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Original Paper

Special Education Teachers' Perception of Principals' Communication and Special Educators' Intentions to Leave the Teaching Profession

Stefanie Denise Wilson

Professor of Business Management, Business and Cybersecurity Division, University of Hawaii-West Oahu, Kapolei, Hawaii, United States of America. E-mail: sdwilson@hawaii.edu

Abstract

For decades, chronic shortages of special education teachers (SETs) across the United States have persisted. The purpose of this study is to assess the relationship between school principals' communication, and SETs' intentions to leave the profession. This quantitative study used multiple regression analysis and the 1999-2000 Public School Teacher Questionnaire, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to determine the extent to which there is a relationship between SETs' perception of principals' communication and special educators' intentions to leave teaching in U.S. public elementary schools. To do so, an index of SETs' perception of principals' communication was created from five SASS survey items. Using this index, this study found that SETs' positive perception of principals' communication had a statistically significant negative effect on intentions to definitely leave the teaching profession. In sum, this study found as SETs' positive perception of their principals' communication increased, the likelihood of special educators' intentions to definitely leave teaching was reduced.

Keywords: principals' communication, special education teachers, teacher shortage

Introduction

Special education teacher (SET) shortages in U.S. public schools stem from insufficient preparation, heavy workloads, and limited administrative support, which contribute to teachers leaving the profession (Aldeman, 2024; Billingsley, 2004b; Hester et al., 2020). Replacing teachers can negatively impact student achievement (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Henry & Redding, 2020; Ronfeldt et al., 2013) when students with disabilities (SWDs) are taught by less experienced SETs (Aldeman, 2024; Bettini et al., 2015). Further, replacing teachers can cost over $20,000 per position (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hester et al., 2020; Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

Researchers have examined teachers' intent to leave as a predictor of actual departure (Boe et al., 1999; Gersten et al., 2001). Gersten et al. (2001) found that 69% of SETs who intended to leave exited teaching within 18 months. As a result, intent to leave is commonly used as a proxy for movement between schools, out of their position, or profession (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Scott et al., 2022). In this study, teachers' intentions refer to SETs who intend to stay in teaching or leave the profession. Intent to stay in teaching includes SETs' intent to remain in the profession: (a) as long they are able, (b) until qualified to retire, (c) unless something better comes along, or (d) are undecided. Conversely, intentions to leave teaching includes SETs who definitely plan to exit the profession. However, intentions to leave teaching does not include SETs who move between schools or transfer education fields.

SETs' intentions to leave are linked to school working conditions (Billingsley et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2022). These conditions include job responsibilities and school support, such as leadership, collegial relationships, and instructional resources (Billingsley et al., 2020). Principals play a central role in shaping these conditions through communication and leadership practices. When principals fail to

provide necessary support, instructional quality and services for SWDs may decline, increasing teachers' intent to leave (Hester et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2022).

As primary school administrators, principals are responsible for ensuring appropriate education for all students and fostering effective learning environments (McNamara & Rizzo, 2023; Pregot, 2021; Sun & Xin, 2020). Principals' leadership involves communicating expectations, supporting evidence-based instruction, maintaining safe schools, promoting inclusive communities, and creating supportive working conditions (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Robinson et al., 2008). These workplace factors can influence SETs' decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

Principals' communication is also reflected in mentoring programs, professional development, and instructional feedback for teachers (DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini, 2020; Suherman & Suhardan, 2019). Transformational leadership practices such as classroom observations and guidance, support teacher effectiveness and student learning (DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini, 2020; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025). Because communication is central to transformational leadership, understanding how SETs perceive principals' communication may help explain teachers' intentions to stay in or leave teaching. Accordingly, this study assessed the relationship between public elementary school SETs' perceptions of principals' communication and their intentions to leave the teaching profession.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guides this study is transformational leadership coined by James Downton, developed by Burns (1978), and built on by Bass (Northouse, 2022). Bass's (1985) expanded perspective of transformational leadership consists of four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Transformational behaviors associated with leadership underscore the necessity for leaders to communicate frequently and directly with staff members (Green, 2020; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Northouse, 2022).

Clear and consistent communication is a characteristic of transformational leadership (Tyler, 2016). Through communication some principals develop learning communities to achieve high academic standards (DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini, 2020; McLeskey et al., 2014). Effective principals skillfully communicate a shared vision, build culture, empower people (DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini, 2020; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2019), and demonstrate what Bass and Avolio (1994) identified as transformational leadership factors: intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation. Figure 1 depicts the principals' role as a communicator to include transformational leadership factors (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2019; Northouse, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey, 2004).

