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WHY DO THEY STAY? A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE MOTIVATION OF
SOUTH CAROLINA ELEMENTARY SELF-CONTAINED SPECIAL EDUCATION
TEACHERS WHO PERSIST IN THE CLASSROOM

By
Judith A. Mills

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Judith A. Mills under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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I began this journey 3 years ago to fulfill what I believe is God's purpose for my life. Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us to "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart. In all of your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight." I have trusted the Lord throughout this journey, and I have seen Him bless me time and time again.

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Abstract

WHY DO THEY STAY? A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE MOTIVATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA ELEMENTARY SELF-CONTAINED SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO PERSIST IN THE CLASSROOM. Mills, Judith A., 2021:

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The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the motivational factors that have influenced South Carolina (SC) elementary self-contained special education teachers to remain in the profession beyond the 5-year mark, while despite having the same experiences, many others quickly leave the profession behind. Based on the theoretical framework of Ryan and Deci's (2018) motivational theory of self-determination, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of 10 special education teachers. Data were collected through interviews, member checked, coded, and analyzed for common themes. The results indicated that student growth and success; relationships with students, parents, and colleagues; collaboration and planning; and a mindset of perseverance were the top four reasons these teachers have persisted in the classroom. The goal of this study was to identify motivational factors that may assist in keeping special education teachers in the profession beyond the 5-year mark.

Keywords: motivation, qualitative, self-contained special education teachers, self-determination theory

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Over the last 3 decades, there has been an increasing shortage of qualified special education teachers. This shortage includes a turnover rate of almost 25% among special education teachers over the past 20 years, a fact that has only added to the increasing shortage (Mrstik et al., 2019). Researchers have spent time studying the reason these teachers exit the profession. Special education teachers are leaving to work in non-education-related fields, transferring to general education classrooms, and moving to other special education positions (IRIS Center, 2020). More specifically, Lambert (2020) cited being overwhelmed by the workload, working with little support, and dealing with demanding parents as reasons special education teachers leave the classroom. Knowing these results, researchers have conversely expressed the need for further study of the factors and motivations that influence teachers to stay in their current positions (Billingsley, 2004; Stewart, 2017; Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze the motivational factors that impact why some special education teachers remain in the profession beyond the 5-year mark, while despite having the same experiences, many others quickly leave the profession behind.

Statement of the Problem

In the past decade, more than 17% of special education teachers in the United States have left the profession (Samuels & Harwin, 2019), and most of them leave with less than 5 years of teaching experience (Billingsley et al., 2004). Special education teachers are leaving the profession at a rate of 12.3%, almost twice as fast as their general education colleagues who are leaving at a rate of 7.6%. Since 2014, a 35% drop in the

number of college students majoring in special education teacher preparation programs has occurred (Dayton, 2019). During this same period, the number of special education services has only declined by 1%, leaving a caseload of one special education teacher for every 17 special education students (Samuels & Harwin, 2019).

According to the South Carolina (SC) Annual Educator Supply & Demand Report released in December 2020 by the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement (CERRA), approximately 6,000 teachers in 2019-2020 from SC did not return to the same position in the 2020-2021 school year. When compared to the previous year, this statistic equaled a 10% decrease. This report also documented 42% of all teachers in SC who left the profession had 5 or fewer years of teaching experience in the state and 16% had 1 year or less. These percentages showed an increase of 36% and 13% from the previous year. SC reported 699 vacant certified teaching positions at the start of the 2020-2021 school year; of those 699 vacant positions, 20% of them were in special education.

If special education teacher shortages and high teacher attrition rates continue, it will become even harder for schools to hire qualified special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). A need for special education teachers exists in the United States; and currently, there are not enough teachers to fill the demand. In fact, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) predicted that between 2018-2028, the needed number of special education teachers will grow by 3%, yet the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics predicted by the start of the 2021-2022 school year, 3,200 unfilled special education teaching positions across the United States will exist. Further, the potential turnover of existing special education teachers may have a critical effect on the success of

students with disabilities (Lesh et al., 2017).

Purpose of the Study

Hester et al. (2020) found teacher perceptions of being unsupported, overworked, and underpaid have had an adverse effect on their well-being, causing them to experience burnout and a feeling of being overwhelmed. The question remains as to what motivates some teachers to stay in the profession, despite these feelings. This study focused on SC elementary school self-contained special education teachers who have stayed in the classroom at least 5 years, when many others have not, and what motivators contributed to the success of keeping them in the special education classroom. Because elementary, middle, and high school teachers, as well as self-contained, resource, and inclusion teachers, have different expectations and demands placed upon them, this study focused on elementary self-contained special education teachers.

According to Lesh et al. (2017), extensive research has been conducted on special education teacher attrition. This research has provided a basic understanding of the factors influencing the intent of special education teachers to leave the profession; however, this research does not portray the stories and experiences of those who have remained. Lesh et al. expressed the need for more qualitative research as to why special education teachers have remained in the profession and how this research might be used when preparing preservice teachers, mentoring new teachers, and encouraging special education teachers to remain beyond the 5-year mark. This study will help fill the void Lesh et al. suggested currently exists in research on the motivators that keep special educators coming back to their classrooms.

Significance of the Study

There are several reasons why educators, administrators, and parents should be concerned with the attrition rates of special education teachers. The current number of special education positions currently unfilled has led to unqualified personnel filling these classroom positions and in turn has resulted in negative effects on student achievement. Billingsley and Bettini (2019) researched the effects that the lack of highly qualified teachers had on student success and found some students with disabilities were not getting the services they needed and were not getting their educational and social needs met by the school system. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA), first passed in 1975, mandated public schools provide all students with a free, appropriate, public education. According to Billingsley and Bettini, for many special education students, the mandate is not being fulfilled due to the current lack of qualified special education teachers in the public school setting.

In addition to the concern of having unqualified teachers in special education classrooms, educators, administrators, and parents should also be concerned with the attrition rates of special education teachers because of the challenge and cost of replacing teachers who leave the profession. Replacing the large number of teachers leaving the classroom has had a detrimental effect on economic resources that could be better used elsewhere. Filling a vacancy costs \$21,000 on average due to the costs of recruiting and training new teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Finally, teachers moving from one school to another has also caused additional problems. One problem is teacher shortages in schools with a high percentage of students of color and students living in poverty (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Carver-Thomas and

Darling-Hammond (2017) found Title I schools have teacher attrition rates 50% higher than other schools, and special education teacher attrition rates are 70% greater than other schools. New teachers tend to leave high-poverty schools, only increasing the lack of access to experienced teachers for those students (Goldhaber et al., 2018). Some attrition is to be expected because teachers are retiring, but retirement only accounts for 18% of all teachers who leave the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

This study is significant to the retention of special education teachers because it may help professors and administrators understand the factors keeping special education teachers in the classroom. This study might also reduce the number of unqualified teachers in special education classrooms, reduce the amount of money spent on replacing teachers, and reduce the added shortage of teachers in high-poverty schools. By reducing the number of unqualified special education teachers in classrooms and reducing the shortage of special education teachers in high-poverty schools, this study may help increase student achievement.

Stewart (2017) researched the role self-efficacy played in the retention of special education teachers beyond the 5-year mark. Stewart interviewed nine special education teachers from the state of North Carolina (NC). Her research found relationships to be influential in special educators' decisions to remain in the profession. Stewart's study also found collaboration and planning, understanding and training, and encouragement to improve the overall self-efficacy of special education teachers. Stewart suggested further research be done regarding the impact increased training opportunities, as well as administrator and district-level support, have on self-efficacy. Stewart also suggested the need for further study using different methodology and interviewing teachers from other

districts and other states and special education teachers from secondary schools. This study furthered Stewart's research by interviewing SC teachers. This study was also conducted through the conceptual framework of Ryan and Deci's (2018) self-determination theory (SDT), whereas Stewart's research was conducted through Bandura's (1977) social cognitive concept of self-efficacy. This study built upon the work of Stewart with the intent of using the findings to impact how we prepare, educate, and train new special education teachers. The data from this study can impact new special education teachers by providing insight into the motivational factors that have kept other special education teachers in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. This study can also assist in filling the gap that currently exists between the number of special education teachers in the profession and the number of positions currently unfilled.

Research Question

The research question guiding this qualitative study, "What factors have motivated SC elementary self-contained special education teachers to remain in the classroom for more than 5 years," was founded on the idea of understanding the motivators keeping special education teachers in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was SDT, which found its beginnings in the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Psychologists Ryan and Deci (2018) first introduced this framework in their book *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In this book, Deci and Ryan originated a theory of motivation explaining how people are driven by an internal need to grow and gain fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Deci and Ryan suggested self-determination is strengthened when our needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Ryan

& Deci, 2018). The concept of intrinsic motivation plays an important role in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Ackerman (2020) wrote that self-determination, or “the ability or process of making one’s own choices and controlling one’s own life” (para. 2) was an important aspect in understanding the need to feel as if one is in control of their own life.

According to Ryan and Deci (2018), extrinsic motivation is a push to act based on factors resulting in external rewards. Whereas intrinsic motivation comes from inside the individual, external motivation comes from outside. Ryan and Deci explained that humans have internal needs that push them to act differently based on individual values, interests, and morals; but humans, as complex beings, are generally driven by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. We have different goals, desires, and ideas that help us determine the difference between what we want and what we need. Cherry (2019) suggested people tend to be more engaged, motivated, and hard-working when they feel as if they are making a positive difference. According to SDT, the presence of extrinsic rewards leads to a reduction of intrinsic motivation (Cherry, 2019). In fact, SDT is based upon the assumptions that the need for growth drives behavior and autonomous motivation is crucial if one is going to experience success (Cherry, 2019). When discussing why teachers chose to remain in special education when many others quit, it may be important to look at the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that have kept them there; therefore, SDT is a relevant framework. In this study, I interviewed elementary self-contained special education teachers who have remained in the profession past the 5-year mark and looked for themes of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as outlined by Ryan and Deci.

Key Terms

Attrition

The rate at which teachers leave the profession (IGI-Global, 2020).

Burnout

“Burnout is the result of prolonged exposure to job-related stress and interferes with the ability to experience meaning through one's work” (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010, p. 120).

Caseload

“The number of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for whom a teacher serves as ‘case manager’ and is responsible for writing and implementing the IEP” (Minnesota Department of Children, Families, & Learning, 2020, p. 1).

Intrinsic Motivation

“Intrinsic motivation is the act of doing something without any obvious external rewards. You do it because it’s enjoyable and interesting, rather than because of an outside incentive or pressure to do it, such as a reward or deadline” (Santos-Longhurst, 2019, para. 1).

Extrinsic Motivation

The act of doing something to get an external reward. “This can mean getting something in return, such as money, or avoiding getting into trouble, such as losing your job” (Santos-Longhurst, 2019, para. 8).

Qualitative Research

“Qualitative research is a type of social science research that collects and works with non-numerical data and that seeks to interpret meaning from these data that help

understand social life through the study of targeted populations or places” (Crossman, 2020, para. 1).

Retention

“Teachers who remained in the same teaching assignment and the same school as the previous year” (Billingsley, 2004, p. 40).

Self-Contained Special Education Classroom

Self-contained classrooms are typically smaller settings with a fewer number of students. Created to help foster enhanced support for students with special needs or specific difficulties, self-contained rooms are generally comprised of about ten students with unique struggles who are most commonly instructed by a lead teacher with a certification in special education. (Chen, 2020, para. 2)

SDT

“Self-determination theory suggests that people are motivated to grow and change by three innate and universal psychological needs. This theory suggests that people are able to become self-determined when their needs for competence, connection, and autonomy are fulfilled” (Cherry, 2019, para. 3).

Self-Efficacy

“The belief in oneself and one’s capability to perform successfully” (Tuckman & Monetti, 2011, p. 389).

Teacher Dispositions

“Professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities” (Nelsen, 2015, p. 86).

Summary

Special educator attrition was a major problem contributing to the ongoing special education teacher shortages reported by 48 states for the 2016-2017 school year (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2016). Many special educators leave the profession due to the extrinsic factors of paperwork burdens, demands of accountability, inadequacy of resources, and lack of support from administrators (Mrstik et al., 2019). Since researchers have shown special education teachers are leaving the field because of these factors, the question remains as to what is motivating some of them to stay in the profession despite feeling overwhelmed and unappreciated. The purpose of this study was to interview special education teachers who have remained in the field for 5 years or more and look for themes as to why these teachers went into the field of special education and what has kept them there, despite the factors that have caused others to leave.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

Special education teachers are leaving the special education classroom to work in non-education-related fields, transferring to general education classrooms, and moving to other special education positions (IRIS Center, 2020). Many of them are leaving because of overwhelming workloads, little administrative support, and parental expectations (Lambert, 2020). Much quantitative research that provides information on the extrinsic factors influencing special education teachers to leave the classroom has occurred (Billingsley, 2004; Sindelar et al., 2010). Some of these extrinsic factors include lack of administrative support, lack of mentors, lack of professional development, and lack of appropriate conditions and supplies needed to effectively teach students with disabilities (Billingsley, 2004; Sindelar et al., 2010).

This qualitative study looked at the motivational factors having an impact on keeping SC elementary self-contained special education teachers in the classroom. A lack of research exists on why special education teachers have chosen to stay beyond the 5-year mark. This literature review addresses several important areas of the motivators that have kept these teachers in the field. First, Ryan and Deci's (2018) SDT is explained in detail. Second, literature based upon the history of special education is outlined. Third, special education attrition and the connections between special education attrition and SDT are discussed. Fourth, the related topics of special education teacher efficacy, job satisfaction, and the connection these topics have to teachers remaining in the classroom are discussed. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the information presented and its relevance to the study.

