MEETING THE NEEDS OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS IN WASHINGTON STATE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE WORKING CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT TEACHERS OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

By

CRAIG ALLAN MEADOR

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Educational Leadership, Sport Studies, and Educational/Counseling Psychology

MAY 2015

© Copyright by CRAIG ALLAN MEADOR, 2015
All Rights Reserved
To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of CRAIG ALLAN MEADOR find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

____________________________
Kristin Shawn Huggins, Ph.D., Chair

____________________________
Michele Acker-Hocevar, Ph.D.

____________________________
Gay Selby, Ed.D.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge all the members of my committee, Dr. Huggins, Dr. Acker-Hocevar, and Dr. Selby for guiding and supporting my efforts. Dr. Huggins has guided me through this process, encouraged me to expand my thinking, and pushed to help me achieve deeper reasoning within my writings. Dr. Acker-Hocevar, thank you for your instruction and input in this process; Dr. Selby who started me on this journey many years ago as I began the Principalship, inspired me, guided me and encouraged me to enter the superintendent/doctoral program. Thank you.

To Ben, Rebecca, Keith and Thaynan, thank you for the support as we labored together the first two summers in Pullman. The evening roundtables, the frozen yogurt runs and continued support through shared classes was appreciated. You helped maintain sanity and provided much levity and I want you to know how much I appreciated your support and friendship. Good luck and continued prayers as you complete your process.

Completion of this goal would not have been possible without the support and encouragement from my wife, Kristin. She was a patient and reliable sounding board, listening to my rants of frustration as I navigated this process offering her encouragement and believed for me when I lost faith in my abilities. I also thank my boys, Jordan, Trevan and Spencer that have been a continual encouragement and bring so much happiness to our home. I am well aware this process required the help of so many and that it never would have happened without the support from friends, family and faculty.
MEETING THE NEEDS OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS IN WASHINGTON STATE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE WORKING CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT TEACHERS OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Abstract

by Craig Allan Meador, Ed.D.
Washington State University
May 2015

Chair: Kristin S. Huggins

With the ongoing shortage of available teachers of the visually impaired and the increasing number of students and demands on time, this study examined the working conditions that affect itinerant teachers of the visually impaired. Through observations and interviews, data was gathered and analyzed to determine the issues that created challenges for these specialized teachers. This qualitative case study included thirteen teachers of the visually impaired on the Eastside and Westside of Washington State during the 2013-2014 school year. These teachers ranged in experience from three to 25 years or more years of teaching experience and their teaching assignments reflected both rural and urban settings.

The study found that the teachers of the visually impaired encountered many of the same issues that their classroom-based special education colleagues encountered. However, unlike their classroom colleagues, they dealt with multiple school sites and districts due to their itinerant position. This added a complexity of contextual issues that they could not control, requiring them to develop strategies to deal with the challenges such as caseloads, time
management, professional learning, dealing with others and isolation. Successful teachers of the visually impaired employed strategies within their settings that provided levels of direct and indirect support, which helped to meet the needs of their students and their needs as professionals. Despite the very challenging nature of the job, teachers of the visually impaired did not suffer the same attrition rates of their special education peers and expressed great satisfaction with their profession.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ........................................................................................................ iii

**ABSTRACT** ......................................................................................................................... iv

**CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION** ...................................................................................... 1

Background ............................................................................................................................... 1

Historical Overview .................................................................................................................. 1

Teacher Shortage ...................................................................................................................... 2

Issues Affecting Current Teachers of the Visually Impaired .................................................. 4

Problem Statement .................................................................................................................. 6

Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................................. 8

Significance of the Study .......................................................................................................... 8

Overview of Methodology ....................................................................................................... 9

Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 11

Limitations ................................................................................................................................. 12

Definitions and Terms ............................................................................................................. 13

Organization of the Study ....................................................................................................... 16

**CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW** .................................................................... 17

Visual Impairment: A Low-Incidence Disability ................................................................. 17

Visually Impaired Students in Washington State .............................................................. 19

Lack of Services: A Clear Impact on Students ................................................................. 21

Shortages of Teachers of the Visually Impaired: The Effect on Students ....................... 24

Issues Affecting Teachers of the Visually Impaired .......................................................... 25

Caseload ................................................................................................................................ 26
Isolation ........................................................................................................................................... 29
Professional growth and development .............................................................................................. 30
Administrative support ...................................................................................................................... 30
Diversity of student needs .................................................................................................................. 31
Demands of paperwork ...................................................................................................................... 32
Distance traveled and remoteness of students .................................................................................. 33
Issues and Job Satisfaction .................................................................................................................. 34
Job Satisfaction and Attrition ............................................................................................................ 36
Attrition ............................................................................................................................................... 37
Years of Experience and Attrition ...................................................................................................... 39

CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................... 41
Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 41
Methodology ........................................................................................................................................ 41
Method Selection .................................................................................................................................. 43
TVIs ...................................................................................................................................................... 45
Data Collection ..................................................................................................................................... 48
Data Analysis ......................................................................................................................................... 49
Trustworthiness ................................................................................................................................... 50
  Internal validity .................................................................................................................................. 51
  External validity ................................................................................................................................. 52
Ethical Considerations .......................................................................................................................... 53
Study Limitations .................................................................................................................................. 54
Positionality .......................................................................................................................................... 54
Significance of the Study ........................................................................................................... 55

CHAPTER FOUR - FINDINGS .................................................................................................. 57

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 57

Role of the Teacher of the Visually Impaired ........................................................................ 57

TVIs ........................................................................................................................................ 59

Three to seven years experience. ............................................................................................ 60

Seven to 13 years experience .................................................................................................. 61

Fourteen plus years of experience ........................................................................................... 62

Identifying the Contextual factors ............................................................................................ 66

Managing caseloads ..................................................................................................................... 67

Using time .................................................................................................................................. 71

Always learning .......................................................................................................................... 74

Dealing with others ...................................................................................................................... 76

Fighting isolation ......................................................................................................................... 80

Connections for Direct Support to Students ............................................................................ 84

Addressing immediate needs ..................................................................................................... 85

Training to change attitudes and misconceptions .................................................................... 86

Finding solutions ......................................................................................................................... 88

Connections for Indirect Support to Students .......................................................................... 90

Connecting to colleagues .......................................................................................................... 90

Connecting to administration .................................................................................................... 93

Connecting to the field ............................................................................................................... 97

Having a known identity ........................................................................................................... 99
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

Education begins on a visual platform, and with the advances in technology, information is immediate, fluid, and transient. Considering the complexities of today’s world, the challenges faced by students with visual impairments become understandable. Due to the lack of, or impairment of, a visual channel as the integrator that helps to, “organize and negotiate the environment, and put objects, sounds, aromas, tactual impressions and people in perspective” (Ward & Johnson, 1997), students with visual impairments lack access to educational opportunities and are greatly disadvantaged. Part of the challenge in providing education to visually impaired students is due to the low-incidence nature of visual impairment, which represents less than 1 percent of the student population (Adams, Hendershot, & Marano, 1999). Most of these students, 84%, are educated in their local schools with the help of an itinerant teacher trained to work with the blind or visually impaired to access education and information (American Printing House, 2006). This system is effective when there are adequate resources to meet the needs of all students. However, serious shortages of trained teachers limit access to education for students with visual impairment (Corn & Spungin, 2003).

Historical Overview

The phenomenon of a shortage of qualified professionals to work with visually impaired students is not a recent occurrence, and an examination of the earliest literature from the 1800s reveals a marginalization of people with visual impairment (Hatlen, 2000). This marginalization is chronicled by the lack of services, training, and opportunities for the visually impaired in the public and private sector. State and private institutions such as schools for the blind were the
primary provider of education well into the last third of the 20th century. Very few special education programs in public school existed until then, creating a crisis when special education became the law in 1975 under the passage of Public Law 94-142, which later became IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. When that occurred, schools scrambled to create programs that allowed all students with disabilities to be part of their local school systems by adopting models developed by larger inner city schools (Hatlen, 2000) and sought guidance from the institution training programs and universities (Koestler, 1976). Public education was not prepared for the demand and the results for many students were a lack of access to trained teachers, materials, and accommodations. This struggle has continued into the twenty-first century and has a significant effect on student progress as demonstrated by lower graduation rates, lower scores on state and national exams, and high unemployment rates (Billingsley, 2004; Ferrell, 2007).

**Teacher Shortages**

Currently, a shortage of trained teachers and specialists of the visually impaired exists, creating educational inequities within and between school districts (Ludlow, Connor, & Schecter, 2005). Districts faced with the challenge of educating visually impaired students are desperate to find qualified professionals. Most districts do not plan proactively to meet the specialized needs of these students but default to the reactive model of meeting emergent needs, since districts often do not know when a visually impaired student will matriculate into their system. Yet, when these needs arise, districts find it difficult to obtain appropriate resources to fulfill their education responsibility in accordance with federal special education regulations in IDEA (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011). The difficulty of finding qualified personnel to work with students in rural settings is especially troublesome as districts lack the necessary structures
to retain qualified staff. Many report a lack of professional development, materials, technical resources and current information on best practice as major hurdles to retention and development of teachers (Rude, Jackson, Correa, Luckner, Muir & Ferrell, 2005).

Despite districts’ efforts to find and retain teachers, the pool of qualified applicants are few and finding university training programs to “home grow” a TVI (TVI), can be futile. The reason is that very few university or college training programs for teachers of the visually impaired exist. In fact, only 41 programs for teachers of the visually impaired were in operation nationally during the 2013-2014 school year. Many of these programs are vast distances away from areas of shortages, and despite the recent development of moving to online training programs, they do not meet the current need. Since university programs train teachers to serve a small, low-incidence population, the number of students enrolled in the training programs is also small. These programs are not high-profile programs layered within the special education department, which means that TVIs usually need a personal connection with the field of blindness to pursue a degree within the field. Historically, programs combatted this with marketing that offered full and partial scholarships from the Office of Special Education Programs, OSEP, for individuals who pursued a teaching degree in the area of low-incidence. Last year, OSEP awarded $250,000 grants to seven university programs that train special education personnel, but these grants did not specify low-incidence training. Additionally, none of the awarded schools were in Washington or the Northwest U.S. Region. The lack of awarded funding to universities makes it difficult to sustain a training program and removes the enhancements of free or reduced tuition to entice teachers into the field (OSEP, 2014).

Subsequently, this lack of training programs means that not enough adequately trained teachers are available to meet the national demands for the field. In the State of Washington
during the 2012-2013 school year, six reported, full, and part-time positions for teachers of the visually impaired went unfilled, severely affecting several students and their access to an appropriate education. The school year of 2013-2014 had similar vacancies represented in full and part-time needs in the greater Seattle area and rural Washington (C. Meador, personal communication, January 10, 2014). A review of the American Printing House (APH) Annual Census and the Ogden Resource Center (ORC) Records for the last 12 years demonstrates that some Washington districts had identified students with a visual impairment who did not receive services from a TVI. Currently, there are less than 85 full- and part-time teachers of the visually impaired within Washington State to meet the needs of more than 1500 students identified in 145 of the 295 school districts (ORC, 2014). The 150 districts that reported no students with visual impairment do not have access to a TVI, but occurrence studies indicate that there are unidentified students. Based upon statistical research, the occurrence of visual impairment is between .0010 and .0015 of the student population, which indicates that the Washington State unidentified student population is between 75 and 800 students (Diament & Kirchner 1999; Wall & Corn 2004).

**Issues Affecting Current Teachers of the Visually Impaired**

Given the number of visually impaired students spread throughout 145 school districts, most teachers serve in the role of itinerants, covering more than one school or district. Because the teachers must travel from student to student, several issues affect them that include multiple preparations, drive time, and caseloads to name a few (Billingsley, 2004; Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Olmstead, 2005). Unfortunately, little research exists regarding the influence these issues have on teachers of the visually impaired to provide appropriate
educational services. Thus, an examination of special education research is necessary to build a basis for a study concerning these issues.

A review of the special education literature identifies many issues that create complications for teachers who serve students with special needs, which include the number of students on caseloads, working in isolation, and having the appropriate resources to meet the needs of students (Berry et al., 2011; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Russ, Chiang, Rylance, & Bongers, 2001). The research also identifies additional issues affecting specialists who do not have a singular classroom but move from student to student, which includes driving distances between school districts, and the lack of collegial support (Billingsley, 2004; Pennington, Horn & Berong, 2009; Singer, 1993). Two separates studies completed in 2004 surveyed TVIs about the challenges of their current jobs, their professional preparation, and their job satisfaction. The first study identified the following: 1) caseload, 2) time, 3) support for students and the knowledge required to be effective in their job, 4) a need for ongoing professional development, and 5) professional concerns regarding TVI shortage (Griffin-Shirley, Koenig, Layton, Davidson, Siew, Edmonds, & Robinson, 2004). The second study uncovered similar issues but also addressed issues of 6) isolation, 7) increasing paperwork, and 8) political issues within schools and districts (Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004). Two of the issues that were of particular importance within these studies and identified in the special education literature were that of caseload and isolation.

The first issue, an increase in caseload size, represents an increase in preparation, an increase in communications with team members, and an increase in paperwork (CEC, 1999). The second noted issue, the challenge of feeling isolated is a concern because it was an issue that was linked to dissatisfaction with special education positions and affected itinerant teachers
similarly (Billingsley, 2004; Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Pennington, et al., 2009). Additionally, special education classroom teachers experience a higher rate of attrition compared to their peers in general education (Billingsley, 2004).

**Problem Statement**

A documented shortage of teachers of the visually impaired exists within Washington State and a limited number of teacher training programs are available nationally. In addition, during the last few years funding provided by the Office of Special Education for teacher training programs in low-incidence disabilities have been reduced dramatically, eliminating tuition waivers and stipends for many programs (OSEP, 2014). The lack of current TVI availability and the low number of new TVIs entering the field has created a scenario in Washington State where some identified students did not receive services and many visually impaired students are unidentified because of the lack of TVIs. Unless there is an immediate, large influx of teachers of the visually impaired, Washington State will continue to experience these issues of under identification and underservice. On a national level there are decades long, documented, teacher shortages (Corn & Spungin, 2003; Mason et al., 2000) and without national policy change and the creation of additional teacher training programs, shortages will continue to be an issue nationally and within Washington State. There is an expectation that Washington State will lose 30% of teachers of the visually impaired, due to attrition tied to retirement within the next five years (C. Meador, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Given this situation of limited human resources, it is imperative to examine the issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired to determine what can and must be done to support and retain teachers within the field. Limited resources and teacher shortages not only affect teachers of the visually impaired but also all of special education. The study conducted by
Correa-Torres and Johnson-Howell (2004) and the Wall and Corn research (2003) identified several TVI issues that paralleled special education teacher issues within schools. These were school climate, administrative support, collegial support, availability of mentor/induction program, professional development, multi-faceted roles, paperwork, changing roles of special education, and diversity of caseload (Billingsley, 2004; DeMik, 2008; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004; Pennington, et.al, 2009). Many of these issues were contextual in nature with teachers having limited control to alter their circumstances. In education settings that provided strong mentor programs and administrative supports, teachers felt greater levels of satisfaction and were more likely to remain with the school or district (Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley & Seo, 1999).

Attrition of special education teachers has been a well-documented issue of over four decades and remains a concern to this day (Billingsley, 2004; Boyer and Gillespie, 2000; Gersten, et al., 2001; Katsiyanna, Zhang, and Conroy, 2003). The literature support of similar concerns of attrition in the field of teachers of the visually impaired is sparse with studies alluding to attrition as a possibility if issues are not addressed (Mason, Davidson & McNerney, 2000). In a study that focused on low-incidence populations and the teachers who served them, the researchers highlighted the issues that contributed to teacher shortage. The issues regarding a lack of peer networking between low-incidence teachers and a lack of concern demonstrated by minimal administrative support had the greatest effect on attrition (Pennington, et al., 2009).

Regardless of reason, the result is a documented shortage of qualified teachers in the field of special education, since the 1980s. The documented shortage in the field of teachers of the visually impaired existed since the inception of IDEA (Kirchner & Diament, 1999; Mason, et al., 2000). This places services for students with visual impairments in crisis due to the low numbers
of qualified teachers of the visually impaired within Washington State. An exodus of teachers of the visually impaired would have a devastating effect upon the services available within the state. In fact, a loss of 20% of the current teachers of the visually impaired would result in a caseload increase of 30% on average (ORC, 2014). This might also translate into more unfilled positions that would have a direct impact on students with visual impairments as the limited number of teacher training programs are not graduating enough TVIs to meet the statewide need. Thus, it is imperative to examine the challenges and issues that TVIs face and the severity of the challenges that affect their ability to do their work in order to provide supports in practice and professional development.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the issues that affect Washington State teachers’ of the visually impaired working conditions. Given the current availability of Washington State itinerant-based services, the researcher interviewed itinerant teachers of the visually impaired regarding issues that help and hinder teacher performance. The results of this study provide information to the general population of teachers of the visually impaired, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and other agencies regarding the current conditions and needs of teachers in the field of visual impairment. The results provide direction for policy, professional support, and professional development to help teachers of the visually impaired become more effective in meeting the needs of students in Washington State.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is multi-faceted. The information gathered provides a more comprehensive understanding of the current work conditions for teachers of the
visually impaired in Washington State. The Correa-Torres and Johnson-Howell study (2004) suggests that several issues contribute to the current work conditions of teachers of the visually impaired. These include the number of students assigned to a teacher’s caseload, the composition of the student caseload (e.g., direct service students, consultation), the distance a teacher travels to students, the resources available, the support provided by administration, and the connection with colleagues. In addition to providing insight into the current issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired, the knowledge gained through this study may help to provide professional support throughout Washington State, helping improve job satisfaction and stemming the possible attrition of teachers of the visually impaired.

**Overview of Methodology**

This research focused on teachers of the visually impaired who are working in an itinerant position, which means that they travel from school to school and usually work as part of a team that includes general education teachers and other specialists to meet the educational needs of the visually impaired student. The possible TVIs in this study were approximately 85 teachers of the visually impaired who were serving in approximately 120 Washington State school districts. They ranged in experience from third-year teachers to veteran teachers with 25 or more years of teaching experience. Two-thirds of the teachers served in a single district with multiple sites. The other teachers divided their work time between multiple districts that had lesser-condensed need. Some of these teachers fulfilled a dual role, which included being both a TVI and orientation and mobility specialist (i.e. cane travel). This is the equivalent of serving two separate caseloads as orientation and mobility is a related service often taught outside of the classroom apart from the general educational setting. The majority of these teachers are the only
TVI within their district, which can create feelings of isolation and perceptions of lacking support (Pennington, et al., 2009). The field of TVIs was limited to full-time teachers within Washington State, since the implications of the study are intended to be directly applicable to the State context.

Using a purposeful sampling method, I chose a maximum variation sampling to determine the range of TVIs (Seidman, 2006). The range of TVIs was determined to be teachers of the visually impaired who were working full time and holding their teaching position within Washington State. I selected 16 TVIs for the study, which represented 22% of all teachers of the visually impaired within Washington State. To assure that this variation of teachers would represent a maximum variation, I applied three criteria that would further aid in the selection process. The first criteria was years of experience, and I selected individuals that met one of three categories, three to seven years, seven to 13 years, and 14 plus years, according to the levels defined by research (Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley & Seo, 1999; Boe, Barkanic, & Leow, 1999; Cross & Billingsley, 1994).

The second criterion for the sampling process was district size. In the 1999 study on student populations of visual impairment, researchers found that there were between 1 to 1.5 visually impaired students for every 1000 students (Kirchner & Diament, 1999). Using the suggested caseload service numbers of 1:8 to 1:12 (Kirchner & Diament, 1999), a population of 8000 students within a district should produce a single caseload. TVIs serving districts of less than 8000 students generally serve multiple districts to construct a full-time position. The logic of Kirchner and Diamant’s (1999) study was that a teacher serving multiple districts would have multiple administrative teams with
which to interact and may have different views of the issues that affect job satisfaction and different issues in meeting the needs of students.

The final criterion identified teachers of the visually impaired who serve in districts on the Eastside and teachers on the Westside of Washington State. The Eastside represents districts that are more rural and less populated than the Westside, resulting in additional drive times, and limited resources (Rude et al., 2005). Thus, the selection of TVIs met the criterion representing a maximum variation sample.

Observations of TVIs’ practice occurred and then interviews using a semi-structured protocol with follow-up questions to explore topics with the intention to elicit deeper responses (Merriam, 2009; Seidmen, 2006) were conducted. The purpose of the interview questions were to uncover the issues that influence teachers in their daily work, their perception of how these issues influence their job satisfaction, and their perception of their job satisfaction connecting to their retention in the field.

After the transcription of the interviews, each transcript went through several cycles of coding to uncover categories and eventually emerged themes. Comparing themes with observation notes and reflexivity journal entries helped to triangulate data. Triangulation was necessary to confirm the integrity of the data and the inferences drawn from that data (Merriam, 2009).

**Research Questions**

To understand the issues that shape the professional practice of teachers of the visually impaired in Washington State, this study posed the following research questions:

1) What issues do teachers of the visually impaired describe as affecting their ability to serve students?
2) How do teachers of the visually impaired perceive these issues affecting their job satisfaction?

3) How do teachers of the visually impaired relate job satisfaction issues as issues that might influence their retention in the field?

Limitations

I have limited experience in qualitative research and therefore careful preparation of questions and observations was critical to ensure a quality study. Throughout the study, I tried to be aware of personal bias and remember that each TVI represented an individual in a separate context. Being mindful of my bias allowed me to let the interview develop without predicting the outcome of response, which could have altered the process. Since I was using predetermined interview questions, I was aware that those questions reflected the interest of the study, and the TVIs may not have shared the same interest (Seidman, 2006). To offset these challenges, I relied on research to review effective questioning strategies used in similar studies and implemented those during the interviews. However, I may not have captured the perceptions of the TVIs accurately.

Another limitation was my personal relationships with most TVIs within the study. My position as the State Vision Consultant provided me with a connection to all teachers of the visually impaired within the State. While I do not serve in a supervisory role, my position does carry some prescribed authority as the represented voice of teachers within the State. The Washington State field of visual impairment education is very small, and I had to be careful in my interviewing strategies in order not to allow personal history, bias, or familiarity color my interview questions and follow-up explorations. The same was true of my field notes, as they needed to be free from speculative interference that might have influenced data analysis.
The third limitation was the time it took me to complete the study. The TVIs cover the regions of the state and although my job as State Vision Consultant allows me the freedom to meet with teachers, as their schedules permitted, it did require for a strict adherence to schedules and effective preplanning. On several occasions, I traveled to meet with a teacher only to discover that a district issue preceded my arrival and the interview had to be rescheduled, or on the day of observation, a student absence occurred.

