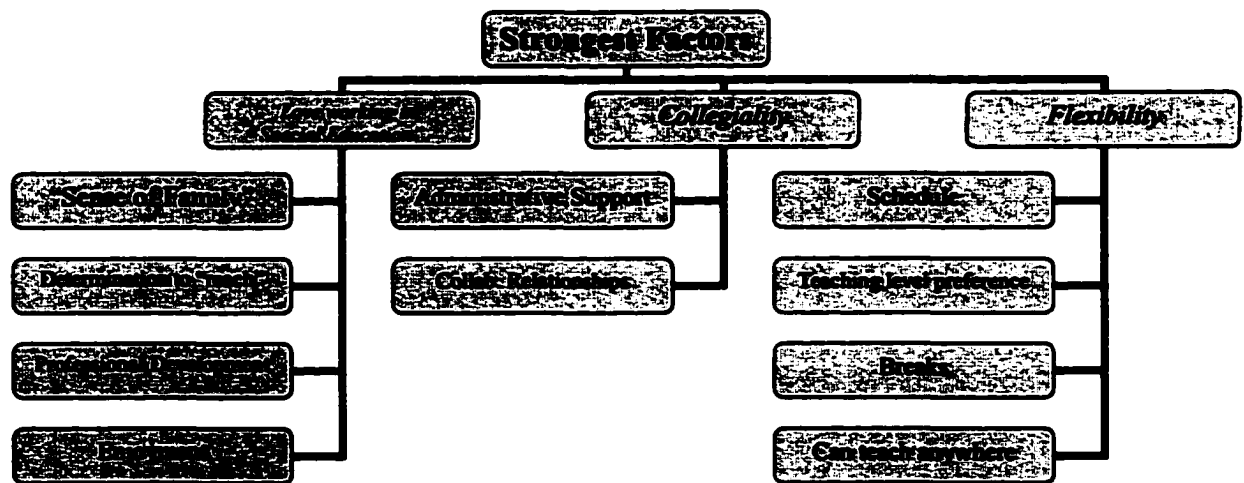


Figure 3 Strongest factors that have impacted your willingness to stay in special education.

Using the axial codes just described, a grounded survey was created which included 8 demographic questions, 24 Likert scale questions, and 4 short answer questions for participants to provide further insight into their responses on the Likert questions. The demographic questions addressed information such as ethnicity, years of experience, route to certification, language ability other than English, grade levels taught, as well as special education setting experience. The Likert scale questions were generated from the information provided during the guided interviews. These questions were based on the information that emerged from the interviews. A question was developed for all the themes and patterns that are represented in Figures 1, 2, and 3 with an additional four short answer questions for clarification from the participants. An example of the survey can be found in Appendix G. These surveys were distributed to special education teachers with five or more years teaching experience in two urban school districts. However, the data collection process was particularly challenging for a couple of reasons.

In Texas, standardized testing (TAKS) is a stressful and high stakes time for students and teachers alike. After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board Committee on Human Subjects, and gaining approval from superintendents to survey their teachers (Appendix C), the dissemination period occurred at the same time of the TAKS testing. The school year was also coming to a close which is a hectic time for special education teachers as final paperwork deadlines have to be met for both campus and district records. Therefore, several follow up phone calls and visits were made in each district to finally obtain 70 qualifying surveys from teachers in both school districts. Eighty surveys in total were received; however, they were either blank, distributed to

non-special education teachers, or to teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience. Next, Likert scale data was entered into the SPSS 11.0 software program, and the short answer questions were transcribed into Microsoft Word.

As the analysis process progressed I became curious about the frequencies from not only the responses from the teachers who identified as Mexican American, but from the different groups from the demographic data. I wanted to know if there were patterns from the survey data such as those with a particular route to certification, different years of experience, and the different school districts, that would provide more insight into factors that contribute to the retention of special education teachers in South Texas. Therefore, I heeded Patton's advice and displayed the significant findings from the overall data as I planned in my research design as well as in the areas I became interested in during the implementation of the study.

Overall Results

The overall results from the 70 qualifying surveys are addressed first to help put results from the other filtered groups into perspective. Throughout this section, I also applied the constant comparative method of the survey results to find connections between the grounded survey and the initial interviews to eventually create grounded theory about possible factors that may contribute to the retention of special education teachers in the Rio Grande Valley. The end of this chapter will address the results of the Mexican American teachers specifically.

Demographics

To begin with the demographic information, 77% of the respondents were female and 79% of the total number of participants identified as Mexican-American, 2 people identified as “Hispanic”, 1 person as African-American, 1 as African, 9 as White/Non-Hispanic, and the few remaining as “Other.” Fifty-eight people said they were bilingual in terms of speaking English and Spanish while 2 additional people said they spoke English with “some” Spanish. Finally, the participants disclosed that they teach in multiple settings which means they can teach students who are identified as “self-contained” mild/moderate or severe, resource, content mastery, inclusion, as well as other settings. Eighty-four percent of the teachers said they teach in a setting that represents some combination which included other setting titles as well. The grade levels taught by these individuals also represented a range in distribution. Table 1 represents this information.

Likert Scale Results

In regard to the 24 questions that were developed from the initial interviews, about 50% of the people agreed that they had been exposed to individuals with disabilities as a child or adolescent. Additionally 38 out of the 70 (54%) participants had an experience as a volunteer, teaching assistant, or student teacher in a special education setting before they became the teacher of record. Ninety-five percent of this group agreed that this experience and previous exposure has impacted their willingness to remain in the field of special education. This figure corresponds with the interviews in that the experiences provided exposure to a setting that these teachers knew how to handle before they became the teacher of record. Ninety-three percent of these people

also said that their desire to help students with special needs to the experiences they had in a special education or similar setting. This finding is a significant follow up to Billingsley's (1993) critical analysis of the existing literature on teacher retention and attrition in general and special education which mentions at the time of her review of the literature, prior work experience was a factor that little was known about, but potentially influenced teachers career decisions. By applying the constant comparative method of analysis, triangulation by source and method led to a significant finding.