SDT

SDT originated around the concept of how a person's social condition can either facilitate or hinder their personal growth. SDT studied how "biological, social, and cultural conditions either enhance or undermine the inherent human capacities for psychological growth, engagement, and wellness" (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 3). The concept of SDT began in the 1970s, with Ryan and Deci furthering their work in 1985 and then continuing their work with SDT well into the 21st century. Deci and Ryan's (2008) initial research addressed the varied amounts and types of human motivation. As they continued to research and the theory evolved, it focused more on the "basic issues of personality development, self-regulation, universal psychological needs, life goals and aspirations, energy and vitality, nonconscious processes, the relations of culture to motivation, affect, behavior, and well-being" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). Ryan and Deci (2018) defined motivation as "what moves people to action. Theories of motivation more specifically focused on what energizes and gives direction to behavior" (p. 13). SDT addressed the motivation of people as their internal predispositions mixed with the environmental factors they encounter daily (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Deci and Ryan (2008) identified three types of motivation: autonomous motivation, controlling motivation, and amotivation. Autonomous motivation stems from someone's intrinsic motivation or desire to participate in the behavior for the enjoyment of the activity. Ryan and Deci (2018) explained that autonomous behaviors are intrinsically motivated because they are an outward display of one's self. Controlling motivations, on the other hand, are extrinsic because these behaviors stem from a person's desire to receive a tangible reward or avoid a punishment. In this case, the

behavior is identified as being controlled. Ryan and Deci pointed out that autonomous and controlling motivations can both lead to action; however, it is autonomous motivation that is connected to high levels of self-determination. Ryan and Deci labeled amotivation as the third type of motivation. Ryan and Deci defined amotivation as “people’s lack of intentionality and motivation, that is, to describe the extent to which they are passive, ineffective, or without purpose” (p. 16).

SDT is different from other theories of motivation because it emphasized the different types and sources of motivation that affect behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2018). SDT focused on how social experiences encourage or deter a sense of well-being and affect initiative, performance, and motivation. SDT outlined three conditions, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and argued when these three conditions were met, the result was “high quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity” (“Center for Self-Determination Theory,” 2020, para. 2). However, SDT also supported the idea when any of these three psychological needs are not met or supported, the result will be a lack of motivation and determination (“Center for Self-Determination Theory,” 2020).

Essential needs for growth, integrity, and well-being, as defined by SDT, include psychological needs “that must be satisfied for psychological interest, development, and wellness to be sustained” (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 10). One assumption of SDT is that humans are curious, active, and social beings. Ryan and Deci (2018) explained since the stage of infancy, humans have expressed intrinsic tendencies to understand the world in which they live. These intrinsic tendencies push humans to internalize and integrate the need for satisfaction. According to SDT, in social settings, the three areas of satisfaction,

autonomy, competence, and relatedness, “support the need for curiosity, creativity, productivity, and compassion” (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 5).

Three Basic Needs

According to Ryan and Deci (2018), people are motivated to grow and change by three psychological needs. People need to feel their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met to experience growth and change. As these personal needs are met and people feel fulfilled, they become self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

Autonomy. Autonomy is the need to feel as if we are masters of our own destiny. It is the need for humans to feel they have some control over their lives and their behaviors (Ackerman, 2020). Autonomy is not to be confused with independence or self-reliance, because autonomous behaviors are not based on a person’s level of independence. Autonomous behaviors are based on the person’s own intentions and volition, meaning the person fully supports participating and engaging in the behavior because they want to, not just because they can (Ryan et al., 2009). Autonomous behaviors allow a person to feel as if their behaviors come from within and reflect who they really are, rather than the behaviors being the result of outside factors (Martela & Riecki, 2018).

Competence. Competence is the need to experience mastery over tasks that are important to oneself. These tasks may include achieving goals, gaining new knowledge, or mastery of skills (Ackerman, 2020). Competence in SDT can also refer to aspects of social behaviors. Ryan et al. (2009) explained social competence as when a person receives positive feedback or positive feelings from another person, they become more socially engaged. In contrast, when someone receives negative feedback or negative

feelings, they in turn become discouraged or disengaged. When we do not experience a level of mastery, the need for competence will not be met, resulting in a decrease in motivation (Ryan et al., 2009).

Relatedness. Relatedness refers to the need to belong. It is the need to feel connected to and involved with others (Ryan & Deci, 2018; Ryan et al., 2009). The need for relatedness can be satisfied by both caring for others and feeling as if others care for you. SDT explained relatedness as being essential to a person's well-being. When people feel connected and important to others, it will motivate them to act accordingly (Ryan et al., 2009).

Connection

Ryan and Deci (2018) wrote how satisfying the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness plays an important role in making life meaningful and purposeful. If all three of these needs are satisfied, a person experiences a healthy sense of well-being and a strong level of motivation; however, Ryan and Deci also proposed that if any of these needs are unmet, a person will experience frustration and feel neglected. These feelings of frustration and neglect will result in an unhealthy sense of well-being and lead to a lack of motivation.

History of Special Education

Prior to legislation beginning in 1961, parents of students with disabilities had very few options for the education of their children. Many students were institutionalized or kept at home. President John F. Kennedy created the President's Panel on Mental Retardation in 1961; and in 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This act provided funding for primary education and gave

students with disabilities access to public education; however, it was not until 1970 when Congress created the Education of the Handicapped Act (P.L. 91-230) to provide grant money for states to establish educational programs for individuals with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2020). This act eventually led to two court cases: *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) and *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972). These two cases marked the beginning of a long journey to provide equality of services for students with disabilities.

Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971) addressed students with disabilities being excluded from public education, while *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972) dealt with students with disabilities in the District of Columbia being suspended, expelled, and excluded from public schools because of the high cost of educating students with disabilities. In 1975, approximately 8 million students with disabilities still were not allowed to attend public schools; as a result, President Gerald Ford enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This act evolved into what is today known as IDEA (Esteves & Rao, 2008). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act specified all children with disabilities must be provided with a free, appropriate education. Students must be served in the least restrictive environment and the school must provide them with an individualized education program (IEP) outlining their educational plan. In 1997, IDEA was amended and required the IEP to contain measurable annual goals, measurement and reporting of progress, and parent involvement (Yell & Drasgow, 1999).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and IDEA (2004) have been the guiding forces behind special education programs in more recent years. NCLB addressed topics

of accountability, highly qualified teachers, and closing the achievement gap for at-risk students (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2006; Wright & Wright, 2020). Esteves and Rao (2008) wrote the most important aspects of NCLB and IDEA regarding special education are the requirements forcing special education to shift from procedural compliance to student results. NCLB and IDEA required IEPs and educational programs for students with disabilities to be centered around student growth and achievement.

History of the Self-Contained Classroom

Self-contained classrooms have been used in public schools for years; however, the use of self-contained classrooms has grown because of NCLB (Chen, 2020). NCLB required standardized test scores to be used to assess the effectiveness of schools. According to Chen (2020), as a result of this requirement, schools began to place struggling students in self-contained classrooms in order to meet their individual needs and to ensure test scores remained high for those students who were not struggling due to cognitive delays. The purpose of the self-contained classroom is to provide struggling students with specially designed instruction including individualized support and interventions. In more recent years, to meet the social needs of students and to provide peer interaction with nondisabled peers, many students in self-contained classrooms will return to the general education setting for varying amounts of time through mainstreaming or inclusion experiences. The amount of time a student spends in the inclusive setting and the self-contained setting must be outlined in the student's IEP (Chen, 2020).

Special Education Teacher Attrition

Special education teacher shortages are the result of attrition, retention, and

recruitment issues. Teacher attrition has been defined as those teachers who leave education from 1 year to the next. Lochmiller et al. (2016) referred to these teachers as the “leavers.” The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (2020) explained,

Educating students with special needs should be a top priority, yet critical shortages of special education teachers and specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) exist in all regions of the country. The demand for these highly qualified professionals is increasing at a time when the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates the shortages are “acute.” These shortages, as well as unfunded positions, impede the ability of students with disabilities to reach their full academic potential and hinder the work of districts to prepare all students to be college and career ready. (para. 1)

According to the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, six million students with disabilities, or 14% of public school students, receive special education services. A 2012 study showed 27% of special education teachers left the profession due to retirement or a desire to scale back their responsibilities; 24% left due to stress, burnout, and lack of support; and 13% left their current position to take another position with a different age group or at a different school (Samuels, 2018). This same survey also noted less than 6% of special education teachers who left their positions mentioned salary, benefits, paperwork, and remote locations as reasons for leaving (Samuels, 2018). Lambert (2020) identified overwhelming workloads, working with high-needs students with little support, and demanding parents as the top three reasons special education teachers are leaving the profession. Billingsley (2004)

found personal factors, teacher qualifications, and stressful work conditions all relate to special education teacher attrition.

Burnout

Special education teachers are expected to fulfill many different positions as part of their job descriptions. These different expectations require high amounts of both physical and mental energy (Robinson et al., 2019). Ansley et al. (2016) found these expectations can have a negative effect on the motivation, health, and well-being of many special education teachers. Doyle (2014) described education as one of the most stressful professions. Due to stress, teachers experience a high level of burnout (Doyle, 2014). According to Emmer et al. (2013), teachers can experience physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual burnout. Emmer et al. described physical burnout symptoms and explained that they include chronic tiredness, including both excessive sleeping and the inability to sleep. Intellectual burnout includes difficulty making decisions, processing information, focusing, or controlling one's temper (Emmer et al., 2013). Social burnout can include teachers becoming withdrawn, cynical, and frustrated; while emotional burnout leads to feelings of inadequacy, absenteeism, and distrust (Emmer et al., 2013).

Emmer et al. (2013) described teachers who experienced burnout as detached and less sensitive to student needs. Robinson et al. (2019) found teacher burnout to have a negative impact on student achievement. In this study, Robinson et al. asked 125 special education teachers to complete a survey on the connection between teacher burnout and job satisfaction. The results of this study showed a significant correlation between special education teacher burnout and job satisfaction. According to the study, many teachers experiencing unsatisfactory levels of job satisfaction also experience higher levels of

burnout and in turn leave the classroom. Robinson et al. suggested that to keep special education teachers in the classroom, there must be increased job satisfaction through professional development opportunities and increased support from school and district administration.

Resources

According to Billingsley and Bettini (2019), there has been little research on the role that a lack of resources has had in special education teacher attrition. Arthur-Ofei (2018) researched special education teacher attrition and retention in urban city schools and found the lack of materials and resources played a role in teacher decisions to leave the classroom. According to Billingsley and Bettini, special education teachers need a wide variety of instructional resources because they teach foundational skills, state standards, and multiple grade levels. Billingsley and Bettini cited a 2007 qualitative study by Gehrke and McCoy, documenting special education teachers who left or planned to leave the classroom. These teachers cited a lack of instructional materials as one reason they considered leaving.

Billingsley and Bettini (2019) listed time as a resource impacting special education teachers' intent to leave the classroom. DeMik (2008) also explained time to be an area of concern when discussing special education teacher workloads. After interviewing special education teachers, DeMik found special education teachers' schedules were less structured than the schedules of general education teachers. DeMik also found special education teachers felt compelled to spend the extra time, including lunch, assisting struggling students.

Arthur-Ofei (2018) discussed how the lack of materials and resources needed to

keep both students and teachers safe can have a negative impact on teacher decisions to remain in the classroom. Arthur-Ofei explained some teachers felt unsafe in their schools, and increased safety measures and resources could encourage teachers to remain in the classroom.

Student Behavior

Special education teachers face frustration due to the many different demands placed upon them. When the demands are more than they can handle, they are more likely to leave the profession (Bettini et al., 2017). Simbajon (2018) wrote about the direct relationship between special education teacher retention and managing the demands of difficult student behaviors. She cited emotional exhaustion to be higher in teachers who are consistently managing students with behavioral issues. Simbajon also connected emotional exhaustion to decreased student engagement and lack of student achievement. Conley and You (2017) conducted a study measuring student engagement and found teachers were more likely to leave the profession if they found student engagement to be problematic for the students they taught. Likewise, Billingsley (2007) found 18% of special educators in an urban district who left the profession did so because of discipline issues, and another 11% left because of student disengagement behaviors of absenteeism and lack of motivation. Student discipline, poor relationships, lack of progress, and meeting the diverse needs of all learners in one class have all been linked to increasing special education teacher stress, burnout, and attrition (Billingsley, 2004; Wong et al., 2017).

Support

Mulvahill (2019) discussed the fact that new teachers leave the education

profession at rates somewhere between 19% and 30% within their first 5 years of teaching. In addition, Mulvahill cited a study from 2016 by the Learning Policy Institute that showed when teachers had mentors and participated in collaboration with other teachers, their turnover rate was cut in half; however, this same study showed only 3% of beginning teachers received the level of support and resources needed to be successful. In a study including 2,060 secondary special education teachers, Conley and You (2017) reported a lack of administrative support was one of the top two reasons for leaving the classroom. This same study showed that of the different types of support available to teachers, lack of district- and school-level administrative support had the most influential impact on special education teachers leaving the profession (Conley & You, 2017). Similarly, Hawks (2016) found special education teachers who had positive administrative support had higher levels of job satisfaction, while those teachers who had little to no administrative support had lower levels of job satisfaction. Hawks concluded to increase special education teacher retention, there must be an increase in administrative support and knowledge of special education.

Workload

The demands of overwhelming workloads including large caseloads and paperwork have all been listed as research-based reasons for special education teacher attrition (Lambert, 2020; Samuels, 2018). In the Michigan Indiana Career Teacher study, researchers found novice special education teachers felt their workloads were more difficult than novice general education teachers (Bettini et al., 2017). In this same study, it was the special education teachers' concerns about their overwhelming workload leading the researcher to predict emotional exhaustion of these teachers would have a

negative impact on their future career decisions. Sheldrake (2013) gave a survey to 200 special education teachers. The results of the survey showed high caseloads and excessive paperwork to be the top two factors affecting special education teacher attrition.