**Definitions and Terms**

*American Printing House for the Blind (APH)* – National clearing house for materials, large print, braille, and adaptive equipment for students with visual impairment. APH also conducts an annual national census to identify the number of students with visual impairment.

*Attrition* – refers to educators who leave the field of special education either to move to general education within their current district or another district or to exit education completely, including retirement (Billingsley, 2003).

*Blind or Blindness* – the original legal definition as outlined in IDEA was, “a student functioning at 20/200 in both eyes with best possible correction.” The current IDEA definition reflects the broad spectrum of visual impairment that includes total lack of sight to functioning as blind due to a variety of issues.

*Braille* – a literacy device for blind students. Braille uses raised dots instead of printed letters and relies on a series of contractions and rules of application in order to formulate a representation of the printed word.
**Caseload** – represents the number of students on IEPs or 504 plans for whom a special education teacher has responsibility or for whom a special education teacher shares the responsibility with other teachers and specialists.

**Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC)** – the specific “blindness skills” that students need to interact with peers; these include braille, assistive technology, orientation and mobility, social skills, leisure and recreation skills, and vocational skills. These are necessary skills that a visually impaired student needs if they are to function within society.

**Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** - originally known as Education for all Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142, IDEA is a federal law that guarantees that all students with special needs will receive a free and appropriate education. It has had several reauthorizations: 1990, 1997, and 2004.

**Individualized Education Program (IEP)** – a prescriptive educational plan that addresses the student deficits that qualify the student for special education programs. The IEP describes present levels of performance and includes measurable goals.

**Itinerant Teacher** – a teacher who travels between education sites to serve students usually to provide specialized accommodations, direct instruction, or consultation with school staff.

**Low-incidence Disability** - a disability that represents approximately 13% of all disabilities, including autism, serious physical impairment, complex health issues, significant developmental delay, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities, hearing impaired, deaf, low vision, and blindness.

**Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)** – Washington States’ agency that is responsible for setting educational direction and policy, directing financial funding, and
developing student programs. OSPI serves as the compliance officer in regards to state and federal laws.

*Ogden Resource Center (ORC)* - serves the State of Washington through braille production, running national and state census, and keeps records of district compliance with braille laws.

*Orientation and Mobility* – specialized travel training for students with visual impairment, usually involving the use of a white cane.

*State Vision Consultant* – appointed position by Washington Sensory Disabilities Services, a state agency under OSPI, to identify and address needs of teachers of the visually impaired within Washington State, to provide instructional support, to review district and student programs, and to be a resource for teachers, districts, and families.

*Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI)* – a teacher who has university training in the education of blind and visually impaired students.

*Team* - refers to the members of the student’s immediate educational team usually consisting of a classroom teacher, specialists, and a TVI, parent, a special education teacher, and a paraeducator.

*Visual Impairment* – an eye condition that affects a student in a manner that they cannot access the general education curriculum without accommodations or specialized services. Visual impairment includes blindness, partial or low vision, or functioning as visually impaired due to neurological disorders.
Organization of Study

This dissertation has five chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the problem and a background of the problem, providing the basis for the study. Chapter 1 includes a description of the methodology, limitations of the study, and definitions of key terms for the reader.

Chapter 2 begins with a look at the historical perspective of the education of visually impaired students and how the nature of low-incidence disabilities affects districts and schools. It examines the current work conditions that teachers of the visually impaired face, the lack of trained teachers who are entering the field, and the limited professional preparation programs that exist. Chapter 2 examines how these shortages affect students, programs, and teachers themselves through using the larger body of special education research to identify the issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired abilities to meet the needs of their students. It concludes with an examination of the current rates of attrition within special education and the issues that cause many to leave the field. Chapter 2 also looks at job satisfaction and the role that it plays in the success of teachers and their continuation in the field.

The third chapter describes the methodology used in this study, covering the description of TVI selection and the data collection and analysis process. Chapter 4 profiles the TVIs of the study and the results. Chapter 5 discusses the study and provides implications for the State of Washington and the larger field of teachers of the visually impaired. The chapter finishes with a personal statement from the author.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the research literature in regards to the underservice of students with low-incidence disabilities is sparse and almost non-existent concerning visual impairment. The research in regards to teachers of the visually impaired and the challenges they face is equally limited. Thus, the research must rely on the larger body of special education literature to support the limited research specific to teachers of the visually impaired. In addition, the majority of TVIs serve in an itinerant capacity that is quite different from the classroom-based services, which represent the majority of the special education literature. Despite these challenges of limited research and research settings, there are many similar issues experienced by the classroom special education teacher and the itinerant teacher. The review begins by defining low-incidence disabilities with specific focus on visual impairment and the visually impaired students within Washington State. This is followed by an examination of the affect that lack of service has on a student with a low-incidence disability, and the current circumstances that affect teachers who work with students who are visually impaired. Because there are striking similarities regarding teacher shortages in both special education and the field of visual impairment, the review will conclude with a look at job satisfaction, attrition and identified factors that contribute to teachers leaving the field of special education.

Visual Impairment: A Low-incidence Disability

A steady growth in the identification and services of special education students has occurred since the passage of Public Law 94-142, currently referred to as the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA is U.S. national policy that guarantees all students with
disabilities or special needs receive a free and appropriate public education. Special education students represent approximately 14% of the total student population in public schools or 6,686,000 students in the 2006-07 school year (Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Kena, Kewal-Ramani, Kemp, Bianco, Dinkes, 2009). This total number disaggregates into disability categories with learning disabilities and speech impairments accounting for 62% of the total population of special education students or approximately 4,145,320 students. The category of health impairments accounts for 9% of the total number of students, while cognitive disabilities and emotional disabilities account for 8% and 7% respectively. The remaining 13% are special education students with low-incidence disabilities, which include blindness, low vision, deafness, hard of hearing, deaf-blindness, significant developmental delay, complex health issues, serious physical impairment, multiple disabilities, and autism (Planty, et al., 2009).

In reviewing student populations, these low-incidence disabilities are rare, accounting for less than 1% of the total student population. The education of these students is unique and each of these low-incidence disability populations requires special training and accommodations that are specific to the disability. Students who have visual impairment represent between .001 and .0015% of the population (Diament & Kirchner 1999; Wall & Corn, 2004). Because of the rarity of the population of students with visual impairment, it is uncommon for large numbers of these students to be a part of every school district’s regular population and some districts will go years without having a student with a visual impairment matriculate into their system. This rarity of students makes it difficult for districts to employ a TVI as part of their regular workforce (Rude, et al., 2005). Further complicating this issue is that 49% of the nation’s schools are in rural districts with 80% of these districts reporting shortages in special education (Knapczyk, Chapman, Rodes, & Chung, 2001). When students with a visual impairment arrive in a district,
the district will then scramble to find a specialist qualified to meet the needs of the students. It is common to place these students into a classroom setting with inappropriate supports while waiting for service and accommodations in technology, curriculum, and resources (Rude, et al., 2005).

In the past, it was common practice to remove students with visual impairments from the general education setting to allow individualized instruction in blindness skills, also known as the Expanded Core Curriculum (Corn, Hatlen, Huebner, Ryan & Sillar, 1995). This practice continues with some conditions, but districts pay careful attention to the least restrictive environment clause within IDEA that dictates that public agencies, to the maximum extent possible, provide education to special education students with non-disabled peers. The use of special classrooms, schools, or non-regular settings are only to be employed when the severity of disability prevents them from participating in a regular general education setting with accommodations or services (IDEA, 2004). While this is protective of the student’s inclusionary rights, it often means that the Expanded Core Curriculum is not addressed (Hatlen, 2004). Regardless, the common denominator for all students with low-incidence disabilities is that they are difficult to serve in current local public school programs (Jackson, 2005; Pennington, et al., 2009; Innes, Enders, Seekins, Merritt, Kirshenbaum, & Arnold, 2000).

**Visually Impaired Students in Washington State**

The population of visually impaired students in Washington State covers urban and rural districts but determining the actual numbers of students requires the use of several reporting tools. Thus, in order to define the population of students with visual impairment in Washington State requires a review of the counts completed annually by three separate agencies. There is some level of difficulty as the counts measure different groups of students for different purposes.
Locally, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) counts students who have a single disability category served on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) while nationally the American Printing House (APH) counts students who meet the definition of legal blindness or function as blind. The populations of students who fall into the category of low vision are unidentified in these counts as they may not be requiring direct instruction and therefore may not have an IEP. Students who are low vision requiring accommodations and consultation may not meet the definitions of blindness, and they may not be included on the APH count (APH, 2012; OSPI, 2013). In this situation, a third, unofficial count completed by the Ogden Resource Center (ORC), which is the Washington State repository for braille and large print materials, identifies the students. The ORC count is an annual count and covers all students identified as visually impaired on an IEP, all students meeting the definition of blind or visually impaired, and all low vision students needing support and accommodations. Each district has an assigned person who is responsible for completing the count and maintaining an accurate record, but history has indicated that some records are incomplete, which affects accuracy. Two research studies completed during the last 20 years examined the percentage of students with visual impairments within the national general student population. These studies found that the percentage of blind and visually impaired students in the general student population represent .001 and .0015% or 1 to 1.5 students in a thousand who had a visual impairment (Diament & Kirchn, 1999; Wall & Corn, 2004). When using these percentages to assess the total enrollment in Washington State public schools during the 2012-2013 school year, the numbers of visually impaired and blind students range between 1574 and 2360 students. The comparison of these numbers with the ORC count for 2012, 1423 students, would indicate that there are between 75 and 800+ unidentified students within Washington State (ORC, 2013).
These numbers represent a wide range of students spanning the ages of birth through twenty-one years of age and include students with a wide range of visual impairment and additional disabilities. The estimation is that approximately 60% of all students identified with a visual impairment also have additional disabilities (Ferrell, Shaw & Deitz, 1998). Students who have multiple disabilities represent more consultative services and fewer direct services from a TVI. Quite often, these students are counted in the multiple disabilities count at the state level, but it is not possible to disaggregate the numbers to determine if this is an accurate percentage for Washington State. Retrieving numbers from the American Printing House census indicates that the 2013-2014 count of students with multiple disabilities is within the 50-55% range (APH, 2014). An informal teacher survey conducted in February 2014 examined teacher caseload and the types of services administered to students (C. Meador, informal survey, personal communication, February 2014). This survey completed by 31 teachers of the visually impaired measured the number of students receiving direct service and students receiving consultation services. The results showed that many direct service students also received consultation services as expected (Olmstead, 2005). In addition, more than 50% of students were consultation students or students with multiple disabilities. While these students may not receive much direct service from a TVI, the teams working with these students need regular scheduled consultations, trainings, and support.

Lack of Services: The Effect on Students

The national shortage of special education teachers is around 10%, representing thousands of unfilled positions nationally and leaving many unqualified teachers to fill these positions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). During the 2000-2001 school year, 11.4% of all special education teachers did not possess appropriate special
education certification, the majority of which were new teachers (Billingsley, 2004). A similar shortage of teachers of the visually impaired exists within Washington State, as several districts have not been able to find certified candidates. Several districts have foregone recruitment and are currently relying on paraeducators to provide services to students (ORC, 2014). To offset the shortage and in the case of low-incidence students, smaller districts will often share resources to meet the needs of students or will purchase services through educational resource centers, employing a consultative model. When trained teachers are available and resources are present, successful implementation of services for students occur. However, far too often, districts are trying to stretch resources, resulting in sub-par service to the students (Collin & Schuster, 2001; Pennington, et al, 2009; Redmon, 2005; Rude, et al, 2005). As a result, there is an inherent direct effect on students; a lack of trained and certified teachers results in a lack of adequate service. In fact, students experience inferior educational programming when trained professionals are not present to provide instruction in the appropriate manner (Carlson & Billingsley, 2001). In 2005, a study regarding the satisfaction and perception of quality of services to students with low-incidence disabilities in rural settings pointed to several issues that created barriers for appropriate services. The common themes that emerged from the study were:

- The district does not employ enough specialized teachers to meet student need.
- General education does not have enough information regarding best practice when working with students with specialized needs.
- Services to students with specialized needs are not adequate.
- Students with specialized needs lack early identification (Rude, et al., 2005).
When there is limited access to a TVI, it results in a lack of training regarding the use of assistive technology, language, literacy, and effective coping skills (Corn, et al., 1995; Hatlen, 2000). This neglect of the Expanded Core Curriculum creates a lack of skills with students. Without these skills, the student’s ability to engage in post high school education and employment is greatly diminished (National Center on Severe and Sensory Disabilities, 2013; Sacks & Wolfe, 1992). Ultimately, students who lack appropriate skills will struggle with barriers that a visual impairment creates, and they will need intervention to be successful in society. The National Center on Severe and Sensory Disabilities (2013) reported that students with visual impairment face the following common struggles:

- Approximately 45% of individuals with severe visual impairment or blindness have a high school diploma, compared to 80% among fully sighted individuals.
- Thirty-five percent of students with visual impairments score below the 21st percentile in letter-word identification and passage comprehension.
- Nearly one-half of youth who are deaf-blind leave school without any formal communication system.
- Unemployment is the outcome for approximately 75% of individuals with severe disabilities (National Center on Severe and Sensory Disabilities, 2013).

Teachers of the visually impaired are clearly aware of these statistics realizing that inadequate services not only have a negative affect for visually impaired students but also create concerns for the families as they consider the future of their students.
Shortages of Teachers of the Visually Impaired and the Effect on Students

The low percentage of students in the general school population who have visual impairments creates a difficulty for school districts to provide service (Pennington, et al, 2009). It is common for rural districts to have only one low-incidence student or several students who have different needs requiring different expertise. In larger districts, a single low-incidence group may be large enough to warrant a full-time teacher, but most districts contract for the services they need if the services are available (Jackson, 2005; Pennington, et al., 2009). In many situations, services are not available and several national studies state that shortages of teachers of the visually impaired number between 3000 and 5000 (Corn & Spungin, 2003; Ferrell, 2007; Kirchner & Diament, 1999; Mason, et al., 2000). A review of Washington State information for the 2011-2014 school years showed that there were approximately 85 certified itinerant teachers of the visually impaired registered with the Ogden Resource Center (ORC, 2013). During these school years, these teachers served between 120 and 145 school districts and four Education Service Districts of the 295 school districts within the state. However, it is important to note that only 145 districts have reported students with visual impairments, leaving 150 districts reporting no students with visual impairments.

Upon first examination, this would equate to the average caseload ranging between 16 and 19 students per teacher, which appears very favorable compared to other specialists who may average between 40 to 60 students per caseload (Russ, et al., 2001). Several studies describe these numbers as excessive and suggest that students are not receiving an appropriate level of service (CEC, 1999; Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Kirchner & Diament, 1999; Mason, et al., 2000). The discussion surrounding caseloads is common throughout all
disciplines of special education including TVIs, but this is only one issue that affects their ability to meet the needs of students.

**Issues Affecting Teachers of the Visually Impaired**

There are several issues identified by research studies that contribute to job stress, recruitment, and retention of special educators both in rural and urban settings. These include caseloads, feelings of isolation, lack of professional growth, administrative support, diversity of student needs and extensive paper work and reporting (Berry et al., 2011; Billingsley 2004; Brownell et al., 2002; Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003; Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). Additional issues tied to rural and specialist positions, such as teachers of the visually impaired, are: remote locations, extensive travel requirements, pay differentials, dealing with multiple administrative teams, and communication with teams (Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Pennington et al., 2009; Rude et al., 2005).

Two separate studies completed in 2004 examined the role of itinerant teachers and the challenges they faced. The first study (Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004), was a small mixed method survey with a follow-up interview of six questions. The study asked TVIs to identify positive and negative aspects of their current teaching assignment and the field of visual impairment in general. The positive aspects identified by the teachers included: working with students, the continual challenge, long-term service to students, and building relationships with teachers. The negative aspects discussed the politics of districts, dealing with multiple school climates, ever-changing special education policies, continual education of teachers and administrators about vision loss, increased paperwork, lack of time, caseloads, lack of team supports, and excessive take-home work.
The second study was a larger survey that recorded information from 422 teachers of the visually impaired in the United States and Canada. This survey covered demographics, satisfaction levels with training programs, satisfaction with the job, caseload demographics, job duties and time allotment, and professional development (Griffin-Shirley, et al., 2004). The goal of the survey was to get a pulse on the professional community and provided quantitative data for the visual impairment field of education in these areas. The quantitative data provided percentages regarding issues of the job, such as use of time, caseload demographics, and job duties, but did not lend to a rich description regarding the issues of satisfaction or personal growth. Both surveys did support the findings from the larger body of special education literature highlighting similar issues and providing a basis for the development of future research. Several of these issues identified in these surveys, warrant further discussion.

Caseload.

Caseload is the most discussed issue in special education with the first focused studies reflecting special education classrooms in the mid-1990s (Russ, et al., 2001). In the book, *Itinerant Teaching*, Olmstead (2005) noted that the caseload must consider the following issues to ensure that the teacher is not overextended: direct instruction time, consultation time with the team, travel time, adaptation and production of materials, office time for reports and data, the severity of the student’s need, and the intensity of the instructional need.

In 2004, a large-scale survey distributed to 422 TVIs noted that the average caseload was 22 students (Griffin-Shirley, et al., 2004). Of these 22 students, there were usually two braille students, four students with low vision, a student with deaf-blindness, and five students with multiple impairments receiving direct services. The TVIs in the study averaged 10 students who received weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly consultative services. In February of 2014, an informal
survey gathered information from 31 teachers of the visually impaired within Washington State (C. Meador, informal survey, personal communication, February 2014). The caseloads for teachers ranged from six students to thirty-three students, which for many exceeded the recommended levels proposed for special education caseloads of 12 to 14 students (CEC, 1999) or the 8:1 ratio proposed by Mason and Davidson (2000). This survey showed that the actual average caseload was 20.4 students per teacher with each teacher having approximately two braille students. This number aligned with the 2004 survey completed by Griffin-Shirley and team, as did other components of the February Survey. Traditionally students who have a single disability of vision loss, especially those who require braille, place the highest demands on a TVI, requiring daily direct service. Braille students represent a heavy load on a teacher caseload as several studies indicate that the amount of time a braille student needed from a TVI was 8 to 15 hours per week (CEC, 1999; Koenig & Holbrook, 2000; McLeskey et al., 2004; Wall-Emerson, Holbrook & D’Andrea, 2009). An emergent braille reader will require three times as much service from a TVI compared to a student who already has knowledge of the braille code and is a competent reader (Lewis and Allman, 2000). While the consultation students may require less face time with the teacher, there is usually an increase in contact time with the team members, thereby possibly negating any time savings for the TVI.

The majority of a teacher’s caseload is rarely in a single school site but spread throughout a district and perhaps multiple districts. A larger caseload requires more record keeping and program adjustments. Depending on distances between students, a larger caseload can negatively affect instruction time. This last factor is critical as most students with a visual impairment require individualized accommodations and a large percentage require specialized instruction from a TVI (Corn & Spungin, 2003; Hatlen, 2000). Additional preparations of
curriculum to accommodate for vision loss also take a great deal of time for the TVI, which leaves them with limited instruction time. As noted in the 2014 February Survey (C. Meador, informal survey, personal communication, February 2014), the average caseload was twenty students, and the average time spent in traveling between students was eight hours per week. While not every student is seen weekly as some represent bi-monthly or monthly consultations with staff, the students requiring specialized direct instruction in braille, assistive technology, or other blindness skills may account for seventy percent of a teachers available time on a weekly basis leaving little time for preparation and consultation (Olmstead, 2005). Due to the shortage of available TVIs, districts often have expectations that the districts’ only TVI will serve all the visually impaired students. Larger caseloads minimize opportunities for individualization and academic success (Moody, Vaugh, Hughes & Fischer, 2000). This means that the services for students are often limited or reduced, negating the intent of IDEA that time spent with the student is dependent on the need of the individual student and not the size of the caseload (Olmstead, 2005). This basic recurring situation in special education creates a conundrum for teachers of the visually impaired as each additional student must fit within the parameters of a teacher’s weekly schedule, creating a sense of frustration as teachers attempt to meet each student’s need (Brown & Beamish, 2012; Rude, et al., 2005). A TVI has the ethical right to refuse serving additional students if the teacher cannot meet the student’s educational requirements within the scope of the teacher’s current schedule. This often creates uneasiness with district administration as they are trying to fulfill the district’s role in providing a free and appropriate education as specified by federal law (IDEA, 2004; Olmstead, 2005). Caseload is a continual concern in special education programs often arising through union-filed grievances and
is a cited factor in studies concerning the attrition of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell, et al. 2002; Miller, et al., 1999).

**Isolation.**

The role of an itinerant teacher is to be a mobile support for a student with a visual impairment. Itinerant teachers will often visit several schools and districts within a week, encountering distinct school cultures, norms, and expectations of service. This transient approach to education demands that the itinerant teacher be able to integrate with the teams in the localized context who also serve the visually impaired students in order to be an effective member of the team (Olmstead, 2005). The average TVI has limited time that she can spend with the student and the team. Therefore, there may be limited time to build connections or friendships beyond the professional level (Brown & Beamish, 2012). In addition, most districts only employ one TVI, and thus, the teacher may not have connections to peers who truly understand her practice or frustrations she experiences with students (Rude et al., 2005; Olmstead, 2005). It is critical that this factor of isolation be addressed as research shows the importance of collegiality in combating loneliness and isolation in special education teachers (Schlichte, Yssel & Merbler, 2005; Ganser, 1999) and that connections with others is essential for student success (Billingsley, 2004; DeMik, 2008; Brownell et al., 2002).

Not only must TVIs build connections within their districts but also with the TVIs who are in neighboring districts and within the state. The specialization of this field provides challenges as the TVI is often the only professional within the district who possesses the knowledge and expertise to address the needs of visually impaired students. This position carries a responsibility to be current in knowledge regarding eye conditions, curriculum options, and the
ever-changing field of technology. As a result, it is imperative that the TVI take the opportunity to develop professionally through all possible avenues.