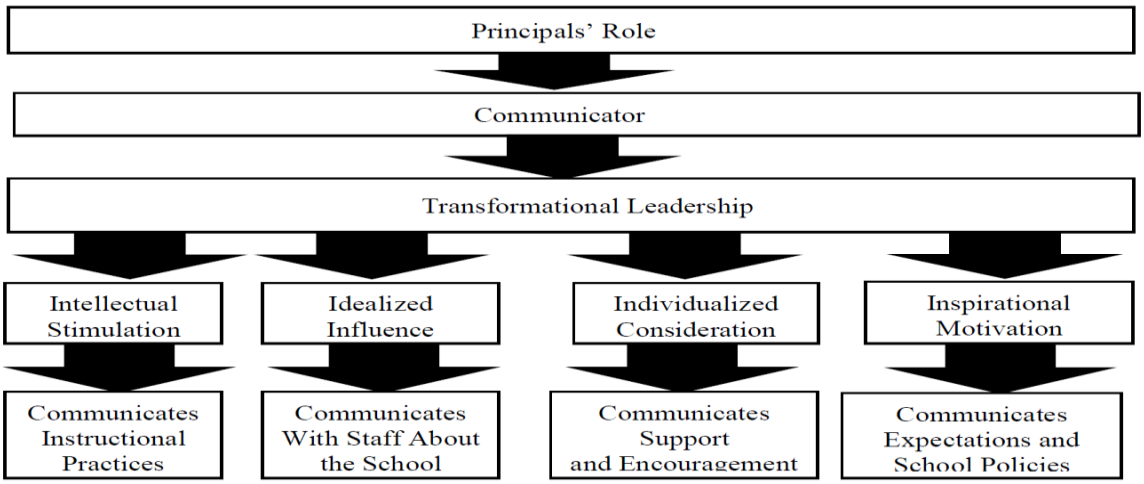

Figure 1. Principals' Role, Transformational Leadership Factors, and SASS Items

Intellectual Stimulation

Communicates Instructional Practices

Principals display intellectual stimulation by facilitating teacher and staff development programs, enhancing standards of student achievement, and elevating engagement with parents and the community (Balyer, 2012; Correa & Wagner; 2011; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Meyers & Hitt, 2017; Seyfarth, 2008). Angelle (2006) found principals support teacher instructional strategies and professional development, influence teachers' intent to remain in their profession, and teachers whose principal genuinely cared about students reported intentions to stay. Transformational principals take the time to communicate opportunities that empower staff to implement new and creative solutions to bolster school productivity (Balyer, 2012; Duke, 2015; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kass, 2013, Sadayi, 2016). Further, intellectual stimulation has been found to have a positive effect on job satisfaction (Sayadi, 2016), a predictor of SETs' intentions to stay in or leave teaching (Ansley et al., 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

Idealized Influence

Communicates With Staff About the School

Transformational principals who exhibit idealized influence create an organizational climate whereby individuals feel inspired and empowered to innovate, and articulate new ideals (Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Xie, 2020). To do so, principals communicate to educators emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support (Hauserman & Stick, 2013; House, 1981; Littrell et al., 1994). For example, principals communicate support by: (a) being a role model, (b) conveying a shared vision of learning, (c) listening to educators and being and tolerant of diverse perspectives, (d) providing resource materials to engender creative and innovative ideas, and (e) developing authentic relationships and camaraderie with organizational stakeholders (Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Nir & Hameiri, 2014; Northouse, 2022).

Effective school principals display idealized influence by communicating a set of internal values as a role model through emotional support and concern for educators (Balyer, 2012; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Kass, 2013; Littrell et al., 1994; Northouse, 2022). Teachers appreciate exemplary role models that embody high ethical and moral standards for themselves and others (Balyer, 2012; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013). Educators value shared leadership and collaboration that engenders a trusting relationship with school staff (Balyer, 2012; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013). Further, Chin (2007) investigated transformational leadership behaviors, such as idealized influence and found a positive association with job satisfaction, a predictor of SETs' intentions to stay in or leave teaching (Ansley et al., 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

Individualized Consideration

Communicates Support and Encouragement

Effective school principals demonstrate individualized consideration by listening to teachers and providing appropriate time for them to perform teaching plans and non-teaching tasks (Bass, 1990; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Kass, 2013; Littrell et al., 1994; Northouse, 2022). Transformation principals are effective communicators who maximize support through personalized, on-going, two-way transparent dialogue with staff, as they strive to solve problems and build school community (Balyer, 2012; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Duke, 2015; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kass, 2013). Further, Nyenyembe and colleagues (2016) found individualized consideration, to be positively related to teachers' job satisfaction (Nyenyembe et al., 2016), a predictor of SETs' intentions to stay in or leave teaching (Ansley et al., 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

Inspirational Motivation

Communicates Expectations and School Policies

Effective school principals show inspirational motivation by expressing appreciation and interest in teacher's work performance and contribution to students' achievement (Balyer, 2012; Bass, 1990; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kass, 2013, Littrell et al., 1994; Northouse, 2022). Open communication encompasses a dyadic principal-teacher understanding that guides instructional strategies and enhances their professional development (Balyer, 2012; Duke, 2015; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Kass, 2013). Confidence in educators' abilities may be communicated by principals' individually or collectively to embolden teachers to become a part of the organization's shared vision, and provide inspiration to achieve beyond their own self-interest (Bass, 1990; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kass, 2013; Littrell et al., 1994; Northouse, 2022).

Oplatka (2004) found when principals demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors, teachers convey greater levels of satisfaction and remain in their jobs. Moreover, Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) reported it is worthwhile for principals to build relations and community through collaborative partnerships which encourages a familial educational culture, a necessary condition for student engagement and progress. Simply put, transformational principals communicate with compassion, uphold ethical standards, develop an action plan to achieve established goals, understand followers' needs and wellbeing, treat followers in a humane manner, and motivate followers to perform beyond their expectations (Balyer, 2012; Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025). Tesfaw (2014) examined the relationship between transformational leadership styles and teachers' job satisfaction, and found inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence are positively related to teachers' job satisfaction (Tesfaw, 2014), a predictor of SETs' intentions to stay in or leave teaching (Ansley et al., 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Singh & Billingsley, 1996). Thus, an effective principal who demonstrates transformational leadership behaviors is the linchpin that communicates: instructional practices, with staff about the school, support and encouragement, as well as expectations and school policies (Even & BenDavid-Hadar, 2025; Green, 2020; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2019).

Research Design and Methodology

The researcher conducted a secondary data analysis of the 1999-2000 Public-School Teacher Questionnaire Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) (Tourkin et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, SASS 1999-2000). Secondary analysis of SASS provided information on a nationally representative sample of K-12 public schools and teachers (Tourkin et al., 2004). The SASS also included items on SETs', SETs' school characteristics, SETs' perception of workplace conditions, and SETs' intentions to stay in or leave teaching. Moreover, using the 1999-2000 SASS in particular, is warranted, as later SASS waves omitted multiple items on teachers' perception of principals' communication, variables central to this study.

For this study, 20 items from 1999-2000 SASS were used to identify special education teachers' years of experience, teaching assignment, certification, professional development, perception of workplace conditions, and demographics of schools and SETs (Tourkin et al., 2004). A description and coding of the dependent variable and independent variables appear in Table 1. The dependent variable was created to measure SETs' intentions to leave teaching. The independent variable of interest was SETs' perception of principal's communication. Other independent (control) variables included special education teacher and SETs' school characteristics, and SETs' demographics such as gender and ethnicity.