Table 1

<i>Demographic Information</i>		Frequency	Percent
Gender:	Female	54	77%
	Male	16	23%
Ethnicity:	White/Non-Hispanic	9	13%
	Black/African American	1	1%
	Mexican American	55	79%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0
	Other	5	7%
Language:	English Only	8	11%
	Spanish & English	57	81%
	Other	5	7%
Setting:	Severe / Profound	5	7%
	Resource	3	4%
	Content Mastery	2	3%
	Multiple	59	86%
	<i>Missing system</i>	1	
Grade Level:	PreK - 5	18	26%
	K - 4	6	9%
	6 - 8	3	4%
	9 - 12	8	12%
	Multiple	34	49%
	<i>Missing system</i>	1	

The next area that deserves some attention is the area of assistants or paraprofessionals. During several of the initial interviews, it was expressed that the paraprofessionals were a much appreciated “support system” and their help with various duties from teaching to paperwork contributed to these teachers remaining in the classroom. The results from the survey indicated that 65% of the participants also agreed with this notion. However, 16% of the respondents also strongly disagreed. After some reflection, this figure can be attributed to the fact that not all special education teachers have the “luxury” of additional help in the classroom and instead of not answering the question, “strongly disagree” was marked instead. If this study is replicated, this question would need to be addressed in the instrument design. Additionally, another question in the survey also helps support the interview statements in that 80% of the participants also agreed that a “sense of family” had been established with their assistant(s). Assistants/paraprofessionals can have some impact on a special education teacher’s career as illustrated in the short answer responses in Table 2.

Students were the next group of individuals mentioned in the interviews as the reason why the teachers were still in the special education setting. When compared to the survey results, 94% of this group also agreed with that statement. When asked if they felt they had established a “sense of family” with their students, all but one person agreed which resulted in 98% agreement. As mentioned before, these teachers become personally invested in each of their students’ lives and remain to ensure their students are successful. Seventy-six percent of the teachers also agreed that being bilingual impacted their determination to “reach” their students who were Spanish dominant speakers.

Table 2

Examples of Short Answer Responses for Survey Question 14: In What Ways do your Administrators, Colleagues, and Paraprofessionals Support Your Efforts as a Special Education Teacher?

“... my assistants have provided me with an immense amount of support. Their knowledge, efforts, experience, patience, flexibility, and willingness to share has made my job bearable.”

“ Paraprofessionals support overall in all self-contained classrooms. Without their assistance, the teacher would have a difficult time dealing with a self-contained classroom alone. There is no way one person can handle five to ten students with multiple disabilities. The teacher and paraprofessionals become a family and support each other throughout the year.”

“There is not been one day in my special education career that I have not thanked the Lord for the support of my colleagues, especially my paraprofessionals....I would not have lasted this long without the support of the entire staff, especially the special education staff.”

“My paraprofessional and I have worked together for many years. We have become a team. She is able to help me better because of this. If I leave the room for an IEP meeting, I feel confident that she will cover my class. The students also respect her more because of the way we work together.”

“The paraprofessionals to a very great extent have become an extension of me. Their love and concern for my students have provided needed support in my efforts to help the children with special needs.”

Another group of people said to impact their willingness to stay in special education for the teachers who were interviewed were the other teachers worked with on campus. To get a better sense of how the survey participants agreed with the statement, this group was addressed by asking two separate questions. The first addressed special

education colleagues specifically, and the other general education colleagues. Sixty-four percent agreed the special education colleagues impacted their willingness to remain while only 52% agreed that the general education colleagues had the same impact. Billingsley and Cross (1991) cited in their study how lack of interaction with other professionals was given as an important reason for leaving among 21% of those teachers transferring from special education to general education. Additionally, Nieto (2003) collaborated with seven teachers in her qualitative study on keeping good teachers and found that a factor that sustained the teachers was “colleagues to whom they could turn to for support” (p. 17). For at least half of the participants surveyed for this study, collegial interaction is important and impacts their willingness to remain in the special education classroom.

Administration was another group of individuals expressed during the interviews as impacting willingness to remain in special education. As a survey question, 76% of the participants agreed the support of their campus administration has impacted their desire to remain in special education as well. This figure does not mean that some people are not remaining on their campus if their administrators are not supportive, but what this number does say is that the majority of the administration from these two school districts supports their special education teachers enough that they remain teaching. This figure is also significant in that the literature discusses how a big factor of teacher attrition is lack of administrative support (Breton and Donaldson, 1991; Billingsley, 1993; Singer 1993). The figure from the survey results helps support the literature. The teachers surveyed and interviewed have been teaching for five or more years in special education and based on

the constant comparative analysis of this study it is due to having a supportive administration.

Another group of administrators that was addressed in the survey were the district personnel in charge of special education. This figure fell slightly below with 70% agreeing these administrators impact desire to remaining in the field; however, these two figures together can be referred to as the leadership in the school districts. If administrators are supportive, they can contribute to retaining the teachers in their districts. One concern in the literature was the issue of “support” and how it is a multifaceted construct (Billingsley, 1993). Some aspects of support relate to emotional/personal support while other aspects of support relate to specific leadership roles of administrators. Therefore, administrative, as well as paraprofessional and colleague support was addressed through a short answer question in the survey intended for participants to provide more insight into what support means for this study. The manner in which these groups of people support special education teachers in these districts is represented in a table found in Appendix H.

Another group addressed in the interviews that were also addressed in the survey were the *mentors*. In the survey results, 43% agreed that mentor support has impacted their desire to remain a special education teacher. Fifteen people strongly disagreed and 7 people did not answer the question. The differences in number might again have some relation to the manner in which the question was presented. Some beginning teachers never have the follow through support of an assigned mentor and some teachers are never assigned a mentor to begin with. Therefore, some answers embedded in the “strongly disagree” responses might be those individuals who never had a mentor assigned in their

beginning years as a teacher. Another consideration is whether or not special education teachers receive the same type of support in the beginning stages of teaching like general education teachers do due to the lack of experienced special education teachers on some campuses. Yet another possibility is that sometimes only one teacher on the campus is assigned to work with the students with disabilities; therefore, another special education mentor does not exist on the campus. The last consideration is that this survey question does not distinguish between campus assigned mentors and other mentors that may be encountered such as field advisors or supervisors assigned in alternative certification programs. The survey responses may be reflecting a range of circumstances and “mentors” needs further definition in future research.