**Professional growth and development.**

The role of a TVI is a multi-faceted role demanding a large knowledge base and expertise across the continuum of vision disorders and best educational practices (Brown & Beamish, 2012; Spungin & Ferrell, 2000). The expectation from classroom staff and district personnel is that the TVI will be able to provide immediate relief for the district through information and programming to meet the needs of the visually impaired student (Olmstead, 2005). The university training programs cannot fully prepare TVIs for the myriad of situations they will encounter once they enter the field and professional growth and development is critical for their success. The availability of online training components has gained ground within the last decade and has helped to fill this need, but the wide expanse of needed knowledge has only increased.

In a 2004 study, 97% of TVIs reported that they were engaged in professional development usually through online articles and online trainings, but they preferred traveling to conferences to have 1:1 interaction with other TVIs (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004). The face-to-face interaction provided access to knowledge not found in the sparse research of the field of visual impairment, making connections with other TVIs critical for teacher success (Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004). Unless a state has a strong network of TVIs or a district has several TVIs, the TVI will need to rely on online support to find the answers that will help them grow and develop.

**Administrative support.**

Administrative support is necessary for the success of the TVI. This includes the assignment of appropriate caseloads, resources for instruction, adequate workspace, professional development, and trust. Several studies report the extreme difficulties that administrators
experience in trying to find and retain special education teachers and especially those serving low-incidence populations (Berry et al., 2011; Ludlow et al., 2005; Irinaga-Bistolas, Schalock, Marvin, & Beck, 2007). A paradox exists in many districts that employ a TVI. District administrators realize the scarcity of teachers of the visually impaired yet will stretch their resources beyond reasonable working conditions in order to meet the needs of the students within their districts (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten et al., 2001; Russ et al., 2001; Thornton et al., 2007). A concrete example of how district administration could support a TVI is by providing adequate workspace for students to meet with them for direct instruction. Often the only meeting spaces for these services are in hallways, closets and in the back of storage areas, sending a message to the teacher and the student that their needs are not important. The psychological effect of such a message contributes negatively to the overall school climate and affects workplace quality (Brownell et al., 2002; Carlson & Billingsley, 2001; Griffin et al., 2003; Zabel & Zabel, 2002).

Administrations that support their special education and itinerant staff through mentor and induction programs have seen higher success rates and lower rates of attrition overall (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten et al., 2001; Rude et al., 2005; Thornton et al., 2007; Zabel & Zabel, 2002). The most successful programs identify the specific needs of a group of teachers, providing them with a culture of support, interaction with veteran teachers, a continuum of professional development and clear goals and purposes (Griffin, et al., 2002).

**Diversity of student needs.**

The main role of the TVI is to provide access to general education for students within their educational setting, which requires a high level of knowledge and the ability to share that knowledge with the classroom teacher and other specialists (Holbrook & Koenig 2000). The students represent a challenge because their needs are so diverse. The TVI is often responsible
to review medical reports and consult with ophthalmologists and low vision specialists to understand the implications of the student’s specific vision loss. They then must determine the educational impact of that information for the team and help with the design of the student’s program. An effective TVI not only needs a strong knowledge base of vision loss but also must possess knowledge of assessment, motor and cognitive development, and must understand the role that vision loss plays in additional disabilities (Silberman & Sacks, 2000). Because the needs of students are so diverse, the TVI must engage in a continual learning process that can be time consuming as they reach out to other TVIs, medical professionals, and school specialists for information. Surprisingly, most TVIs feel that this particular challenge, although time consuming, is stimulating, and they enjoy this aspect of continual learning (Brown & Beamish, 2012; Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Spungin & Ferrell, 2000).

**Demands of paperwork.**

Paperwork is endemic of education as every teacher is responsible for record keeping, assessment, and preparation of lessons. This is especially true in the field of special education where each student has individualized lessons and programs driven by IEPs. Special education teachers must follow rigorous federal, state and district guidelines that often result in documentation of services, additional meetings, and record keeping, ensuring full implementation of IDEA (Billingsley, 2004). This can create stressors for new special education teachers as the paperwork is often confusing and overwhelming (Boyer & Gillespie, 2000; Brownell et al., 2002). Additionally, the demands of paperwork in special education are cited as an issue affecting workload, job satisfaction, and attrition (Billingsley, 2004; Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004; NCTAF, 2007; Planyt et al., 2009; SPeNSE, 2014). TVIs are not immune to the amount of paperwork as they are a member of the special education team and are required to
complete their progress notes and prepare goals for the student’s IEP. In the case of students whose only disability is visual impairment, the TVI is often the case manager, which carries additional responsibilities of parent correspondence, creation of meeting notes, and assembling of the IEP or evaluation. Students who have a visual impairment usually require adaptations to assessment tools and often the TVI is responsible for the adaptation and assessment (Olmstead, 2005). These assessments represent additional time-sensitive paperwork aligning with federal guidelines for evaluation and IEP purposes. In addition to assessment, there have been steady increases for paperwork that document the TVIs time in the form of travel, preparation, consultation, and direct service to the student as districts try to recoup financial expenditures through state grants such as Washington State’s Safety Net (OSPI, 2015).

**Distance traveled and remoteness of students.**

The challenge of distance affects most teachers of the visually impaired but especially those serving the rural communities or covering multiple districts. In the Griffin-Shirley et al.(2004) study, they showed that teachers were in transit slightly less than a fifth of their week but spent more time engaged in consultation and non-teaching activities. An example of a non-teaching activity is the packing and unpacking of the car as TVIs transition to school buildings, consultations, and preparation (Olmstead, 2005). By comparison, the February Survey (C. Meador, informal survey, personal communication, February 2014), showed that average itinerant teachers in Washington State spend one fifth of their week in transit between students, and one eighth of their time in consultations with staff and families while the rural Washington itinerant teachers spent approximately one fourth of their week in travel status. In the most extreme of these situations, teachers were spending more than 16 hours traveling to remote students.
each week. An obvious concern with remote students is the amount of time that they receive from the TVI as the distance limits their access to teacher time. For the students in the outer districts, a TVI may only be available once a week or less, which means that the classroom special education teachers are required to provide a majority of the accommodations and direct instruction for the visually impaired student. This often creates anxiety and concern as the special education teacher is working outside her area of specialty without having the appropriate training (Berry et al., 2011; Ludlow et al., 2005; Schwartzbeck, Prince, Redfield, Morris, & Hammer, 2003). In order to relieve the anxiety the TVI will often provide intense training opportunities for the team and the paraeducators assigned to students with visual impairment. While this is not ideal because students receive inadequate services, it is sometimes the necessary path to education (Rude et al., 2005).

**Issues and Job Satisfaction**

Special education teachers, including teachers of the visually impaired, often enter the field with a sense of mission or higher purpose to affect the lives of students, but these can be quickly diminished if appropriate cultures and administrative supports are not present (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell et al., 2002; Gersten et al., 2001). The research on job satisfaction identifies issues that can have a negative or positive impact on the teachers’ ability to meet the demands of the job. These issues represent both intrinsic and extrinsic issues, and they intertwine so that an examination of both is necessary to determine what are the most critical for teacher job satisfaction.

Intrinsic issues are those issues that draw special education teachers to the field. These intrinsic feelings can fade quickly given the environment of most special education
settings. Teachers must feel that they are making an impact on students and that other teachers and the administration value their efforts (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell et al., 2002; Schlichte et al., 2005; Thornton et al., 2007). The need to feel needed or the ability to influence the lives of students is necessary, and studies have shown that teachers are willing to sacrifice pay to transfer to an environment where they feel their practice can be successful (Brownell et al., 2002; Gersten et al., 2001). The more challenging the teaching environment, the more support needed from administrators to help teachers accomplish their tasks. Teachers who have the support of administration through resources and a real voice in decisions that affect their classroom or instructional practice tend to have stronger feelings of workplace satisfaction (Brownell, et al., 2002; Thornton et al., 2007). A sense of autonomy or control over one’s circumstance is critical to managing the demands that attack the intrinsic issues. Teachers must believe they can be effective despite the challenges in order to stay engaged (Billingsley, 2004).

Extrinsic issues that are central to special education teacher retention include salary, school climate, support from administration, and a level of control over their classroom or program (Brownell, et al., 2002). These issues by themselves do not determine job satisfaction as job satisfaction is individualized and a part of the affective domain. In a review of studies regarding work-life balance and job satisfaction, authors, Kossek and Ozeki (1998), pointed out that the results in many studies regarding job satisfaction are inconclusive and that issues outside the workplace not mitigated through workplace structure have a significant effect on the employee. Their review acknowledged that additional stressors at the work place can add to job dissatisfaction and that the workplace should remediate these concerns (Kossek & Osseki, 1998).
Examples of these stressors include many items previously addressed such as climate, caseload, lack of support and isolation. Failure to remediate stressors within an environment has a wearing effect that attacks the resolve of the individual. Teachers placed in poor working conditions on a continual basis find their commitment to teaching and job satisfaction change for the worse, making them at higher risk for attrition (Brownell, et al., 2002).

Intentional design of the work environment will reduce the stressors that are associated with the job and will help with retention efforts. Studies show that placing teachers in structured environments that promote open and honest communication, trust, and appreciation for their efforts create a higher rate of job satisfaction (Berry et al., 2011; Brownell et al., 2002; Gersten et al., 2001). Strong commitment to professional development can help to offset teacher frustration and provide teachers with the necessary tools to deal with the ever-widening diversity found in their caseloads (Pennington et al., 2009). By addressing the most vulnerable to attrition, new teachers, districts that employ strong induction programs are more successful in retaining teachers and provide the level of connectivity and support that is critical for job satisfaction (Thornton et al., 2007).

**Job Satisfaction and Attrition**

Does a lack of job satisfaction equate to attrition? The research does not draw a clear conclusion but does denote that a lack of satisfaction with the job is one factor that led to the decision to exit the field. Not surprising, it takes multiple issues to bring the teacher to the position of dissatisfaction with a job, meaning that the dissatisfaction issues must be greater than the intrinsic reward to continue teaching (Gersten et al., 2001).
Conversely, there are many examples of teachers who are unhappy with their jobs but continue in the field of education due to reasons other than extrinsic issues.

The role of a TVI is a multi-faceted job laden with complex responsibilities. In the 2004 survey conducted by the team of Griffin-Shirley, teachers of the visually impaired listed many issues that affected their ability to work with students. Despite their frustration and challenges, 75% reported satisfaction with their jobs. More than half of the 422 teachers reported that they were satisfied with salaries, professional development, administrative support, and caseload (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004). While it is noted that workplace satisfaction is linked to intent to leave or attrition (Billingsley, 2004; Mor Barak, Nissly & Levin, 2001; Shier, Graham, Fukuda, Brownlee, Kline, Walji, & Novik, 2013), it is also noted that satisfaction with the job was determined by professional and personal life satisfaction (Graham & Shier, 2010). While it is apparent that the meaningfulness and complexity of work may be a contributing factor to workplace satisfaction, no singular factor can be determined as the precedent to attrition nor can job satisfaction be considered a sole predictor as a reason for remaining in the field (Shier et al., 2013)

**Attrition**

Despite the lack of causality between job satisfaction and attrition, there is a connection and attrition is a concern. The research has defined special education teacher attrition to mean leaving the field of special education to enter general education, leaving the field entirely, or transferring to another district (Billingsley, 2004). There is an anticipated wave of attrition arriving in Washington State due to the Baby Boomer generation leaving the workforce in the next three to five years. Washington State will lose approximately one fourth of its teachers who
serve students with visual impairment, resulting in caseload increases of approximately 30%.
The prominent concern of the vision field is the lack of teachers entering the field (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004) and that the personnel shortage documented in the Diament and Kirchner study of 1999 and the Mason and Davidson study of 2000 is not resolved. There is no clear data regarding the number of teachers of the visually impaired who leave positions or the field entirely as no mechanism exists to track these occurrences. Due to the lack of research, a need exists to examine attrition to the greater population of special education teachers and draw inferences from this population regarding teachers who serve the visually impaired. Studies regarding special education teacher attrition found the following reasons that led to teachers exiting the field: age, teacher preparation, appropriate certification, salary, school climate, administrative support, collegial support, availability of mentor/induction program, professional development, multi-faceted roles, paperwork, changing roles of special education, and diversity of caseload (Billingsley, 2004; DeMik, 2008; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004; Pennington, et al, 2009). Other studies point to teacher burnout as the reason for the continual decline of special education teachers (Irinaga-Bistolas et al., 2007; Schlichte et al., 2005). In a study that focused on low-incidence populations and the teachers who served them, the researchers highlighted the issues that contributed to teacher shortage. The issues influencing the affective domain such as a lack of peer networking between low-incidence teachers and a lack of concern demonstrated by minimal administrative support had the greatest impact on attrition (Pennington, et al., 2009; Rude et al., 2005).

In a review of attrition studies, Billingsley (2004) proposed the following four reasons as the primary reasons why teachers left special education:
• Younger and inexperienced special education teachers are more likely to leave than their older, more experienced counterparts are.

• Uncertified teachers are more likely to leave than certified teachers are.

• Special education teachers with higher test scores (e.g., National Teacher Exam) are more likely to leave than those with lower scores.

• Teachers’ personal circumstances (e.g., family move, decision to stay home with children) often contribute to attrition.

**Years of Experience and Attrition**

Extensive research on teacher retention and attrition identified years of experience as a contributing factor. Novice teachers are the most vulnerable population at risk for leaving the field, with general and special education teachers in the first two years leaving the classroom voluntarily at a rate of 8%. These same rates dropped to 5% for teachers who had seven to thirteen years of teaching experience and dropped to 2.5% for teachers with 14 to 22 years of teaching experience (Boe, et al., 1999; Brownell, et al., 1999; Cross & Billingsley, 1994). Contrasting special education teachers with general education teachers shows a significant difference with 6 to 8% of general education teachers leaving the field within six years of teaching compared to 10 to 15% of special educators leaving within the first six years (Billingsley, 2004; Singer, 1993).

In a large scale longitudinal study completed between 1972 to 1983, Singer (1993) examined attrition rates of special education teachers and concluded that teachers of students with learning disabilities, cognitively challenged, or with multiple impairments were the most likely to stay in the field of special education. In Singer’s study, the finding was those teachers who serve low-incidence students such as the visually impaired and the hard of hearing are the
most likely to leave their field. This study did not provide reasons for this phenomenon, leaving room for speculation that perhaps the itinerant model, which represents the majority of teachers who serve visually impaired students, could be a factor. In 2004 (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004), a study conducted with teachers of the visually impaired examining job responsibilities, needs, and satisfaction. The study reported that seventy-five % of the 392 respondents stated that overall they were satisfied with their jobs. The survey did not ask about attrition nor did it provide insight regarding the 25% who either were dissatisfied or did not respond to the survey questions. Despite the survey, it does not necessarily negate the findings of Singer (1993).

The number of teachers of the visually impaired has not increased while the number of students with visual impairments continues to climb (APH, 2014; Planty et al., 2009; SPeNSE, 2014; Wall & Corn, 2004;). While there is progress in technology and alternative methods to educate students, the design of the itinerant model still requires teachers to work with many districts and schools and often results in a lack of professional and personal connection with the programs they serve (Redmon, 2005). To further complicate matters, there is limited preparation in personnel programs for the isolation, which exists when working with a low-incidence population located in rural areas (Prater, Harris & Fischer 2007). Districts must account for this issue by providing continual educational opportunities and ongoing connections with job-alike peers to remove isolation as a factor of attrition.

A shortage of teachers of the visually impaired in Washington State and the overall trends in special education demonstrate that the demand for services will not decrease in the coming years. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired as they serve students within Washington State. This knowledge will address these issues in the hopes of staving off attrition for a field that is already in a crisis state.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter explains the methodology and process that were used to examine and identify the issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired as they strive to meet the educational needs of their students. After much consideration regarding how to answer my research questions effectively, a qualitative methodology was selected to unearth the common and uncommon issues that exist. The first section of this chapter describes this selection process. In the second part of this chapter, there is an explanation of the research design, which includes TVI selection, data gathering, and analysis. In the last part of the chapter, I examine the limitations and significance of the study. This chapter covers the positionality of the researcher, which is critical to discuss given the nature of this study.

Methodology

In this study, I examined the perceptions regarding the challenges that teachers of the visually impaired face and the impact of those challenges on their daily jobs. The study employs the following research questions:

1) What issues do teachers of the visually impaired describe as affecting their ability to serve students?

2) How do teachers of the visually impaired perceive these issues affecting their job satisfaction?

3) How do teachers of the visually impaired relate job satisfaction issues as issues that might influence their retention in the field?
Researching the issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired and their ability to meet the educational needs of students is important as this knowledge will provide understanding for administrators and practitioners in the field of education for the visually impaired as well as provide a direction for professional development for teachers.

Due to the limited research in the field of visual impairment, it is necessary to refer to the field of special education as a whole to establish a foundation for research. Research within the field of visual impairment has earlier beginnings, but it is sparse and large, collective studies are limited. The majority of research that is specific to the field of visual impairment relates to the educator focusing on improvement of practice or from the medical community discussing the physical aspects of vision loss. While the research is applicable, it is limited due to the low-incidence nature of vision loss and the availability of achieving large enough populations to conduct proper statistical analyses. Research centered on the role of the itinerant teacher is also limited with few studies in existence that highlight issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired.

In conversation with itinerant teachers of the visually impaired, gathering anecdotal evidence provides insight highlighting teacher frustrations, perceptions, and insecurities; however, the issues not identified are sometimes the situations that are creating these frustrations, perceptions, and insecurities. Special education literature regarding issues affecting special education classroom teachers is extensive, identifying several issues that influence teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction. The review of this literature and the limited literature regarding TVIs makes it difficult to determine if the itinerant TVI is experiencing the same issues as their special education peers and if teachers of the visually impaired are subject to the same issues of job satisfaction and attrition. Making the assumption that an itinerant teacher
shares the same experiences with that of a classroom-based teacher may prove false but parallels can be drawn between teacher shortages and diverse caseloads (Billingsley, 2004; Mason et al., 2000; McLeskey et al., 2004).

The other alarming trend in special education to consider is the high rate of attrition of its classroom teachers (Berry et al., 2011; Boe, 2006). As highlighted in Chapter Two, several issues exist that lead teachers to dissatisfaction with their positions, and although dissatisfaction does not always equate with attrition, it does share a connection (Gersten et al., 2001; Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995). Given the shortages of teachers of the visually impaired, job satisfaction, and more importantly retention, of teachers currently employed is critical.

The expected outcome is that the information from this study will provide new information that currently does not exist within the field of education for the visually impaired that will allow the development of programs to address the concerns. This may result in the creation of professional learning opportunities and a connection for resources and improvement in practice. The knowledge gained will provide direction for policy makers within Washington State to address the lack of a teacher training program to offset the current teacher shortages in Washington State.

**Method Selection**

The development of this study moved from a quantitative methods approach to a mixed methods exploratory approach and finally settled in the realm of a qualitative methods approach. The quantitative approach would have used a prediction model working from the known issues of special education research to identify issues that influence the work lives of teachers of the visually impaired. While this would have verified results among teachers concerning known
special education issues, it neither would have unearthed job-specific issues nor addressed deeper issues of job satisfaction and possible retention issues. The mixed methods exploratory approach was not selected due to the focus of the study, which is the small number of TVIs within Washington State and issues of time. Thus, the qualitative method allowed for a richer dialogue and provided TVIs an opportunity to share from their wide realm of experiences and knowledge, allowing for multiple perceptions derived from the context of the situation (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2006). In this case, the teacher’s individual experiences tied to large and small districts provided for personal perceptions within the differing contexts.

The goal for this study was to examine the work of itinerant teachers of the visually impaired within their contexts, arrive at an understanding of their perceptions of their work, and communicate their views to others. A review of several types of qualitative research occurred, and given that the research relied on a single interview and observation with each of the thirteen TVIs, a basic qualitative approach was selected (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). This is an interpretive or constructivist approach relying on the TVIs to provide their perceptions and invite an examination of their current work conditions. The goal of this experience was to decipher the issues that arise within the TVIs’ settings and to understand how their experience has affected their approach to their work. To obtain the teachers’ experiences, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Seidman, 2006).

The benefit of a qualitative approach includes the ability to uncover issues through interviewing and observing TVIs rather than using the issues that have been identified in special education studies focused on job satisfaction, retention, and attrition (Billingsley, 2004), which may not be the issues associated with job satisfaction, retention and attrition of itinerant teachers of the visually impaired. Ultimately, though, collecting different types of data provides deeper
understanding of the research questions in hopes of providing implications to drive action in order to retain teachers of the visually impaired in Washington State.

**TVIs**

The TVIs in this study were a representative sample of the approximately 85 teachers of the visually impaired who were serving in approximately 120 Washington State school districts in the 2013-2014 school year. These selected individuals served in an itinerant role, which means that they traveled from school to school and usually worked as part of a team that included general education teachers and other specialists to meet the educational needs of the student. They ranged in experience from third-year teachers to seasoned veterans with 25 or more years of teaching experience and two-thirds of the teachers served in a single school district with multiple school sites. The other teachers split their time between multiple school districts that had lesser-condensed need. Some of these teachers fulfilled a dual role, that of teacher of the blind and orientation and mobility specialists (i.e., cane travel training), which is the equivalent of serving two separate caseloads as orientation and mobility is a related service taught outside of the classroom apart from the general educational setting. The majority of the teachers selected were the only TVI within their district, which can create feelings of isolation and perceptions of lacking support (Pennington, et al., 2009). The field of TVIs was limited within Washington State, since the implications of the study are directly applicable to the state context. A purposeful sampling method representing a maximum variation (Seidman, 2006) aided in the selection of the specific itinerant teachers of the visually impaired that were included in the study. There were several criteria used in the selection of teachers. For the first criterion, selection of individuals fell into categories of years of experience that were, three to seven years, seven to 13 years, and 14 plus years. These ranges were based on the findings of teacher attrition
occurring at varying experience levels defined by research (Brownell, et. al 1999; Boe, et al., 1999; Cross & Billingsley, 1994). I excluded teachers who had two or less years of experience from the study as new teachers are generally adjusting to the cultures of schools and districts and are new to the world of itinerant teaching. The second criterion used in the sampling process was district size with 8000 students being the line of demarcation based on previous studies examining the occurrence of visually impaired students within the general student population and proposed caseloads (Wall & Corn, 2004; Kirchner & Diament, 1999). These studies demonstrated that there are approximately one to one and a half visually impaired students for every 1000 students. The research prescribed caseload for a TVI falls between eight and twelve students, with some variance due to outside issues such as drive time and level of need (Mason et al., 2000). Staying within these parameters suggested that a district size of 8000 or greater students should support the full-time equivalent of one TVI, whereas a district with fewer than 8000 students would not support a full-time position. Therefore, a TVI working in a smaller district would be required to serve multiple districts in order to maintain a full-time position.