Paperwork. According to Billingsley (2004), paperwork played a major role in overwhelming special education teachers and had an impact on their decisions to leave the classroom. Billingsley (2004) added that teachers who have adequate time to complete their paperwork are more likely to remain in the classroom. According to Samuels (2018), as teachers work with higher numbers of students, it becomes more difficult to complete the abundance of paperwork required by federal, state, and local governments in IDEA. Billingsley (2004) pointed out every time a teacher gets a new student, their paperwork increases. In fact, special education teachers spend an average of 5 hours a week on paperwork, which is more than the time spent on planning instruction. Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) tracked 36 special education teachers and documented how they spent their time. Their study showed special education teachers averaged 16% of their day was spent on academic instruction, while 15% was spent on instructional support, and 12% was spent on paperwork; however, Vannest and Hagan-Burke noted paperwork for some teachers was excessive and took almost 50% of their day. The amount of time spent on paperwork was disheartening for most special education teachers because their reason for becoming a special education teacher was to make a difference in the lives of students (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010).

Caseload. Increasing special education teacher caseloads (the number of students a teacher is responsible for) has been cited as one possible factor impacting special

education teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found only 7% of special education teachers indicated large caseloads as a reason for leaving the profession. However, according to Billingsley (2004), it is not just the number of students on a teacher's caseload that might cause difficulty for the teacher, but it is also the number of disability categories that cause added stress for the teacher when trying to meet the diverse range of student needs. Billingsley (2004) listed student discipline problems, lack of student progress, safety, and diversity of needs as problematic issues related to special education caseloads. In a study by DeMik (2008), special education teachers responded that serving students with a variety of needs was challenging and had a negative impact on their intent to remain in the profession. Billingsley (2004) also reported that teacher attrition might be based on the disability categories represented on the teacher's caseload. For example, teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and physical disabilities were less likely to leave; while teachers of students with emotional disabilities were more likely to leave.

Special Education Teacher Attrition and SDT

SDT has been used as a theoretical framework to study teachers who left the profession due to educational policies and practices over which they have no control (Haerens, 2020). Teachers bring their own individual differences, personality traits, motivational styles, and motivational needs to school daily. Haerens (2020) pointed out teachers' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be negatively affected by administrative control, lack of flexibility, and lack of support. Haerens also discussed how a teacher's lack of motivation makes it difficult for them to motivate their students and in turn might make them become overwhelmed and discouraged and experience

burnout, resulting in many leaving the profession.

Stewart (2017) found collaboration and planning, training, encouragement, and relationships to be the top four factors that increase self-efficacy and keep special education teachers in the profession. Stewart's study was conducted through Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory; however, these factors can easily be translated to the components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of SDT. Current research connecting teacher attrition and SDT focused on the fulfillment of the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of preservice and first-year teachers, teacher morale, and teacher burnout (Kaplan & Madjar, 2017; McCormick & Barnett, 2011; Morris, 2019). However, overall, there is very little current research connecting special education teacher attrition and retention to SDT.

Special Education Teacher Turnover

Teacher turnover has been defined as changes in a teacher's position or assignment from 1 school year to the next (Boe et al., 2008). Three types of special education turnover include attrition, teacher migration to a different school, and special education teachers transferring to a general education classroom. Boe et al. (2008) referred to special education teachers who leave special education for general education positions as switchers. Boe et al. found more special education teachers switch to general education than actually leave the profession altogether; however, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) explained when teachers switch positions, it has the same effect on schools and students as if the teacher had left the profession altogether. Boe et al.'s research showed most special education teachers who switched positions did so for the following reasons: a general education position they were more qualified for, burnout,

or lack of administrative support.

Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) pointed out some teacher turnover should be expected and for some teachers; it may be a good thing as they find their place in the education profession. However, they also pointed out when teachers switch positions, it can lead to teacher shortages, inexperienced teachers in the classroom, larger class sizes, negative impacts on student achievement, and high costs of replacement. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond also addressed the fact that teacher turnover not only affects students, but can affect school stability, collegial relationships, and teacher collaboration.

Special Education Teacher Efficacy

Teacher efficacy has been used as a framework to explain why special education teachers remain in the classroom. The way people behave in different situations is based upon their own personal beliefs about their attitude, abilities, and cognitive skills. Self-efficacy, a theory first coined by Bandura, is defined as a person's belief in their ability to complete a task or reach a specific goal (Alford, 2018). Alford (2018) explained self-efficacy as an important factor leading to successful student and teacher outcomes. According to Bandura, self-efficacy influences behavior and job performance in three different ways: goal setting, effort, and persistence (Alford, 2018). Alford expressed how teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy will be more confident in their own ability to make progress toward meeting personal goals, even during difficult situations.

Alford (2018) surveyed 110 general education and special education teachers in Atlanta, Georgia and found there was no significant correlation between self-efficacy and student achievement. These findings may explain the higher rate of emotional exhaustion,

lower personal achievement, and a higher rate of burnout when compared to general education teachers. Alford's research also showed teacher self-efficacy in instructional strategies, classroom management, administrative support, and relationships with coworkers was positively connected to teacher retention.

Stewart (2017) conducted a qualitative study in which she interviewed nine special education teachers from one urban school district in NC. She looked for common themes as to why special education teachers have persisted in the classroom and the role self-efficacy played in keeping them there. Stewart found collaboration, understanding and training, and encouragement to be beneficial to improving the self-efficacy of special education teachers; however, she found it was relationships that influenced their decision to stay in the classroom. The findings from this study are beneficial for providing experiences that will increase self-efficacy and in turn keep special education teachers in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

Special Education Teacher Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction has also been used as a framework to research why special education teachers remain in the classroom. Alford (2018) suggested, "job satisfaction is influenced by the interaction between personal characteristics (e.g., age and cultural values) and job characteristics (e.g., benefits, work conditions, and whether or not the job satisfies their individual needs)" (p. 47). Job dissatisfaction has been cited as the main reason special education teachers leave the classroom (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Hughes, 2019). Hughes (2019) conducted a quantitative study including 296 special education teachers in Ohio to examine how job satisfaction affected their intent to remain in the classroom. Hughes found most of the teachers who completed her survey were

satisfied in their current position, but 79.4% stated if given the opportunity to choose another career path, they would leave the profession. Hughes's research found special education teachers who were provided meaningful professional development and felt supported by their school administration experienced higher levels of job satisfaction and were more likely to remain in their classrooms. Bettini et al. (2015) pointed out that special education teachers who felt supported by administrators were less stressed and more committed to their classrooms and showed higher levels of job satisfaction.

Connection

Research has also been conducted on the connection between self-efficacy and job satisfaction and the role this connection played in keeping special education teachers from leaving the classroom. Understanding the connection between self-efficacy and job satisfaction can provide insight into the development of programs and strategies that can be used to encourage teachers to remain in the classroom (Alford, 2018). Alford (2018) explained if both teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction were improved upon, more teachers would persist in the field of education. Alford also pointed out research connecting self-efficacy to student achievement has shown a positive connection to job satisfaction.

Special Education Teacher Retention

Many suggestions for ways to keep special education teachers in the classroom have been proposed. Vittek (2015) cited induction and mentoring programs as having a positive effect on improving both job satisfaction and teacher retention. Belknap and Taymans (2015) identified isolation as a negative factor affecting special education teacher resilience and retention. Lambert (2020) also mentioned pay increases, including

incentive pay, bonuses, and loan forgiveness as ways to attract and retain special education teachers.

While there are various reasons why special educators leave the profession, research has also shown there are factors that can encourage teachers to remain. Harris-Looby et al. (2017) found six factors that encourage special education teachers to persist in the profession: personal commitment, desire to protect students, a professional calling, the changing nature of the profession, the desire to change the feelings of others about special education, and personal experiences with students with disabilities. Harris-Looby et al. noted several of these factors had a strong social/emotional connection. Roster (2019) suggested one important aspect of retaining special education teachers included greater support of social and emotional health through mentoring teachers in the beginning stages of their career.

Induction

A well-implemented induction program geared specifically toward the needs of first-year teachers can positively impact stress levels, job performance, and teacher retention (Vittekk, 2015). Goldrick (2016) explained that teacher induction and mentoring programs should include more than just assigning an experienced teacher to help a new teacher become familiar with a new school. Goldrick recommended induction programs provide support to the new teacher for at least 2 years and should include collaboration, assessment of progress of teaching standards, and professional development specific to the needs of new teachers. Wasburn-Moses (2006) suggested induction programs for special education teachers provide professional development on writing IEPs, implementing IEPs, and handling different problems that beginning teachers experience.

Vittek (2015) wrote if induction programs provide new special education teachers with the opportunity to grow personally and professionally, some of the stress that comes with being a first-year teacher will be reduced. Vittek also supported the idea that part of a successful induction program includes a mentoring program where new teachers have someone who can give them support, advice, and help to alleviate the feelings of isolation many first-year teachers experience.

Mentoring

Mentoring, which is commonly found in teacher induction programs, has shown to have a positive connection to teacher retention (Fish & Stephens, 2010); however, many beginning teachers do not receive the support they need (Smith-Washington, 2017). Billingsley et al. (2004) found first-year teachers felt they benefitted more from informal mentoring because they were advised on how to handle specific needs or situations, whereas the formal mentoring programs had a more predetermined set of requirements that were to be followed. Mrstik et al. (2019) recommended mentoring may be one solution to the problem of special education teachers leaving the classroom. The National Center for Education Statistics of the Institute of Education Sciences within the USDOE conducted the Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study. This study took place over a 5-year period. Data were collected through five different intervals beginning in August of the 2007-2008 school year and included 1,900 first-year teachers. The results showed 80% of beginning teachers who had qualified mentors persisted in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark. These data are compared to only 64% of beginning teachers who did not have qualified mentor teachers and left the profession (Raue & Gray, 2015).

Goldrick (2016) recommended mentors be assigned to new teachers at the start of

the year. Mentors should teach the same area and grade level as the new teacher.

Wasburn-Moses (2006) suggested that due to the different responsibilities special education teachers may have, special education first-year teachers should have both a special education and a general education mentor. Goldrick also discussed the importance of mentor teachers being given time during the school day to collaborate, observe, and interact with the new teacher. If the mentor teacher does not have the time needed to assist the new teacher, the new teacher will not receive the support needed to be successful. This lack of support may increase the likelihood of the teacher leaving the profession (Goldrick, 2016).

Belknap and Taymans (2015) interviewed nine first-year special education teachers; one important theme that arose in the interviews was isolation. Belknap and Taymans found when teachers felt isolated, they in turn showed low levels of resilience. Mrstik et al. (2019) explained how many special education teachers teach in a self-contained classroom, limiting the amount of time and interactions they have with other teachers throughout the day. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) listed seclusion as an area where beginning teachers struggle. It is important for beginning teachers to experience a collaborative culture where they are provided with opportunities for mentoring, support, and to discuss their problems in the classroom with other colleagues.

Belknap and Taymans (2015) stressed that schools must do all they can to keep teachers in the classroom and how making special education teachers feel resilient can assist in this process. Moir (2009) listed lack of teacher preparation, lack of classroom management, and isolation as challenges new teachers experience. A lack of support with

these challenges may increase the high attrition rate of teachers. Belknap and Taymans suggested facilitating resilience in beginning special education teachers by providing opportunities for them to build relationships with others, including mentors, in order to alleviate the feeling of isolation. Belknap and Taymans also suggested providing professional development for new special education teachers about the expectations associated with being a special education teacher. They included the importance of including professional development with mentor teachers on what special education case management looks like, how to be an effective case manager, and how effective case management can lead to feelings of resilience which in turn can have a positive effect on teacher attrition and retention.

Nonwork-Related Factors

Some teachers leave the classroom for nonwork-related reasons connected to their personal health and families (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Boe et al., 2008; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) reported pregnancy, childcare, health, and family factors cited by 42% of special education teachers and 37% of general education teachers as impacting their decision to leave education. Billingsley (2004) reported some teachers left the profession because they felt they needed to make more money to support their family's needs. Billingsley (2004) also explained that teachers who earned higher levels of education, had fewer years of teaching experience, and were in a minority group were more likely to leave the profession to pursue other career options.

Salary

Hester et al. (2020) cited low pay as one of the reasons special education teachers

leave the profession. A study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute found the gap between teacher salaries grew from 5.5% in 1979 to 18.7% in 2017 (Addonizio, 2020). Addonizio (2020) expressed concern over this pay gap and explained that teacher salaries must increase to compete with other professions. Allegretto and Mishel (2019) also pointed out competitive salaries are critical to keeping teachers in the profession.

Teacher Dispositions

LePage et al. (2008) connected teacher dispositions to the possibility of increasing teacher persistence in the classroom. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2015) Commission on Standards and Performance Reporting adopted the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's definition of teacher dispositions: "Professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities" (Nelsen, 2015, p. 86). CAEP stressed the importance of teacher education programs demonstrating their students have certain dispositions necessary for teacher licensure and certification (Nelsen, 2015). Beverly et al. (2006) explained professional dispositions for teachers should focus on behaviors related to effective classroom teaching and professional interactions with others. Nelsen (2015), however, questioned whether dispositions could be taught in the classroom or whether they were aspects of character resulting from learned behaviors or experiences.

Many different dispositions have been linked to the persistence of special education teachers in the classroom. Singh (2011) expressed the importance of a strong commitment to professional ethics and strong communication skills as dispositions effective teachers demonstrate. LePage et al. (2008) wrote about the importance of

special education teachers possessing the disposition of communication. They stated collaborative communication skills are one of the special education teacher's main responsibilities. Special education teachers must demonstrate a commitment to communication with families and professionals if they are going to be successful and persist in the profession.