Table 1. Description and Coding of the Dependent Variables and Independent Variables

Special Education Teacher Characteristics					
Survey Page #	Survey Item	Survey Question	Survey Reference #	(Variable Name) and Indicator	Variable Type
43	61b[a]	How long do you plan to remain in teaching?	T0340	*Leave* (Definitely Intend to Leave) *Dependent Variable:* As long as I am able=0; Until I am eligible for retirement=0; Will probably continue unless something better comes along = 0; Definitely plan to leave teaching as soon as I can =1; Undecided =0;	Binary
SETs' Perception of Principals' Communication Index Items (CPINDEX15**) 0-15					
40	59	Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?	N/A	N/A	N/A
40	59a	Principal lets staff members know what is expected of them	T0299	(CPEXPECT1) Strongly disagree =0; Somewhat disagree=1; Somewhat agree=2, Strongly agree =3;	0-3
40	59b	The school administration's behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging	T0300	(CPSUPPORT1) Strongly disagree =0; Somewhat disagree=1; Somewhat agree=2, Strongly agree =3;	0-3
40	59h	My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it	T0306	(CPENFORCE1) Strongly disagree =0; Somewhat disagree=1; Somewhat agree=2, Strongly agree =3;	0-3
40	59i	The principal talks with me frequently about my instructional practices	T0307	(CPINSTRUCT1) Strongly disagree =0; Somewhat disagree=1; Somewhat agree=2, Strongly agree =3;	0-3
40	59l	The principal knows what kind of school he/she wants and has communicated it to the staff	T0310	(CPSCHOOL1) Strongly disagree =0; Somewhat disagree=1; Somewhat agree=2, Strongly agree =3;	0-3

Table 1. Continued

Special Education Teacher Characteristics					
Survey Page #	Survey Item	Survey Question	Survey Reference #	(Variable Name) and Indicator	Variable Type
Demographics					
45	64	Are you male or female?	T0356	(Male**) Male=1, Female =0	Binary
45	65a	What is your race?	T0357	(Black**) Black =1, 0 if otherwise (Native**) Native Indian or Alaskan Native =1, 0 if otherwise (Asian**) Asian or Pacific Islander, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Samoan, Other Asian =1, 0 if otherwise (White**) = 1; 0 if otherwise	Binary
45	66	Are you of Hispanic origin?	T0359	(Hispanic**) Yes=1, 0 if otherwise	Binary
45	67	What is your year of birth?	AGE_T	(Teachers' Age) Less than 30 years=1, 0 if otherwise** 30 to 39 years=1, 0 if otherwise** 40 to 49 years=1, 0 if otherwise** 50 years or more=1, 0 if otherwise	Binary
Preparation and Training					
9	6a	Full-Time Years Teaching Experience	T0065	(Experience**) Number of Years of Full-time Teaching	Continuous
15	13a	Teaching Certificate	T0103	(Certificate**) Yes=1, 0 if otherwise	Binary
21	27	In the past 12 months, have you participated in any of the following activities related to teaching?	N/A	N/A	N/A
21	27f	Mentoring and/or peer observation and coaching, as part of a formal arrangement that is recognized or supported by the school or district.	T0155	(Mentoring **) Yes=1, 0 if otherwise	Binary
22	28a	In the past 12 months, have you participated in any professional development activities that focused on in-depth study	T0159	(Professional Development**) Yes=1, 0 if otherwise	Binary

		of the content in your main teaching assignment field?			

Table 1. Continued

Special Education Teacher Characteristics					
Survey Page #	Survey Item	Survey Question	Survey Reference #	(Variable Name) and Indicator	Variable Type
Work Environment					
44	62	The following questions refer to your before-tax earnings from teaching and other employment.	N/A	N/A	N/A
44	62b	During the current school year (1) What is your academic year base teaching salary?	T0347	(Salary) Less than $25,001 =1, 0 if otherwise** $25,001 to $30,000 =1, 0 if otherwise** $30,001 to $35,000 =1, 0 if otherwise** $35,001 to $45,000 =1, 0 if otherwise** $45,001 or more =1, 0 if otherwise	Binary
40	59k	Most of my colleagues share my beliefs and values about what the central mission of the school should be.	T0309	(Climate**) Strongly agree =1; Somewhat agree=1; Somewhat disagree =0; Strongly disagree =0;	Binary
41	59m	There is a great deal of cooperative effort among the staff members.	T0311	(Collegial Support**) Strongly agree =1; Somewhat agree=1; Somewhat disagree =0; Strongly disagree =0;	Binary
School Characteristics					
Survey Page #	Survey Item	Survey Question	Survey Reference #	(Variable Name) and Indicator	Variable Type
N/A	N/A	Urbanicity of School	URBANIC	(Location) (Urban**) =1, 0 if otherwise (Suburban**) =1, 0 if otherwise (Rural) = 1, 0 if otherwise	Binary

N/A	N/A	Percent Minority Students	MINENR	(Minority) Less than 5% Minority students=1, 0 if otherwise** 5% to 19 % Minority students=1, 0 if otherwise** 20% to 49% Minority students=1, 0 if otherwise** 50% or more students=1, 0 if otherwise	Binary
N/A	N/A	Limited English proficiency students	LEP_T	(Limited English Proficiency) 0% LEP =1, 0 if otherwise**	Binary
n = 1690*					

**Note*. The sample for this study includes, only U.S. public school elementary special education teachers who reported on the 1999-2000 SASS that their main teaching assignment field was in one of the following special education areas: special education general, autism, deaf and hard of hearing, developmentally delayed, early childhood special education, emotionally disturbed or behavior disorders, learning disability, mentally retarded, mildly/moderately disabled, orthopedically impaired, severely/profoundly disabled, speech/language impaired, traumatically brain injured, visually impaired, and other special education (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey). This resulted in a sample of 1690 public school elementary special education teachers.

***Note*. Independent variables indicated by asterisks.

[a]SASS 1999-2000 item 61b was as follows: How long do you plan to remain in teaching?

1=As long as I am able;

2=Until I am eligible for retirement;

3=Will probably continue unless something better comes along;

4=Definitely plan to leave teaching as soon as I can;

5=Undecided at this time.