The premise is that the serving of multiple districts increases the complexity of communication, as the teacher must work with multiple teams of teachers, administrations, and district policies (Berry et al., 2011; Rude et al., 2005;). The final criterion was a selection of teachers from the Eastside and the Westside of Washington State. The reason for this consideration of the study was that the Eastside represents a more rural population than the Westside of Washington State that hosts most of the largest districts. Larger districts tend to have greater resources and services for students with visual impairments in the form of teachers, technology, and materials readily available (Rude, et al., 2005).

My current role as State Vision Consultant allowed me access to all the itinerant teachers
of the visually impaired within the state, making the selection process for the qualitative study relatively uncomplicated, since I knew I could collect data from the TVIs I had purposefully sampled. However, by having the three criteria on sample selection, I chose a sample that met the criteria, which could provide the diversity of perspectives needed to answer my research questions instead of simply sampling for the itinerant teachers with whom I share close work connections. I solicited 16 TVIs but only 13 of the TVIs were interviewed as saturation began to occur around interview eleven and no new information was forthcoming in the 12th and 13th interviews (Merriam, 2009). Table A represents a list of the TVIs. These teachers were from regional locations around Washington State, representing varying years of experience, district size, number of districts served and geographic locations in order to have TVIs from the Eastside and Westside of the state.

Table A

*Selected TVIs and Criteria*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TVI</th>
<th>Years’ Experience</th>
<th>District Population</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>14+</td>
<td>&lt;8000</td>
<td>Westside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staci</td>
<td>14+</td>
<td>&lt;8000</td>
<td>Westside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>14+</td>
<td>&gt;8000</td>
<td>Eastside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addis</td>
<td>14+</td>
<td>&lt;8000</td>
<td>Westside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darcy</td>
<td>14+</td>
<td>&gt;8000</td>
<td>Westside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indira</td>
<td>14+</td>
<td>&lt;8000</td>
<td>Westside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talia</td>
<td>3-7</td>
<td>&gt;8000</td>
<td>Eastside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>14+</td>
<td>&gt;8000</td>
<td>Westside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenzie</td>
<td>7-13</td>
<td>&lt;8000</td>
<td>Westside</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

I contacted TVIs via phone or in person to explain the intent of this study and asked for their participation. Willing TVIs agreeing to be a part of the research signed an informed consent document that detailed information about the data collected from the interviews and observations, the purpose of the research, their rights as TVIs and the potential harm and benefits that may have been incurred from the research. A recording and transcription of the interviews occurred and each TVI had a pseudonym for reporting purposes to protect confidentiality.

Scheduled observations with the teachers lasted a minimum of two hours and many extended into half days and covered multiple locations. Observations examined the issues that affect the routine of itinerant teachers of the visually impaired as they moved throughout their day. I conducted interviews following the observations, which included a series of open-ended questions that addressed the research.

The first questions were specific to the teachers and asked them for their personal story within the field. For example, my initial question asked them to tell me how they became a TVI. Then, I asked them to tell me about their work, identifying what made their work easier and more difficult. The questions that followed focused on interactions within schools and districts and their perception of connections to the educational settings. The final set of questions addressed the issues of job satisfaction and attrition, and I finished the interviews by allowing the
TVI to identify advice they would give to novice itinerant teachers of the visually impaired. Careful attention and scrutiny to question development made certain that questions did not lead TVI responses (Seidman, 2006). The questions encouraged TVIs to identify and explain the issues that affect their job as a TVI without any preconceived idea of what may be uncovered. Additional probes or explorations (Seidman, 2006) were prepared if explanations were needed to clarify TVI responses. Member checking occurred during the interview process as a means to provide clarification or to call attention to salient details that warranted further probing. The structure of the interview was to establish firmly in the mind of the TVIs that they were the experts and that their experiences and perceptions are valid to the world of educating students with visual impairments. Questions are included in Appendix A.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began simultaneously with data collection rather than waiting for all observations and interviews to be completed. I used a transcription service to transcribe the audio recordings from the interviews and then reviewed the transcriptions in conjunction with the original audio recordings. This allowed for checking the accuracy of transcribed data.

An initial coding approach used during the first coding cycle (Saldaña, 2009) allowed me to isolate small pieces of information and to look for similarities among the issues that teachers felt were relevant to their work. Given my lack of experience as a researcher, this seemed to be an appropriate selection, providing many opportunities to reflect on the unique nature of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Review of transcripts and simultaneous audio files helped to clarify responses from TVIs and allowed for repeated listening to the collected data. Coding ideas onto note cards and a constant comparative analysis allowed an inductive process to organize data by similarities and differences (Merriam, 2006).
I selected focused coding for the second cycle of coding because it assists in yielding major categories or themes from the data (Saldaña, 2009). After second cycle coding, the review of each transcript and notes began to reveal categories or reoccurring concepts and emergent themes in the data that led to identifying specific issues or concerns of itinerant teachers of the visually impaired. Field notes from the observations followed a similar first coding cycle and then were compared with the interview analysis in a second coding cycle. The emerging categories, and subsequent themes, helped to determine the issues affecting teachers’ ability to work with students.

**Trustworthiness**

Scrutiny of qualitative research occurs for several reasons, which include the bias of the researcher, generalizing results from small random samples, reliability of the researcher as a primary tool, achievement of saturation, and lack of hypothesis (Merriam, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Internal and external tools help to establish validity, and it is imperative that researchers engaging in qualitative studies conduct their research with the highest level of ethical consideration. This ethical scrutiny must be applied to the collection of data, analysis, and interpretation as well as the presentation of the findings (Merriam, 2006). This scrutiny will result in what Lincoln and Guba (1985) called trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) used a four prong approach in addressing the issue of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Merriam (2006) addressed the issue in the terms of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. For my basic qualitative study, I selected the terms outlined by Merriam (2006), Lincoln, and Guba (1985) to address the nature of trustworthiness through internal and external validity.
Internal validity.

Establishing validity within qualitative research is a challenge as people are the tools for data collection and the investigations are the constructions of people’s realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews. We are thus “closer” to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the TVIs (Merriam, 2006).

Given the construct of this study, that is, teachers with common job descriptions with varied experiences and serving in varied settings, I chose the strategies of triangulation, member checks, and reflexivity to provide validity. In addition, I had the advantage of having a deep understanding of the TVI culture and strong relationships within the field, creating another form of internal validity that Lincoln and Guba (1985) termed, “prolonged engagement.” Prolonged engagement occurs when the observer is engaged long enough to understand the situation and the context, establishing trust with the TVIs and moving beyond preconceptions (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Triangulation is a tool the researcher can use to certify that the findings from the study represent a broad view rather than a conclusion drawn from a single entity or from the bias of the researcher himself. The function of triangulation is to locate and reveal the understanding of the object under investigation from "different aspects of empirical reality" (Denzin, 1978). Denzin proposed four types of triangulation, which are data, investigator, theory, and methodological. Data triangulation refers to the examination of several pieces of data, and this is the option selected for this study. I chose to use the interviews, the observed behaviors, and the documents
collected from the TVIs and the limited TVI research to make sure that there was a level of corroboration of the information provided.

Another form of internal validity was to solicit additional input from the TVIs through member checks (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Member checking is the process of providing preliminary information to TVIs to determine if the interpretation of data is correct and whether there is a need for additional information. Member checks conducted during the interviews, allowed the TVIs an opportunity to elaborate on responses ensuring that communication was clear. After the interviews, meetings with several of the TVIs occurred in person and via phone to review transcription responses for clarity. In addition, the TVIs had the chance to review the preliminary findings from their interviews and allowed to make comments.

The final tool applied was reflexivity or “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The purpose of reflexivity is to provide the researcher the opportunity to reflect on biases, position, and role within the study and to report those to the reader. It is the realization that the researcher provides one possibility in regards to the interpretation of the data and that they do not hold any privilege authority over other interpretations (Creswell, 2008).

**External validity.**

External validity refers to the extent to which the results of the study can be generalized to other situations or how applicable the findings are in a different setting (Merriam, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to this concept as transferability and suggested that the transferability relies more on the person making the generalization than the originator of the research.
The burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought. The appliers can and do (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the application of this approach, the results from the study should provide truths that can be applicable as long as the appliers consider their setting and population. The most common tool applied for external validity is “thick description.”

Thick description refers to the description of the setting and TVIs of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the forms of quotes, field notes, and documents (Merriam, 2006). In this study, I used thick description to describe the TVIs, their realities, and settings, thus providing the reader with context to consider when determining the validity or transferability of this study.

**Ethical Considerations**

During this study, it was important to protect the people in the study through confidentiality measures that included pseudonyms for the TVIs and security measures for the audio files and transcripts to include the storage of said items in secure locations (Seidman, 2006). In order to maintain a professional and positive relationship with the TVIs, sharing information with others did not occur. These measures helped to establish credibility for future projects, studies, and partnerships, which is an ongoing aspect of my job.

In addition to personal security, confidentiality is important for the ethical integrity of the study. By providing confidentiality, TVIs are able to provide accurate and detailed information free of bias or fear of retaliation from within their personal circles. Adhering to these guidelines
did not pose a problem due to the nature of the study as TVIs represent varying districts across the state and therefore did not interact with one another professionally on a continual daily basis.

**Study Limitations**

This was my first attempt at a qualitative study and as a result, I acknowledge that my inexperience created some limitations. The first limitation was the “new” nature of this process, and it took time to become comfortable with questioning colleagues that I have known for several years. The Washington State field of visual impairment education is very small, and so I was careful in my interviewing strategies not to allow personal history, bias, or familiarity color my interview questions and follow-up probes. The personal relationships with most of the TVIs within the study was another limitation to the study as I had to step back and listen to the TVIs without engaging. Often times the TVIs asked questions during the interview process, wanting validation for their point of view, and I had to refrain from supplying that need. The third limitation was the time it took to complete the study, as it was dependent on teacher availability and required rescheduling several of the interviews due to unforeseeable circumstances. My job as State Vision Consultant allowed me the freedom to make the changes to meet with teachers, as their schedules permitted, but did require a strict adherence to effective preplanning.

**Positionality**

I have worked with students with visual impairments for 28 years, and during this time, there have been some constants with each student. All students with visual impairment need additional training to accommodate for their vision loss in addition to the standard general education curriculum (Corn, Bina, & DePriest, 1995). All students with visual impairment struggle with vision loss at some level and need access to accommodations to negotiate physical, psychological, or social barriers to independence (Hatlen, 2004; Sacks & Wolfe, 1992). This
instruction requires the skilled attention of a TVI. My position as State Vision Consultant has afforded me many opportunities to witness varying approaches to the education of students with a visual impairment, all of them finding varying levels of success due to issues that help or hinder their practice. While I serve as a resource to the entire state, I only supervise 12 of the 85 teachers, and I purposely eliminated those individuals from participation within the study. The reason for this decision was to avoid clouding the results that can occur when a superior is interviewing a subordinate. My position places me in the role of an insider in collaboration with other insiders in familiar environments and with familiar colleagues. Despite my lack of jurisdiction over the teachers in the first phase of the study, I needed to mindful that I hold a symbolic position as State Vision Consultant that affords a certain level of perceived power.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is multi-faceted. The information gathered will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the current working conditions for teachers of the visually impaired in Washington State. Anecdotal evidence suggests that several issues contribute to the current realities and include the number of students assigned to a teacher (i.e., caseload), the make-up of the student caseload (e.g., direct service students vs. consultation), the distance a teacher travels to students, the resources available, the support provided by administration, and the connection with colleagues.

In addition to providing insight into the current working conditions and issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired, the knowledge gained through this study may help to provide professional support throughout Washington State, to improve job satisfaction, and to stem the possible attrition of teachers of the visually impaired. Ultimately, it is my hope that the information from this study will help to establish the
need for a teacher training program within Washington State to meet the needs of students with visual impairments.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents data from one to one interviews with thirteen teachers of the visually impaired in Washington State whose years of experience varied between three to more than 25. These teachers served in settings that covered large urban districts on the Eastside and Westside of Washington State, small rural settings on the Eastside and Westside of Washington, educational cooperatives, Education Service Districts, and private contractors. Despite the variety of settings and backgrounds, teachers all shared similar responses to the interview questions, which addressed satisfaction with the job, factors that affect them in their day-to-day work and their long-term outlook about remaining in the field. In addition, teachers highlighted aspects of their role and their perception of how they viewed themselves in their work settings.

In order to provide a richer understanding of the findings, it is imperative to establish a general description of the role of TVI. Following that will be profiles of the teachers that participated in the study.

Role of the Teacher of the Visually Impaired

The role of the TVI is multifaceted as most teachers serving this population are itinerant in nature. This means that they often work at multiple sites within a district or districts responding to unique students while navigating several different political structures and establishing their position within the culture of each individual school and team. This challenge of establishing position provides the greatest hurdle for the TVI, requiring them to
enact the role of a politician and presenting themselves as a solution or remedy to the districts’ need.

The ability to be politician and a remedy for a district is critical. They fulfill the role of a politician because the students are often seen as a challenge for the classroom, the school, and the district due to the unique programming needs and the financial costs associated with his education. This can cause the student to be perceived as a challenge to the educational well-being of the whole school, creating misgivings about the student and the negative affect he is going to have on the overall school budget. The TVI must be able to deal with these complexities while advocating that the student is a rich addition to the fabric of the school. Within the role of a remedy, the teacher must be able to help problem solve issues, educate the staff and students about the unique nature of the visual impairment, and help the visually impaired student find his niche within the school.

This role-playing process of politician and remedy happens simultaneously while the teacher focuses on the educational needs of the student. The TVI is responsible to assist with educational assessment as well as an assessment regarding the physical abilities of the student in order to identify appropriate accommodations. The TVI then presents this information as a road map for successful instruction to the educational team and identifies her personal role within the team to help them understand the level of support she can provide. This may mean that the TVI takes on a primary role in daily instruction, perhaps in teaching braille, assistive technology, or other blindness education skills, or the TVI will play the role of educational consultant and support if the only need is to provide the accommodations the student needs to access the general education curriculum.
Another challenge for the TVI is that this exercise of establishing student programs is a repeated process; on average, 17 times, at the beginning of the school year (C. Meador, informal survey, personal communication, February 2014). Each of the student programs require continual monitoring and adjusting as the year progresses, involving all members of the student’s educational team. This role of the TVI based on the itinerant model means that the teacher is traveling to the student’s location within the district occupying a quarter of her week, or 10 hours. Given the situation, time for instruction to students, consultation with team members and attention to student needs becomes limited, forcing the teacher to prioritize many situations.

The other unusual aspect of the role of TVI is that the teacher will often serve the student for the entirety of their years in the public school system. This means that the teacher will usually have a complete understanding of the student, and often will have a strong relationship with the student’s family.

**TVIs**

In the initial phase of the study, 16 TVIs were selected that fit the criteria established for the study. Of the 16 chosen, only 13 completed the consent for the study and made themselves available. The 13 TVIs represented the Eastside and Westside of Washington State, both in rural and urban settings. Selection of TVIs examined years of experience and size of districts with 8000 students serving as a point of demarcation.

Years of experience was a screening tool in the selection of TVIs based on the work completed by Billingsley (2004), which indicated that experience played a major role in teachers leaving the field of education. Screening by district population was based on occurrence of vision loss research (Wall & Corn, 2004; Kirchner & Diament, 1999), which
indicates that a percentage of .0015 within a population of 8000 students would present twelve students with visual impairment, which is considered to be an appropriate caseload for a TVI (Mason, et al., 2000). I listed the TVIs in their experience groupings.

**Three to seven years of experience.**

**Terri.**

Terri began her work in public education as a para support person. Exposure to students who had a visual impairment “sparked a curiosity” and she pursued an opportunity to receive a full scholarship to a teacher training program. She served with another TVI in a single district on the Eastside and had a caseload of 16 students with several students who had braille as part of their education program. She spent less than 20% of her week in transit between students as they were located within a singular district. Terri had a workspace shared with other support specialists within the district. The district had several trained braillists who served specific students within the classrooms, which helped to maintain instruction when Terri was not there. She indicated that she had ample resources, including brailed materials, technology, and equipment.

**Michelle.**

Michelle began as a classroom special education teacher and received her training in visual impairment through a multi-state grant that provided scholarships to a distance education university. Michelle worked for an agency that served multiple districts covering more than 200 square miles on the Eastside of the state. She spent about 40% of her week in transit trying to meet the educational needs of students and had a caseload of forty plus. Due to the amount of time that Michelle spent in transit, her car was her office, although she did have workspaces in most of the sites that she visited. Michelle relied heavily on support staff from the local
districts who are with the students to accomplish educational goals. Resources varied from
district to district, but Michelle indicated that if a real need for specific equipment existed she
would be able to work with district administration to obtain the equipment.

_Talia._

Talia came to the field after teaching several years in a variety of grades. She felt the
need for personal growth and responded to the opportunity to pursue a full scholarship to
become a TVI. The decision to enter the field was more chance as she had no background or
experience working with visually impaired students. She was the only TVI within a single
district located on the Eastside of Washington State situated in a farming region. The district
had a population greater than 10,000 students, and she served 18 students on her caseload with
three students who required braille, which accounted for the majority of her focus and
workload. Talia spent 20% of her week in transit between students and said that she had
adequate workspace for her direct service students. In the schools where she served as a
consultant, she did not have dedicated space but felt she had access to meeting space if needed.
Talia stated that the district had provided her with the materials and supplies to accomplish
educational tasks with students and noted that the services of a certified braillist helped with the
preparation of materials.

_Seven to thirteen years of experience._

_McKenzie._

McKenzie did not begin her professional career in the education field. She learned of an
opportunity to receive a scholarship for a Master’s degree to become a TVI and took advantage
of the opportunity. McKenzie served an eight-district, educational cooperative in a rural,
Westside location with a caseload of 12 students. Her transit time consumed 25% of her
workweek, as the distance between several sites was greater than 15 miles. McKenzie had workspace within the schools she served and stated that she had enough materials for students but bigger purchases, such as technology, were a challenge with several districts as they did not understand the specialized needs of her students.

Dell.

Dell made the decision to become a TVI after she heard about the field at a career fair and the guarantee of free tuition. She served in a single district on the Westside of the state that offered minimal travel between sites. Dell was a private contractor and not a district employee and felt this provided her greater control over her schedule. She had a caseload of 18 students with two of the students requiring braille services on a daily basis. Dell had dedicated workspace in each of her settings and felt that there were ample resources for students. Obtaining more expensive items was not a challenge within the district.

Fourteen plus years of experience.

Cheryl.

Cheryl began her career in early education and made the decision to become a TVI because of the relationships with teachers of the visually impaired that came to serve students in her facility. The district she served was larger than 8000 students and bordered on two of the largest districts within the state. Cheryl was part of a two-member team that served the visually impaired students within the district and had eleven students on her caseload but also noted that she served students with autism. Her transit time represented 20% of her workweek. Cheryl felt that her district was supportive of providing appropriate materials for students, but it was difficult to find workspace within some of the schools due to increasing student populations and lack of instructional space.
Indira.

Indira was originally a general education teacher and learned about an opportunity to pursue a free Master’s degree in the field of visual impairment. She worked with two small districts on the Westside of the state, bordering a large population center and had a caseload of 15 students. Her weekly transit time was less than 20% of her workweek. Indira had many classrooms that she visited, and the special education teachers in the classrooms had set aside space for her and the students to function with appropriate materials and technology. In schools where direct service with students were not needed, she had to access small study rooms off the library or the conference room in the administrative wing to meet with students one to one.

Addis.

Addis says she, “fell in love,” with the idea of working with the visually impaired population at an early age after reading a book about Helen Keller and pursued the field in college. Addis worked for a small district, which had a small caseload of students, and in order to keep her employed full time, they had subcontracted her to several districts in the surrounding rural regions. Her weekly transit time was around 30%, and she noted that some weeks it was closer to 35%. Addis did not have office space in several of the districts she served but did have “stashes of materials” spread throughout several settings within districts, allowing her to have materials on hand. In the classrooms where a student had direct services with Addis, the teachers had created a work area stocked with equipment and materials for the student. Addis said that advocating for workspace was an ongoing challenge with several of the schools, especially with schools that were less familiar with her role.
Sally.

Like Addis, Sally was inspired early in her life when she read the story of Helen Keller and decided that she would become a teacher who worked either with the deaf or blind. She enrolled in a program at a university, and after exposure to both deaf and blind education, she found herself gravitating to the field of blindness. Sally served a large school district on the Eastside of the state and was part of a three-teacher team that also had braillists to help support students. She had a caseload of 15 students and served as a TVI and as the orientation and mobility specialist. She spent about 20% of her week in transit between sites. Sally said that she had adequate workspace and materials and was confident that she could obtain equipment for the student if she could present strong a rationale.

Staci.

A series of connected work events led Staci into the field of educating students with a visual impairment. A year prior to the study, she moved to a new district because her district was not guaranteeing her full-time work with visually impaired students. At the time of the study, she worked in a suburban district with several of her 14 students requiring braille. As a result, she found herself working very long days to keep up with the student needs. Staci’s travel time was close to 15% of her workweek. She had limited workspace but said she had adequate resources, many of which she either created herself or had the district purchase.

Helen.

Helen was a classroom teacher and was interested in making a change when she learned about the opportunity to pursue a free Master’s degree in visual education. She worked as a self-contractor, serving several small rural districts on the Eastside of the state with a caseload around 18 students. Her transit time was greater than 25% as some of the outlying districts
were an hour away from her home. Helen felt that she had strong skills but that the continually changing technology and expansion of services provided the greatest challenges to her effectiveness. In most sites, workspace was limited, but there was an adequate supply of materials for students. She acknowledged that continually educating administrators was a large part of her responsibilities and that successfully advocating for student needs hinged on that education.