School District A vs. School District B

The number of qualifying surveys from school District A was 30 while 40 were collected from school District B. The first impact from the data was noting that 50% of District A’s teachers are in the 5-9 year range, while 60% of District B’s teachers have 15 or more years of experience. Fifty percent of District B’s participating teachers reported to have been certified by a traditional route where only 38% of District A’s teachers went this route to certification. Rather, 41% of District A’s teachers were licensed through an alternative program where only 20% of District B’s teachers went this route.

Table 3

School District A vs. School District B

District	Teachers	5-9 years	10-14 years	15-19 years	20+ years	Traditional Certification	Alternative Certification
A	30	50%	13%	7%	30%	38%	41%
B	40	20%	20%	30%	30%	51%	21%

The school districts were similar in many of the areas on the survey; however, they significantly differed in two areas. The first was in the area of leadership. School District B teachers appear to feel more supported by their campus administration by 20% more than District A's teachers. Additionally, District B teachers say that district personnel support them 16% more than District A teachers. This result is significant due to the literature expressing that a major factor in teacher attrition is lack of administrative support (Breton and Donaldson, 1991; Billingsley, 1993; Singer 1993). Interestingly, District B also has teachers with more years of experience than A which is possibly associated with this finding.

The next difference is in the area of professional development. The statement on the survey implies that professional development opportunities that have been provided have had an impact on the willingness to stay in the field of special education. District B teachers agreed with 89%, while only 72% agreed in District A. It would be interesting to know whether more opportunity is provided in District B teachers, or if the quality of staff development is better for these teachers to agree at a higher rate than the other district.

The last area of significance between the districts is with the survey statement, "I enjoy that as a special education teacher I am expected to teach a variety of subjects at multiple levels." District B agreed at 80%, while A's teachers only agreed with 60%. This figure is difficult to interpret due to all programs not running the same from campus to campus, and further from district to district. Therefore, the programming in District B could be investigated to inquire why District B teachers do not mind teaching in this fashion as much as the teachers in District A.

Years of Experience in Special Education

Beginning with the demographics for this filter, 25 people responded as having 5-9 years of experience, while 9 participants were in the 10-14 range, 12 were in the 15-19 range, and finally 15 people reported to have 20 or more years of experience working in the special education setting. Overall, the responses to the survey questions were rather close in frequency. There were no significant gaps between the frequencies to imply information toward the years of experience as a factor for this study.

Route to Certification

Before this area can be discussed it is important to first be aware of the number of teachers who reported in each of the areas for special education certification. Thirty-one people responded as going through the traditional route which entails completing a university program with student teaching. The next group was the 20 people who reported certification through an alternative certification program (ACP) which included taking some coursework through the university. Currently there are other alternative programs in this area that the state recognizes as certifying entities however, these organizations are recent and would not have been available for the teachers who have 5 or more years of teaching experience. Finally, the last group of people represents the “exam only” bunch who became certified by simply taking the special education test. These 14 people were able to challenge the special education test because in the state of Texas the only requirement to go through this process is to be certified in another area. Essentially this group of teachers may have taken some coursework in special education to be able to pass the test, however it is not a requirement.

The areas that appear to have significant findings are in a few areas. The first is with the statement that says “I attribute my desire to help students with special needs to my experiences with a family member(s) who has/have a disability.” The individuals who became certified by taking the exam only agreed with this statement with 79% which was higher than the other groups by 35%. The next significant area was with the question that asks if the person had some type of experience as a volunteer, teaching assistant, or student teacher before becoming the teacher of record with a follow up statement saying this previous exposure strengthened their willingness to remain in the field of special education. The individuals who went the traditional route to certification agreed with both statements with 100%. While those that went through ACP agreed with 88% and finally the exam only group with 75%. In the literature, Huling (1999) discusses the significance of early field experience in teacher education. Although the ACP teachers in this study were not necessarily required to have a hands-on field experience as like in the traditional program with student teaching, however a significant percentage had another form of hands-on experience prior to becoming a teacher of record that strengthened their willingness to remain in the special education classroom. Based on the information from the initial interviews, the survey results, and the literature, “prior field experience” is a significant finding in special education teacher retention.

Finally, the area of language was the last area where a significant gap appeared in the frequencies. Seventy-nine percent of the participants agreed that their bilingual skills have impacted their ability to “reach” their Spanish dominant students and the percentage went up to 85% for the parents. These figures are better interpreted through the short answer responses from the survey.

Table 4

Short Answer Responses for Survey Question 28: Please Describe the Extent to which Being Bilingual Has Impacted Your Determination to “Reach” Your Spanish Dominant Students with Disabilities and Their Families

“ Being bilingual has enabled me to gain trust from the student and the parent. I have been able to establish rapport with the parents and build a relationship with the parent for support.”

“ Being bilingual has allowed me to better understand the concerns parents have for their children. It has also helped me realize that some of our students in special education who are Spanish speaking do not truly belong in special education. With some of these students it is just more of a language barrier.”

“ Being a bilingual teacher is a big asset to my students and their families because I am able to speak and understand the language. I also understand the culture and I feel I can contribute more to their children.”

Mexican American Special Education Teachers

Addressing the factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers was the primary motivation for this study. Considering the increasing numbers of “Hispanic” students on the rise in our nation’s schools (U.S. Department of Education) and with no published study addressing how to help retain Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) teachers in the field for our students, the results from this filter contribute to a foundation for future research. To put the results from this study into perspective the demographic information displays that 55 out of the 70 survey participants identified as specifically Mexican American while 2 additional

people identified as “Hispanic.” Eighty-one percent of these respondents were also female.

Keeping in mind that a majority of the participants for this study were Mexican American, the data that was particularly significant for this filter, more so than what has already been presented, is the data that addresses the axial coding “sense of family.” Family is important to many people; however, it was particularly poignant for this study in that family is a strong cultural value for Mexican Americans and this phrase was expressed during the initial interviews. Special education teachers usually work with the same students for a number of years, as well as with a paraprofessional(s) if one is assigned; therefore, a sense of family is established due to the investment of time spent with one another in the special education setting, much like the investment of time with their personal families. To address whether or not this “sense of family” impacted special education teachers willingness to remain in the special education setting two questions were developed for the survey.