Dependent Variable

SASS item 61b asked," How long do you plan to remain in teaching?" SETs selected one response from the following: As long as am I able=1, Until I am eligible for retirement=2, Will probably continue unless something better comes along=3, Definitely plan to leave teaching as soon as I can=4, or Undecided at this time=5. Item 61b was recoded into a binary dependent variable (Leave) that appears in Table 1. Leave was coded as follows: Definitely plan to leave teaching as soon as I can=1, Will probably continue unless something better comes along=0, Undecided at this time=0, Until I am eligible for retirement=0, and As long as I am able=0.

Independent Variable of Interest

SETs' Perception of Principals' Communication

The independent variable of interest for this study was SETs' perception of principals' communication. The objective was to assess the relationship between SETs' perception of principals' communication and special educators' intentions to leave teaching. Five items were selected to assess slightly different aspects of the same construct; SETs' perception of principals' communication associated with transformational leadership. SETs responded to these five items regarding perception of their

principals' communication of: expectations, supportive behavior, enforcement of school rules, discussion of instructional practices, and school vision. Figure 2 illustrated the steps involved in moving from the concept of SETs' perception of principals' communication to a measurement variable (Northouse, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey).

SASS items 59a, 59b, 59h, 59i, and 59l asked, Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: (59a) "Principal lets staff members know what is expected of them", (59b) "The schools administrations behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging", (59h) "My principal enforces schools rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it", (59i) "The principal talks with me frequently about my instructional practices", and (59l) "The principal knows what kind of school he/she wants and has communicated it to the staff". SETs responded whether they strongly agree (1), somewhat agree (2), somewhat disagree (3), or strongly disagree (4). Each ordinal item was recoded as follows: strongly agree=3, somewhat agree=2, somewhat disagree=1, and strongly disagree=0.

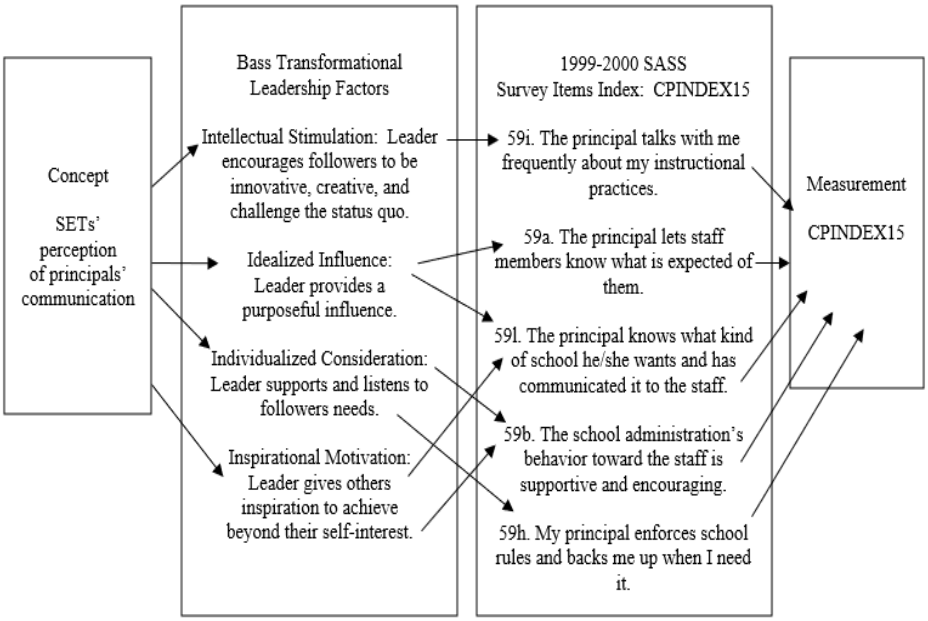

Figure 2. Concept, Factors, SASS Items, and Measurement

Perception of Principals' Communication Index

Rather than treat the five SASS items as separate measures, the researcher combined them into one index, CPINDEX15. CPINDEX15 was the sum of the five items scored 0-3, so that respondents overall scores ranged from 0 to 15. Index construction required computation of a correlation matrix for the items that comprised CPINDEX15. As shown in Table 2, all five items were correlated at a statistically significant level of .001 or less. This evidence supported using those items to create an index, CPINDEX15.

Internal reliability refers to how well multiple items work together to measure a single concept. Reliability addresses the index's measurement of a single construct (e.g., SETs' perception of principals' communication) and determines if items comprising the index are internally consistent. Cronbach's alpha is a statistic used to determine whether items that makeup CPINDEX15 were internally consistent. Cronbach's alpha (.828) was computed for the five SASS items as shown in Table 3. Researchers suggest a Cronbach's alpha greater than .70 is internally reliable (Bryman & Cramer, 2001; Field, 2009). Therefore, the .828 alpha for CPINDEX15 was accepted to establish reliability.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for CPINDEX15 Items

		CPEXPECT1	CPSUPPORT1	CPENFORCE1	CPINSTRUCT1	CPSCHOOL1
CPEXPECT1	Pearson Correlation	1				
CPSUPPORT1	Pearson Correlation	.542*	1			
CPENFORCE1	Pearson Correlation	.508*	.567*	1		
CPINSTRUCT1	Pearson Correlation	.416*	.433*	.412*	1	
CPSCHOOL1	Pearson Correlation	.622*	.485*	.508*	.405*	1
n = 1690						

Note. Author's calculations from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). Estimates adjusted for SASS probability weights.

*p <.001 (2-tailed).

Table 3. Reliability Analysis for CPINDEX15 Items

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.821	.828	5
n = 1690		

Note. Author's calculations from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). Estimates adjusted for SASS probability weights.

Control Variables

SETs' Demographic Characteristics

As shown in Table 1, several SETs' demographic characteristics were included as controls. Gender, race and ethnicity were recoded into binary variables. Teachers' age was recoded from four ascending ordinal categories into four separate binary variables.

SETs' Characteristics and Work Environment

For this study, several teacher and work environment variables identified in prior research as predictors of career decisions were included as controls (Gersten et al., 2001). Research has shown mentoring by peers was associated with intent to stay in special education (Whitaker, 2000). Participation in mentoring or professional development activities were recoded as binary variables (Albrecht et al., 2009; Whitaker, 2000).