Another disposition linked to the persistence of special education teachers in the profession is the ability to show empathy, patience, and understanding of student needs (Sherman, 2006). Along with understanding the needs of the student, Amatea et al. (2013) identified the ability to understand the needs of the families of children with special needs and the importance of including the family as integral members of the child's educational team as an important disposition displayed by successful special education teachers. Amatea et al. stressed the importance of including families because they contain knowledge of student strengths, areas of needed growth, and daily challenges the student faces. Thornton (2013) identified critical thinking as a necessary disposition for special education teachers. Amatea et al. also addressed the importance of critical thinking and the ability of the special education teacher to focus on the strengths rather than the needs of the students to be dispositions that can increase the amount of time a special education teacher persists in the classroom.

Chaney (2017) expressed the importance of the perceptions a special education teacher has on the expectations of the profession, student needs, and student behaviors may be directly linked to the teacher's dispositions and may affect the behavior of the teacher. Chaney supported the need for providing professional development opportunities on teacher dispositions to special education teachers to strengthen their dispositions and

keep them in the classroom.

Freedman and Appleman (2009) studied general and special education teachers in urban, high-poverty schools. They were trying to determine why some teachers stayed in the school and why others left. Their study identified six reasons teachers persisted in the classroom. One of these six reasons was directly linked to teacher dispositions and positive attitudes toward the profession of education. Freedman and Appleman reported that when commitment and perseverance were encouraged during the preservice teacher education training programs, the teachers persisted longer in the classroom. LePage et al. (2008) also expressed the importance of preservice teachers learning the importance of the dispositions of caring, empowering, and building relationships with difficult children as essential to their longevity in the classroom.

Rademaker (2013) pointed out that teachers can also have negative dispositions. Negative dispositions relating to special education teachers can include complacency, the idea that there is no positive impact on student learning, and a lack of commitment to the profession. Rademaker supported the idea that it is not the responsibility of college professors to try to correct the negative dispositions on preservice special education teachers, but they should challenge the students by providing honest feedback about how their negative dispositions may affect their success and longevity in the profession. Rademaker also connected teacher dispositions to teaching style and job satisfaction and explained that if teacher dispositions are connected to job satisfaction, additional studies of teacher dispositions need to be conducted to minimize the attrition rate of special education teachers.

Summary

This chapter presented a review of the literature showing the need for this study. First, the literature review presented the theoretical framework of SDT by explaining SDT and the three components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and how the satisfaction of these factors leads to increased motivation. Next, the literature review addressed the history of special education to provide an understanding of the requirements and expectations for special education teachers. The literature review then presented research on factors related to special education teacher attrition and reviewed the topics of special education teacher turnover, self-efficacy, and retention. Finally, the literature review discussed the idea of teacher dispositions and the impact dispositions may have on a special education teacher's ability to persist in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to interview SC elementary school self-contained special education teachers who have persisted in the profession beyond the 5-year mark when many others have left in the first 5 years. The purpose of this study was to look for themes related to the motivations of teachers who stay in the profession. This chapter begins with a description of the methodology used to complete the study. The research question is reviewed along with an introduction of how the participants were selected, how data were collected and analyzed, the role of the researcher in the study, and the process of validating the data.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has been explained as descriptive research that seeks to explain something that can be observed but not measured (McLeod, 2019). The goal of qualitative research is to explain the social realities of individuals, groups, and cultures (McLeod, 2019). The purpose of qualitative research is to explain how and why a phenomenon or behavior exists within the context of how people live and feel (McLeod, 2019). This study employed the phenomenological method of qualitative research design.

Phenomenological Research

Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined phenomenological research as “a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). McLeod (2019) explained the purpose of phenomenological research as a method to provide insight into participant perspectives or motivations behind their behaviors. Phenomenological research involves studying someone’s lived experiences based on their

memories and perceptions of the phenomenon being researched (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It focuses on the meaning people give to their everyday experiences.

Phenomenology can include the analysis of one's spoken or written experiences. Data are collected by analyzing written documents or conducting in-depth interviews (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Creswell (2007) explained how in-depth interviews with a small number of individuals are the primary way of collecting data for a phenomenological study. In-depth interviews should include a description of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Creswell, 2007).

Types of phenomenological studies include transcendental and hermeneutical research. Transcendental phenomenology, originally developed by Edmund Husserl, is also referred to as descriptive phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Transcendental phenomenology involves the researcher describing the experience while removing themselves from the experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Hermeneutical or interpretative phenomenology, originally developed by Martin Heidegger, is concerned with the world as the human experiences it as it is lived (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). It involves the reader interpreting text to find meaning in everyday experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Transcendental Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher, first identified transcendental phenomenology (Reiners, 2012). Husserl's definition of transcendental phenomenology was founded on the idea of how individuals connect with their world (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Husserl's idea of transcendental phenomenology was focused on using a person's lived experiences to gain meaning and understanding of their everyday life (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). He understood phenomenology as a method to reach

understanding by digging deep into a person's reality (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Transcendental phenomenology asks the critical question, "What do we know as persons?" (Reiners, 2012, p. 1). Sloan and Bowe (2014) explained Husserl's phenomenology to be about the relationship between consciousness and knowledge. Reiners (2012) also discussed an important aspect of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology called bracketing, which is the process used by researchers to remove themselves from the experience.

Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Husserl's student, developed interpretive or hermeneutical phenomenology (Reiners, 2012). Heidegger's focus was on the concept of being a part of the world rather than knowing the world (Reiners, 2012). Heidegger's idea of hermeneutical phenomenology disagreed with Husserl's bracketing theory. He believed the researcher cannot remove oneself from the object or experience because humans share context, culture, and language (Barrow, 2017). Hermeneutical phenomenology attempts to find meaning by interpreting our everyday world and experiences (Reiners, 2012); therefore, the critical question of hermeneutical phenomenology is, "What is being?" (Reiners, 2012, p. 2). An important aspect of hermeneutical phenomenology is that the world already contains meaning, and we gain understanding as we experience the world because experience comes before understating (Gobel & Yin, 2014).

Rationale

I chose a qualitative research design based on transcendental or descriptive phenomenology to better understand how the experiences of SC elementary school self-

contained special education teachers have had a positive effect on the motivational factors keeping the teachers in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. The transcendental phenomenological method helped provide understanding of how and why the identified motivational factors have kept these teachers from leaving the profession. The transcendental phenomenological method provided a systematic approach to data analysis based upon the lived experiences of the teachers in this study. The transcendental phenomenological approach was chosen over the hermeneutical approach because the hermeneutical approach focused on interpretation of text and language rather than lived experiences. To make a positive effect on increasing the number of special educators who remain in the profession, it is important to understand the lived experiences of those who have stayed.

One important concept in the explanation of transcendental phenomenology is the idea of epoche or reduction. This concept of epoche was described by Moustakas as the process of setting aside one's own preconceived ideas to fully listen and understand the described experiences of those being studied (Zahavi, 2019). As a special education teacher for the past 26 years, it was important that I utilize this aspect of epoche or reduction throughout this study. I had to put aside my own preconceived ideas as to what motivates other special education teachers to remain in the profession. I had to make sure to stay unbiased and block my own assumptions throughout the study to gain a valid understanding of this phenomenon to fully understand the lived experiences of other special education teachers who have persisted in the profession.

To stay unbiased, I had to stick with the predetermined questions during the interview, I had to listen, and I had to be respectful of the thoughts and opinions of the

participants of the study. I avoided interviewer bias by being conscious of my body language to make sure it did not influence participant responses. Another step in excluding my biases included being prepared early and staying focused on the goal of each interview. Other steps I took to remain unbiased included keeping detailed records, transcribing all conversations and interviews, and reporting all the data in my findings, even if the data contradicted my own opinions. Finally, I had to be honest about the limitations of my study and follow all Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements.

Research Question

The research question designed for this study, “What factors have motivated SC elementary self-contained special education teachers to remain in the classroom for more than 5 years,” was based upon the information needed to answer what motivational factors have caused SC elementary school self-contained special education teachers to persist in the classroom. It was theorized that as teachers are interviewed, common a priori themes should appear connected to the three components of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness; however, it was also possible that emergent themes would also appear. Stewart (2017) found collaboration and planning, training, encouragement, and relationships to be factors that increased special education teacher efficacy. It was possible these same themes may appear throughout the course of the interviews. While I was looking to connect themes to SDT, I also checked to see if any of the same themes documented by Stewart emerged in my data analysis.

The process of interviewing teachers and looking for common themes to describe the motivational factors keeping them in the profession also fit the explanation of how a phenomenological qualitative study should be conducted. The following question guided

the study and the teacher interviews: “What factors have motivated SC elementary school self-contained special education teachers to remain in the classroom for more than 5 years?”

Participants

Moser and Korstjens (2018) explained the process and criteria for determining and sampling participants in a phenomenological study. They recommended participants should meet a predetermined set of criteria, and the most important aspect of that criteria should include experience with the phenomenon being studied. Moser and Korstjens also recommended the participants should have shared experiences, but their individual characteristics and individual experiences should vary. The plan for this study was to interview 10 SC elementary school self-contained special education teachers who have remained in the profession beyond the initial 5-year mark. Renwick (2019) suggested starting with five participants and increasing in number by five based on the subject matter, the complexity of the study, and the experience of the researchers. Renwick also pointed out when there is a smaller number of participants in a qualitative study, there is more of an opportunity to build strong relationships, have more natural conversations, and in turn collect better data. However, Renwick encouraged researchers with limited experience to have a larger sample size to ensure valid and reliable results, which is why this study included 10 special education teachers.

Moser and Korstjens (2018) discussed the importance of collecting data until saturation occurs. Data saturation occurs when new data no longer produce different results or new information. Renwick (2019) explained how the best way to know if you have the right number of participants is when you hit the point of saturation. So, while the

plan was to interview 10 teachers, the data collection process and the number of participants included in the study depended upon the point when data saturation occurred. I felt like I hit the point of data saturation after interviewing eight participants, but I continued to interview the last two participants just to make sure no new information emerged.

Criteria

Moser and Korstjens (2018) recommended having a predetermined criterion for participants in a study. Any teachers who did not meet any aspect of the predetermined criteria would not be included in this study. The criteria for this study's sample of participants included

1. SC teachers currently teaching in an elementary school self-contained special education class.
2. Teachers currently teaching in any category of special education (learning disabilities, developmental delay, intellectual disabilities, autism, etc.).
3. Teachers currently certified or licensed in the field of special education by the SC Department of Education.
4. Teachers with more than 5 consecutive years of experience in elementary school self-contained special education classrooms.
5. Special education teachers willing and able to participate in interviews either virtually or face to face.

Sampling

The two most used sampling methods in qualitative research are random or convenience and purposeful or criterion sampling ("Qualitative Sampling Techniques,"

2020). Purposeful sampling is a technique used to recruit participants who can provide detailed information about the phenomenon being studied. Random sampling is a technique used in qualitative research to gain participants who are easily accessible or convenient to the researcher. Moser and Korstjens (2018) stated that phenomenology uses criterion sampling. In criterion sampling, participants must meet a list of predetermined criteria. According to Moser and Korstjens, the most important criteria is the participant's level of experience with the phenomenon being studied; however, they should vary in their individual characteristics and their individual experiences. Purposeful criterion sampling was used for this study. I recruited special education teachers who met the criteria through social media outlets (see Appendix A). A recruitment email was sent to any possible candidates containing a Google form to verify that the potential candidate met the criteria (see Appendix B).

Demographics

The 10 teachers who volunteered to participate in the study were from two different parts of SC. SC is divided into three regions: the upstate, the midlands, and the low county. Participants in the study were kept completely confidential but were reported by their location in the state. Table 1 outlines the demographic information of each of the 10 participants including what region of SC they are from, how many years they have been teaching, how many years they have been in elementary self-contained special education, and their highest level of education.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Region of SC	Years in education	Years in elementary self-contained	Highest level of education
1	Midlands	16	10	Master's
2	Midlands	13	8	Master's
3	Upstate	6	6	Bachelor's
4	Upstate	34	24	Master's
5	Midlands	20	20	Master's
6	Midlands	10	9	Master's
7	Upstate	6	6	Master's
8	Upstate	8	6	Master's
9	Midlands	35	35	Master's
10	Upstate	15	15	Master's

As indicated in Table 1, this study included teachers ranging from 6 years of experience to 35 years of experience as elementary self-contained special education teachers. One of the teachers was certified to teach through an alternative route, but all others received their certifications through colleges and universities. At the time of the study, the 10 teachers taught a mix of special education categories including developmental delay, autism, intellectual disabilities, behavioral support, and multi-categorical classes (classes containing a mix of disability categories).

Role of the Researcher

Roger et al. (2018) explained the importance of the researcher in a qualitative study and how the researcher's role is different from the role of a researcher in a quantitative study. In a qualitative study, the role of the researcher is to connect the observer to the realities of the one being observed. Roger et al. also acknowledged the relationship of the researcher and the participants in the study. The researcher is responsible for keeping their own assumptions and biases out of the study and

establishing a sense of neutrality throughout the study.

Because the role of the researcher in a qualitative study is to explain why people think, feel, or behave the way they do, the role of the researcher is to attempt to gain access to the personal thoughts and feelings of the participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015); however, in the process of gaining access to the personal thoughts and feelings of the participants, it is the researcher's responsibility to build a sense of trust and safety among the participants. The researcher must provide safeguards for the participants and the data they provide (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

My role as researcher in this study was to interview SC elementary school self-contained special education teachers who have persisted in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. As a veteran special education teacher for the past 26 years, it was important for me to keep my personal biases and assumptions out of the interviews. I know my personal thoughts as to why I have stayed, but I do not know if other teachers share my thoughts and experiences. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of a variety of themes related to why special education teachers remain in the profession. To gain access to the personal experiences of others, my role was to ask targeted questions, respect differing ideas, and keep my personal biases out of the conversation in order to not lead the participant to answer the questions in a particular manner. I had to remain neutral in the process. My specific responsibilities also included designing the study, drafting the interview questions, selecting the participants, interviewing the participants, transcribing the interviews, analyzing the interviews for common themes, and then connecting the data back to SDT.