One question addressed if the teachers felt they had established a “sense of family” with their paraprofessionals, and the other question addressed establishing a “sense of family” with their students in the special education setting. The “sense of family” established with paraprofessionals was expressed with 75% agreeing. However, this figure should be considered with some potential to be higher. As mentioned previously, the design of the instrument did not take into account that some special education teachers do not have assistants and these participants may have marked “disagree” instead of leaving the question blank. However, the figure for establishing a “sense of family” with the students was expressed with 98%. One person did not agree.

Another significant area to address is that of the languages spoken by the participants. Sixty out of 70 teachers said they spoke English and Spanish. This language issue can be unique to the area in that the areas' proximity to Mexico. The purpose of this study is not to imply that all people of Hispanic, Latino origin speak English and Spanish. However, the language is important to many.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

**“It wasn’t curiosity that killed the cat.
It was trying to make sense of all the data curiosity generated.” - Halcolm**

The Principal Research Question

The principal research question for this study was, “What factors contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers who have been teaching for five years or more in the Rio Grande Valley?” Other questions of interest that emerged throughout this inquiry were, “What similarities and differences exist between the teachers’ years of experience in special education?”; “What was significant about the route of certification sought for endorsement?”; and “What similarities and differences exist between the school districts from which the special education teachers participated?”

After teaching for five years as an elementary special education teacher in South Texas, a curiosity developed about the factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers who have taught for five years or longer. As a predominantly Mexican American woman myself, who lasted in the field for the predicted statistic of five years before I needed a break from the public education system, I wanted to know what sustained other minority teachers in the special education setting.

I wanted to know what these people were made of, the support they were given, experiences these individuals have had in their lives and careers that influenced their willingness to remain in the special education classroom. This curiosity was the drive that sustained me throughout my inquiry. As a novice researcher, little did I know that in qualitative research, data collection and analysis occur throughout the research process which generates a wealth of data that in the end, I had to make sense of. The books and my co-advisor told me that I would always have more data than I needed, but the problem for me was, deciding which data I actually needed.

At the beginning of this project I naïvely chose to conduct a qualitative study because I thought I would finish this project more quickly. I do not know where I got that idea because on the contrary, this has been a very involved and rigorous experience. In retrospect, I now have an appreciation for qualitative inquiry that was not present six months ago. I would have benefited from reading Patton's (2001) comparison of qualitative and quantitative research:

Quantitative measures are succinct, parsimonious, and easily aggregated for analysis; quantitative data are systematic, standardized, and easily presented in a short space. By contrast, the qualitative findings are longer, more detailed, and variable in content; analysis is difficult because responses are neither systematic nor standardized. Yet, the open-ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents. (p. 21)

Through guided interviews, I was able to obtain rich data from five participants as to why they have remained in special education for more than five years. By developing rapport with these teachers, and conducting face to face interviews, I was able to obtain data that

may not have been obtained through a survey alone. By then applying the results from the interview data I was able to develop a survey that was grounded in the interview responses. To gain further insight from a wider population of special education teachers, short answer responses were included on the survey. Although I did obtain more rich data, there were limitations to this type of data collection. Unlike the interview process, I was not able to probe the survey participants for further clarification, and if a question was not answered, I was not able to address the situation. Nevertheless, I was able to obtain rich data that I would not have been able to get if I had strictly conducted a quantitative study. Although open-ended responses on questionnaires represent the most elementary form of qualitative data collection (Patton, 2001), the value of the depth and detail of feelings revealed in the data is unparalleled to other forms of research.

Throughout this study I applied three theoretical frameworks used in qualitative research. I used a heuristic approach which enabled me to discover similarities and differences that I shared with the professionals that have remained in the field longer than me. As a primarily Mexican American woman from another part of the United States, I found my experiences from the special education setting very similar to the responses from the participants of the study. I am now interested in the responses from the Mexican American special education teacher population in other urban areas to compare results and factors for special education teacher retention.

The other theoretical orientation used in this study was social constructivism which was used to give “voice” to a group of teachers that currently does not exist in the published literature. I wanted to “hear” from these teachers through the short answer responses and through the interviews why they continue to remain in a field of education

despite the ever changing policies, procedures, and teaching expectations. I wanted to contribute another perspective for minority special education teacher retention other than the African-American/Black and White populations that are currently present in the research.

Finally, through the theoretical orientation of grounded theory I am now able to offer my research as a study that has potential to lay the groundwork for more studies on the subject of Mexican American special education teacher retention in the Rio Grande Valley. Grounded theory was also used as a methodology for my inquiry. Through five guided interviews, dissemination of 114 surveys that were grounded in the interview responses, and through the use of the constant comparative method between the interviews, the survey Likert and short answer responses, along with the existing literature, I rigorously compiled significant data that provides a foundation to establish grounded theory that can drive further research.

Another process that was new to this novice researcher regarding qualitative research was the action of memoing and diagramming. Throughout this study memos and diagrams were utilized to constantly make connections as the data presented itself enabling me to come to conclusions that are now significant for future research. At the beginning of the study, I was not clear about how the time I was investing in this additional writing would benefit my research. Much to my surprise and appreciation from my co-advisor to follow through with this process, my thoughts and final analysis were clear to me to present in this thesis because of the time previously invested in the memoing and diagramming. Strauss and Corbin (1990) remind us that “[m]emos and diagrams help you to gain analytical distance from materials. They assist your movement

away from the data to abstract thinking, then in returning to the data to ground these abstractions in reality” (p.199). The analysis of all the survey data was completely abstract to me until I returned to the data from the initial memos. Miraculously, everything made sense and became real when I was able to make connections between the initial interviews, the survey data, and the memos generated from this data.