SETs' perception of school climate is a predictor of intentions to stay in or leave teaching (Miller et al., 1999; Scott et al., 2022). Therefore, in order to determine if SETs' perception of principal communication has an independent, direct effect on intentions, a control for the relationship between school climate and intentions was included. School climate was recoded as binary in which strongly agree or somewhat agree=1 and somewhat disagree or strongly disagree=0.

Miller et al. (1999) found collegial support linked to SETs' intentions to leave teaching. SETs responded to a four-point Likert scale from (1), strongly agree (1), somewhat agree (2), somewhat disagree (3), or strongly disagree (4) to: There is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members. This variable was recoded as binary in which strongly agree or somewhat agree=1 and somewhat disagree or strongly disagree=0.

Singer (1992) found an association between SETs' salary and intentions to leave teaching. A SASS item asked SETs, "During the current school year-what is your base year teaching salary?" This item was coded into five ascending ordinal categories representing salary intervals. Further, this item was recoded into five separate binary variables.

Controls for teacher experience and training was included. Specifically, number of years of full-time teacher experience was a continuous variable, coded in years. If a SET has a teaching certificate, this item was coded (Yes=1, 0 if otherwise).

SETs' School Characteristics

This study included several school level variables as controls. School characteristics included location, percent minority students, and limited English proficiency. Each of these items were recoded into binary variables.

Data and Results

The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between SETs' perception of principals' communication and special educators' intentions to stay in or leave teaching in U.S. public elementary schools. The 1999-2000 SASS consisted of 42, 086 K-12 teachers, 1,690 of which were public elementary school SETs. SETs were identified as individuals who taught at an elementary school and reported their main teaching assignment field to be in any of the following special education areas: special education general, autism, deaf and hard of hearing, developmentally delayed, early childhood special education, emotionally disturbed or behavior disorders, learning disability, mentally retarded, mildly/moderately disabled, orthopedically impaired, severely/profoundly disabled, speech/language impaired, traumatically brain injured, visually impaired, and other special education (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey).

SETs were asked to respond to 71 fixed-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questionnaire items from the 1999-2000 SASS. Of particular interest for this study were SETs responses to 20 SASS items as shown in Table 1, representing: perception of principals' communication, demographics, preparation and training, work environment, and school characteristics. The analysis addresses the following research question (RQ) and associated null and alternative hypothesis:

RQ: To what extent is there a relationship between special education teachers' perception of principals' communication and SETs' intentions to stay in or definitely leave teaching in U.S. public elementary schools?

H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between special education teachers' perception of principals' communication and SETs' intentions to definitely leave teaching in U.S. public elementary schools.

H_a: There is a statistically significant negative relationship between special education teachers' perception of principals' communication and SETs' intentions to definitely leave teaching in U.S. public elementary schools.

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 1,690 public elementary school SETs met the study's criterion for inclusion. Descriptive statistics as shown in Table 4, include mean and standard deviation values for the dependent variable, Leave (Definitely Intend to Leave) and all independent variables. Three percent of SETs reported that they "definitely plan to leave teaching as soon as I can". The mean and standard deviation of SETs' Perception of Principals' Communication Index (CPINDEX15) is 10.58 (3.218) respectively.

Method of Analysis

The dependent variable for this study has two possible outcomes, coded intent to leave=1, intent to stay or undecided=0. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, binary logistic regression was an appropriate method of analysis (Lomas & Hahs-Vaughn, 2012). This technique estimates the probability of an outcome that has only two categories. Binary logistic regression estimates the probability of the relationship between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation for Sample Variables

	SASS Label	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teacher Characteristics					
Leave (Dependent Variable)	T0340	0	1	.0314	.174
SETs' Perception of Principals' Communication Index (CPINDEX15)		0	15	10.58	3.218
Principal lets staff members know what is expected of them	T0299	0	3	2.39	.709
The schools' administration's behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging	T0300	0	3	2.13	.939
My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it	T0306	0	3	2.31	.838
The principal talks with me frequently about my instructional practices	T0307	0	3	1.41	.931
The principal knows what kind of school he/she wants and has communicated it to the staff members	T0310	0	3	2.34	.774
Demographics					
Gender	T0356				
Male		0	1	.09	.290
Race*	T0357				
Black		0	1	.09	.290
Native Indian or Alaskan Native		0	1	.01	.112
Asian or Pacific Islander		0	1	.01	.120
White (Reference Category)		0	1	.88	.325
Hispanic origin	T0359				
Hispanic		0	1	.04	.189

Teachers' age*	AGE_T				
Less than 30 years		0	1	.18	.386
Between 30 to 39 years		0	1	.23	.418
Between 40 to 49 years		0	1	.38	.485
50 years or more (Reference Category)		0	1	.21	.411
Preparation and Qualification					
Full-time years teaching experience	T0065	0	51	11.66	8.497
Teaching Certificate	T0103	0	1	.94	.243
Mentoring supported by school/district	T0155	0	1	.41	.493
Professional development participation	T0159	0	1	.60	.490

Table 4. Continued

	SASS Label	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teacher Characteristics					
Work Environment					
Teaching salary*	T0347				
Less than $25,001		0	1	.11	.313
Between $25,001 to $30,000		0	1	.17	.379
Between $30,001 to $35,000		0	1	.18	.382
Between $35,001 to $45,000		0	1	.31	.461
$45,001 or more (Reference Category)		0	1	.23	.422
Climate	T0311	0	1	.79	.409
Collegial support	T0309	0	1	.85	.352
School Characteristics					
Urbanicity of school	URBANIC				
Urban		0	1	.29	.455
Suburban		0	1	.50	.500
Rural (Reference Category)		0	1	.20	.403
Percent of minority students*	MINENR				
Less than 5% minority students		0	1	.19	.392
Between 5% to 19% minority students		0	1	.23	.422
Between 20% to 49% minority students		0	1	.24	.428
Greater than 49% minority students (Reference Category)		0	1	.34	.473

Limited English proficiency (LEP) students	LEP_T				
0% LEP		0	1	.31	.461
n = 1690					

Note. Author's calculations from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). Estimates adjusted for SASS probability weights.