Data Collection

Moser and Korstjens (2018) discussed the importance of data collection in

qualitative research and how the data collection process can be “unstructured and flexible” (para. 14). Qualitative data are generally collected through interviews, focus groups, and observations (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Data were collected in this study through interviews and followed the plan found in Appendix C.

Interviews

Moser and Korstjens (2018) defined an interview as a conversation between the participant and the interviewer that focuses on past situations, present situations, or personal concerns. Moser and Korstjens also suggested interviews begin broad and then the interviewer should narrow down the conversation. The interview should be semi-structured and focused, but it should allow the participant the opportunity to speak freely about their personal experiences, feelings, and opinions (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The interview should be approximately 30 to 90 minutes long (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

After completing the Google form and informed consent form (see Appendix D) and verifying that each participant met the criteria, an initial interview was set up to gain greater knowledge about the reasons the participants have chosen to stay in special education. Then, a second interview was held to dive deeper into the lived experiences of the participants. This interview was followed up with an email sharing the information that was gained in the interview. This email was for member checking, the process of sharing major themes and findings with the participants to provide them with the opportunity to clarify the findings. Participants were given the opportunity to make sure the data accurately reflected their personal thoughts and experiences. After the process of member checking, all participants agreed that the identified themes correctly represented their participation in the study.

The initial interviews followed the semi-structured interview protocol found in Appendix E. It included predetermined questions, while the second interview was individualized based upon themes and information that arose in the initial interview. The purpose of the second interview was to gain an understanding of how and why these teachers have stayed in the profession. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

After each interview was transcribed via Zoom, I coded the interview, identified common themes, compared the themes to the three components of SDT, and identified any outlying themes that did not connect back to SDT. I also looked for themes that connected back to the themes outlined by Stewart (2017) and made a list of recommendations that were identified as suggestions that could assist preservice and induction teachers to remain in the classroom. My final step included identifying important quotes from the participants that supported the findings and gave recommendations for future research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began after the interviews as I coded each individual interview. Yi (2018) described the coding process to be done either deductively or inductively. Deductive coding involves a predeveloped codebook containing possible themes the researcher expects to be present; however, additional themes can be added to the codebook as they appear throughout the data collection process. Inductive coding is generally used when the researcher does not know much about the topic and is developed after the interview takes place, based upon the results of the interview. This study included deductive coding. Yi recommended coding the entire interview knowing not all

the conversation will be included in the results of the study, which is what I did. After the interviews were coded, the next step involved putting similar ideas into categories and from there turning categories into themes. This process outlined by Yi was followed to turn interview data into theme data. The themes were also connected back to the three components of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Other themes that arose but did not fit into the SDT components were also categorized. Figure 1 is a flowchart displaying the steps that were used in the data analysis process.

Figure 1

Data Analysis Flow Chart

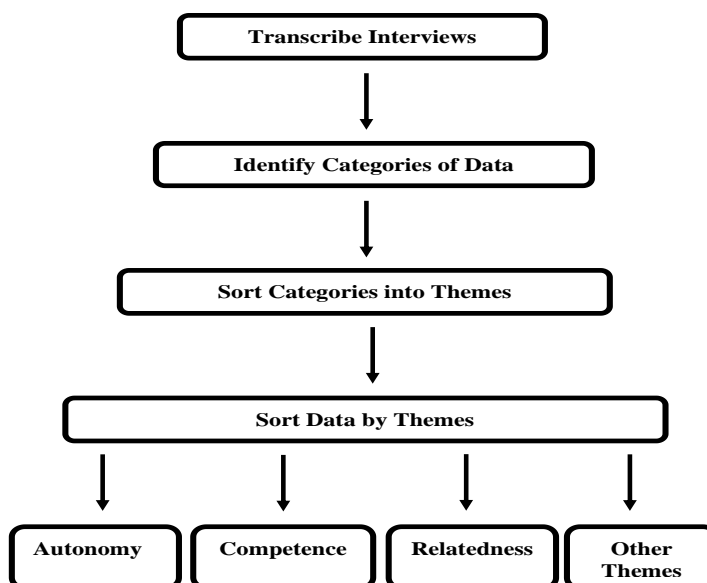


Figure 1 outlined the steps that were used to move the interview data into theme data. Line-by-line coding was used to move from categories to themes. Yi (2018) recommended line-by-line coding because it assists the researcher in pulling out all details from the data. Line-by-line coding involves applying a code to each line of an interview transcript. The purpose of this type of coding is to allow new codes to emerge,

and it was used throughout the coding process of the entire study.

Validity and Reliability

Yi (2018) stressed the importance of validity and reliability in a qualitative study. It is the researcher's job to maintain neutrality and to ensure validity and reliability. As part of the process to ensure validity and reliability, I piloted the interview questions with two special education teachers who have passed the 5-year mark. Their responses were not transcribed or coded. Their responses were used solely to practice interview skills and gathering feedback. The participants in the pilot study were given the opportunity to give feedback on the interview questions. The first participant recommended when there are questions that had more than one part, I should allow the participant to answer each part individually rather than asking them all at the same time. Piloting the interview before beginning the research process allowed me to work out any possible issues in advance. This process helped the interviews run smoothly and built trust with the study participants, as they were able to see the organizational structure in place to protect them and their responses.

Validity of Interview Questions

Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined validity in qualitative research as the way the researcher checks to make sure the findings are accurate from both the standpoint of the researcher and the participant. Creswell and Creswell identified eight strategies that can be used to determine the validity of qualitative data and recommended the researcher incorporate multiple strategies into their research. This study included member checking, reporting negative or discrepant information, and peer reviewing of data collection. Member checking included sharing major themes and findings with the participants to

provide them with the opportunity to clarify and comment on any of the findings. I employed member checking by having a follow-up email with participants after themes were identified to share the findings with the participants and allow them to provide feedback on the findings (see Appendix F). According to Creswell and Creswell, member checking is one way to determine the validity of interview questions because it allows participants to determine if they feel the data are accurate based upon their responses to the questions. By reporting negative or discrepant information, I was able to add credibility by presenting contradictory information. Reporting discrepant information also allows the researcher to discuss the evidence about a theme and build a case for the theme. I also had a peer review the data that were collected through the interviews to make sure I accurately identified themes and did not miss any emerging themes. I asked a qualified reviewer who has had experience in qualitative data to be my peer reviewer.

Reliability

Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined qualitative reliability as the researcher's way to remain constant throughout the study. Creswell and Creswell gave several suggestions to establish the reliability of a qualitative study. This study employed several of Creswell and Creswell's suggestions. First, I followed the outlined protocol of the interview plan in the data collection steps and the steps in the data analysis flowchart. Second, I checked all transcripts and codes to make sure there was no shift in the meaning of the codes throughout the coding process. Creswell and Creswell discussed continually comparing the data with the codes and taking notes about the codes to assist in making sure the process is reliable. I kept a log of codes and themes related to each interview throughout the coding process to make sure the codes remained constant

throughout the process of coding all the interviews.

Summary

This chapter described the methods that were used for this study. This study included a transcendental phenomenological design. Data collection occurred through interviews of elementary self-contained special education teachers who have stayed in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. The research question was reviewed and the procedures for selecting participants was outlined. The data collection and analysis process was also detailed in this chapter. Finally, the role of the researcher and the process of validating the data were explained. It was also important to note that throughout the data collection and analysis phases of this study, all IRB protocols were followed in an ethical manner.

Chapter 4: Results

Overview

This chapter begins with a review of the purpose of the study and the research question. From there it reviews information from Chapter 3 about the 10 participants and presents more information about their backgrounds in special education and their responses to interview questions. Next, the identified themes are discussed beginning with the connection to SDT, and specific examples from the participant interviews are included to support each theme. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings presented in this chapter as to why these 10 teachers have remained in the profession beyond the 5-year mark when many others have not.

Research Question

“What factors have motivated SC elementary self-contained special education teachers to remain in the classroom for more than 5 years?” The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to look for themes related to the motivations of SC elementary self-contained teachers who have persisted in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark. The research question provided the focus for the study and the basis for the interviews and the interview questions.

The goal of this study and this research question was to identify motivational factors that have kept special education teachers in the classroom and to provide suggestions and recommendations for preservice and induction special education teachers that may assist in keeping them in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark. This information can be used by college professors, school administrators, and district-level administrators when working with preservice and induction-level teachers.

Participant Interviews

After receiving IRB approval, I began the process of recruiting participants. I posted information on social media outlets. While most of my participants came directly from those postings, three volunteered after learning about my study from others who had already participated. I initially had many teachers agree to participate, but several were concerned about the time involved and did not return all the needed documents. All participants were required to complete a Google form and informed consent before interviews were scheduled. Interviews were scheduled around the convenience of the participants at times that were mutually agreeable between the two of us. All interviews took place via Zoom. It took 3 months to recruit and interview all 10 participants.

While demographic information about the participants was included in Chapter 3, I would like to go into a little more detail about the experiences of the 10 participants in special education. All participants were asked the same scripted questions in the first interview. These questions not only included topics related to why the teachers have stayed in the profession, but also why they originally went into the profession, expectations of special education teachers, challenges of being a special education teacher, questions about leaving the profession, and how COVID-19 has impacted their classroom.

Why Special Education?

All the teachers were asked about their path into special education. Eight of the teachers planned to become special education teachers. Two of them found their way to special education through job openings. Two of them said they knew as children they wanted to teach children with disabilities.

Participant 3 said,

I knew I wanted to do special education from elementary school. Yes, I was paired with some students who were in special education classes and would come into our classroom and do related arts and things with us and I always took to them. Then my mom did some work in special education, and I later worked in a camp for kids with special needs. It was just always in my heart.

Participant 6 added,

When I was in first grade, I had a student in my class that had cerebral palsy and he was in a wheelchair. My teacher asked us to be his buddy and help him get around the school when we have to go to PE and music, and I just loved it and always wanted to be like that student's teacher ever since I was in first grade. So, my mom said that from that point on, I always said I'm going to be like his teacher when I grow up, and here I am a lot of years later doing that.

Four of the participants had experiences with family members or friends who had physical, mental, or intellectual disabilities. It was watching these family members grow up and the experiences they shared that brought these participants into special education.

Participant 1 shared,

My brother had some special needs. He has Neurofibromatosis which has some learning disability issues and a lower IQ with it. So, I think really seeing that there needed to be a better way to help these kids. I also had a son who had some physical challenges that impeded learning. Those experiences are what made me really go with it, when I could've gone in another direction.

Participant 9 said,

I grew up with my brother who suffered with learning disabilities. I watched my mama deal more with it. He had severe attention deficits when he was young; as well as they found out later on, after they did medical evaluations, that he was practically blind in his left eye. Up until that point they were treating him as a child with a mental disability. And that was all they could do back then. I watched him struggle. So, I knew I was interested in special education.

Participant 8 credits her experiences in an inclusive kindergarten for beginning the path that brought her to special education: “When I was in preschool my best friend had Down’s Syndrome. Gracie died recently. So, I guess just like growing up with her from a young age led me here.” Participant 10 is the daughter of two special education teachers and the granddaughter of a special education teaching assistant. At one point in her life, her father ran a facility in Illinois that served as an inpatient facility for adults with special needs. She said for more than 20 years, “I’ve always been around it. It’s just very natural, very normal for me.” She went on to add that for 3 years, she worked in the same school with her dad. When asked to describe this experience, she replied, “We worked right across the hallway from each other. We shared students. We did field trips together. It was amazing!”

Five of the participants were influenced to enter special education through job- or work-related avenues. While Participant 3 said she wanted to be a special education teacher from childhood, she also worked at a summer camp for students with disabilities in the state of SC while she was in college. This experience solidified her plans to enter the special education profession. Participant 7 also worked at a camp for children with disabilities and shared,

I kind of always had the desire to become a teacher, I worked at a basketball camp in high school and there were two children with an autism diagnosis. You know I kind of just fell in love with working with them and I felt like I spent so much time hanging out with them and supporting them that it kind of geared me toward it going into college. I knew going into college it was definitely teaching and then it kind of solidified I wanted to do special education from there.

Participant 5 reported that a job working in a group home for adults with disabilities led her to special education:

I didn't grow up wanting to be a teacher, but I guess the end result and seeing them function on a day-to-day basis and going out in the community made me pursue a career or an education in the special education realm.

Two of the teachers did not enter the profession as special education teachers but were placed in special education classrooms due to job-related issues; however, both have chosen to stay in elementary special education. Participant 1 spent 4 years in a general education kindergarten classroom before her class was closed. She was offered a developmental delay classroom, and she has stayed there for the past 10 years. Participant 4 set out to teach middle school biology but was offered a fourth-grade class at a Catholic school in New York. When she reported to her job, they had given her classroom to someone else and offered her a third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade special education classroom. She took the class and began working on her master's degree in special education. While neither of these two teachers intended to teach elementary children with special needs, they were put in these positions and felt called to the profession, in much the same way as Participant 4, who said, "I found my place."

Expectations and Roles

All participants in the study were also asked about the expectations and many different roles that were expected of them as elementary self-contained special education teachers. They were also asked how they meet all the different expectations and roles placed on special education teachers. The roles that emerged from the interviews included de-escalating behaviors, committee meetings, nurse, parent roles, training and managing other adults, parent counseling/education, paperwork, and meeting the academic and social needs of the students.