Implications of the Results

As presented in the analysis chapter, there were several areas that emerged as significant factors for retaining special education teachers, particularly Mexican American special education teachers for our Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students with disabilities. The first area that emerged to have an impact on teacher retention was having *prior experience* in a special education or similar setting prior to becoming a teacher of record. This *hands-on* experience prepares teachers for the realities of the special education classroom. This experience can occur in many different ways as was identified through the interviews, surveys, and literature. The traditional route to certification requires a student teaching period that can offer this hands-on experience, as can working as a paraprofessional, volunteering in a classroom, nursing home, or hospital. The key word is *hands-on* as some field experiences only allow observation which does not offer the same exposure to the possibilities that can be encountered when forced to handle situations as a teacher. By comparing the data responses from the different routes to certification, this experience was clarified by the ACP teachers as well as from the teachers who entered the field via the “exam only” route to become a special education teacher. The responses from these two groups of teachers also included hands-on experience that paralleled the aforementioned, but with a

twist. As mentioned in the short answer responses from the survey, some experiences also included working with a family member(s) with significant disabilities while others mentioned they were once general education teachers who were significantly impacted by the experience of working with the students with disabilities in the general education setting. The result was some of these teachers then took the certification exam and became special education teachers. I was surprised by these short answer responses because they contradicted the literature; it is more common to read about teachers who leave the special education profession for the general education setting.

As a Mexican American special education teacher who taught in South Texas for five years, I also attribute my initial years of remaining in the field to my prior experience before becoming the teacher of record. Before I left home for South Texas, I volunteered for a semester at my old elementary school. I had hands-on experience working with students at different grade levels and then was hired on staff as a paraprofessional in the last two months of school. I worked in a special education setting and received hand-on experience in dealing with situations that would benefit me when I finally had my own classroom.

Leadership was another area that impacted teachers remaining in the field of special education. The literature cites this factor in numerous attrition studies and this study help support the previous findings. The teachers in this study remain teaching due to having the support from their administration at both the campus and district levels. What was surprising however was the high percentage of participants who agreed that their administration impacted their desire to remain in special education. With further inspection, by examining the results between the two school districts surveyed, the

administration in one district appeared to be stronger in terms of support for their special education staff. As mentioned in the analysis chapter, this school district also has teachers with more experience teaching in the special education setting. Educational pedagogy expects teachers and campus personnel to collaborate for the benefit of student achievement. This study expands this construct to include the need for school districts to collaborate with each other for the benefit of teacher achievement (retention) instead of merely competing against each other for sport and state achievement ratings like “exemplary” and “recognized.”

In my personal experience, my principal from my first year of teaching had the biggest impact on my willingness to remain in special education. The administration that followed did not know how to support the special education staff which led to frustration from our department. Eventually, I needed to leave that campus. Now that I have had a year to complete my personal studies and write this thesis, I am now ready to return to the classroom to once again be effective for my students.

Perhaps the most significant finding from this study was the axial code that has now emerged into “*la familia*.” The “sense of family” was an axial code that emerged in the interviews and was further explored through the surveys. However, in the surveys students and colleagues, which included general education, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administration, all had significantly high percentages as individuals who impact special education teachers desire to remain in the field. When examining the culture being addressed, it is natural to think that when a “sense of family” is established for these special education teachers, they are more willing to remain in the

field. Murillo (1976) explains Mexican American family values and patterns as the following:

The family is likely to be the single most important social unit in life. It is usually at the core of his thinking and behavior and is the center from which his view of the rest of the world extends. Even with respect to identification, the Chicano/a *self* is likely to take second place after the family (p.19).

Although we cannot always think of the traditional sense of *la familia* as a central aspect of Mexican American culture in urban contemporary settings (Williams, 1990), there is still something to be said about tradition and familiarity and that is the extended sense of family, or *la familia*. In the school setting *la familia* is important to making people feel valued in schools and therefore willing to invest time and energy into helping the family to succeed. From the moment I arrived on my campus my first year of teaching in South Texas, I was surrounded by staff that supported my efforts as a special education teacher. I was blessed to work with paraprofessionals that not only watched over the students, but watched over me as well. Also, the other teachers on campus collaborated with me and eventually, a sort of extended family atmosphere evolved on our campus among the teachers and paraprofessionals. I learned that when teachers and students take the time to assist one another as a family, everyone benefits. I recognize now that these familial types of relationships with my students, colleagues, and administrators ultimately pulled me through to my fifth year of teaching.

Implications for Practice

This study established a grounded theory that recognized three factors that impact Mexican American special education teacher retention in the Rio Grande Valley. The

results show prior experience that is hands-on, leadership, and a sense of la familia as factors that contribute to the willingness and desire to remain in the special education setting. Therefore, schools of education need to examine whether their student teaching requirements meet the needs of the prospective teachers by ensuring the experience is hands-on and not purely observational. Additionally, Alternative Certification Programs need to also examine program requirements for prospective teachers to have some type of hand-on experience before they enter the classroom, which can occur in many different forms as discussed previously. ACP programs are controversial as to whether they produce effective teachers. Since hands-on experience is part of a retention factor according to this study, then ACP programs in the Rio Grande Valley can have one more positive aspect associated with their program model if they are able to be instrumental in their special education teachers remaining in the field.

Leadership is the next area that can be addressed by several parties. University programs can examine how they address special education within their degree plans and how it directly impacts the teachers of the administrators they are producing. As discussed in this study, leadership not only includes the campus administrators, but the off campus personnel as well. Therefore, school districts need to conduct needs assessments between school districts to become more effective for their teachers. Competition between school districts needs to be eliminated and the sharing of best practices promoted for the benefit of teacher retention which will impact student achievement in all school districts. There is no reason why one school district should be able to retain more experienced teachers over another school district. Leadership between school districts need to collaborate just as teachers are expected to in order to

better meet the needs of our students in special education and ensure all children in the Rio Grande Valley are receiving a Free and Appropriate Public Education.

Implications for Future Research

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990),

The purpose of grounded theory is to specify the conditions that give rise to specific sets of action/interaction pertaining to a phenomenon and the resulting consequences. It is generalizable to those specific situations only. Naturally, the more systematic and wide spread the theoretical sampling, the more conditions and variations that will be discovered and built into the theory, therefore the greater its generalizability (p.251).

Throughout this study I have made clear the conditions that gave rise to the results of this inquiry. It is important to note that the results of my study are unique to my situation only. The next step for further research is to apply the same methods; however, include more urban district special education teachers in the sampling. At that time, other conditions and variations may need to be built into the theory, which will then have results that are more generalizable. Further replications of this study will then need to occur in different areas of Texas, and then the U.S., with high concentrations of Mexican American special education teachers to meet the generalizability factor.