**Note*. Sum totals do not always equal 1.0 due to rounding.

Logistic Regression Results

Multivariate Logistic Regression Predicting SETs Intentions to Leave

In Table 5, the dependent variable, Leave was coded 1 = Definitely plan to leave teaching as soon as I can, coded 0 = otherwise. The independent variable of interest was SETs' perception of principals' communication (i.e., CPINDEX15), along with several other independent (control) variables. The results of a multivariate logistic regression analysis appear in Table 5.

For logistic regression, there are two primary output components: 1) goodness-of-fit tests; and 2) coefficients. As shown in Table 5, the chi-square test of the model containing 25 independent variables resulted in a statistically significant value (Chi-square = 11138.344; $df = 25$; $p < 0.001$), indicated the generated equation was significantly better predicting SETs' intentions to definitely leave than the constant-only model. In other words, the model was reliable in distinguishing between SETs with intentions to definitely leave, rather than stay in the profession. The next measure, Hosmer-Lemeshow's goodness-of-fit statistic can be thought of as a test for lack of goodness-of-fit. Therefore, large probability (p) values support a well-fitted model, such that we cannot reject the equation. The Hosmer-Lemeshow test (Chi-square = 3.702; $df = 8$; $p < 0.883$) offered strong evidence that the model fits the data well. The second component of logistic analysis, the coefficients in the regression equation, also appear in Table 5.

Table 5. Multivariate Logistic Regression for Leave

Independent Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp(B)[1]
CPINDEX15	-.131**	.004	1068.595	.877
Gender				
Male	-.405**	.053	58.466	.667
Race				
Black	1.996**	.035	32019.200	7.357
Native Indian or Alaskan Native	-17.425	695.201	.001	.000
Asian or Pacific Islander	-.154	.122	1.608	.857
Hispanic Origin				
Hispanic	.307**	.066	21.722	1.360
Teachers age				
Less than 30 years	-.124	.058	4.509	.884
Between 30 to 39 years	.060	.048	1.554	1.062

Between 40 to 49 years	-.071	.037	3.641	.932
Full-time years teaching experience	.020**	.002	73.614	1.020
Teaching Certificate	-.440**	.052	72.164	.644
Mentoring supported by school/district	-.554**	.031	325.746	.574
Professional development participation	-.603**	.028	460.339	.547
Teaching Salary				
Less than $25,001	.644**	.054	140.350	1.904
Between $25,001 to $30,000	.198**	.053	14.058	1.219
Between $30,001 to $35,000	-.320**	.054	34.987	.726
Between $35,001 to $45,000	.522**	.038	188.713	1.686
Climate	-.860**	.031	774.457	.423
Collegial support	.295**	.036	67.592	1.343
Urbanicity of School				
Urban	.458**	.041	124.590	1.580
Suburban	.046	.040	1.319	1.047
Percent of minority students				
Less than 5%	-1.484**	.079	352.548	.227
Between 5% to 19%	.887**	.038	539.656	2.428
Between 20% to 49%	.116*	.037	9.666	1.123
Limited English proficiency students				
0% LEP	-.991**	.034	832.340	.371
Constant	-1.777**	.097	338.952	.169
Model Chi-square (25) 11138.344, p<0.001				
[2]Hosmer-Lemeshow Chi-square (8) 3.702, p<.883				
Nagelkerke R-square .206				
Observations=1690				

Note. Author's calculations from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). Unless otherwise indicated, estimates adjusted for teacher sample probability weights.

*p<0.01; **p<0.001

[1]Odds Ratio

[2]According to Allison (2014), goodness of fit tests with large sample sizes make it nearly impossible to find a model with a p-value larger than .05 (p.11). Therefore, since the weighted data for this study produced a sample over 200,000, an unweighted model was used to compute the Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic (Allison, 2014).

SETs' Perception of Communication Index

The results for SETs' perception of principals' communication supported this study's research hypothesis: There was a statistically significant ($p<0.001$) negative ($\beta=-.131$) relationship between SETs' perception of principals' communication and special educators' intentions to definitely leave teaching in U.S. public elementary schools. Consistent with this hypothesis, holding constant all other independent variables, each additional one-unit increase in SETs' positive perception of principals' communication (CPINDEX15) decreased the log odds ($\beta=-.131$) that SETs reported an intention to definitely leave the profession. This statistically significant coefficient ($\beta=-.131$) had an odds ratio (Expβ) of .877, allowing for computation of a change in odds%: $\left|.877-1\right| * 100=12.3\%$. This was interpreted as follows: each additional one-unit increase in CPINDEX15 was associated with a 12.3% decrease in the odds SETs' intend to definitely leave teaching, holding constant all independent variables.

SETs' Demographics

For men, the coefficient was negative and statistically significant. This indicates that being male compared to a female SET reduced the log odds of special educators' reporting a definite intention to leave the profession. Conversely, Black or Hispanic ethnicity SETs produced an increase in the log odds of leaving the profession compared to White colleagues.

SETs' Preparation and Qualification

My interpretation of logistic coefficients continues with results for SETs' preparation and qualification. As revealed by the statistically significant coefficient for fulltime teaching experience, each additional one-year increase in experience was associated with an increase in the log odds of SETs reporting an intention to definitely leave the profession. In contrast, the results for SETs' certification compared to no certification, mentoring versus no mentoring, and participation in professional development in comparison to no professional development, all indicated a reduction in the log odds of definite intent to leave teaching.

SETs' Work Environment

Further, my interpretation of logistic coefficients for work environment included the following statistically significant variables: salary, school climate, and collegial support. The findings for salary were mixed. Compared to their colleagues earning more than $45,000 annually, SETs paid less than $25,001, between $25,001 - $30,000, or between $35,001 - $45,000 per year increased the likelihood SETs definitely intend to leave the profession. However, those SETs with annual salaries between $30,001 - $35,000 compared to colleagues receiving more than $45,000, decreased the log odds of intent to leave teaching. For school climate, the coefficient was negative and statistically significant, indicating that SETs who reported a positive school climate were less likely to intend to definitely leave teaching. Conversely, SETs that agree they have experienced collegial support compared to those that have not, increased the log odds of definite intent to leave the profession.