_Darcy._

Darcy pursued an education degree right after high school and then made the change to the field of visual impairment as she began to experience her own vision loss. She worked in one of the largest districts that had centralized services for students with visual impairments. This was the setting where Darcy did most of her work and as a result, had minimal travel time each week. She was a part of a five-member team of teachers, allowing for the diversification of duties, which she felt was highly beneficial for students within the district. The district had provided Darcy with excellent workspace for her students, and she had plenty of resources in braille as well as technology.

_Carolyn._

Carolyn began her career in early education where she had several students who had visual impairments. She built a strong relationship with the TVI who frequented her classroom and in time, decided to return to get training to become a TVI. Carolyn was a transplant from another state and had seen many models employed in different school districts. She served as the only TVI in a large district but did have braille support and an orientation and mobility specialist. Her transit time was about 15% of her workweek. Carolyn worked hard to maintain relationships with specialists and people in decision-making positions and stated that she
approached the job as a member of the team. Carolyn said that her district had provided excellent professional space and solid work areas with good resources and current technology for use with students.

Three main themes emerged from the one-to-one interviews with the TVIs. The first theme was identifying the contextual factors that are part of the job of the itinerant TVI. The second theme was the need to develop connections that provided the TVIs with indirect support to accomplish their work and mediate the contextual factors. The last theme that emerged was the satisfaction that the TVIs found in their role as TVIs.

Identifying the Contextual Factors

In 2004, a survey conducted by the field of visual impairment focused on the responsibilities, job satisfaction, and needs of teachers who work with visually impaired students. This study uncovered that the most pressing issues for teachers of the visually impaired were issues of caseload, time, support in dealing with both the variety of students and the knowledge required to be effective in their job, a need for ongoing professional development, and a concern for the field regarding lack of professionals (Griffin-Shirley, et al., 2004). Another 2004 study conducted by Correa-Torres and Johnson-Howell identified additional issues of isolation, increasing paperwork, and political issues within schools and districts as being issues that teachers of the visually impaired faced. All of these issues are contextual in nature. The TVI had little control over these issues, and they could not resolve them through strategy or practice but needed the help of others to address the matter fully. The TVIs of this study also noted the issues identified in the 2004 studies were consistent with one additional issue added, which was the continual education of teachers and administrators about the effect of vision loss on the education process. The previous two studies were of a
quantitative design that asked TVIs to respond to issues that they felt affected their job, in addition to determining demographics, geographical settings, and job satisfaction. In the findings section of the Griffin-Shirley et al. (2004) study, an implication for future studies suggested that a qualitative design would provide a richer understanding of the issues they identified. This study looked at the issues and nuances of the job and tried to determine which issues had the greatest affect on TVIs and their effectiveness with students.

While all of the previously identified issues from the survey were addressed by some or all of the TVIs, five particular issues resonated deeply, which were managing caseloads, using time, always learning, dealing with others, and fighting isolation.

**Managing caseloads.**

A conversation regarding caseload must occur to understand that the problems with caseloads are more than the singular factor of numbers of students served but the issues that surround each of those students that the teacher must address to provide service. Individual student needs are a large determining factor, but equally important is the severity of vision loss and the amount of support the student needs within the educational setting. Depending on these variables, the time that is required and the type of instruction can vary significantly as illustrated by the differing needs of a braille student, low vision student, and a student that receives consultative services. The suggested time that the average elementary braille student is to receive services from the TVI should fall between the range of ten and fifteen hours each week while a low vision student may only need weekly scheduled lessons or short-term instruction provided as the need arises (Koenig & Holbrook, 2000; Wall-Emerson et al., 2009). Sharply contrasted to the direct service students is the consultation model, designed so that the
teacher is spending very little time with the student but focusing their efforts in coaching the paraeducator or classroom teachers in best practice to address the vision impairment.

After establishing the face-to-face time for each of the students, the teacher must then divide her remaining workweek between travel to the various student locations, meetings with the team, preparation for student lessons and communications with the family and staff. When asked what the most difficult aspects of the job were, Michelle, who had the largest geographical distance to cover of all the TVIs, stated, “having a lot of kids, the caseload. But because of the itinerant role, it is the time spent driving to get to them.” Inevitably, most TVIs struggled with balancing the direct service time with the other job requirements. When an imbalance in the amount of available time occurred, teachers often forewent their planning time and lunches and used off-the-clock time in order to meet the needs of their students.

All of the TVIs in the study commented on caseload, whether they had excessive student counts or manageable numbers. They felt that caseload and all the issues that were involved with caseload had the most influence on their ability to be effective in their work. Indira made several comments that highlighted this issue of caseloads:

Caseloads, you know, that is so tricky. If you got two academic braille kids, you got a full caseload. I had over 30 kids on my caseload last year, and a lot of those are on a consult. But those consult kids, you still have to see them, and you still have to take care of them. And, they might not show up on in your count, but they are still there.

And, this is all complicated.

The trickiness or complication that Indira talked about was the division of available time amongst the prescribed service time on the students’ IEP and the unmeasured demand on time as new students emerged needing assessment or observation. Compounding these issues was the
consultation students that needed attention and the growing number of students identified with visual impairments. Helen confirmed that the landscape of services and vision conditions were changing, creating additional numbers on the caseload and new responsibilities.

This is my 28th year and the more and more as I look at my caseload from when I started and even my caseload from seven and a half years ago when I started in this district, I see 504 students on my caseload who have vision processing issues. Their acuity is 20/20. But, they can’t read and they can’t do school work because they can’t track, because they have central suppression—a myriad of different issues. And since I am the vision specialist, even though I’m not going to provide direct services, I’m the person that gets the call.

The line between students who receive services from a TVI and those who do not has blurred over the years and teachers like Helen received requests to assess 504 students and to address issues like convergence and vision therapy, which was outside of the TVIs expertise.

The division of time and the emergence of new students were problematic in regards to caseload and additional factors, such as geographical distance compounded caseload issues. The teachers could not control where the students were located, and for some of the more rural regions this created a bind in service delivery as teachers rushed from school to school. During the school year of the study, McKenzie had a manageable caseload, but that was not always the case. When she worked for another school, her caseload was large, covering multiple districts spanning distances greater than 30 miles. Here are the thoughts she shared about her previous caseload:

When it was too big, I did not feel like I had enough time to plan or think ahead or stay ahead of the game with kids, which was challenging. The distance, the geographic
distance, the amount of time I spend driving compared to anything else [is most difficult]. I spent at least three hours a day driving, so that is a pretty big detriment to getting things done.

McKenzie’s statement about her driving distances tied in directly to caseload numbers and more importantly a strong overlap with the frustration of meeting the needs of students within a limited window of time.

I definitely feel like caseload is huge in terms of satisfaction. Feeling like you don’t have the time in the day to meet the needs of your kids—that is huge. If you feel like you’re just running around, trying to keep up, but not ever getting ahead of things, that sort of thing leads to dissatisfaction. It is managing the unmanageable.

The number of students did not necessarily make a caseload unmanageable but the need of the students was the determinant factor as clarified by McKenzie. Unfortunately, the number of students was usually what drove caseload decisions because it was simpler for administration to divide students by the number of TVIs available. When pressed on the issues regarding caseload, the TVIs expressed that the size of their caseload reflected the actual number of students in the district and not the needs of the students or available instructional time. Several of the TVIs felt that a lack of understanding on behalf of school administration about the complexities of the job contributed to this issue. Carolyn, who has worked in several districts within Washington State, had this to say about caseloads and administration:

There needs to be an education of special ed. directors and administrators, so they can understand what our job is. They must realize that giving a caseload of 35 students to someone who is a 0.8—it borders on insanity. They must realize what an appropriate caseload is.
The education of the administration regarding the manageability of a caseload is an ongoing training issue as special education directors and school administrators change frequently and this knowledge is generally not passed on to the incoming administration. Talia had concerns but was not as hard on the administration within her district, pointing out that the lack of awareness was partly her responsibility:

I just don’t think they are not aware of it. They are so busy that they don’t really think. Our special ed. count is pretty high, so I think they are dealing with the behavior classrooms. There is so much variation in the district itself that I am just a very small piece of the puzzle that they don’t recognize it—that my caseload is pretty high...so, I don’t think that it is that much noticed. And, I don’t raise a lot of issues.

These issues regarding caseloads cannot be resolved by the removal of any one factor but require attention to several components, some of which are fluid such as changing student populations, availability of trained teachers of the visually impaired, and the knowledge of administration. Caseloads and the issues related to student numbers were an ever-present challenge for all the TVIs, and time availability to meet student needs compounded this issue.

Using time.

The teachers scheduled work time was constant, with most itinerant teachers working eight to ten hours each day, but it was how itinerant teachers organized and scheduled their time amongst their students that proved to be a challenge. Teachers began their year with educating the staff within the school about their role in the education of the students with visual impairment. They built schedules with the team regarding appropriate times to see the student in order to lessen the general education impact if a pullout lesson was required. They repeated this process for each student on their caseload, relying on open communication with all members of
the team. As with any team, the TVIs noted that use of time had to be flexible as often the schedule changed very quickly within the scope of the day as concerns arose, which possibly required emergency meetings or a direct intervention on the part of the TVI. One of the mentioned frustrations was losing teaching opportunities because of a breakdown in communication that, despite best efforts, always seemed to be problematic. Helen expressed her frustration:

It is just kind of the normal things. You ask teachers to let you know ahead of time if a student is going to be absent, so you can rework the day. Then you get there and, “Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you.” They don’t let you know, and you’ve driven an hour to get there. And then, there’s no kiddo…getting the staff to understand that they really need to work with you, with the scheduling. You hate to keep saying, “I’m only one in the district. I am a department of one.”

Although it was a reoccurring situation, the frustration of lost time was a shared feeling of all the TVIs as they saw that this was a lost teaching opportunity and other students could have utilized the time. Chery described several other issues, unrelated to communication, which diverted time from students and created problems:

It is a challenge—the organization of it all…it is hard to find parking spots sometimes. Buses are coming and going. There are lockdowns, there are fieldtrips, and there are all those types of things. And so, I think just making sure that I can do my job within the day with the amount of travel that I have throughout the district is very challenging. So, it is just creating the schedule and then keeping it. Because if one thing in your day doesn’t go right, it backs you up.
In addition to the aforementioned divergences that affected teaching time with students, the idea of lost time or opportunity to use time with a student was a particularly frustrating situation. The loss of an hour or a session meant that lessons needed rescheduling. Unlike the classroom teacher, the TVI could not always revisit the lesson the next day. Often these lost teaching times meant that the TVI would not be back for a week or two, directly impacting the skills that the student needed and created some anxiety or frustration for the TVI. McKenzie expressed this frustration as she wrestled with time demands and students’ needs, causing her to prioritize her efforts, which meant that some of the needed skills would be set aside while she addressed the most pressing. She stated:

> If I think about the Expanded Core Curriculum (blindness skills)...I’m not meeting the needs. There is not enough time in the day...now in this job, I’d say it’s more of there is not enough time in the day to do all the things that a kid needs. And you have to kind of pick which skills you will teach.

When TVIs reflected on the uncontrollable issues, such as absences, field trips, and interruptions and coupled that with the student needs, they often felt that a good deal of their time was spent managing time and not instructing students. Talia had this observation:

> There are those variables we really have no control over that make it difficult to feel like you are actually teaching the kids anymore. Technically, we are a teacher but sometimes you feel more like an administrator of the program versus the actual teacher.

Most of the TVIs worked with several paraeducators and braillists who relied on the direction of the teacher to meet the needs of students. As Talia described, the interruptions that affected her daily schedules with students meant that she had to orchestrate learning opportunities.
instructed by others, essentially removing her from the role of direct instructor to the role of program manager.

This idea of not having enough time, the uncontrollable issues that affect teaching time, and the frustrations about meeting the needs of students are further compounded by the scope of knowledge that is needed to be effective in teaching visually impaired students. Due to a wide range of students served and the continually shifting educational landscape, there was a heavy requirement of the TVI to be engaged in ongoing professional learning.

**Always learning.**

The scope of the TVI is vast, covering the full spectrum of vision disorders and the interplay of additional disabilities. The TVIs in this study expressed feelings of inadequacy in many areas that included vision disorders, best practice, assessment, and technology. They faced the challenge of being up to date with the educational landscape and being a sage versed in the knowledge of the field, creating a paradox of continual learning that was tiring but also invigorating. Cheryl understood this paradox well and felt the weight of responsibility to be up to date with current information:

I feel that it can be pretty overwhelming because there are a lot of things in vision that you need to look at. It is hard when you start; it is hard now after 14 years to know everything. You know, I still have to look at things on the computer. I still have to have conversations. Somebody calls and then says, “Well, what is this condition?” I don’t always know.

The inability to know an answer frustrated many of the TVIs and several expressed feelings of being inadequate to do the job effectively, primarily due to the amount of knowledge needed. McKenzie spoke about the scope of the job:
The wide range of skills that you’re expected to know that you should know about babies, birth to three,…about elementary, middle school or high school, transition kids, academic to multi-impaired—from how to do division on the abacus to how to do the iPad with voiceover to how to do object schedules…none of it’s like rocket science, but to just have this huge kind of range, which makes it really interesting and never boring. It can be kind of a challenge because how do you get training on all those things, and how do you stay on top of them?

A large part of the challenge was that no two students were the same, even if they shared the same eye condition, and that created the necessity to prepare for each student as an individual. Staci, who said, “Every year is a first year for every student,” acknowledged this. She continued, “The stuff I needed for second grade is not what I will be using [with other students] next year.” This statement appeared basic but spoke to a deeper understanding that there was little that was common among students with visual impairments and few curriculums or teaching resources that were ready-made. Most curriculums needed revamping to address the unique needs of these students, which meant that all the effort provided to one student may not benefit the students who followed. This amount of creating and recreating kept the TVIs always looking for tools or programs that would help to lessen the amount of preparation and planning. These tools, often in the form of technology or new curriculum strategies, came with their own requirement of time, and teachers had to master the technology to use it with students effectively.

The requirement to learn new technology, approaches to teaching specialized skills, curriculum, and information was daunting but also embraced by all of the TVIs within the study. Carolyn expressed her feelings in this manner. “If I quit learning in this job, I will quit
teaching. People who don’t continue to learn in this job, they might as well go home.”

Carolyn was talking about both the acquiring of new knowledge to survive within the profession as well as the mastery or demonstration of the knowledge, which kept the job fresh. Darcy described her job as a “never-ending learning experience,” and spoke to the amount of time it took to be an effective teacher:

When I first started, it was the never-ending hours that you spent just learning how to assess a kid, what reasonable expectations are, [and] how to write goals. But I don’t know if easier is the right word because I think I still put in as much time as I did back then, because I’m constantly searching for new information, new strategies, [and] new tools. And again, that’s the beauty of having to think outside the box.

The need to be continually learning and embracing the scope of knowledge not yet possessed was daunting for the TVIs. It was also a challenge that kept them engaged as a professional, and many found a satisfaction in acquiring greater knowledge.

In addition to the knowledge, they were learning through professional development, a great deal of knowledge came in the day-to-day exchange with colleagues within schools and districts. TVIs not only acknowledged that learning to interact in different educational settings was critical to being effective but also noted that people provided some of the greatest learning opportunities as well as challenges.

**Dealing with others.**

The TVIs in this study talked a great deal about positive and negative relationships with staff in the schools and voiced that these relationships were some of the biggest challenges in helping students become successful. Each TVI believed that it was their responsibility to
educate the staff working with the student and to advocate for inclusion in the decision-making processes regarding the education of that student. Michelle commented:

A lot of these districts have no idea what to do with them [students with visual impairments]; they have no idea how to serve them. They have no idea what [services and resources] is out there. I do a lot of advocating and explaining why supporting the VI students is needed.

Often times the TVIs found that educating staff about the effect of vision loss solved misunderstandings and a cohesive partnership with the classroom teacher and district staff formed. However, sometimes the education of staff had little effect, creating frustration for the TVI. Addis, who served several small districts, had encountered this frustration on a few occasions and said, “There is a lot of educating, which just makes it difficult, because a lot of professionals don’t care, or they don’t understand.” Several TVIs spoke about the unwillingness of classroom staff to make changes in a student’s program once the education process was completed. Indira spoke of such an issue:

You do get frustrated with some of the staff, because they don’t see the importance of what you are asking them to do. I understand that they can’t do everything for one student out of twelve within a special ed. classroom, but they can at least take some of the suggestions and run with it, rather than saying, “It’s too hard.” Or, “I am not interested.”

Sometimes, the challenges that people created were not an unwillingness to run a program but an unwillingness to provide the physical support to start a program. McKenzie spoke to this situation:
Usually people are pretty nice, but there’s always the schools where from the get-go, there is resistance. There’s nowhere for you to work; there’s no one that can help you. And, it’s just like you are bothering people all the time.

The lack of adequate space in which to teach was the most common occurrence as Helen, Michelle, Staci, and Addis battled with schools to find suitable places to provide instruction. The most daunting of all challenges from staff was the outright refusal to create programs or move programs in a different direction. Carolyn shared her experience:

If I feel like I am spitting in the wind all the time, it gets really old. I do not like being told “No” a lot. I want to try this with a student; I want to do that with a student. Can we do…and the knee jerk reactions of being told, “No!” There are some people you come up against who seem to do that a lot. It is just safer and easier for them to say “No!”

The TVIs expected resistance when they were dealing with teachers and staff that had not worked with visually impaired students before. Terri pointed out that some of this resistance from staff was a “fear of blindness” as the student presented a teaching challenge, and they were feeling unprepared. Darcy shared some additional insight regarding fear:

I have had some teachers that are easier to work with than others, and I realized a lot of it is this fear. They just are scared, and it comes out. And, it rears its ugly head in different ways.

Others saw this resistance as a challenge to change the routine of the established classroom and that some teachers were not willing to release control of their environment, which made the TVI more resolved to fix the situation. Terri outlined her strategy for this type of encounter:

Right off the bat, I let them know what we are doing. This is our goal; this is what the student needs. And if I have any resistance with that teacher, I know that this is a class
that my student needs a pro-tech, or a braillist, or someone. Either I am not explaining things well, or it is sounding like too much work, and they are not willing to work with this. So, I make time to go into that class.

Despite the reasons for resistance, all of the TVIs had similar experiences in their professional career and expressed that they combatted this resistance with continual education and attempts to build personal relationships with staff. For every difficult staff member encountered, TVIs felt that the positive experiences outweighed the negative interactions and that creating a culture of acceptance was possible by establishing relationships and bringing support to the process. Helen shared this thought:

They know that they need you. Whether they are happy or not, you are there. They may not be happy you are there because they associate you with the student, and they may not be having a good situation with that student. But, they know they need you, and they are glad that you are there to help support them.

This idea of bringing support and establishing a relationship had the end goal of creating a better learning environment for the student. Although the TVIs could not control the resistance of the teacher, they could control their personal responses. McKenzie described the desired outcome of the relationship-building process in the following statement:

[Relationships] have an enormous impact on being a TVI. As a TVI, you are itinerant, and you can’t be the person responsible for what happens with the kid day in and day out. You have to partner with people and expect that they’re going to at least try to follow through on your ideas…when you have that relationship, you can say, “We could try this.” And you come back next week, and it’s done; it’s happening. It just multiplies what you are able to do.
A positive relationship between the TVI and the classroom teacher was a direct benefit to the student as ownership of the educational process became a shared responsibility with the team. It was also a benefit for the TVI because more learning opportunities occurred, as the team did not wait for the return of the TVI to provide the next instructional piece. Establishing relationships with colleagues also helped with one of the largest issues faced by TVIs, which was the issue of isolation.

**Fighting isolation.**

The very nature of itinerant teaching, the moving from location to location to meet the needs of students, often led to feelings of transiency for the TVI. This was especially true for the rural teacher or teachers who were serving several districts and dealing with multiple administrative structures as the teacher had little time or allegiance to any particular structure. This role afforded the TVIs a good deal of perceived autonomy with their schedules and flexibility but also created feelings of disconnection to the inner workings of the schools they served, resulting in isolation. When TVIs described the challenges of the job, all the TVIs mentioned isolation in one of two ways. The first way was that in many situations TVIs are a program of one. They are one teacher, dealing with multiple sites and situations with little or no support from the professional field. The second mention of isolation was that of fulfilling a role that districts and schools did not understand, leaving the teacher with a lack of identity or feeling disconnected from the educational settings. Isolation has been recognized as a common characteristic of itinerant teaching and is well documented as an issue that affects job satisfaction and overall effectiveness of the teacher due to lack of connection and support (Billingsley, 2004; Demik, 2008; Rude et al., 2005; Singer, 1993). The TVIs who were in rural situations talked more about being the only teacher of students with visual impairments.
with limited access to others that really understood their role while teachers who served in larger districts discussed the issues of not being connected within their buildings. Both viewpoints spoke back to the research and the ideas that connection for support and relationships were vital for teachers and job satisfaction (Billingsley, 2004).

The term “isolation” has physical connotations of being alone, and this was often true for the TVIs as they traveled a good deal of time. Their instruction model was usually one child at a time, and they were often the only person in the district with their expertise. Due to the low-incidence nature of vision loss, there were also limited resources available to use with a student. Sally, who currently works in a large district, spent a good deal of her career working in rural settings:

When I was isolated, it was less rewarding. Whether it is difficult now [in a larger district], you know, I am not sure. I think the isolation, the feelings like you have to invent things, [and] the lack of a curriculum, sometimes, it is frustrating. But the rural positions were harder for me.

McKenzie, who currently serves rural districts, concurred with Sally’s thoughts. “I would say that isolation makes the job more challenging because there’s nobody that I interact with on a day-to-day basis who is from the vision field.”

The idea of isolation seemed somewhat paradoxical as the TVIs connected with several teams, classrooms, schools, and districts on a weekly basis and had to make more personal connections during the week than most traditional classroom teachers. However, the TVIs described these connections as being mostly “face time” to help them move services for students forward and not true attempts at developing deeper relationships thus creating shallow
personas rather than collegial supports. Several TVIs mentioned the idea of being unknown as disconcerting. McKenzie had this to say:

I think probably a lot of people don’t know who I am still in the building because they haven’t directly had me with their students; they don’t even know who I am. Even the people who know me probably don’t even know what goes on in terms of what I actually do with the students.

Addis, who served several districts, had experienced the same frustrations. “I think they perceive me as different. I am not even sure that they all realize I am a teacher first and foremost. They view me almost like an outside consultant or not in the education field.”