Recommendations for Future Research

As discussed previously, because there was no prior research on factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican American special education teachers, this study provides a foundation for future research. Therefore, further studies investigating the difference types of *prior hands-on experience* in relation to teacher retention need to be

investigated. Additionally, *leadership* models need to be examined more closely in how support is offered to their special education staff. In this study leadership included administrators from both on and off the school campus. A question to investigate is whether administrators that have prior exposure to special education (by teaching, having a family member, or other reason) are better able to support their special education teachers? In some states it is very easy to become an administrator and this study may provide program evaluators a perspective to evaluate the requirements expected of future administrators regarding special education which can impact the administrators' ability to retain their CLD special education teachers. Finally, the ways in which a sense of *la familia* is established on campuses needs further inquiry for special education teacher retention.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. Only five participants were interviewed to create the grounded survey and there may have been other factors that contribute to special education teacher retention that were not identified due to the experiences of a limited number of individuals. Next, only teachers from two school districts were surveyed, which is not representative of all Mexican American special education teachers in the Rio Grande Valley. The number of surveys returned could have also impacted the results of this study. The resulting factors of *prior hands-on experience, leadership, and la familia*, that were prevalent in this study, may also not be specific to the Mexican American culture. Only with further research will these factors be better addressed, however in the mean time, can be applied to current urban school district models in the Rio Grande Valley. The experiences of teachers in the lower Rio

Grande Valley are unique to this area and further research of Mexican American teachers in other areas of Texas and the United States would be useful to compare with the data from this study.

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APPENDIX A

**Institutional Review Board
Committee for Human Subjects Approval Form**



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - PAN AMERICAN

1201 West University Drive • Edinburg, Texas 78539-2999 • (956) 381-2287 Office • Fax (956) 318-5265

MEMORANDUM

To: Michelle R. Koyama, Graduate Student, Department of Educational Psychology,
College of Education, UTPA, Dr. Jo Ann Mitchell, Graduate Advisor

From: Dr. Bahram (Bob) Faraji, Chair, Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects in
Research *BF*

Subject: Protocol for "Factors that Contribute to the Retention of Mexican-American Special
Education Teachers"

Date: March 24, 2003

The above referenced protocol has been:

- Approved (committee review)
- Approved (expedited review, IRB# 246)
- Conditionally approved (see remarks below)
- Tabled for future consideration-Re-submit with corrections
- Disapproved (see remarks below)

by the Institutional Review Board Federal Wide Assurance Number (FWA 00000805).

As stipulated in the guidelines of the IRB, this protocol will be subject to annual review by the IRB and any deviations from the protocol or change in the title must be resubmitted to the Board.

For additional information you can contact the IRB University website at
<http://www.panam.edu/dept/sponpro/Policies/Policies.html>

**AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY, YOU MUST FILL OUT THE ENCLOSED
REPORT FORM**

cc: Dr. Wendy A. Lawrence-Fowler, AVPR

APPENDIX B

**Audio Tape Release Form for Interviews
Used for Survey Construction**

AUDIO TAPE RELEASE FORM

I voluntarily agree to be audio taped during the interview being conducted by Michelle Koyama. I understand that the tapes will be used only for clarification of interview data and only Michelle Koyama and her advisor will have access to these tapes. These tapes will be identified by subject numbers and no names will be used to identify the person being interviewed. The tapes will be kept for six months in a locked file at the University of Texas – Pan American in room COE 244. After data is collected the tapes will be destroyed.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

REFUSAL TO BE AUDIO TAPED

I do not agree to be audio taped during this interview conducted by Michelle Koyama. By refusing to be audio taped I understand that my personal statements may not be recorded efficiently and data may be lost.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form for Interview Participant Whose Responses will be used for Survey Construction

INFORMED CONSENT FORM - Interview Participant-

I, _____, have been informed by Michelle R. Koyama that I am one of five participants that have been asked to volunteer to be interviewed for a study titled, "Factors that Contribute to the Retention of Mexican-American Special Education Teachers." I understand that my responses will be used in conjunction with the other interviewed participants' responses to design a survey that will be distributed to other special education teachers in two school districts. I understand that I will not be identified by name in any of the documentation. I have also signed an audio tape release form that requests my permissions to audio tape the interview to be used for clarification of the interview data.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Texas Pan-American Institutional Review Board – a committee for the protection of Human Subjects in Research. For research related problems or questions regarding subject's rights, the Human Subject's Committee may be contacted through Dr. Bob Faraji, Chair, at 381-2287.

I have read and understand the explanations provided to me and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Date _____

APPENDIX D

Guided Interview Script with Questions To be used for Survey Construction Participants

WRITTEN SUMMARY OF WHAT IS TO BE SAID TO THE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

(This script will be used in conjunction with the “Informed Consent Form” and
“Permission to Audio Tape Form”)

After my interview participants have been selected, I will schedule a time to interview each participant individually at his/her convenience and give her/him an oral presentation that summarizes my study. After my presentation, I will ask each participant to sign this written summary, a short informed consent form, as well as a form authorizing permission to audio tape the interview.

I will use the following as a guide:

- I. Introduction:** My name is Michelle Koyama and I am a graduate student at the University of Texas - Pan American. I am conducting research on the factors that contribute to the retention of Mexican-American Special Education Teachers.

Currently, the majority of the research has explored why teachers leave the field of special education. Additionally, teachers statistically remain teaching for five years before a career change is made due to burnout or other factors. I would like to find out what has impacted teachers to stay for more than five years in the field of special education despite the paperwork and ever changing demands of the position. Another factor I am exploring is the issue of ethnicity. There are no statistics that I am able to find regarding the retention of Mexican-American, Hispanic, or Latino/a, teachers in the field of special education. For our students who are both bilingual and who have a disability, this may be significant.

- II. General Research Question:** What Factors Contribute to the Retention of Mexican-American Special Education Teachers?