SETs' School Characteristics

As revealed by the statistically significant coefficient, an urban school compared to a rural school increased the log odds that SETs definitely intend to leave the profession. The findings for percent minority students were mixed. Schools with less than 5% minority student enrollment compared to schools with greater than 49% minority students decreased the log odds that SETs' intend to definitely leave teaching. Conversely, the coefficients for schools with between 5% and 49% minority enrollment, compared to schools with more than 49% minority students, increased the log odds that SETs' intend to definitely leave the profession. The statistically significant coefficient for schools with limited English proficient students were interpreted as follows: If a school has no limited English proficient students compared to a school with limited English proficient students, SETs were less likely to report intent to definitely leave teaching.

In summary, the dependent variable, Leave (e.g., Definitely plan to leave teaching as soon as I can) was predicted by a combination of SETs' demographic, preparation and qualification, work environment, and school characteristic variables. The results supported this study's hypothesis regarding the

importance of SETs' perception of principals' communication. Specifically, a positive increase in SETs' perception of principals' communication decreased SETs' intentions to definitely leave teaching as soon as they can. Moreover, this relationship remained even after controls for more than 20 other independent variables were added to the model. In other words, as CPINDEX15 increased, the likelihood that SETs' intent to definitely leave teaching was reduced.

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to assess if there is a relationship between U.S. public elementary school SETs' perception of principals' communication and special educators' intentions to leave teaching. Drawing on Bass's transformational leadership framework (Northouse, 2022), as administrators, principals' communication can help SETs effectively manage instruction, challenge work demands, and collaborate interactions with staff (Bettini et al., 2022; Billingsley et al., 2020) all of which can improve SETs' work conditions and reduce special educators' intent to leave teaching (Bettini, Cumming et al., 2020). Based on Bass's transformational leadership dimensions (Northouse, 2022), I operationalized SETs perception of principals' communication. My results suggest principals can reduce SETs' intention to leave the profession by demonstrating behaviors associated with transformational leadership to communicate about: instructional practices, the school, support and encouragement, as well as expectations and school policies. Figure 3 depicts the principals' role as a communicator, SETs' perception of principals' communication associated with transformational leadership behaviors, SASS Index and Measurement CPINDEX15 and results.

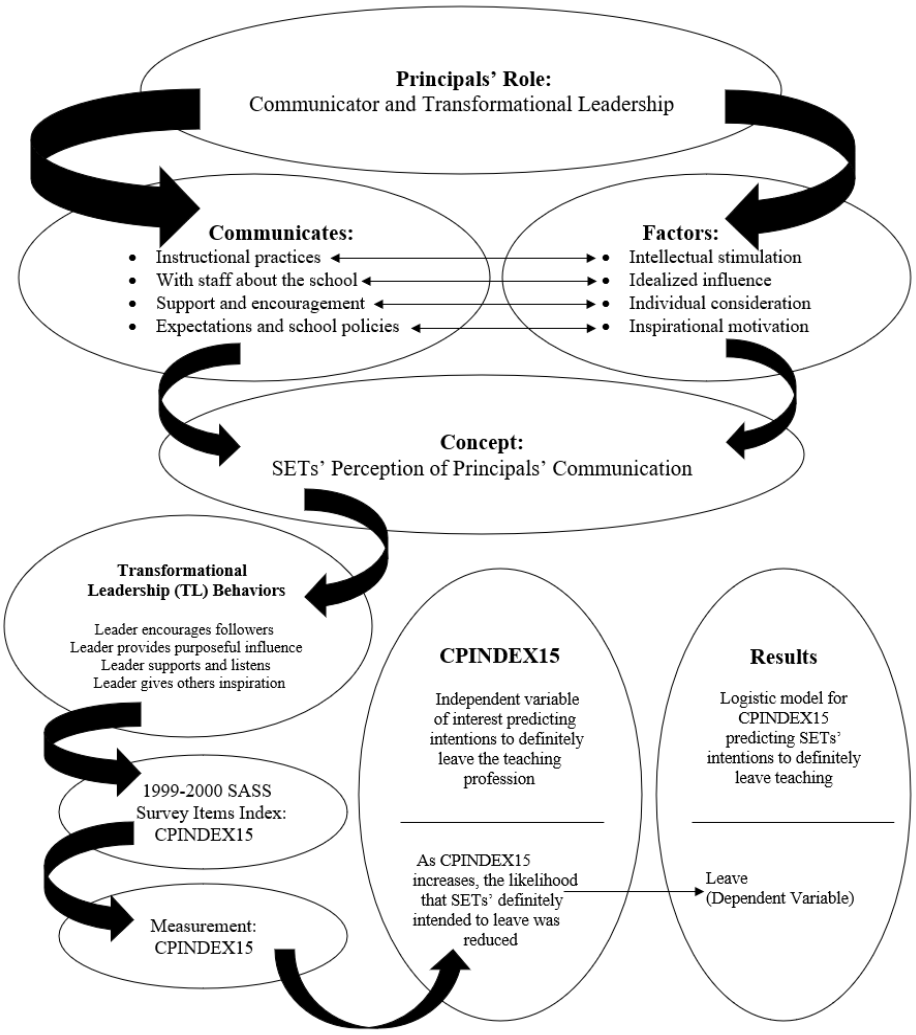

Figure 3. Principals' Role, Concept, TL Factors, CPINDEX15 Measurement and Results

My findings extend and support research on SETs' intent to stay in or leave the profession (Scott et al., 2022). First, my results advance existing literature on SETs' intentions by revealing when SETs reported their principals' communication positively, SETs' intent to definitely leave the profession decreased. Second, in addition to CPINDEX15, my study found several other independent variables attained statistically significant effects on SETs' intentions to leave teaching. Consistent with Singer (1992), my results indicated that male SETs were less likely to report intent to definitely leave the profession than females. Similar to Layden et al. (2022), I found Black SETs were more likely to state intent to definitely leave teaching compared to White SETs. My study supported research on the positive association mentoring has on SETs careers (Whitaker, 2000), especially during their first five years of teaching when special educators are at the highest risk of leaving the profession (Mathews et al., 2017). Finally, consistent with prior research, SETs at schools serving less than 5% percent minority students were more likely to intend to stay in the profession, compared to teachers at schools serving more minorities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Limitations