Deescalating Behaviors. Participant 2 mentioned that one important role for her was to deescalate challenging behaviors of students before they lose control or “blow up.” She explained that as a teacher of students with emotional disabilities and autism, helping her students deescalate when they start to get upset and then teaching them how to cope and properly respond in different situations are important roles for her because, “I have to teach them more than just academics.” She also discussed that she must be trained and certified in Crisis Prevention Institute, a behavior management program. One component of the program trains teachers in the proper way to restrain students when necessary.

Committee Meetings. Participant 3 mentioned committee meetings as one of her roles. She was discussing meetings with parents and then added, “It seems like there’s always some committee that needs a special education representative and there’s not that many of us, so we are expected to help out.” In her school, there are only three special education teachers, so they must split the committee responsibilities between the three teachers on top of their other responsibilities. She said she does not mind helping out, but

“I feel as if I am always in a meeting.”

Nurse. One role Participant 6 mentioned was that of a nurse. She discussed her roles as, “I think you have a vast majority of roles, I mean, first and foremost you are the teacher, but you are also a nurse to the kids that have some more medical needs.” She mentioned that this year she has two students with “very involved physical disabilities and it is part of my job to make sure that their physical needs are met, as well as their academic and social needs.”

Parent Roles. Participants 1 and 4 described one of their roles as responsibilities that are typically expected of parents. Participant 1 said,

I feel like mama. I feel like I have to be the mom. I have to discipline them, I have to teach them, I have to change their diapers. You know, I have to just play the role of mom. I love them and I care for them.

Participant 4 explained her role as,

I have to be a disciplinarian. I have to be a nurturer for the little ones. And I’ve learned to navigate a lot more of specialists and doctor referrals and what’s out there in the community for recreation and just the whole world of special education for my students because their parents aren’t always able to do so.

Both participants felt as if they had to act in roles other than just the teacher. They had to act as a parent to make sure the needs of their students were met.

Training and Managing Other Adults. Four of the participants discussed how training general education teachers, managing teaching assistants, and working with other related service providers were other roles they were expected to fulfill. Participant 2 specifically referred to her role in training general education teachers on how to work

with her special education students. Participant 2 explained how training general education teachers to instruct her students with emotional disabilities is one of her top challenges: “Since most of my students do mainstream at least once a day, training general education teachers how to manage the behaviors of my students is a critical role.” She also explained that taking the time to build relationships with these teachers has had “an impact on her ability to work with and train her peers.”

Participants 5, 9, and 10 discussed training general education teachers, but they also included managing teaching assistants and other related service providers. When discussing her different roles, Participant 5 said,

It probably makes it difficult for people to stay in, because you have to manage so many different things. You have to manage different ability levels within a group. You have to manage not only their instruction, but also their grading. You have to manage other adults because you can't do it on your own, so you have paraprofessionals that you need to work with.

Participant 9 discussed the importance of working with paraprofessionals. She was also concerned about training and managing the other adults in her classroom. She described herself as a supervisor: “In the classroom, you are fortunate if you have two or three assistants. But you are also their supervisor, which is one more thing to manage.”

Participant 10 explained managing adults as one of her bigger roles:

I feel like my bigger role is with the adults that I interact with. There are six adults in my classroom right now. I have three teaching assistants. I have a one-on-one for one of my students and I have an interpreter in my classroom. So, I have a lot of hands, which sounds fantastic, but it can be a struggle sometimes because

you're always juggling a lot of ideas from adults while trying to work with the students. So that can be a big struggle.

Parent Counseling/Education. Four of the participants discussed one of their roles as a parent counselor and parent educator. Participants 4, 7, 8, and 9 talked about how they had to help parents so the parents in turn can help their students. Participant 4 explained that because she works with younger students for many parents,

This is the first time they are hearing about their students learning differences and so you spend a lot of time counseling parents and talking to them about what this means. I think some of them are very shocked to learn that their child is not meeting those milestones.

Participant 7 discussed how important it is to make sure parents understand the progress their student is making and how she spends time educating parents on student progress. She expressed her role in helping parents as critical to their understanding:

I have to figure out ways to help parents understand and communicate with parents and families. I let them know that just because the report card may not reflect that they know their numbers through 10, they show it in different ways. So, I think it is definitely a huge challenge to us in our field, because progress is different from what you see on a report card and parents don't always understand that.

Participant 8 said that she felt like

fifty percent of a special education teacher's job is done before and after school when the kids aren't there. When the kids are there, they are your priority, but when they are not there, you're prepping lessons, working on paperwork, and

communicating with parents. You have to help the parents understand everything and the only time to do that is when you aren't teaching, and they aren't at work.

Finally, Participant 9 described all the different roles expected of special education teachers as,

the hidden stress factor that people coming in don't realize and don't see. It's not what you see when the children walk through the door, it's all the other stuff behind it. You have to have a lot of parent training. You have to help them deal with emotional issues and denial. You have to help them learn how to deal with their own children.

Paperwork. Paperwork, which has been identified as a factor in overwhelming special education teachers and as having an impact on their decision to leave the classroom (Billingsley, 2004), was identified by seven of the 10 participants as one of their roles other than teaching. Participants 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10 listed paperwork as one of their roles as a special education teacher. Participant 2 discussed how she does not have enough time during the day to teach and to complete the paperwork required of her, so she spends time at home completing her paperwork. She said, "I go home, I cook dinner, and then I get back to work for a while. Sometimes I work on weekends in order to keep up with my paperwork." However, it was Participant 4 who went into detail about the impact completing paperwork has on her instructional time: "And then of course there's always the lovely paperwork that you have to do that takes forever. The lovely paperwork, that keeps you from teaching, but you have to do it."

Meeting Academic and Social Needs. All 10 participants mentioned the expectation of meeting the academic, emotional, and social needs of their students as one

of their roles as a special education teacher. When describing her different roles as a special education teacher, Participant 1 said, “Being able to meet the expectations and the roles of each individual child and what they need in order to make progress, not only you know in life in general, but also in the academic world.” Participant 4 described her role as, “I have to teach across all domains. I mean I’m doing fine motor things and gross motor things as well as speech-related activities, cognitive skills, and self-help.” Participant 5 discussed the difficulty of not only managing all the different academic levels within her class, but even the “different ability levels within my small groups.” Participant 6 said that while meeting all the needs of her students was hard, it was also “the fun part of being a special education teacher. It's not always the same and you are always having to change up what may work and do different things.” Participant 7 described her role by saying,

I have to yes, be an academic teacher, but you also have to be a functional skill and an emotional kind of support to these students. I teach kindergarten through second grade so it’s also bathroom needs and help feeding. But that’s what I love about special education.

While the teachers expressed how difficult meeting all the needs of their individual students could be, it is also important to note that this same expectation was viewed as one of the aspects of special education the teachers loved and enjoyed.

Biggest Challenge

After discussing the different roles and expectations placed on elementary self-contained special education teachers, each teacher was asked what they would consider to be the top challenge special education teachers face. Eight of the teachers all agreed that

the top challenge they faced was meeting all the diverse learning needs that are represented in their individual classrooms. Participant 7 explained it this way,

So, that's definitely, I think a big thing. It's not just differentiating instruction.

There are so many functional skills that we also have to work on. I think it's also a huge challenge targeting all needs I have to be an academic teacher, but you also have to be a functional skills teacher. You are an emotional kind of support to these students as well. I teach kindergarten through second grade so it's also bathroom needs and helping with feeding at lunchtime. I think that's what I love about special education, but that's also one of the biggest challenges because you really have to hit all of those things to help your students. And I think it's so challenging because well first off there's not enough time in the day to hit all those things. But you know a general education teacher can clearly measure progress from grades received on a test or whatever, but for us it's those little things you know. And with every student needing something so individualized it's really hard.

Participants 2 and 10 were the only ones not to mention meeting the diverse needs of all learners as the top challenge special education teachers face; however, both identified having enough time to accomplish everything to be the top challenge. Participant 2 described it this way, "There's just too much to do and not enough time to do it."

After describing their individual roles and challenges in these roles, each participant was asked how they met these challenges and expectations without allowing themselves to become overwhelmed to the point they considered leaving the classroom. Participant 4 described meeting the challenges as "exhausting and a lot of the time

emotionally draining.” The answers to this question were very similar. The participants mentioned focusing on student progress, building strong support systems, setting boundaries, having a mindset of perseverance, focusing on the small victories, and reminding yourself that the positive student growth and outcomes outweigh the challenges. Participant 3 said, “I keep reminding myself that it is never going to be all done and I have to set limits. However, it is all for the kids and I have to remind myself of that someday.” Participant 5 said, “You persevere, and you just do it. I’m a special educator and it’s what I do. I do it because of the students.” Participant 6 focused on the importance of the bigger picture:

By focusing on the small incremental steps of progress and looking at the total picture as opposed to looking at how far behind the student may actually be compared to age-level peers. You know you’re not always going to have a perfect day. You’re not always going to make a bunch of progress every single day and just making sure you’re looking at the small windows of time through the year.

Participant 2 also talked about the importance of her relationships with students, their families, and the big picture. When asked how she faces the challenges of special education and why she has not left the profession, she responded,

My kiddos. I just like getting to see their progress and being able to work with students for a couple of years. I think that is one of the advantages. I really like getting to know and connect with the students and their families. It helps me keep the bigger picture in mind.

Participant 9 also focused on having a realistic mindset and setting boundaries when she said,

The most challenging part is being able to come to grips with knowing you could do a better job. You have to set barriers. Those barriers are there to help you overcome and move on. You can't drag yourself down.

Overall, the participants stressed that special education teachers are expected to do a lot more than just teach; however, they said that while student growth is worth facing the challenges, they must keep this idea of student growth in mind, build a strong support system, focus on the small gains and the big picture, and finally set realistic boundaries for themselves.

Leaving the Profession

According to Samuels and Harvin (2019), in the past decade, 17% of special education teachers in the United States have left the profession. With this thought in mind, all the participants were asked if they have ever thought of leaving the profession. Six of the participants expressed that they had considered leaving. Participant 2 responded,

I've thought about leaving the profession, but I've kinda just chosen to stay. I think in some ways it has crossed the line from being just a job to being my ministry. I feel like I'm called to make a difference in their lives.

Participant 3 said she has had moments when she has wondered "if I could do anything else and just leave work at work." Participant 4 had a similar answer in that she has had "fleeting moments when things seemed overwhelming." However, she said that in those moments, she has tried to focus on finding solutions rather than on problems: "Most of the time I am looking more for a solution rather than me leaving. There's always a solution." Participant 5 agreed that she has thought of leaving, but she is "determined not

to give up and to continue to try and find ways that you can be effective.” Participant 9 expressed her frustrations and how she has considered leaving many times; however, she said that her personal mission and personal philosophy have kept her in the profession. She added, “Focusing on what you’re accomplishing and letting go of what you can’t control and focusing on one thing at a time” has helped her on the days when she wanted to give up. Participant 8 did leave the profession but returned to special education when “the right job” for her arose.

Four of the teachers expressed that they have had no intention of leaving the profession. Participant 6 did explain that she has earned her administrative certificate and may one day move into administration; but as an administrator, she wants to be “a source of encouragement and support to special education teachers.” Participants 1 and 7 both expressed they were happy where they were and had no intentions of leaving. Participant 7 did discuss the importance of having a support system to help on the hard days, but for her, “quitting is not an option.”

COVID-19

All the participants in the study were asked about the impact COVID-19 had on their individual classrooms and if it caused them to consider leaving the profession. Nine of the participants reported they had not considered leaving the classroom due to the impact of the COVID-19 virus. Participant 2 reported that “it floated through my mind, but I also feel like we can get through this.”

All the participants reported that COVID-19 has made for a difficult school year and has impacted what they do daily. Participant 1 reported that all her students started the 2020-2021 school year asynchronously. She said that “it was very, very, very

challenging not being able to see the progress the students were making.” Participant 3 expressed her concerns about student progress during COVID-19 “because virtual instruction is just not super appropriate” for her younger special needs students.

Participant 5 reported that teaching virtually because of COVID-19 has forced her to change:

It’s weird. I feel like I have changed a lot this year and I’m just trying to roll with it, but it has definitely challenged my role as a special educator because not only is it difficult to reach these children when they’re sitting across the table from you within your reach, and you can control the seven hours of their day. You have to try to meet their needs, through a computer screen and that’s hard because it’s not reciprocal.

Participant 6 described the impact of COVID-19 as having been stressful and having a negative impact on the social skills development of her students. She described the impact COVID has had on her classroom as,

It has been a little stressful trying to keep some of these kids more separate and having to have a mask on to work on sensory issues with things touching their faces. You know being able to really do centers without friends has kind of hurt us a little bit.

Participant 9 agreed that COVID-19 has placed added stress on special education teachers:

It was hard with all the people coming in and insisting that this platform or that one is best for my kids, but they’ve never been in here and don’t have any research to show me what a special needs student can learn in a synchronous way.

However, it was Participant 10 who explained that not all experiences related to COVID-19 have been negative and that for her classroom, there have been some positive impacts. In a normal school year, her students would go into the general education setting for related arts, science, social studies, recess, and lunch; however, because of social distancing, her students did not do that. She said that while

this is not really healthy for their social exposure; we have been able to get so much more done. This year I got to make my own schedule; we were never interrupted. I got so much more done. I wish I could do this every year and keep my kids with me all day long.

Other than these comments by Participant 10, all the other participants only had negative comments about the impact of COVID-19, but none of them reported seriously considering leaving the profession or being worried about catching COVID-19 from one of their students.

Participant Suggestions on Motivation

As part of the interviews, the participants were asked for their thoughts and ideas on suggestions that could help to motivate and encourage preservice and induction teachers to remain in the classroom. Participants were also allowed to offer words of wisdom to beginning teachers. Some of the suggestions given were specifically for K-12 teachers, some were for administrators, and some were for higher education institutions.

Table 2 reports these suggestions and recommendations by theme.