- III. Request For Consent:**

- A. I would like to take this opportunity to ask for your permission to interview you for this study. I also need to inform you that after I complete all my interviews, I will compile your responses to construct a grounded survey which will then be distributed to special education teachers in two school districts in the Rio Grande Valley.
- B. I would also appreciate your permission to audio tape our interview so that I can manage the data better and so that I can transcribe our discussion. I ensure that the interview will be confidential and that after the study is complete, I will destroy the tapes and transcriptions. During the study I

will keep the audio tapes in a locked personal file where they will be safeguarded.

Just to make sure I have defined confidentiality for this study, it means that I will be the only one who has access to the raw data; no one else will have access to the taped conversation/interview.

May I have your permission to interview you for my study? _____

May I have your permission to audio tape our interview? _____

Thank you.

This is my contact information if you have questions that may arise later:
Home: 956.683.1962 or Work: 956.994.9732.

Interviewee _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator _____ Date _____

Witness _____ Date _____

APPENDIX E

Informed Consent Form for Survey Participants

TO: Special Education Teachers

FROM: Michelle Koyama, Graduate Student – UTPA

THROUGH: The Special Education Office

I, _____, agree to participate in a study specifically for special education teachers titled, “Factors that Contribute to the Retention of Mexican-American Special Education Teachers.” Currently, the majority of literature available reports reasons why special education teachers leave the field, but few studies have examined why they have remained in special education. As a participant I will complete a survey to the best of my ability and provide detailed explanation when it is necessary. I understand that my attention to details may be significant in the findings of the results. I also understand that I will **not** put my name on this survey. I will return the survey in the envelope that has been provided to me to the special education office after it has been sealed.

I have been informed that this research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Texas – Pan American Institutional Review Board – a committee for the protection of Human Subjects in Research. For research related problems or questions regarding subjects’ rights, the Human Subject’s Committee may be contacted through Dr. Bob Faraji, Chair, at 381-2287.

I have read and understand the explanations provided to me and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant _____ **Date** _____

APPENDIX F

Letter of Agreement for Superintendents

**LETTER OF AGREEMENT
- Superintendent, School District A-**

April 22, 2003

I consent to allow Michelle R. Koyama, a graduate student at the University of Texas – Pan American, access to survey the special education teachers in the Blank Independent School District, for the purpose of conducting educational research.

I understand the purpose of her project is to investigate factors that special education teachers report to have influenced their desire to remain in the field. An additional area that will be investigated is the responses of the teachers who self identify as Mexican American. I also understand the components of the survey are grounded in that they are compiled responses from special education teachers of varying years of experience. I have also been made aware that the study is qualitative in design therefore the teachers will have the opportunity to write detailed responses to add to the richness of the study.

I understand her aims as a researcher are entirely ethical. She has ensured me that confidentiality will be enacted through coding the surveys. The surveys will be anonymous however names will be used on the envelope to designate the specific campus and person to whom the survey is intended. Further, when the study is completed, the surveys and transcriptions will be destroyed.

To ensure the surveys are disseminated to the correct teachers for this study, Michelle will have access to a list of names of the current special education teachers in the school district who report to have taught for five years or more. The personnel director is able to run a query of employee data to obtain this information.

For the dissemination of the survey, the researcher has requested access to the special education office for three scheduled visits during the months of April and May of 2003. The first visit will be to disseminate the surveys from the special education office through inter-school mail with permission from the Director of Special Education signified by a signature on the cover page to the survey. The surveys will be returned within a week time frame where they will be collected in an envelope provided by Michelle Koyama. During the second visit, Michelle will collect the surveys and follow up with fax or phone calls to missing participants to ensure the remainder of surveys are returned within another week. If a third visit is necessary, she will return to collect the final surveys. Michelle has assured me that she will not be disruptive during her scheduled visits.

Name
Superintendent

Date _____

Name
Director of Special Education

Date _____

Michelle Koyama
Principal Researcher

Date _____

APPENDIX G

Survey

Grounded Survey

PART I. Demographic Information: Please circle only one answer for each question.

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

- a. 0 – 4 b. 5 - 9 c. 10 -14 d. 15 – 19 e. 20+

2. How many of those years have been in a special education setting?

- a. 0 – 4 b. 5 - 9 c. 10 -14 d. 15 – 19 e. 20+

3. What is your gender?

- a. Female b. Male

4. What is your ethnicity?

- a. White/Non-Hispanic b. Black/African-American c. Mexican-American
d. Asian/Pacific Islander e. Native American Indian f. Other - describe: _____

5. What languages do you speak?

- a. English only b. Spanish and English c. Other – describe: _____

6. What type of *special education* certification program did you complete?

- a. Traditional w/ student teaching b. Traditional without student teaching but with an emergency certificate
c. Alternative Program with university coursework in special education d. Regular Alternative Program e. Exam Only

7. What special education setting(s) have you taught in?

- a. Self-Contained Severe b. Self-Contained Mild/Moderate c. Resource
d. Content Mastery e. Inclusion f. Multiple: describe _____

8. What grade levels do you have experience teaching for special education?

- a. PK – 5 b. K- 4 c. 6 – 8 d. 9 – 12 e. Multiple: describe: _____

PART II.

Please circle only one response for each question.

1. As a child/adolescent I was exposed to individuals with special needs.

- a. YES b. NO

2. I attribute my desire to help students with special needs to my experiences with a family member(s) who has/have a disability(s).

- | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|----------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|
| a | b | c | d | e | f |
| Strongly Agree | Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3. Did you have experience as a volunteer, teaching assistant, or student teacher in a special education setting before you became a teacher of record?

- a. YES b. NO

If yes, complete items 4, 5, & 6. If no, skip to number 7.

4. My experiences as a volunteer / teaching assistant / or student teacher has influenced my willingness to stay in the field of special education.

- | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|----------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|
| a | b | c | d | e | f |
| Strongly Agree | Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

5. My previous exposure as a volunteer / teaching assistant/ or student teacher strengthened my willingness to stay in the field of special education.

- | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|----------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|
| a | b | c | d | e | f |
| Strongly Agree | Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

6. I attribute my desire to help students with special needs to my experiences working as a volunteer or as an assistant in a special education OR similar setting.

- | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|----------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|
| a | b | c | d | e | f |
| Strongly Agree | Agree | Somewhat Agree | Somewhat Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

7. Is there someone or some experience that you attribute to your decision to becoming a special education teacher? If so please describe that person and/or experience below.