This lack of knowledge was bothersome to the TVIs as they felt disconnected to those with whom they worked and ultimately that disconnect had an effect on the student as well. Talia talked about this situation. “There is still a little bit of not knowing what I do and how that affects kids. And as a result, I am left off district notices, and we learn about a meeting for a student after the fact, which is a little frustrating.”

A greater frustration expressed by the TVIs was the realization that they really had no connection within the professional community in their schools or district. McKenzie shared her story:

Isolation is hard–being the only one out there; unlike a third grade teacher who can walk across the hall and say, “I tried this; it didn’t work. What you think?” They have staff meetings where they’re talking to other general ed. teachers and special ed. teachers will be isolated. But at least, there’s another one in the district who is a special ed. teacher. In my district, there is five speech paths, [and] five OTs. There’s the
schools, and they all have a group. And so when we have staff meetings, everyone
breaks up into a group, and I go over to my desk by myself.

Other TVIs mentioned that most teams were nice and encouraged them to join them in
discussion. However, even within those discussions, they felt that they did not have input and
when discussion became field-specific, they move into the role of observer. They felt a part of
the larger team but not a part of a specific discipline team when they were the only TVI in the
district. Cheryl reflected on this lack of belonging to a team:

Most of the time isolation is a bummer. All the speech language pathologists are
meeting as a team; all the occupational therapists are meeting as a team; all the PTs are
meeting as a team...so, it is just that “teamness” that I miss.

This reality provided a real paradox for the TVI, as they were a valuable member of the team
but lacked a real connection to a learning community, limiting opportunities for professional
reflection on practice and growth as a practitioner. TVIs felt that either they had to accept the
isolation, or they were responsible to create a niche and find somewhere to connect. Many
wondered if creating the niche was worth the effort. Carolyn, who described herself as a very
social person, offered her perspective on this matter:

I don’t think that most people would choose isolation as a conscious choice. I think
isolation is something that comes with the job, but I do not think it is by choice. In fact,
I fight it all the time.

In Carolyn’s situation, she was “adopted” by a team of speech pathologists, and they had grown
a personal relationship outside of the work setting. However, she acknowledged that there
were times in professional meetings when she had little to add to their discussions. All of the
TVIs felt that they needed connection, but several of the TVIs felt that focusing their efforts on
connecting with other TVIs through informal get-togethers and fostering long distance support systems was more meaningful. Indira, who felt she had good district connections, still thought that the support she had from other TVIs was professionally more beneficial:

I think that it [TVI support] is very important to have, especially, when you are first starting out to have others that you can talk to, rather than people in district, because nobody knows what you are doing. And, it’s really important to have somebody that you can talk to.

For all the TVIs, being known and having an identity with others was as important as the actual work of being a TVI. All of them sought identity either with their districts or with the larger TVI community as a whole.

**Connections for Direct Support to Students**

The overarching goal of the TVI is to serve students effectively, despite their educational setting, so that the student can achieve their highest level of independence and success. The contextual issues described previously created additional challenges for the TVIs in pursuit of the overarching goal and they battled these challenges by creating effective learning environments through connections with others. Connections within schools began for the TVI when a need for direct support for students existed. Addressing the immediate needs, providing training to change attitudes and misconceptions, and finding solutions were some of the focuses of the TVIs early in the creation of services for the visually impaired student. A natural result of these activities was the development of a team that actively included the TVI to address the needs of the student.
**Addressing immediate needs.**

Schools generally do not plan proactively for low-incidence students but follow a model of need-based services, meaning that they generally do not have a TVI on staff but enlist the services of a TVI after the student arrives (Berry et al., 2011; Rude et al., 2005). Often times this created concern and frustration as schools pieced programs together, trying to meet the needs of students until vision services were established. Upon arrival, the mission of the TVI was to step in and address the immediate need, so that effective instruction for the student could begin. Helen described that her first meeting with the school staff was met either with a sense of relief or with a sense of anxiety, depending on the comfort level of the staff. There was relief for those staff who viewed her as someone who solved problems and anxiety for the staff who were concerned that she was going to create additional work:

> Every building is different. So in some buildings, there is a lot of support and other buildings, it’s like “No, this blind kid is yours.” I like to tell people, “I am your support person.” In the good buildings, I’m a big, huge part of the support because of the needs of the student. You are happy to walk into those buildings. Then, we have the other buildings that are like “Oh, No!” You come into a building and the principal gives me this look like, “Oh yeah, you’re here because we have ‘that’ student.” You kind of become velcroed to the hip. You’re an extension of that student, be it good or be it bad. These varied responses had a lot to do with the level of fear or intimidation that the school personnel felt because of the student. TVIs pointed out that the totally blind academic students caused teams to feel the greatest anxiety, and as a result, they often welcomed the TVI and were eager to follow suggestions and implement changes. Addis experienced this situation:
With the academic braille students or even academic very low vision students, you are it. You are the show! And so, people will definitely work around you because if you are not there, they don’t have a clue what to do with the student.

Often times, the schools regarded the TVI as the problem solver, or the specialist that had the perfect tool to fix the situation and allow normality to return to the classroom. Cheryl described this process as being multi-layered within the classroom because it was more than just support to the student:

Support can vary; you know, like support for him is daily support, about an hour a day. And that is braille instruction, but that is also working with his classroom teacher to get those materials ahead of time [and] to get them to the braillist. It’s to decide what items are needed and how to adapt things. And how they will look for him. It is also working with other kids in this classroom, so that they understand about his vision loss.

It took time for the schools to realize that these students presented a myriad of challenges that could not be resolved with one tool or a single solution. Often times, the process of helping the students be successful required experimenting with various solutions vetted by trial and error and continually training the team about the effect of vision loss on the educational process.

**Training to change attitudes and misconceptions.**

The idea of training covers a multitude of items from the use of equipment to the training of paraeducators on how to read braille. However, all successful training requires a level of trust between the TVI and the team. The team had to rely on the TVI to provide clear direction and timely education about the needs of the student, so that the team felt equipped to deal with the challenges.
The training of staff who directly worked with the student was essential, and this training extended beyond classroom instruction to address misconceptions and attitudes about blindness. The schools that were served by the TVIs were vigilant about safety for blind students, and they often created constructs that were artificial to the educational environment such as providing the student with a one-to-one paraeducator, assigning students as playground buddies, or excusing the student from the regular requirements of the classroom. While well-meaning in their intent, what was beneficial for the student was often contrary to the environment that the team had created for the student, and it was up to the TVI to challenge ideas regarding student expectations.

Several of the TVIs mentioned that they spent a good deal of time in helping the team readjust their attitudes. Terri shared that this was one of her frustrations. “The challenge for me is getting the teachers on board to create independent kids. The teachers want to do everything for the student.” Likewise, Staci had a similar thought. “It is difficult to get the teacher to stop praising everything, and to treat them truly as everyone else in the class.” She mentioned that often times teachers excused her students for missing assignments and late work, so the natural consequences for poor performance were lost. Dell talked about the “Sherpas” that were assigned to her students to escort them to class, not allowing them to practice independent travel. While the TVIs appreciated this desire to help, they felt that the structuring of an artificial environment for the student was detrimental and that training to alter attitudes of the team was necessary.

This process of attitude correction was a big part of the direct support that the TVI provided for the team. As mentioned in the previous section, the TVIs spent a great deal of time educating others about blindness in the hopes of creating a successful learning environment for
the student. They felt that this was a never-ending process as new situations arose and new individuals arrived in the school setting. Each new situation often created a challenge to the school, and the TVI was asked to problem solve the situation and provide the school with possible solutions.

Finding solutions.

With the exception of challenging staff misconceptions or adjusting low student expectations, the majority of solutions usually involved the student’s need for accommodations, access to the curriculum, or equipment and materials. Much of the problem solving occurred at the beginning of the school year through observation of the classroom and consultation with the teacher and student. A typical process is similar to what Cheryl described:

This is usually a one-time team meeting after a classroom observation to explain what the student’s visual condition is. Often times, I see a medical report. And, it is very different from what students are functionally doing in the classroom, so they have questions. I am actually letting a team know that the student is a student first and what that student’s strengths are and that vision often times is a strength, even though their acuity might be low. It is also kind of deciphering if that student needs a 504 plan or if they need an IEP. Or, they just need kind of a one-time consultation.

This review of previous information and observation of current student performance allowed the teacher to mediate the discrepancies and construct an appropriate educational program that would help the team determine how the classroom and school could best serve the student.

The biggest challenge for most districts that had students with visual impairments was the need for expensive technology or braille books, which required support from administration to purchase. Despite the costs on some of these items that can exceed several thousand dollars,
most of the TVIs were successful with getting districts to fund these items. McKenzie described this process:

I try to balance asking for what the kids really need with respecting the fact that they don’t just have endless amounts of money to get these things. But mostly, they are respective, because they want to do what’s right for kids. I almost never have run into a situation where they just absolutely refuse to work with you.

Darcy shared a similar approach.

I have a relationship with our special education director. If I call, I always try to have my rationale very, very clear in my head before I make a request because I want to make sure that it is reasonable. So, I really try hard to think about both sides.

In addition to trying to understand the finances of the district and the position of the special education director, some of the TVIs spoke of using data to make requests. Sally described her approach:

I don’t go in flakey-like and say, “We need this.” I don’t make emotional requests; I back it with data, so I know when they need more help, when they need an additional teacher. I just back it up with data. I broke down how many students we had, [and] what a typical day looks like, and the administrator had no problem asking for another teacher.

The success of these TVIs pointed to a trust level established with the administration, developed over time or through a demonstration of support for administration by the TVI. Addis described the problem solving she does to assist administration by dealing with issues before they become a district problem:

You want the directors to come to you if there is any kind of trouble, so I keep those directors abreast of any concerns or budding issues. If there is a problem, a complaint, or
the parent comes in with a concern, the directors know me and things just run a lot smoother. “Oh, let me give Addis a call, and we’ll see what’s going on.” You can waylay a lot of issues that way. I try to keep in contact with the parents, so any little concern or issue I can deal with [it] immediately and not have it get blown up or have them have to go to the special ed. director or principal.

This proactive approach to dealing with issues was beneficial for both the TVIs as well as the administration and helped to foster a deeper relationship built on trust and mutual support. TVIs found that this proactive approach was not only effective with administration but with the classroom team as well because it provided them a stronger presence within the team. The TVIs saw a direct benefit to the level of service provided to their students and indirect support from staff that helped with the challenges of being itinerant.

Connections for Indirect Support of the TVI

As connections became deeper, relationships emerged, which helped the TVIs find indirect supports to deal with the aforementioned challenges that came with the role of the TVI. Relationships with administration and people in positions of authority could result in lower caseload numbers while relationships with staff could help battle isolation. Another outcome that emerged from those relationships was a higher degree of job satisfaction and feelings of personal value and confidence. The quickest connection to form was with the immediate team, which was a process that moved the TVI from knowledgeable outsider to valued voice and ultimately, core team member.

Connecting to colleagues.

Providing the team with knowledge about vision loss was the beginning of the connection with the team as people looked to the TVI to help direct them in their program efforts with the
students. As these teams developed over time, the TVIs found that their role moved from knowledge provider to the role of active team member. Being a part of the team provided the TVIs with a professional connection that increased their job satisfaction because they felt valued by team members. Helen described her connection with one team in a district:

In some schools, I’m more heavily in the support role than in others where I am just part of six or eight people on the team because the student has a lot of needs. They need OT (occupational therapy). They need PT (physical therapy). They need speech. They need a lot of things where I’m part of that team, and we sit together and problem solve together, which I really enjoy that aspect of it.

The TVIs for several reasons appreciated this inclusion with the team. The first reason was that they were able to share knowledge that would benefit the student’s educational program. The second reason was that being included in these meetings provided a sense of value and helped to offset their feelings of isolation as they were now connected to the entire team. These connections with team members were encouraging for the TVIs as they felt they shared a common goal to help the student succeed. In Indira’s case, she felt that this opened opportunities to communicate with team members and be an encourager to the entire team:

The thing that I always try to do with connections is say, “This is what I taught today.” I think they really appreciate it, because not only do I try to say, “This is what I need to work on, but this is something really good this kid has done.” And, “Kudos to you.” So, it’s a value to the kid [and] a value to the staff, so that everybody can share those celebrations.

Sharing accomplishments and challenges helped TVIs form bonds with the team, which was especially important for the TVIs who did not have other vision professionals within their
district. Aligning themselves with team members was helpful for TVIs not only because it helped with feelings of isolation but also because it aligned them politically within the district through acceptance by others. Carolyn found common ground with a larger group of related service providers within her district:

There are particular departments that are very effective at pushing an idea or their agenda in getting a lot of resources—time, money, support, equipment, and personnel. I have really tried to align myself with them because A, they are just some amazing, dedicated super bright people and fun to be around. But B, [I] align[ed] myself with them, so I was not the red-headed stepchild. Last year they wrote a grant for technology, and because I go to a lot of their meetings, since I did not have a department…they naturally included me, which was such a gracious, kind thing to do. And, that right there is one way of working with people.

Carolyn experienced a moment with a team that not only represented kindness but also a respect for her and the work that she did with students. This level of respect was recognition that the TVI’s expertise was a benefit to the team and necessary for the success of the student and their educational progress. The TVIs found that a direct result of building connections was the recognition of their expertise, which created a willingness with the team to be flexible with schedules, allowing the TVIs more access to the students. Sally’s experience with one of her teachers highlights a strong connection:

I think my connections with staff are really big, and I feel like I get a lot done because I already have the history with them. I can just stop the choir teacher in the hallway and say, “Hey, can I grab this student?” because she knows me…Building connections is really important to me. And in the end, it makes your job a lot easier.
When the connections were strong, team members sought out the TVIs to consult about students who may or may not need direct services from a TVI. Team members recognized that the TVI possessed a level of expertise that may help the team member be more effective in achieving their educational goals for the student. Indira had established a connection with a therapist within her district that grew into a symbiotic relationship where the therapist contacted Indira at the beginning of the evaluation process rather than after the evaluation was completed. This was very helpful for her and the team as they were able to address vision loss and the educational implications for therapy and programs. Indira explained the situation:

I really think connection with team is very, very important. Currently I have a really good situation with a therapist because she is interested and she keeps saying, “I want you to come and look at this kid, come and look at that kid.” I am able to be working with the SLP (speech language pathologist), the PT (physical therapist), the OT (occupational therapist), and…the classroom teacher. So, I am not just working directly with the students, but I am working with other people, too.

This comment spoke to the feelings of value and respect from the team, which was an outcome of connection with colleagues who could help TVIs mediate some of the challenges that they faced. The TVIs also sought deeper connections with administration because administration held the authority to affect their work with students and their working conditions.

**Connecting to administration.**

The connections with administration were not daily occurrences and generally revolved around requests for expenditures, caseload adjustments, or dealing with contentious situations involving families. In addition, turnover of special education administrators was a common event in many of the districts, which meant that TVIs were in a continual education process
regarding their role, student needs, and challenges. Carolyn’s district had a complete turnover of district personnel, including the superintendent and special education director.

We had a regime change. And it has been extremely challenging to understand what the new directors want—to work with them to forge those relationships, gain their trust. And, I am sure they are trying to do the same thing with me—forge that relationship and gain my trust.

Building trust with administration was a focus for Carolyn, realizing that many of the visual impairment educational crises in their district required the administration to rely on her expertise, despite the fact that they had little experience dealing with her. This was common as many of the TVIs felt their relationship with district administration was formed during crises and that they had to demonstrate that they were worthy of trust by making good decisions for the student and the district. The actions of the TVIs built the groundwork for relationships with administration, and when successful, they earned their trust in matters pertaining to their students. Talia had a good relationship with her administration and explained that her end goal with these relationships was to be the administration’s problem solver in all concerns pertaining to student vision issues.

I have three supervisors, and I try to build a rapport with them and have them know that I am the one to come to if there are questions about assessment, large print, or anything that our vision kids need...they trust me in what I do.

Talia built this trust by providing accurate and timely information to the administrative team. Having established trust between the administration and TVI created a connection that resulted in a respect for the TVI position. This connection allowed TVIs the opportunity to educate administrators regarding the difficulties of their jobs in the hopes of fostering a deeper
understanding of their positions. Addis had been with the same district for years and had seen an attitudinal change with her current administration regarding her position:

I feel that at least there has been a little more acknowledgment and understanding of what our jobs entail, and we have to do a lot of that education ourselves. But, I think people listen better now; they are a little more respectful of professionals in general... like special ed. directors and people who are really in charge of what you are able to do. There is not as much, “Here’s your caseload. Do it.” They are a little more interested in knowing what you are doing, how well you are doing it, why you are doing it, and a little more interested in whether it’s too much for you. And, they will listen to you. Not always can anything be done about it, but always they will listen.

Addis’s experience with her administrators expressed the value of the deeper connection she had with them. This level of understanding made the challenging situations more bearable as TVIs felt supported professionally and emotionally, even when financial or resource support was not available. Cheryl spoke about this support:

I feel that they [administration] provide the support materials that I need to be successful. They back me up on things that I might need to help me problem solve...things that might typically happen in a staff meeting.

The knowledge that the administration was willing to support with resources and politically during open forums such as staff meetings provided Cheryl a level of security. Carolyn spoke about the administrative support she felt regarding her role as a professional:

They do whatever they can to help support the student’s needs. And even if they do not know what to do, most of them very much trust me when I give recommendations or suggestions, which is nice to have my opinion...my professional opinion respected.
When the TVIs felt they had the respect of the administration, they worked hard to maintain that connection. A big part of developing these connections was for TVIs to work as a partner with the administration in problem solving difficult situations. Carolyn found that the administration in her district wanted to make decisions that were in the best interest of students but often lacked the knowledge to make good decisions. She employed the following method to resolve student issues and create common ground with administration:

I have learned at my old age not to ask permission or ask if I could do X, Y, or Z, or bring a problem to an administrator but, [instead] to bring solutions, like two or three solutions to make their job easier. So they can just say, “Yeah, I am picking solution B.” And, I can be like, “Awesome. Let us go with that.” Just feeling like an equal partner in this wonderful world of education that we have for our students, I think that is really important.

Most of the TVIs had experienced good relationships with administration at some point in their careers, but not everyone shared Carolyn’s experience. TVIs desired a relationship with administration that provided access to decision makers, opportunity for input, and acknowledgement of their efforts. The TVIs who had experienced this type of relationship felt that this created a positive work atmosphere that motivated them to push ahead despite the difficulties that arose from time to time. Indira felt that she had this structure in one of the districts she served and that this made a huge difference in her attitude and her work effort:

I think it (positive feedback from administration) makes me want to do better. The positive interactions made me want to be better and made me want to do more. I don’t want them to think that I am slacking off and want them to see me doing a good job.

Sally shared a similar thought:
It makes us feel really good to be part of a program that supports us, and it is like win-win. When we feel valued and supported as a professional, we really kind of rise to the occasion, and we would pretty much do anything for that administrator because they have my back, too. So if there is ever something coming down the pipe, I divert it because I know she appreciates that; she doesn’t like surprises.

This type of positive feedback, input in decision-making, and understanding of the challenges faced by the TVIs helped to foster a strong connection with the administration. When TVIs had strong connections with colleagues and administration, they felt supported within their districts, which increased their job satisfaction and helped to reduce feelings of isolation. However, TVIs still found themselves at a loss dealing with the scope of their duties and the knowledge required for meeting the needs of students. They desired a connection with peers that had job-alike duties or understood the field of vision education.

**Connecting to the field.**

Strong connection within a district helped to alleviate some of the challenges of isolation but the TVIs expressed that these relationships did little to address the challenges of managing time, dealing with caseload structures, and addressing their lack of knowledge. In order to deal with these issues the TVIs found it necessary to develop connections within the field that they could access on a regular basis because all teachers were overwhelmed at some point. Helen summed it up in this way. “There are so many things that you learn in your university training and then you get out on your job. And [then] you are like, ‘They never told me anything about that.’” To combat the feelings of being overwhelmed Indira made a strong suggestion for new teachers:
The main thing that I would advise [a new teacher] is to find a mentor…we do so many different things, and we are expected to know so much. And, there is no way. The technology you learn today is obsolete tomorrow or it breaks down. Now, what...you can’t know everything. You need to know where to find that information. So having a good mentor, they can teach you where to go.

While Indira addressed the issue of knowledge and the pursuit of getting answers, others spoke to the value of sharing ideas and frustration with another TVI that has had similar experiences. Staci pointed out the value of those kinds of connections:

I think that it [connections with other TVIs] is very important to have. Especially when you are first starting out it is important to have others that you can talk to, rather than being isolated. Because nobody [in the school] knows what you are doing.

It was important for the TVIs to have a person who could provide clarity and support because the nuances of the job were unique and challenging. Darcy shared her advice regarding the value of such a relationship and she shared a typical conversation that she had with a new TVI this year:

We are here to work with you. We understand. Ask questions and bring things to the table. Don’t be embarrassed because we’ve all been new teachers at one time, and there’s nothing like having a support system…we are all learning. We’re still learning.

This need for continual learning was one reason that all TVIs needed connection with a support system consisting of other TVIs because there is sparse research due to the low-incidence nature of the population of visually impaired students resulting in limited curricula and resources. Due to the limited resources, the TVIs felt that they needed a connection to individuals who had expertise in technology for visually impaired students, braille, or adapting materials. The likelihood of having this expertise nearby was rare, forcing the TVIs to look beyond their
districts for answers. Many of the TVIs spoke directly to this concern and urged all teachers, and especially new teachers to connect to the greater body of TVIs within the state. Addis summed it up in the following statement:

I think the biggest advice I could give them would be to get connected. Connect themselves with the State School for the Blind. Connect themselves with other TVIs in their area. It is time consuming, but I think that it’s very important to be connected and learn from other professionals.

The peer connection to other TVIs was perhaps the most critical for the TVIs in this study as they felt a heavy responsibility for the education of the student and the appropriateness of the recommendations they made to the district. Peer connections provided them direction and confirmation about their choices.

Connections with colleagues, administration, and other TVIs were critical to help provide a level of indirect support that addressed the challenges that the TVIs faced on a regular basis. With these connections, the TVIs felt that they had an established role within their districts and access to supports to remain effective with their students.