Table 2*Suggestions and Recommendations for New Teachers*

Theme	Suggestion/recommendation	Participant
Relationships	“Have someone you can vent to.”	1
	“Mentors who help induction teachers need to help them to see the big picture.”	2
	“Connect with students and families.”	3
	“Find your people – build a strong support system.”	4
	“Teach preservice teachers how to speak to and help parents.”	4
	“Encourage one another.”	7
Growth and success	“Remember you are here for the kids – they are worth it.”	1
	“Teach the mindset that it’s ok when you have a bad day.”	4
	“Celebrate the little victories.”	7
	“Instruction must be research based.”	9
	“Success comes when you focus on 1 thing at a time.”	9
Perseverance	“Don’t sweat the small stuff.”	1
	“Expose preservice teachers to people who are determined to succeed.”	2
	“Keep the big picture in mind.”	4
	“It’s ok to let them be kids. Some days you have to put the plan aside.”	8
Collaboration and planning	“Instead of evaluations of induction teachers, provide more opportunities for collaboration with veteran teachers.”	5
	“It’s ok to ask for help.”	6
	“Take advantage of working with and training with others.”	10
Other	“Have an outlet outside of school.”	1
	“Share realistic expectations.”	2
	“Teach flexibility and the importance of trying multiple things until you find the one that works.”	5
	“Know your why.”	8
	“Have extra activities on hand and be ready to go when you need something different to do or have an interruption in schedule.”	8
	“Have a personal philosophy and stick to that philosophy.”	9
	“Set personal and professional boundaries.”	9
	“Make the most of your time.”	10
“Get experience in all different types of special education classes – they are not all the same.”	10	

Table 2 lists the suggestions and recommendations given by the participants to new and induction teachers. The table lists the identified theme and includes a section for other suggestions. It also indicates which participant made the recommendation of suggestions.

Thematic Coding

Line-by-line coding was used to identify themes in each interview. Yi (2018) recommended line-by-line coding because it assists the researcher in pulling out all the details from the data. Line-by-line coding involved applying a code to each line of an interview transcript. The purpose of this type of coding was to allow new codes to emerge and was used throughout the coding process of the entire study. Before I began to code the interviews, I created a color-coded notebook. The three components of SDT, the themes identified by Stewart (2017), and the new themes that emerged were all identified by different colors. After each interview, I coded the interview based upon the color of each theme in the codebook and then added new themes as they emerged. The following themes were identified throughout the study: autonomy, competence, relatedness, collaboration and planning, and perseverance. Table 3 includes each identified theme and the participants who mentioned the theme in the interview process.

Table 3

Identified Themes by Participant

Participant	Autonomy	Relatedness	Competence	Collaboration and planning	Perseverance
1	X	X	X		X
2	X	X	X	X	X
3	X	X	X		X
4	X	X	X	X	X
5	X	X	X	X	X
6	X	X	X	X	X
7		X	X		X
8	X	X	X		
9	X	X	X	X	
10	X	X	X		

As indicated in Table 3, all participants identified the themes of relatedness and

competence in their interviews. Nine of the participants identified autonomy, and seven of 10 identified perseverance as a theme. Next, each of the five themes is discussed in detail, and the individual categories connected with each theme are explained.

Autonomy

Autonomy was defined as the need to feel as if we are masters of our own destiny. It is the need for humans to feel as if they have some control over their own lives and their own behaviors (Ackerman, 2020). Autonomous behaviors are based on a person's own intentions and volition, meaning the person fully supports participating and engaging in the behavior because they want to, not just because they can (Ryan et al., 2009). Autonomous behaviors allow a person to feel as if their behavior comes from within and reflects who they really are (Martela & Riekkki, 2018). Before assigning themes to the transcribed interviews, each interview was broken down into categories and then the categories were put into themes. Within the theme of autonomy, the following categories emerged in the participant interviews: self-fulfillment; ministry, purpose, and passion; setting limits or boundaries; and job opportunities and job security. These reasons as to why special education teachers have persisted in the classroom are part of who they believe they are and are behaviors they can fully support and engage in out of their own control or choice.

Self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment was an identified category under the theme of autonomy for Participant 1. When asked why she has stayed in the profession beyond the 5-year mark, one of the reasons she expressed was the self-fulfillment she received from watching her students grow and change. She said the feeling of “self-fulfillment from knowing that I can help a child be an independent person in this world, and the world

they live in” helps her “to choose to continue in the profession.”

Ministry, Purpose, and Passion. Five of the 10 participants said they stayed in the profession because they felt it was their ministry, their purpose, or their passion. They all agreed that special education was where they were supposed to be, and that mindset kept them choosing to remain in the profession. Participant 2 referred to special education as her ministry:

And I think in some ways it has crossed the line from being just a job to being a ministry, especially given that I’m in a school right now that the kids that are in my quadrant come to me have so little in terms of worldly goods, but also in terms of that security and that safe environment. I feel like I’m called to make a difference in their lives and seeing some of them be successful and get out to the program and know that they made it in spite of overwhelming odds makes it worth continuing to remain in the classroom for me.

Participants 4 and 9 referred to their positions as special education teachers as their purpose. Participant 4 described her purpose as a special education teacher as,

My heart is in this, so I don’t think that it has as much to do with the circumstances. You know more difficult times, more difficult children, more difficult circumstances, but I don’t know why for me the quote that teaching is not what I do it’s who I am really resonates with me. So, there is no other choice. It’s what I do. It’s my purpose.

Participant 9 also agreed that her choice to stay in special education was largely impacted by the idea that it was her purpose. Participant 9 has taught special education for 35 years and explained why she has chosen to do so for so long:

The big part of that question, why did I stay is because at this point it's my purpose. I mean that's who I am at this point and that's why I've done this for so long. Even though I joke about the fact that I could be a Wal-Mart greeter, I'm happy and I just can't really see myself doing anything else.

These two participants both indicated that there are days they must remind themselves they have chosen this profession and it is where they are supposed to be.

Finally, Participants 7 and 8 referred to special education as their passion and their "heart." It is where they feel they are supposed to be in the long run and where they truly want to be. Participant 7 said,

I know this is going to sound kind of cheesy, but I know I do have a passion for this. I do love going to school. I mean when the alarm goes off, I dread it, but when I get up and get there, I truly do love it.

Participant 8 left special education at one point in her career and chose to come back. When asked why, she responded, "I really do feel like I have a heart and a passion for kids with special needs, and I do feel like I can make more of a difference for these students."

The key to the theme of autonomy is that it is a motivational factor based upon a person's choice to participate in a behavior out of their own volition or will. These five participants explained they choose to stay in this profession out of their own volition because it is their ministry, their purpose, or their passion.

Setting Limits and Boundaries. Two of the participants discussed how setting their own limits and boundaries has kept them from becoming overwhelmed. Participant 2 expressed the importance of "reminding myself that it is never going to be all done and

it's ok to have limits." She also shared a story about how she had to take medical leave to take care of herself. From this experience, she learned,

You have to set boundaries and do things you enjoy that are outside of the classroom because if you're not happy and you're not healthy and you are not taking care of yourself, then you can't do what you are passionate about.

Participant 9 also shared her experiences that drove her to understand the importance of setting boundaries in this profession. She explained, "Boundaries, you must set boundaries! When you say it's time to go, or if you say you are going to leave at 3:00 then you must go. You can set your boundaries."

Job Opportunities. Two of the participants discussed how knowing they had job security and job opportunities has encouraged them to remain in the special education profession. Participant 8 left special education and then later returned. When asked why she returned to special education, she replied,

Honestly, job opportunity. This is where the job is. I wasn't at the point where it was like I'm never going to do special education again. I was definitely willing to do special education and a door opened in that area. I was willing to go wherever the job needed me to go, but I really do feel like I have a heart for kids with special needs and I do feel like I can make more of a difference for these kids.

Participant 10 also discussed the confidence knowing she could always find a job has given her,

I've worked in different places. My husband was a marine, so we moved a lot and there was always a job. I know once we left one place, I could always find a job in another place. So, you know I never was fearful of not finding a job, and I feel

like I'm really good at this.

Competence

Competence is defined as the need to experience mastery over tasks that are important to you. These tasks may include achieving goals, gaining new knowledge, or mastery of skills (Ackerman, 2020). When someone experiences a level of mastery and the need for competence is satisfied, motivation is increased (Ryan et al., 2009). When coding the transcripts of the participant interviews, two categories emerged that fit into the theme of competence. One participant, Participant 4 discussed the need to look for and find solutions rather than focus on problems, and all 10 participants discussed the impact student growth and success had on their decision to stay in the special education classroom.

Solutions. Participant 4 expressed the importance that finding solutions has had on her mental stamina and her ability to stay in the classroom. Rather than focusing on the problems or struggles of her students, she places her focus on finding solutions that result in student achievement. She said, "Most of the time I was looking more for a solution rather than me leaving. You know there's always a solution." She further described how "fulfilling" it is for her when she finds a solution to a problem and in turn can see a student improve and grow. This level of fulfillment from finding solutions fits under the concept of competence because it is the idea of being motivated by gaining new knowledge and mastering new skills.

Student Growth and Success. Student growth and success is one of two areas all 10 participants referenced as a reason they have persisted in the elementary special education classroom beyond the 5-year mark. Every participant in the study referenced

the importance of focusing on student achievement rather than student needs and how student successes, big or small, outweigh the tough days, the paperwork, the low pay, and all the daily aggravations many teachers experience. Student growth was the most mentioned theme by the teachers interviewed for this study as a motivational factor that has kept them in the elementary self-contained classroom beyond the 5-year mark. When asked what has kept her from leaving the profession, Participant 1 responded,

The kids' progress. Seeing them grow, because only a special education teacher can see the way these kids grow. A regular person may look and say well, they don't know anything, but just because they don't know things doesn't mean they haven't made tremendous growth. So, just seeing them and how much they have grown gives me the joy to continue, no matter how many problems I face, and I do face quite a bit.

Participant 2 said she keeps coming back to her special education classroom because of "the difference I am making in the long run. What I do matters. Seeing these kids be successful and sometimes get out of my program keeps me coming back despite the hard days."

When asked how she faces the daily challenges in her special education classroom and does not allow those challenges to overwhelm her, Participant 3 replied, "Well, at the end of the day it's for the kids. I just like to see their progress. Being able to work with students for a couple of years, I think, is one of the advantages of special education."

Participant 4 described the rewards of student successes as being "immense."

Participant 5 talked about the amount of time she spends outside of the school day working for her students. She talked about working at home on weekends and evenings.

So, when asked why she was willing to work on her own time and if working these kinds of hours made her consider leaving the profession, she responded, “The end result is worth it. I’m trying to make changes and I’m trying to make the tweaks but it’s for the bigger picture and the outcome for the students is so worth it.” Participant 5 responded that she had considered leaving special education, and when asked why she did not, she said, “because of the students.” She also told a story about being in the check-out line purchasing groceries and she was asked by the cashier what she would do if she won a million dollars and if she would quit her job. Participant 5 said she looked at the cashier and responded,

Well, no, I wouldn’t. A million dollars isn’t enough. I looked at her and said no, I’m a teacher and so it’s not that the money isn’t enough, but I would still go to work and still do my job and teach children because I have an impact in their lives.

Participant 6 got very excited when she was asked why she stayed in special education:

Because I love my job! I love my kids! I love helping them. I love when parents message me and say they are washing their hands or have tried a new food or he’s even starting to recognize letters on a stop sign. Just the little things like that really keep me going and just knowing that you are making a difference. Because I mean, we try with these children with special needs, just showing up and caring and just giving them love that a lot of them don’t even get really. And you know the tough days are tough, but the good days are even better!

Participant 7 also discussed the importance of celebrating the “little victories and the little wins” and how these little victories and wins keep her going and keep her in the

profession. Participant 8 had an interesting perspective on the impact of student success and how it has motivated her to stay in the classroom. She left special education at one point in her career but later decided to come back. When asked why she returned to the special education classroom after leaving and going to teach in a general education classroom, one of the reasons she cited was, “I do feel like I can make more of a difference for these kids.”

Participant 9 had an interesting take on the role student growth and success has played in keeping her in the profession. She focused on how important it was to have a personal philosophy of education and how that philosophy should drive what you do in the classroom. Her personal philosophy is based on the idea that she’s “not going to be there when the students turn 30 so it is my job to teach them how to care for themselves and how to become independent, life-long learners.” However, it is seeing this personal mission fulfilled in the lives of her students as they become independent, make gains, and “being able to provide these children with what they need when they leave me” that has kept her coming back to the special education classroom for 35 years. Finally, Participant 10 reiterated the same importance of seeing student growth and success as a motivational factor that has kept her in the classroom. When asked why she has persisted in the special education classroom, she replied,

It’s fun! I tell my husband every day I love my job. He hates his job. He’s a banker, but I love my job; my kids are hilarious; and we have a blast every day. I think the most difficult thing about special education is the behaviors and dealing with that. But if you can figure it out and find a way to create a plan for that child and see the change in them, I mean it’s so rewarding; not for them, but for me.

This is awesome! I feel a lot of times like I'm the lucky one when it comes to these kids because I get to see where they come from and where they're going.

The theme of competence and the category of student success was listed by all 10 participants as playing a crucial role in keeping them in the elementary self-contained special education classroom. All the participants discussed how there are going to be difficult days, but the rewards of watching the students grow and learn outweigh the difficulty of being a special education teacher.

Relatedness

The third and final basic need based upon SDT is relatedness. Relatedness refers to the need to belong. It is the need to feel connected to and involved with others (Ryan & Deci, 2018). The need for relatedness can be satisfied by both caring for others and feeling as if others care for you. According to SDT, when people feel connected to and important to others, it will motivate them to act accordingly (Ryan et al., 2009). In the interviews with all 10 participants, each one referred to the theme of relatedness and the impact the connections they have made with students, parents, and colleagues has had on keeping them in the profession. Many of the participants also expressed the importance of new teachers finding their own support system and relying on that support system on the days when special education was emotionally and physically difficult. The theme of relatedness surfaced in the categories of encouragement and relationships.