8. My own parent(s) have had an impact on my desire to remain in special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

9. Having had the assistance of a paraprofessional(s) in my classroom has had an impact on my desire to remain a special education teacher.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

10. I feel I have established a “sense of family” with my paraprofessional(s) and/or volunteers.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

11. My students are the reason I have remained in the field of special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

12. My special education colleagues have impacted my desire to remain in special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

13. My general education colleagues have impacted my desire to remain in special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

14. In what ways do your administrators, colleagues, and paraprofessionals support your efforts as a special education teacher?

15. The support of my campus administrator(s) impacts my desire to remain in special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

16. The support of special education district personnel impacts my desire to remain in special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

17. Having had a mentor early in my career has positively influenced my experiences and impacted my desire to remain in special education

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

18. I feel I have established a “sense of family” with my students in special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

19. Having the proper knowledge and training about students with disabilities has impacted my willingness to stay in the field of special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

20. I feel that my thirst for knowledge in the field of special education drives my decision to remain in the classroom.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

21. Special education teachers identify flexibility as being a factor to remaining in the field of special education. Please describe what flexibility means to you in the special education setting.

22. I enjoy teaching in the field of special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

23. The professional development opportunities I have had have impacted my willingness to stay in the field of special education.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

24. I enjoy that as a special education teacher I am expected to teach a variety of subjects at multiple levels.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

25. I appreciate that I have extended breaks (holiday) which allow me to make time for my family and “de-stress.”

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

26. My bilingual skills have impacted my determination to “reach” my Spanish dominant students with disabilities.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

27. My bilingual skills have impacted my determination to “reach” the Spanish dominant parent(s) of my students with disabilities.

a	b	c	d	e	f
Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

28. If you are a bilingual (English/Spanish) teacher please describe the extent to which being bilingual has impacted your determination to “reach” your Spanish dominant students with disabilities and their families.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND YOUR THOUGHTFULNESS IN YOUR
RESPONSES!**

*Please place this survey and consent form in the envelope provided to you
and return them to the special education office.*

APPENDIX H

Table representing short answer responses how paraprofessionals, colleagues, and administration, support special education teachers

Memos – Question 14
In what ways do your ADMINISTRATORS, COLLEAGUES, and PARAPROFESSIONALS support your efforts as a special education teacher?

<i>Paraprofessionals</i>	<i>Colleagues</i>	<i>Administrators</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce skills • Assist with behavior • Assist with implementing IEPs • Knowledge, effort, experience, patience, flexibility, willingness to share • It depends on the person • Support is great • They make my job more manageable and flexible • Assist with one-to-one and small group instruction as well as with the paperwork • Work well with the teachers and students • Overall support in a self-contained classroom • The teacher and paras become a family and support each other throughout the year • Become knowledgeable in the field and with special education policy and procedures • Providing one-on-one when needed as well as with clerical work. • Work as a team**** • They are my second set of eyes, hands, and mouth. • My greatest support – I would not be able to have a successful life skills program with out their help • Help us keep up with students' status • She is a "God send"; she is good at her work and gets along with the students • Efficient and ready to go the extra mile • Very helpful • OVERALL support • Works well with the students • Cover classes • Always help when needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They understand • Implement modifications • Asked T to return to campus • Knowledge, effort, experience, patience, flexibility, willingness to share • Special Ed Dept. teachers support each other, share ideas, and create materials together • Every attempt to work as a team • It depends on the person • Support is great • Work well with the students and respect the students' abilities • Support with paperwork, ideas, and common feedback with difficult situations • "SOME" work together as a team and support one another. We share curriculum, materials, and assist each other with ARD meetings. • Work as a team** • Encouraging when I feel down • Share relevant info and materials • Encouragement • Complement my work • Keep in close contact about our students in general ed setting** • My diagnostician is helpful • Understand each other's problems • Exchange ideas from in-services • OVERALL support • Cooperate with the paperwork • Always help when needed • Communication and helping in a positive manner** 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support decision making • Approachable to talk to • Supportive, compassionate, and understanding of both the teacher's needs and students' needs • Every attempt to work as a team • Assigned me an assistant. • Buy materials for our students in a timely manner; they make every effort to include our students in school activities • Given me the power to make the right decisions for our students • Support my decisions** • Provided me with the necessary resources and supplies*** • Supports with discipline** • Praise my work and efforts • Informs about in-services regarding special education issues • Support me 100% - includes my students in all activities, programs, awards, etc.** • They send us to conferences/in-services***** • Ready to help when problems come up • Has not split up teacher/para team • Allowed our clubs the same access as others on campus • Always help when needed • Allow me to run with ideas** • Ask for my opinions • Although may not be knowledgeable about special education, sincerely tried to support our program • Allow my students to experience different settings

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and helping in a positive manner** • Help me carry out my classroom plans • Give moral support • By laughing with me and becoming a personal friend • Appreciating my patience, understanding, and cooperation with my students • Encouragement • Ready to give 100% everyday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give moral support • Appreciating my patience, understanding, and cooperation with my students <p><i>These responses are a combination of general education and special education colleagues</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by allowing field trips • Appreciating my patience, understanding, and cooperation with my students • Support me at ARD meetings
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My administration forgets about the special education department – the students and the teachers • It depends on the person • Most are supportive but some can be difficult and do not understand the needs of our students • Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't

“ALL THREE CAN BE A LIFE LINE OR THE STRAW THAT BREAKS THE CAMEL’S BACK”

*** denotes more than one response**

VITA

Michelle R. Koyama was born in Denver, Colorado and was raised by her mother and maternal grandparents. She graduated with a BA in Psychology with a minor in Ethnic Studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1996. After completing her undergraduate degree she joined the non-profit organization Teach For America which selected her to teach in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. She worked as an elementary special education teacher for five years in the Weslaco Independent School District at (Tony) Rico Elementary School. Also during this time, she worked for four summers with Teach For America at their summer Institute in Houston, Texas training first year special education teachers. In 2001, she began to pursue her Master's Degree in Special Education for the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional Learner from the University of Texas – Pan American. Upon completion of this degree she will return to the classroom in Colorado, working for the Denver Public School system as a special education teacher.