**Having a known identity.**

A theme that emerged from many interviews was the need of the TVIs to be known and valued by the colleagues and administration they served. The TVIs described the frustration of existing in anonymity in many settings due to the specialization of their role or the challenges of being itinerant. Even the TVIs who felt they had resolved their identity issues within their district were still conscious of the fact that many did not understand their role.

Educating the teams about the role of the TVI was important for two distinct reasons. The first was to help create an awareness of the responsibilities of the TVI within the team, and
the second was to create an identity for the TVI within the school. This identity was more than a greeting by the office staff; it was the acknowledgement from that staff that the TVI was an active member of the learning community. This identity gave them a purpose in the eyes of others, although some of the titles used to reference them were inaccurate as McKenzie was called, “the blind lady,” while Carolyn was referred to as the “division specialist.” Indira was the “vision expert,” in her school; Dell, Addis, and Talia were the “vision therapist.” Although the labeling by school staff was harmless and not intended to be derisive, it did bother a few of the TVIs, as they wanted full recognition as educators first. The title of “teacher” emphasized that they had an active role in the education of the student compared to the role of a therapist that connotes a medical practitioner. Darcy shared this thought on the matter:

    I think that we are misunderstood within the field of education. Because like in a school district, they don’t quite know where to place us. We are certificated staff. We are teachers. We’re not ESAs; we are not therapists. We have to keep working and working and educating others.

A contributing factor to this misunderstanding was the role of being itinerant where so much of the instruction happened in a one-to-one setting with the student apart from the classroom.

McKenzie realized that this was part of the challenges and that establishing her identity through the education of others was her responsibility:

    People don’t know who you are. My perception is that I am very much an outsider, very much unknown. And, I have to either be okay with that or really take it upon myself to build a connection, to make sure they know who I am and what I do.
The thought of being an outsider carried a negative connotation for McKenzie. In an earlier job, she worked for an educational agency, serving multiple districts and struggled to establish connections within school buildings. She stated:

If you don’t know the people or you haven’t been welcomed, it’s hard to do your job, to find people to follow through [with instruction]…if they care about who you are, what you are doing, then they want to follow through.

In her setting, Sally did not feel she had the same struggle as McKenzie, and she had met the challenge of identity but still struggled with people having a real understanding of her job. The thought that people did not understand what she was doing was disconcerting for her because she felt that so much of her acceptance and her reputation relied on others’ perception of her work. “Many people looking out [of classrooms] see me on the streets with my students working [travel training with a cane]. They don’t really understand what I am doing, but they know I am out doing something.” In addition to educating everyone, Sally felt that she had, the responsibility of demonstrating that she was a person of integrity by dispensing her schedule to all and avoiding areas like the teacher’s lounge so that people would have the perception that she was hard working.

The idea of people not knowing what a TVI does was more common where TVIs were new personnel in the district or had served the district a short time, but all the TVIs realized that having an identity with all was not a likely possibility. They did find that with the investment of time, key players began to gain a better understanding of the role of TVI through shared interactions. Carolyn spent several years in her current district and had this perception of how others viewed her:
I think most people in this district now do know who I am. They know that I have a very busy job. I hear the good. And maybe there is bad out there, [but] I just don’t hear a lot about that. I think most people have a pretty good idea now. Enough people have seen me out and about and I have had enough contact with people that they pretty much know what I do.

Even though Carolyn felt good about her identity within her district, her statement hinted at an uncertainty regarding a true understanding of her role. Many of the TVIs felt that this ambiguity would always exist with those individuals not directly involved with the students and that they should focus their education efforts with the immediate team. From their perspective, the deepest connections formed would be with those individuals and any appreciation experienced would be from the immediate team.

Equal in importance to being known for their work and their role as an educator, TVIs commented about acceptance by the team and being “valued” and being “of value” to the people with whom they worked. The role of TVI is unique, and the TVIs liked the recognition for the specialized work that they provided. This uniqueness created an instant value with the team that served the students with visual impairments because in the beginning of the students’ educational matriculation into the district, only the TVI held knowledge necessary for student success. Addis described the first impression that many teams have of her. “It’s that nature of what we do that creates that illusion—that maybe we are somebody with a little more power.” She realized that this illusion that gave her instant value was short lived if her actions did not support this illusion and that her true value with the team developed as connections grew deeper. The TVIs did not openly express being valued for expertise as a desired outcome, but they were very aware that they held a knowledge that the team needed for the student. “Appreciation” was the word that
surfaced within the interviews. The TVIs felt that if they were effective in their service to the students and the team, then appreciation from the team would be a common outcome, reinforcing the value they felt as a team member. McKenzie shared her thoughts on appreciation. “I perceive that they really appreciate that you are coming in because they aren’t sure what to do with the student. And so to them, it’s very valuable that you come.” Indira had a similar thought on this matter:

I think the staff that I work with, overall, really appreciates me coming in and working in their classrooms. I don’t know whether that’s true or not, but they seem appreciative. I am just going to be in this LaLa land and say, “Yeah, they appreciate me being there.” …I feel good where I am.

Appreciation from the people with whom the TVIs worked drove them to work harder for the team and the student and the TVIs who felt valued for their contribution to the education of their students found great satisfaction in their role within the team.

The thoughts and feeling regarding identity, appreciation, and valued in their role is perhaps why the TVIs were passionate about their work as TVIs. This passion coupled with a commitment to the field of blindness education provided the TVIs with a career that was ever challenging and despite the difficulty, none of the TVIs desired to pursue a different occupation.

**Finding Satisfaction**

This study sought to answer several questions, one of which related to the aspects of job satisfaction and attrition. In the larger body of special education literature, attrition is a national concern with a high rate of qualified individuals continuing to leave the field, adding to the tens of thousands of unfilled positions (NCTAF, 2007). Although limited in scope, the literature that specifically addressed the special education itinerant teacher identified them as
the most vulnerable to attrition. The reasons for this vulnerability were the factors of remote locations, extensive travel requirement, isolation, dealing with multiple administrative teams, and communication with teams (Pennington et al., 2009; Rude et al., 2005; Redmon, 2005; Singer, 1993). The two studies that focused specifically on TVIs addressed most of the challenges outlined in the earlier part of this chapter and each addressed the issue of job satisfaction but not attrition. The 2004 survey conducted by the team of Correa-Torres and Johnson-Howell surveyed 23 TVIs and found that the TVIs overall were satisfied with their job despite the challenges. This is comparative with the larger survey, which found that 75% of the 422 respondents expressed some level of satisfaction with their job (Griffin-Shirley, et al., 2004). Neither survey addressed the issue of attrition leading to speculation regarding the 25% not satisfied with their job and if satisfaction did have a bearing on attrition with those teachers.

In this study, all the TVIs felt strong satisfaction with their career, and none of them planned to leave the field with the exception of retirement.

**Feeling satisfied.**

The job of TVI provided the individual TVI with a role of valued resource to an education community and a demand from that community to commit to personal growth in knowledge and ability in order to remain a valued resource. The challenging nature of the job and the complexity of responsibility provided meaningfulness coupled with a sense of purpose that provided an outcome of satisfaction (Shier, et al., 2013). Darcy expressed this sentiment. “I love it because you never really feel like you know the job because you have to constantly be thinking outside the box.” These challenges required the TVI to commit themselves to a constant state of readiness for professional growth that provided focus and helped to offset the
frustrations that the diverse caseload presented (Pennington, et al., 2009). Sally had this to say regarding the commitment to the job of a TVI:

I always tell people it is the best job in the world. Really, it is an amazing job. But, there are just so many characteristics I think that you have to have. You need to be flexible and really organized and self-motivated. It really is important to keep up on your skills to be the best teacher you can be. If not, you get stuck doing the status quo, and that leads to boredom and I think, a lack of satisfaction, which is not a quality way to deliver our work.

The TVIs felt that keeping up on skills and continually learning was essential to being effective in this job. The challenge to continue growing professionally required a commitment by the TVIs and several of them were quite adamant about the demand to be a student of the field, as Sally pointed out, “Anyone that doesn’t want to grow should just leave. I want them to get out of the field as you are probably doing students a disservice.” There was a serious tone about this demand as the TVIs felt that not continuing to learn and improve skills had a direct effect on the students the TVIs were serving.

**Serving students.**

Teachers of the visually impaired believe they make a difference partly because they possess a knowledge that most professionals do not have regarding the education of a visually impaired student and partly because they have committed to the challenge to work with this population. Addis talked about the profession and the affect a TVI has with students:

I am extremely satisfied with this job. I get a lot of reward out of it. I have had multiple students that I have started out with their birth and they are 25 or 26 years old now. I’ve
gone with those kids all the way through their academic careers and there’s a lot of satisfaction in seeing those students be productive adults.

Darcy’s thoughts on this matter were similar. “Number 1, seeing student progress. That is just probably the biggest thrill. Seeing parents be happy about the progress their child is making. That is awesome!” McKenzie echoed much of Carolyn’s sentiment but also spoke to the relationships with families that occur during the student’s educational years:

Feeling like you are making a difference with kids, those moments where you see them do something that you have been working on for a long time and it clicks. That’s very rewarding. And the interaction with families, and feeling like you’re making a difference for a whole family in terms of the success of their child.

Several teachers felt they had a responsibility that stretched beyond the school setting to support the family with training and setting high expectations for the student. This responsibility was the overarching goal of the TVI–the goal of helping the students achieve their highest level of independence. While working towards this goal the TVIs met resistance at times, and the TVIs felt that they had to represent the student first, which at times put them at odds with team members. However, if they persevered in their advocacy and provided the team with continual education, then the results were usually beneficial for the student and satisfying for the TVI.

Advocating for students.

The role of being a TVI required a focus on the student first and building acceptance of programs second. Resistance to proposed changes and running additional instruction was common and the TVI had to push and advocate for the student. The TVIs in this study were familiar with these experiences and several actually cherished the role of advocate, even when there was confrontation. Staci mentioned that during a difficult moment she was not a “team
player” because she was fighting for workspace for her student. Carolyn deemed herself “the rebel with a cause” and firmly believed that advocacy was her role:

You have to be open to the fact that you are going to get slammed down. You have to be open to the fact that you going to be told, “No!” ten times, but you still have to believe that person wants to tell you, “Yes!” And that they will tell you “Yes!” one day, and they usually do.

Indira was in a long drawn out confrontation with a classroom teacher who did not want to make accommodations for a student. She described how she addressed the resistance:

There are people who are negative about what you do, or how you do your work. I think that you want to do more and be better to prove them all wrong. So even if you got this negative energy coming at you, you take an “I am going to show you,” attitude.

The TVIs acknowledged that fighting resistance was tiring but worthwhile especially when they began to see change. Indira continued her story:

I am hoping that by showing her [classroom teacher] that this [accommodation] really works. That the student can start noticing things and seeing things, that there is some meaning for this. I am meeting some resistance, but at least that teacher is starting to follow through a little bit more.

When advocacy was successful, it broke down walls with classroom teachers and staff, building an effective learning environment. Often times the work of advocacy had long reaching implications, as more staff were educated about the specialized needs of visually impaired students. Cheryl reflected on one school that she had been serving for seven years and the progress that they had made for students with visual impairments:
It is just a positive thing because so many people have been trained. I am really proud of the work that I have done, what people know, and what people remember and how the classrooms are set up. All those things are based on what I have done. That, to me, is a real positive.

This is an example of what TVIs were trying to accomplish within the school setting but more importantly it represented an attitudinal change of the staff working with the student. This change was the recognition that even though these students may need specialized instruction or accommodations they are just students. McKenzie talked about this change in mindset:

I think that [attitude] transfers over into how incorporated the student is in the everyday fabric of the school. This [attitude] can come from the building level of people, how receptive they are to that student and to making the student a part of what’s happening versus the “blind kid” over there. That (attitude) can have a huge impact.

The TVIs felt that being an agent of change within schools was very rewarding because the student benefited greatly from their efforts. The idea of shared ownership meant that everyone worked for the student. Sally shared her thoughts on the satisfaction that comes with a successful setting:

I would say the reward comes in seeing what other people are doing for a student, seeing how they are handling an IEP. They [staff] run information by you constantly, “Hey I have this referral. What do you think?” Or, “Do you know what this classroom teacher is doing?” This is when you know you had success in getting ownership.

The TVIs saw their work as meaningful and beneficial to students and all expressed a great deal of satisfaction for several reasons. Teachers in the study reported that the diversified nature of the job of TVI made it very challenging and at times, overwhelming for them. The unique nature
of students, dealing with multiple platforms of instruction, learning to navigate political systems within districts and schools, engaging team members, and the continual education of staff and administration were a few of the challenges that they dealt with on a regular basis. While these teachers may perceive these challenges as overwhelming, they actually welcomed the challenges as an impetus for growth and an opportunity to prove to themselves and others that they had valuable knowledge and skills that would benefit students. Most importantly, they saw that their role allowed students to achieve their highest level of independence, which was the overarching goal of all the TVIs.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to review the findings from the research, discuss the conclusions, and provide recommendations for future development for professional growth, state policy, and research. This qualitative research was conducted with teachers of the visually impaired within Washington State to gain a clearer understanding of their working conditions and the issues that affected their ability to meet the needs of their students and to determine what effect these issues had on job satisfaction. For this research study, I selected an interpretive or constructivist approach to conduct a basic qualitative study that relied on the TVIs to provide their perceptions and invite an examination of their current work realities (Merriam, 2006). This approach allowed each TVI to share their perspective free from expectations of other TVIs as each educational setting had individual nuances despite the commonality among the TVIs of being an itinerant TVI. That is, the TVIs did not have daily contact with other TVIs within the study. The result of the research was a rich descriptive narrative of the work conditions of TVIs within Washington State.

Review of Study

There is limited research regarding the issues that affect teachers of the visually impaired and this study attempted to examine the limited issues from the research and unearth new findings. TVIs for this study represented teachers with varying levels of education experience and were working in districts of varied sizes, with several teachers serving multiple districts. In addition, selections of TVIs were from both the Eastside and Westside of Washington State, providing a purposeful sample of TVIs. After an observation, the TVIs participated in semi-
structured interviews, which produced detailed recordings for transcription and analysis. There were sixteen TVIs selected, but only thirteen completed the process, which was adequate as saturation began to occur at interview 11 (Meriam 2009). The method chosen for the coding cycles was constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and establishing trustworthiness occurred through internal and external methods that included triangulation, member checking, thick description, and prolonged engagement (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Several key themes emerged from the study, including contextual factors faced by TVIs, connections for direct support of students, connections for indirect support of self, and finding satisfaction. The first theme, identifying the contextual factors, described the issues that are part of the itinerant world of TVIs, despite the educational setting, experience of the TVI, or geographic location. Within this theme were several subthemes that emerged in both special education and TVI literature and were observed in the TVI’s setting and identified in the interviews. The first of these subthemes was the issue of caseload, or the number and severity of student served by the TVI (Berry et al., 2011; Griffin-Shirley et al., 2004). Second, TVIs struggled with using time effectively to meet the needs of students and dealing with constant interruptions and obstacles that affected their effective planning. The third subtheme was the continual quest for knowledge to stay ahead of technology, medical conditions, and new educational practices (Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004). Given the wide range of students, birth to 21, and the myriad of eye conditions and their effect on education, the TVI had to commit to continual professional development and reading research. The challenge of dealing with others to accomplish goals for students was the fourth subtheme as often TVIs were the outsider, needing the support and buy-in from team members to serve students in an effective manner. The final contextual subtheme was dealing with isolation. In most districts, the TVI
was the only professional serving visually impaired students with little peer support to ensure appropriate practice (Brown & Beamish, 2012; Mason et al., 2000) and minimal direction for their professional development from their district administration.

The second theme in this study showed that TVIs worked to offset challenges through connections with others, and these connections followed a development from outsider with knowledge to trusted colleague. The subthemes that emerged from this theme addressed each of these roles. First, TVIs had the responsibility to address the most immediate of needs so that the student could function in the classroom while the second subtheme addressed the issue of the TVI as the trainer or educator tasked with developing the staff who worked with the students. Sometimes this was professional training in the use of technology or braille, but often it was training to dispel myths and correct co-dependent practices between staff and student. Third, was the TVI’s role as the problem solver, which looked to the TVI to be the lead in identifying the needs for the student and resource guide for the classroom teacher and district administration.

The third theme of the study was establishing indirect support for the TVI through building level and district connections. Several subthemes emerged from this theme, the first of which was connections with colleagues who provided acceptance and helped to alleviate the issues of isolation. The second subtheme focused on using the connection to administration to help with resource needs, support, and possible reduction in caseload. The third subtheme was a connection to the larger field of TVIs who provided guidance, support and a listening ear and who understood the challenges of the job (Rude et al., 2005). The fourth subtheme interrelated with indirect support but focused more on issues of identity and value of being a TVI and an effective member crucial to the educational needs of the student.
The final theme addressed the issue of job satisfaction. The TVIs quickly dispelled much of the research literature that identified many of the contextual issues as challenges that create dissatisfaction as all of them thoroughly embraced their profession, feeling challenged and fulfilled (Billingsley, 2004; Boyer and Gillespie, 2000; Gersten et al., 2001). Two subthemes emerged in the interviews regarding this topic, which were student service and advocacy. The first subtheme of service to the student was a role that the teachers embraced as they saw themselves as both provider of skill training and a conduit of information that would help a student achieve their highest level of independence. The other subtheme was the advocacy on behalf of the student, which involved the finding of resources, training of staff, and changing the attitudes towards students with visual impairment. The teacher in this study viewed themselves as a critical and necessary component for the success of their students and despite the challenges of the job, they all expressed a dedication to their profession and the students they served.

Discussion of Results

Contextual issues.

The nature of the job of TVI is unique as the role is itinerant lacking the supports found in traditional education settings as a result, there are several issues that the TVI could not control. The review of the literature identified several factors that affect all TVIs at some level despite setting. These were: 1) caseload, 2) time, 3) support for students and the knowledge required to be effective in their job, 4) a need for ongoing professional development, 5) professional concerns regarding TVI shortage (Griffin-Shirley, et al., 2004), 6) isolation, 7) increasing paperwork, and 8) political issues within schools and districts (Correa- Torres and Johnson-Howell, 2004). This study supported all of these findings but identified caseloads, managing
time, continual learning, dealing with others and isolation as the major contextual issues that affected TVIs in Washington State.

All of these issues created an odd combination of challenge, expectation, and fulfillment. The teachers who had caseloads covering large distances spent between 20 and 35% of their week traveling to students and spent considerable time creating educational structures or tending relationships to make certain that instruction would continue once they left the school. The challenge was to meet the needs of the varied students within the allotted time, which was often overwhelming. The research indicated that building of caseloads is a reflection of student need and not by district numbers (CEC, 1999; Russ et al., 2001), but TVIs served caseloads that represented the entire district population of visually impaired students. Russ, Chiang, and Bongers (2001), noted that when caseloads increased, there were substantial increases in the number of meetings, demands for time, paperwork, and frustration for the TVIs. Despite these challenges, teachers felt that they had little option other than to work harder, faster, and longer to meet the expectations of the special education team. Several TVIs expressed concern that they were not meeting all the needs of their students and were neglecting several of the Expanded Core Curriculum skills (Corn & Spungin, 2003). Without a longer instructional day, or unlimited access to the student, the teachers had to make difficult decisions in prioritizing the skills that taught to students. The result was that skills in the area of daily living, social and recreation or leisure were often ignored or paired with other school offerings in the hope that the student would attain these skills through participation. The research completed by Sacks and Wolf (1992) pointed out that these are the skills that are most necessary for successful integration into the adult world, and the difference between employment and unemployment (National Center on Severe and Sensory Disabilities, 2013). In the end, the amount of service
available reflected the number of students on the caseload, which became a management issue of resources and time.

The management of time was not an exact science as there were several factors that affected the TVIs, most of which relied on communication with others on the educational team. Surprisingly, time management was not a skill taught in the university programs and teachers had to learn from others or through trial and error. Each of them had devised strategies to meet the needs of students, often through the building of structures within the classroom and training staff how to work effectively with students. Despite these structures, the TVIs experienced demands that were greater than the resources (Brown & Beamish, 2012; Rude, et al., 2005; Spungin & Ferrell, 2000). As TVIs travel from student to student, they had additional unforeseen issues of traffic, finding parking at the schools, and unplanned consultations with building personnel. Perhaps the most glaring issue involved instances when the TVI would arrive at a school only to find that the student was not present and the communication with the TVI did not occur. The TVIs did not spend time lamenting lost teaching opportunities but would reconstruct their daily schedule and look forward. This practice not only demonstrated organizational skills but also an effective emotional coping mechanism for the TVI that allowed them the freedom to let go of the frustration of the moment by employing a philosophy of, “It is what it is,” or “there’s always next time,” and “Tomorrow is another day.” Teachers often used this lost instructional time for professional growth by doing preparation, reviewing technology, and researching topics related to the field.

It was interesting that none of the TVIs called themselves experts in their profession and several shunned the idea that they had it altogether. The main reason for the unwillingness to be the expert was the vast knowledge that the TVIs felt they did not possess. The expectation from
the classroom was that the TVI would have the answers to resolve issues or be able to answer in-depth questions about a student’s vision, behavior, or future needs (Holbrook & Koenig, 2000; Spungin & Ferrell, 2000). However, the TVIs found this “answer” role difficult as their average caseload covered from birth to 21 years of age, embodying the full spectrum of vision disorders with several students having multiple disabilities. Few felt that they had all the answers and spent a considerable amount of time learning new technology, teaching practices, student medical conditions and how vision loss affected education (Silberman & Sacks, 2000). Despite the challenge, the majority of the TVIs felt that the need to be continually learning kept the job fresh and exciting and many connected to other TVIs within the state to find answers to difficult situations that often were not student issues, but finding effective ways to deal with adults.