The 1999-2000 SASS was not the most recent survey of public education teachers in the United States. Consequently, the data may not be representative of contemporary SETs and generalizations to other teacher cohorts must be tentative. However, the fundamental dynamics shaping SETs' intentions to stay in or leave teaching has not changed dramatically (Bettini, Gilmour, et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2020, Gilmour et al., 2023; Hester et al., 2020; Mathews et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2022). The 1999-2000 SASS does not include items about educators' intentions to move between schools. Therefore, my findings should not be applied to SETs' intending to transfer to another school, rather than intent to leave the profession altogether. While SETs' intent has been reported to be predictive of leaving the profession (Gersten et al., 2001), other researchers found a majority of teachers who reported intent to leave were still teaching in the next school year (Nguyen et al., 2025). This suggests other unmeasured variables may contribute to teachers leaving the profession. Finally, SASS items represented SETs' perception of principals' communication, not direct measures of principals' actual communication behaviors (Men, 2014). Thus, it is possible SETs' perception of principals' communication may differ from the communication that actually occurred.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Future Research

Despite limitations, my results have important implications for principals, district leaders, policy stakeholders, and researchers. Applying the transformational leadership behaviors (TLBs) framework, my study found SETs' perception of principals' communication to be associated with special educators' intent to definitely leave teaching. My findings offer elementary school principals' insight into how their communication influences SETs' intentions.

Implications for Principals

Principals can exhibit transformational leadership behaviors by communicating with SETs about special education law to help SETs apply instructional practices and policies to support SWDs learning, while also communicating respect for SETs' work (Bettini et al., 2015). SETs depend on principals' guidance to help them traverse challenging work conditions (Billingsley et al., 2020). Therefore, recognizing SETs' perception of principals' communication is an opportunity for principals to support SETs (McLeskey et al., 2022), and influence SETs' intent. School-level and district-level leaders should consider co-facilitating professional development and mentoring training emphasizing principals' communication skills. Such programs could produce a handbook of the principal's communication strategic plan with a goal to enhance a supportive work environment and reduce SETs' intent to leave the profession. Furthermore, the principals' communication strategic plan could be updated as appropriate with modifications, strategies, and tactics for effectively communicating with SETs and other school stakeholders.

Implications for School Districts

School districts that participate in SETs' accreditation, prepare and hire SETs, could offer principals' training in communication areas predictive of reducing SETs' intent to leave the profession. My study can be used by school districts to justify inclusion of communication skills in principals' job

description and require applicants to submit a statement of their communication philosophy and practices. Furthermore, school district seminars that address communication, transformational leadership behaviors, and align with the Wallace Foundation's perspective regarding the role of principals are recommended. Topics might include: (a) teacher-centered conversations (e.g., intellectual stimulation: communicates instructional practices); (b) staff communication (e.g., idealized influence: communicates with staff about the school), (c) principal-special education teacher communication strategies (e.g., idealized consideration: communicates expectations and school policies), and (d) collaboration, team teaching and leadership (e.g., inspirational motivation: communicates support and encouragement) (Tyler, 2016; Wallace Foundation, 2024).

Implications for Principal Preparation Programs

Educational leadership programs should include transformational principal leadership curricula and training with an emphasis on communication. According to Duncan et al. (2011), communication was one of three areas principals required substantial support, yet this skill receives little professional development. Leadership theory coursework teaching communication strategies is not frequently found in principals preparation programs (Tyler, 2016). Thus, more curriculum emphasis on transformational leadership behaviors that foster principals' communication with teachers can enhance interaction and may influence SETs to stay in the teaching profession.

Implications for Future Research

Researchers should replicate this quantitative study with more recent SASS datasets. Bass's (1985) perspective of transformational leadership can provide a useful theoretical framework for future research on SETs' intent to stay in or leave teaching. Consistent with (Miller et al., 1999) and (Scott et al., 2022), I found several work environment variables had a direct and statistically significant effect on SETs' intent to leave. Specifically, mentoring, school climate and collegial support were associated with SETs intentions. Researchers may want to consider whether these work environment variables mediate the relationship between SETs' perception of principals' communications and special educators' intentions to stay in or leave the teaching profession. Furthermore, researchers should investigate to what extent SETs' perception of principals' communication (CPINDEX15) interacts with other variables, such as: age, gender, ethnicity and teaching experience, to determine if interactions mediate the association between SETs' perceptions and intentions. Researchers should also consider including both elementary and secondary school SETs, along with additional variables measuring administrative support, work conditions, and communication. More studies need to examine the relationship between SETs' intentions and actual departure from the teaching profession.

Finally, research using qualitative methods to investigate how principals communicate with SETs is needed. For example, observational studies of principals' communication with SETs could build upon the results of my study. Another interesting research question might be to explore: How does principals' communication support SETs' intentions to stay in or leave the teaching profession?

Conclusion

Principals' communication is essential for building relationships with special education teachers (SETs) and promoting inclusive schools that support students with disabilities (SWDs). (Billingsley et al., 2020; Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews, Billingsley et al., 2020). The interdependent nature of principals and SETs roles have evolved alongside federal mandates requiring accountability, collaboration, and shared decision-making to improve outcomes for SWDs. (Billingsley et al., 2020; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). These reforms have increased the need for communication and coordination among school leaders to implement policies and practices that support SWDs and meet state and federal requirements. Despite policy changes, factors influencing SETs' intentions to stay in or leave teaching have remained largely consistent, including workload, preparation, and administrative support. Research indicates that little improvement has occurred in these areas over the past two decades, highlighting the continued importance of supportive working conditions (Gilmour et al., 2023).

Principals' leadership expressed through communication plays a central role in collaboration with SETs and in implementing special education reforms. Through shared decision-making and collaborative interactions, principals can help create positive working environments that influence SETs' perceptions

of leadership and may reduce their intent to leave teaching. Effective communication allows principals to coordinate instruction for SWDs, support teaching quality, use data to address student progress, and engage families in students' development. As educational change continues, principals' communication particularly associated with transformational leadership behaviors, remains critical for guiding collaboration with SETs and may influence special educators' perceptions of principals' communications and SETs' intentions to remain in or definitely leave the profession.

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Informed Consent

The author declares that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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