Relationships and dealing with others can be difficult regardless of role, but TVIs found some unique challenges due to their position within the team as many felt unwelcomed in new settings and met resistance. TVIs felt that this resistance was due to fear caused by a lack of understanding about blindness or a resentment of the student and another adult affecting the classroom teacher’s ability to teach in a familiar manner. Sometimes resistance was present within the building with staff being reluctant to release teaching space or support scheduling changes to address the student needs (Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Rude et al., 2005). Regardless of the reasons, resistance was a shared experience. The most common approach used by the TVIs to remove the resistance was to be clear with communication and provide continual support to the staff with the hopes of establishing relationships within the team. Building connections were difficult for some of the TVIs and all mentioned that they fought the view of being an outsider to the team, which created feelings of being isolated.
Isolation is a real experience of itinerant teachers and can create issues with connections, teacher effectiveness, and job satisfaction as established in the research (Billingsley, 2004; Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; DeMik, 2008; Brownell et al., 2002; Rude et al., 2005). The teachers who served the rural districts or multiple sites often viewed themselves as a team of one with little support from administration and the professional field. These individuals worked hard to establish links to TVIs in other districts or throughout the state for professional connections (Rude et al., 2005; Olmstead, 2005, p.152). Those fortunate to have some support still felt that identity issues created a disconnection with district staff in regards to their role and a misunderstanding by office personnel and staff who were outside the immediate team. The results were that communication with the TVI was often overlooked, or not relayed, creating missed meetings and opportunities for instruction.

The situation for most of the TVIs was that they had no professional community within their districts, which created feelings of loneliness or of being an outsider. Being an outsider was not a comfortable position for any of the TVIs, and they fought this identity issue by identifying someone within the state to connect with for professional support. A few teachers had been successful in establishing connections with professional communities in their districts and were able to build relationships that extended beyond school boundaries.

**Connections for direct support.**

The reality of itinerant teaching is that to have success with students there is a need to build connections with teams, so that education happens on a continual basis and not just when the TVI is present (Billingsley, 2004; Correa-Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; DeMik, 2008; Brownell et al., 2002). Creating connections began on the most basic of levels by dealing with the immediate issue regarding the needs of the student. The TVIs found themselves tasked with
creating a solution that would allow the classroom to move in a familiar manner and it was the goal of the TVI to help the team understand that there are rarely simple solutions. The TVI operated from the framework of developing skills over time that would help the student achieve their highest level of independence, and this goal sometimes ran contrary to the classroom approach of achieving student success framed within the scope of an academic year.

Once the TVIs had established connections within the classroom and had provided supports for the student, they began working on the long-term changes through training. Often times, they were responsible for training paraeducators in braille or the use of technology and providing professional development to all the staff on how to work with the student. The TVIs felt that the bigger issue was that of dispelling myths of blindness and helping the staff to have appropriate expectations for student performance (Holbrook & Koenig, 2000; Silberman & Sacks, 2000). It was common for students to receive praise for finding their seat, going to the restroom by themselves, and completing mundane tasks. In addition, many students received allowances for noncompliance and did not face the natural consequences for incomplete assignments or unacceptable behavior. It was a challenge for TVIs to help staff treat the visually impaired student as just another student and not a special attraction within the school.

The TVIs had to determine the appropriate approach to education of the visually impaired student through the process of reviewing student records, completing observations, and having the students demonstrate their skills. This process usually occurred at the beginning of each school year creating a need for intensive staff training, obtaining resources, and meeting with administration regarding student needs. The relationships with administration were mostly positive for the TVIs and they realized that the administration was in a precarious position, extending trust to the TVI to provide accurate information and valid financial requests for
student needs such as braille books or technology. When TVIs exercised sound judgment and provided strong data to back their requests, they validated the trust extended to them by the administration. This established reciprocity of support between the TVIs and the administration and most of the TVIs found that administrators relied on them to be proactive and troubleshoot difficult situations with the student or parent. In turn, the TVIs felt that administration was supportive of requests made on behalf of the student and personally supported within their programs. It became apparent that the TVIs possessed several skills that were more administrative in nature than what was typical of a classroom teacher. They had to negotiate the political climates within a myriad of settings, use data to support financial requests, and practice a solutions based approach to problems, presenting multiple options to the administration for student needs and programs. The TVIs did not acquire these skills in a university program but learned through experiences, which were sometimes very painful.

**Connections for indirect support.**

An interesting finding in this study was the use of connections for student support and ultimately for personal support to address the contextual challenges noted in the research by Correa-Torres and Johnson-Howell (2004). In all of the interviews, no TVI explained a sequential plan to build this indirect support, but rather it was a natural occurring phenomenon that happened in relationship building. The idea of using others for personal gain and benefit was not manipulative as much as it was a symbiotic construct of making connections for personal benefit. The TVIs began with the overarching goal of helping students achieve their highest level of independence, which placed them in direct connection with the team that worked daily with the students. Their first role was that of outside knowledge provider, which in time moved to role of a valued team member. These connections helped to offset feelings of isolation...
and frustration regarding the work they were trying to accomplish with the student and when the
team embraced the training and techniques provided by the TVI, the TVIs felt a sense of worth
and value, which led to feelings of satisfaction regarding their role. With this acceptance came
professional respect from other team members, resulting in team members seeking out the TVI
for professional opinion as well as opportunities to be collegial or social.

The connections with administration were not as frequent but were in many ways more
advantageous as the administrator held positional authority and financial decision making
authority that could have a direct effect on the teachers’ ability to be successful. The TVIs noted
that these relationships were sometimes tough to build as the administrators changed quite
frequently and required continual education regarding the role of the TVI. When the TVI had
established the reciprocity of trust, they found that the administration was willing to invite them
into the decision making process regarding expenditures, and programs for students. This often
opened the door for dialogue regarding needs of caseload adjustment, professional development,
and the hiring of additional teachers or paraeducators. The outcome of these connections created
feelings of respect, satisfaction, and in situations where additional support was hired, relief.

While the connections for indirect support with school staff were essential, it did not
negate the need to connect with peers from the field. The TVIs within this study had identified
several peers from around the state who served as emotional and knowledge support and they
relied frequently on these individuals (Billingsley, 2004; Brown & Beamish, 2012; Correa-
Torres & Johnson-Howell, 2004; Brownell, et al., 2002). Several of the TVIs suggested that
newer teachers find a mentor who could not only be that empathetic person and sounding board,
but also a source for knowledge.
One of the subthemes that emerged was the issue of identity of position within schools and districts. It was important for the TVIs to be known as a TVI and that people would value and respect that role. This identity developed quickly within the team and classroom but did not always translate to the building or the district level as TVIs found themselves frequently stopped and questioned by district administration regarding their identity and purpose in the school. While this is a good safety measure, some TVIs felt devalued and treated as an outsider. A misunderstanding of their role and identity created suspicions from staff regarding the TVIs effectiveness with students and use of time, and the TVIs were keenly aware that it was critical that they operate with high integrity. They were purposeful in making familial connections in buildings by stopping in at the office and greeting the staff with a continual introduction of their name, title, and purpose. This was for an awareness but also part of building a favorable connection with the office because the perception was that the office staff was a primary source of information for administration. Favorable connections with the office staff ensured that the administrator knew that the TVIs had been present, cordial, and reliable.

Equally important to establishing identity was that of feeling appreciated and valued. The TVIs realized that they worked for the student and there was an intrinsic value attached, but that praise, acceptance, and appreciation was something that they desired from the team and administration. When this occurred, the TVIs felt that they worked harder for the student and the team.

**Finding satisfaction.**

Satisfaction with the job was one issue that surfaced many times in the research literature, but this was not an issue noted by the TVIs within the study or in the research conducted by Griffin–Shirley, and team (2004). TVIs found a great deal of satisfaction with the job for several
reasons, the first of which was the challenge. As described throughout this study, the job of TVI was very complex, requiring a strong commitment to ongoing learning, and creative problem solving. The TVIs found that this challenge kept the job fresh and exciting.

In addition, TVIs enjoyed the one to one work with students, which continued year after year, allowing them to serve a student during their entire academic career, spanning birth to graduation. They enjoyed building long-term relationships with their students and seeing the affect they had on the students’ lives and their families. Their role of advocate for the student, allowed them to create change within a school environment through the education of staff and families.

All of them were very engaged in the lives of their students and with their profession, and they expressed a great deal of satisfaction with no desire to leave the field, despite the many challenges and the sometimes frustrating conditions of their work.

**Implications of the Study**

In an examination of the major themes of this study, it is very apparent that several issues have a direct effect on the TVI in Washington State. There are the factors, which are contextual in nature and ever present that include, caseload, time management, knowledge, dealing with others and isolation. Then, there are the issues that tied to the contextual issues representing support for the student and support for the TVI. It is the secondary issues that the TVI can have some influence or some direct level of control. For example, building connections with teachers was critical in order to assure that students would receive services when the TVI was not present. Several TVIs felt that the stronger the relationship with the classroom staff, the better services the student received.
The majority of the research on the issues that affect special education teachers and teachers of the visually impaired focused on the outside factors exerting a pressure that limited teacher effectiveness (Billingsley, 2004, Mason et al., 2000; McLeskey et al., 2004; Pennington, et al., 2009). Very little of the research presented solutions to address these issues and the literature itself was almost void of techniques that the teachers could use to limit the effect of issues. The study did identify many of the same issues found within the literature but perhaps more valuable was that the study unearthed what teachers were doing to offset the issues.

Teachers established relationships with the teams, administration, and peers for two reasons. The first was to provide direct support for the student and the seconds was to find support for themselves in dealing with the contextual issues in which they lived. Establishing relationships with the team meant that services for the student would be more effective than if the teacher provided all the services themselves and helped to establish their position as a valued member of the team. The indirect support that the TVI received helped lessen issues of resistance and difficult connections and helped to alleviate isolation in several instances. The connections with administrators helped to provide direct support to the student by garnering resources, support for programs, and inclusion within the school. The indirect support for the TVI resulted in support of program and possible reduction in caseload, thereby improving issues with time management and satisfaction and connections with peers provided a direct conduit of information and empathy, which the teachers found invaluable.

The TVIs themselves demonstrated effective tools for dealing with several contextual issues, highlighting the unique nature of being an effective TVI. The first was dealing with the needs of the student within the traditional classroom setting as frequently the TVI and the classroom teacher had two different views of student success. The classroom teacher was
charged with helping students meet their grade level expectations within the scope of the school year while the TVI, supportive of this notion, was geared to look towards the future with goal of helping students achieve their highest level of independence. At times, these two views conflicted as the classroom teacher waived opportunities for a student to demonstrate independence in order to move the student through a lesson in a more timely fashion. During these moments the TVI had to employ strong skills of negotiating the political climate in order to advocate for the needs of the student.

It was not uncommon for the TVI to be directly involved with administration regarding programming and advocacy on behalf of the student, demonstrating skills that were more in line with administrators than traditional teachers. The TVIs were very adept with using data to drive requests for the student and often this data came from student performance, national research, or current findings from other TVIs. Usually these requests were presented to the administration with several solutions or options which was an approach usually appreciated by administration because it allowed them to make decisions based on the research provided by the TVI.

These TVIs displayed strong skills in adapting to various school climates and political situations within districts by identifying people in power positions and developing networks to resolve issues. This was critical for their practice, especially for those that served multiple districts and schools as they were limited by time. The most skilled of the TVIs seemed to move through schools and districts with an ease that was not casual, but confident about their position and their purpose.
Implications for Washington State: Concerns, Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Concerns.

The TVIs described their jobs as fulfilling and expressed their intent to continue in this field until retirement, which for several was only a year away. The attrition that is coming to Washington State with retirements poses several problems for the field as there is a current shortage of TVIs within the state, and there is no teacher training program to offset these deficits. Recent discussions with the public universities in Washington State have yielded very little interest in the creation of a program with the larger universities declining because the program would not be cost effective (C. Meador, personal communication, March 2014). This study demonstrated that teachers are not planning to leave but are susceptible to being overworked in districts that cannot find additional TVIs or support personnel. The result is that students will receive an inferior education as they are limited in their service from the TVI (Corn & Spungin, 2003; Mason et al., 2000; Olmstead, 2005). This lack of teachers creates direct issues tied to caseloads.

Caseloads should be addressed statewide using one of several caseload management tools that are available at this time, but currently few districts employ such a practice, allowing student numbers within a district to determine the caseload, which creates wide disparity between neighboring districts and throughout the state. The autonomous nature of Washington State school districts makes it difficult to create a large-scale effort to address these issues.

Policy.

The shortage of teachers of the visually impaired is a national problem that is now in its fifth decade. The expectation that states will be able to find enough teachers to meet the needs of their students is not realistic unless states begin to address this issue itself. Washington State has
long relied on districts to determine what is best for their programs and outside of state testing and the adoption of the Common Core has placed few requirements in regards to services within a district. Federal law, IDEA, dictates that students with visual impairments have access to a trained professional in the area of education and the related services of orientation and mobility, but Washington State law does not require formally trained teachers of the visually impaired to provide this service. An endorsement for teachers of the visually impaired is available but it is not a required certification in Washington State. This lack of certification requirement masks the current shortage within our state and allows districts the freedom to hire TVIs or to fill those positions with general special education staff when a TVI is not present. This substitution of service undermines the student providing inferior education (Carlson, 2001; Corn et al., 1995). As of this time, Washington State represents a handful of states that do not require this certification. Until the requirement for certification exists there will not be a unified impetus to provide funding to a public university to create a teacher training program meeting the current and future shortages within the state.

Another policy to examine is the role of the ESDs within Washington State. One of the roles of the ESD is to provide support and services to districts that do not need full-time teachers or specialists, allowing districts to conserve their dollars by contracting for their current needs. Only four of the nine ESDs currently hire teachers of the visually impaired and as a result, there are regions that lack services and cannot find access to a TVI. ESDs should be required to have TVIs and orientation and mobility specialists on their staff, so that every district will have access to trained personnel for their students. There should be a provision of state funding to offset the costs associated with these positions due to the low-incidence nature of the disability and the
transiency of students within regions. This would allow the ESDs to maintain TVIs on their staff, regardless of fluctuating student numbers.

A final policy to consider would be to establish reasonable working conditions for the TVI. This should reflect caseload numbers and severity and include geographical distances traveled. The number of students that exist within a district or region often establishes caseloads but the number of students is not always an accurate indicator of reasonable workload. Caseloads need to examine student severity, geographical distances between students, and level of support within each education setting (Olmstead, 2005). There are several accepted tools used for managing caseloads, and Washington State should formally adopt or make recommendations to districts to employ these tools when determining caseload for its teachers.

**Practice.**

The role of administrative support is one of the most critical issues that needs to improve. This improvement can include appropriate caseloads, resources for instruction, adequate workspace, professional development, and trust. During this study, it was quite common to see TVIs meeting with students in a clean, spare closet, hallway, or a common area that serves as a major thoroughfare for other students. The constant interruptions affected the students’ concentration and created frustration for teachers sending a message to the TVI that they are an afterthought to the education that occurs in the classroom and within the school. The research literature suggests that these actions create negative message about the value of the TVI (Brownell et al., 2002; Carlson & Billingsley, 2001; Griffin et al., 2003; Zabel & Zabel, 2002). Given the current shortage that exists within Washington State, administrators should be working hard to make TVIs feel valued and appreciated, and studies have shown that by providing a supportive culture districts have better success of keeping personnel (Griffin et al., 2002).
Another practice that needs to occur should come from the field of professionals that is the establishment of a teacher mentor program for new teachers or teachers who are new to Washington State. Mentor programs have proven to be effective in addressing the needs of new special education teachers within schools and have found success similar to that of general education classrooms (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten, et al., 2001). The design of this program would establish the peer supports that provide knowledge and content expertise as well as an understanding counsel.

What is evident is that resources to meet the needs of students have not grown and given the historical shortages of TVIs, the limited number of training programs and the continually decreasing funding from OSEP, it is time to consider how we structure the role of the TVI, especially in the rural settings. A few of the TVIs in this study relied heavily on trained and untrained staff to provide instructional content between the scheduled visits of the TVI. This placed an undue burden on the TVI as they were required to create materials and write explicit instructions for the delivery of lessons. It also created some concern on behalf of the TVIs that students were not receiving adequate services and expressed uneasiness as they felt they were not meeting professional expectations.

**Future research.**

When I designed this study, the goal was to find those hidden issues that were affecting teachers. However, as I began the interviews and observations, there were few hidden issues. The issues were very apparent and identified by previous research but what emerged was a depth of impact that the issues had on the TVIs. Each of the contextual issues carried a weight that the teachers felt on a daily basis, and they had designed effective coping skills to deal with those
issues by building connections. The idea of connections for student support made perfect sense, but the indirect support that teachers drew from these connections was not expected.

A future study could examine the connections and the indirect support that teachers received to determine if these connections were reciprocal. Interviews with the support staff, classroom teachers, and administration could reveal insight into the development of relationships with the TVI. This information could help to alter approaches to instruction, deal with the previously mentioned resistance and provide more effective support strategies.

Another future topic of research would be to examine the skill sets that successful itinerant TVIs demonstrated. The TVIs in this study used many skills to navigate political circles in order to establish programs for students, to create roles of advocacy and to grow connections. A review of leadership literature would highlight skills that effective administrators possessed, which would help frame the study to determine if the skills of the TVI were similar.

A final topic would be to study the rural itinerants that have excessive distances to cover and large caseloads. It would be helpful to examine the structures that they have created to meet the needs of students. An examination of other sparsely populated states like North Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming may yield possible solutions that could benefit Washington State.

**Personal Researcher Statement**

I have worked in the field of educating visually impaired students for 28 years, and the world of TVIs has changed little during this time. I can recall my early years as an itinerant teacher, scrambling to get from student to student throughout Central Oregon. I remember feeling lost and confused at times and often embarrassed that I was not able to meet all the needs of the students I served. Despite these challenges and my feelings of always running behind, I found myself highly satisfied with the job. Now, all these many years later I am still in the field,
working in an administrative position but still deeply connected by a passion for the education of students with vision loss.

The time that I was able to spend with TVIs around the state confirmed that this deep connection to the field was something that many of us shared. The TVIs all shared similar situations, despite geographical location or size of district. They faced the same challenges, only the players in the scenarios changed, and as a result, they spoke the same language. I was told to be aware of this process, that my asking TVIs to share their experiences would be a powerful connection with the individuals. I expected this to occur, but the bridges that were built surprised me. Relationships that previously existed went to a deeper level and acquaintances became relationships as TVIs opened up, sharing their work experiences and often shedding tears. It was also amazing to see their passion for the field ignite as they spoke about the success of students or situations when they had to be a champion for a student. The interview process provided them an opportunity to ask aloud, “Am I the only one that feels this way about this job?” and “Am I normal?” The answer to those questions are “No,” and “Yes.” The TVIs were not alone in their passion, and they were indeed very normal. When asked about leaving the field, the answer was always an emphatic, “No!” They felt fortunate to have arrived in this career serving visually impaired students, because few had any connection with individuals that were blind prior to starting their university training programs. Several of the TVIs felt that fate or divine intervention brought them to this place.

In my role as State Vision Consultant, I have the ability to structure my work and take on the tasks that have meaning for the field, and selfishly, items that I enjoy. Many of the issues that were discussed were on my personal “to do” list, but many did not have a sense of urgency surrounding them. These opportunities allowed me to reorganize some of my efforts for this
year and moved some projects forward. Some of the issues that I had been dealing with had lost their shine and had been pushed aside until the political climate at the state level changed, or I was able to make inroads with a university regarding teacher training. These connections lit a fire, so to speak, and deepened my resolve to continue to fight for policy change within our state that will help to make the world of the TVI more manageable. I feel a renewed sense of energy and have a clearer idea of how to approach issues of professional development for teachers, creating structures for support and being a resource so that TVIs can function more effectively. In short, I feel very fortunate to be in this field and this study, the time spent with TVIs has reassured me that I made the right career choice many years ago.

Conclusion

The job of a TVI requires a passion to work with often overlooked and underserved students. This field is young enough historically, and small enough for today’s teacher to feel that connection to the past and to capture that spirit with the work they do on a daily basis. It draws heavily from our history of teachers that have gone before and made a difference in the lives of students marginalized by society. This history stretches back to the work of Diderot in France in 1872 (Margo, Harmon & Smith, 2013) and continues forward with perhaps the most famous of blind educators, Annie Sullivan who worked with Helen Keller. A lesser-known story but equally as powerful was the story of the Piney Woods School started by Laurence Jones in rural Mississippi. Laurence C. Jones, a recent graduate of the University of Iowa felt called to rural Mississippi in 1909, when he learned that 80% of the population in Rankin County was illiterate. He arrived in Piney woods with less than $2, a bible, and a few textbooks and began about his work under a cedar tree (Le Jeune, 2013). His students were sharecroppers’ children and despite racism, natural disasters, and a thwarted lynching he managed to persevere. When
an African American blind student came to Piney Woods, he expanded his mission to create the Mississippi Blind School for Negroes at the Piney Wood School, so that all students would have access to education. His philosophy of education was to train the head, heart, and hands. The head was traditional learning while the heart addressed the spiritual condition of the student. The hands were vocational education, as every student was required to master three skills that would lead to employment.

Over one hundred years have passed since the beginning of Piney Woods, yet the mission of the TVI is pretty much the same, which is to help students reach their highest level of independence. Similar to Laurence C. Jones, TVIs teach students to access the curriculum but also teach the skills necessary for students to function in the real world. Many of the TVIs in this study felt similar to Dr. Jones and believed that this job was a calling and that they were destined for this career. I cannot and would not dispute the belief, as I too, often feel overwhelmed and blessed to have landed here in this profession. There are many issues that challenge TVIs in their attempts to be effective with students, and they have found ways to combat many of the issues. There are growing shortages due to retirements, a form of attrition within the field, yet the remaining TVIs are still passionate about their work. The combination of the challenge, the intrinsic value that arrives in helping students find success and helping families find hope, creates a deep satisfaction for these TVIs. It has been both a privilege and an inspiration to see these TVIs at work for students, and I am thankful they are in the field.
REFERENCES


Interview Questions

Interview Guide

1. Please tell me how you became a TVI.
2. Please tell me about your work as a TVI.
3. What has made this work easier?
4. What has made this work more difficult?
5. Please tell me about your interactions with school and district administration
6. How do these interactions influence your work?
7. How do you perceive your connection to the schools and districts you serve?
8. How does that connection influence your work?
9. How do the factors you have mentioned relate to your sense of being satisfied with your job?
10. Have you ever considered leaving the field of TVI?
   a. If so, what were the factors that brought you to that point of consideration?
   b. If not, what were the factors that led you to your decision to stay?
11. What needs to happen in our field to keep teachers to work with students with visual impairments?
12. What would you say to a colleague who was contemplating leaving the field?
13. What advice would you give to new teachers who are just entering the field?
14. Is there anything else about the factors that influence your job satisfaction and retention as a TVI that you would like to add?