Encouragement. Stewart (2017) found encouragement to be one of the top four factors that increase self-efficacy and keep special education teachers in the profession. Four of the 10 teachers interviewed in this study referenced the impact that receiving encouragement from parents, students, administrators, and colleagues has had on them

and how this encouragement has helped them to stay positive and persist in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark. Participant 2 talked a lot about how she has built relationships with the general education teachers who also work with her special education students. She said that she “wants them to feel supported.” She said she goes out of her way to encourage these teachers; and while she originally made a point to go out of her way to encourage them so when her students mainstreamed into their classes they would be successful, she actually found it to be “fulfilling and in turn encouraging to myself.”

Participant 10 referenced the encouragement she has received from her current administration. She said that their encouragement, “makes me want to work harder. Knowing she [the principal] has my back all of the time makes me happy to work extra hard for her.” Participant 10 also talked about the encouragement she has received from her administration. Three years ago, a new principal joined her school. This new principal was a former special education teacher, and she understood what special education teachers do and what they go through. Participant 10 said that for the new principal, “it was her priority that special education be included and treated just like every other student. She has been so supportive and so encouraging to us as special education teachers. I feel lucky to work with this administration.”

Participant 7 talked about the encouragement she receives and provides to the teaching assistants in her classroom: “We remind each other of the little victories and the little wins.” They work together to help each other remember where the students began and where they are now and encourage each other to “look at the big picture and the difference we are making in the lives of our students.” These words of encouragement help remind them why they are in the classroom and why they keep coming back day after day and year after year.

Encouragement for these four teachers was an important aspect of relatedness that has played a positive role in keeping them in the classroom.

Relationships. Relationships, the foundation of the theme of connectedness, is the second area all 10 participants referenced as the reason they have persisted in the elementary special education classroom beyond the 5-year mark. All 10 teachers interviewed in this study discussed the important role relationships with students, parents, and colleagues have played in their happiness and desire to remain in the special education classroom. Stewart (2017) found relationships to be the top factor to increasing self-efficacy in special education teachers and in turn the top factor that keeps these teachers in the classroom. The results from the current study supported the finding of Stewart in this area as well. Relationships and the theme of connectedness were the second most mentioned theme by the teachers interviewed for this study as a motivational factor that has kept them in the elementary self-contained classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

When discussing the impact of relationships with colleagues, Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 10 all expressed the importance of building relationships with others in the profession and how having those relationships has been instrumental in keeping them in the profession. Participant 1 said,

I am one of the veteran teachers out there in Special Ed. so they're looking you know, the newer teachers are looking to me for advice and answers, and of course it's nice to have you know somebody that needs you too.

Participant 1 also added that it was important to have relationships that can serve as an outlet when the profession becomes overwhelming: "There was a time where I didn't

have any outlet and I questioned what I was doing, but then once I found my outlet then it's like okay, I can keep going from day to day." Participant 2 also discussed the importance of those relationships you build with your colleagues and how important it is for you to lean on each other on the hard days. She also talked about how important it is "to have relationships with those who will remind you that the outcomes outweigh the challenges, and it is this group of people who remind you of why you do what you do."

Participant 4 talked about this same idea and expressed the importance of having a support system with your colleagues:

I think it's really important to find your people, and I think that you have to have the mindset that you are going to have days that knock you on your fanny and it's ok. But more than not I feel like if you have a good support system you are more likely to stay in the classroom.

Participant 5 explained the importance of having relationships with mentors or veteran teachers as "that support is important and sometimes just having the support to know it's ok to bounce ideas off of one another or listening to someone, or a veteran teacher offering suggestions rather than an evaluation".

Participants 7 and 10 discussed how relationships with others can make the job fun and increase the motivation of wanting to come to work. Participant 7 focused on her relationships with her teaching assistants and how these relationships make her want to go to work:

I love my job. I love my students. I'm again fortunate to work with a great team, so I think that's always great. You know, I go to work and work with my best friends and with the kids I love. On the tough days, we can come back the next

day and laugh about whatever happened, so I think that's just a huge thing.

Participant 10 expressed the difference having a supportive administration has made in her decision to stay in the profession. She said she has worked with different administrators, but the "support I have from this administration encourages me to come to work. I know that they have my back."

Participants 1 and 8 discussed how their relationships with their students encourage them to persist in the classroom. Participant 1 described her role as being more than just a teacher:

It's more than just teaching them the content, you know some children don't have that mom at home to fulfill the needs that they have as a student and as a child, and when they come to school they're seeking that relationship. That's part of that social/emotional learning. You know, children need somebody that they can hug and cry to and tell their secrets to. Whether they are older or younger, and I just know I think as a teacher you should be told in the beginning that you are going to be mom. You're going to have to do more than just teach the content. However, those relationships are worth it, and they are what keep me coming back.

At one point in her career, Participant 8 left the special education profession, and when asked why she came back, she replied,

I think I just like the kids. I like developing a relationship with them. You get to know them, you get invested with them and when I think about leaving again, I think well, maybe after this one finishes with his looping cycle but then there's always another kid that you feel connected to and that you just don't want to leave.

Relationships with students follows right along with the idea of student success. These relationships and connections with students have played critical roles in why some teachers persist in the classroom.

Finally, Participants 3, 4, 6, and 9 all talked about how important building trust and relationships with families is to their well-being. Knowing they have the support of parents and can work together helps encourage and motivate them. Participant 3 said, “I really like to get to know and connect with the students and their families.” Participants 4 and 9 both talked about how you must build relationships with parents. Participant 4 said, “With the younger children sometimes it is the first-time parents are hearing about their children’s learning differences and so you spend a lot of time counseling parents and talking to them about what this means.” She said that when you can develop a relationship of trust with the parents, “it makes it hard to leave their children.” Participant 6 connected building relationships with parents and student success and how encouraging it is when they call you and tell you about the progress, they see their kids making “it really keeps me going.” She also expressed the importance of building a relationship of trust with parents and including them on your team:

I always communicate to my parents that I’m here for you and you’re here for me.

We’re here for your child and really keeping that relationship focus is key

because when you lose that or lose sight of that you are going to struggle.

In all the interviews with the participants, we spent a lot of time talking about relationships and the role they play in keeping teachers in the classroom. They also talked about the importance of preservice and induction teachers understanding how valuable relationships with parents, students, and colleagues are and how these relationships can

help to keep them in the classroom long term.

Collaboration and Planning

Collaboration and planning were identified by Stewart (2017) as one of the top four factors that increase self-efficacy and keep special education teachers in the profession. The idea of collaboration and planning was also identified as a theme in this study that keeps teachers in the classroom. Four of the 10 participants discussed the importance of collaboration and planning and the influence it had on keeping them in the classroom. Participants 2, 4, 5, and 6 all discussed how important it was for teachers to work together, to plan together, to help each other out, to act as mentors, and to ask for help when needed. Participant 2 discussed how much she enjoyed working with general education teachers to plan together for the success of her special education students. Participant 4 discussed how having a team to plan with makes her job easier and more manageable. She said she works with other special education teachers and described them as having “shared responsibility.” She said they work together to “plan which class new students go into. Planning together gives us a lot of flexibility.” Participant 5 shared how important it is for veteran teachers to be willing to collaborate and plan with new teachers:

Maybe more collaborative support the first year or two instead of it being an evaluation process where you’re being evaluated and more of a sit-down and work together would help keep these teachers in the classroom. I know having a team to plan with has definitely helped me.

Participant 6 discussed how hard it is for teachers to ask for help and how if more teachers worked together and were not afraid to ask for help, maybe more would be

willing to stay in the classroom. She said she had to learn early in her career how to ask for help and that it made a positive impact on her. She also suggested that new teachers should be encouraged to ask for help and

just don't be afraid to ask for help, because there are a lot of other teachers that can help you or that may know something, or you can bounce ideas off of each other and just how you make it.

Collaboration and planning were identified by Stewart (2017) and by this study as having a positive impact on keeping special education teachers in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

Perseverance

One new theme that emerged in this study is the mindset of perseverance. Seven of the 10 teachers interviewed mentioned the importance of having a mindset of perseverance. Several of them discussed how you must make up your mind that you are in special education and you are going to stay. Several of the participants also discussed how important it is to have a realistic understanding of how difficult special education can be and by having this realistic understanding, it makes it easier to persevere on the difficult days. When talking about what has kept her in the classroom, Participant 1 stated,

I've always had to be the person that showed that I'm not gonna quit when the road gets tough. You know that I'm going to push through and I'm going to keep going. When I put my mind to something, I'm going to stick with it.

Participant 2 said she just made up her mind: "I've kind of chosen to persevere." She said she made her mind up a long time ago that this was what she was supposed to do, and she

is going to “finish what she started.” Participant 7 also talked about how she was determined to make it. When asked about why she was still in special education, she very confidently declared, “I have no desire to leave. I want to stay as long as I can.”

Participant 5 discussed how she had to work on weekends and evenings to meet the learning needs of all her students. When asked how she works these kinds of hours, she replied, “I just do. I persevere and I just do it because it has to be done.” Participant 5 also talked about how being flexible helped her “to not give up.” While she did say she had considered leaving special education, she also said that “I guess I just don’t give up and I try to find ways to be effective.” For her, she truly had a mindset that she would persevere, and she would make it.

Participant 6 said she has days when she must remind herself that it is worth it and she is not going to give up. She said she tells herself,

I can do this, like things were tough then and they’re still tough now but I made it before, and I can keep going. These kids are making progress. And just knowing that you know it may be tough, you may have five tough days but you’re going to have one good day, so you keep pushing on to get to that one good day.

Participant 9 also talked about how important it is to remind yourself why you are here and that perseverance “is a mental thing. You must come to grips with the barriers and the things you can’t control and not let that drag you down. You just keep going.”

Perseverance is a mindset that “I am not going to give up”; and for seven of the 10 teachers interviewed, having made up their minds that they are not going to quit or become a statistic has played a valuable role in keeping them in the special education classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

Summary

This chapter began by looking at the participants and their responses to the interview questions. The chapter then moved on to discuss the different topics that were covered in the interviews and then on to the different themes that emerged. The interviews found support of all three motivational areas of self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When all the themes were compared and presented, the interviews identified student growth and success, which falls in the theme of competence, as the top reason elementary self-contained special education teachers remain in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. Relationships, which fall into relatedness, a new theme of having a mindset of perseverance, and ministry, purpose or passion also emerged as the next three reasons these teachers have persisted. Finally, collaboration and planning (identified by four participants), finding solutions (identified by four participants), and encouragement (identified by one participant) were also identified as supporting motivational factors for some of the teachers interviewed in the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine the lived experiences of SC elementary self-contained special education teachers who have persisted in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark. This study was designed around the theoretical framework of SDT to collect and analyze data based upon the factors that have motivated these teachers to remain in the classroom when many have not. The findings from this study may help fill the void that currently exists in research on the motivators that keep special education teachers in the classroom and may be useful when preparing preservice teachers, mentoring new teachers, and encouraging current teachers to remain beyond the 5-year mark.

This chapter reviews the study's purpose and processes related to data collection and analysis. The study then reviews the findings and interprets them through the lens of SDT. The next portion of this chapter discusses the limitations of the study. Finally, it concludes with suggestions and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Data Collection

I interviewed 10 elementary special education teachers and used the information from those interviews to analyze factors that have motivated them to stay in the profession. I coded the transcripts from each interview, put the data into categories, and then put the categories into themes based upon the three components of SDT and other themes that arose.

Each participant participated in two virtual interviews via Zoom. The first interview followed a script, and all participants were asked the same questions. The second interview questions were individualized based on the data collected during the

first interview. In the second interviews, participants were asked questions that pertained to their individual lived experiences and their individual ideals. Deductive coding was used to determine categories and themes of data. All the transcribed interviews went through multiple rounds of coding to make sure I did not miss or misinterpret any information. After the coding process was complete, all participants received an email containing the transcripts of their interviews as well as a list of the identified categories, themes, and suggestions/recommendations that emerged in their interviews. As part of member checking, each participant was allowed to respond or clarify the data collected from their interviews. The participants did not have any disagreements with the findings. Three participants mentioned how much the interview questions really made them think about what they were doing and why they continued in the profession.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through the steps outlined in Figure 1 and described in detail in Chapter 3. This process was explained by Yi (2018) and involved coding the entire interview, putting similar ideas into categories, and then turning the categories into themes. The coding process also included line-by-line coding recommended by Yi because it assisted the researcher in pulling out all the details from the data. The purpose of line-by-line coding was to allow new codes and themes to emerge. From this process, a new theme emerged: mindset of perseverance.

Connection to SDT

The findings in the study supported the three components of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2018) that are motivators for why people act the way they do. The research question guiding this qualitative study, “What factors have motivated SC elementary school self-

contained special education teachers to remain in the classroom for more than 5 years,” was founded on the idea of understanding the motivators keeping special education teachers in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study are all connected to the theoretical framework of SDT founded by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (Ryan & Deci, 2018). SDT is a theory of motivation that explains how people are driven by an internal need to grow and gain fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Ryan and Deci (2018) described humans as having internal needs that drive them to act differently based on individual values, interests, and needs. Ryan and Deci explained that these internal needs push humans to look for ways to satisfy their needs. According to SDT, people must make sure their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met to experience growth and change. As needs are met, people feel fulfilled and become self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2018).

Autonomy. Autonomy is defined as “the need to regulate one’s experiences and actions. It is a form of functioning associated with feeling volitional, congruent, and integrated” (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 10). According to SDT, when people act with volition to fulfill their needs, they bring their own resources, interests, and capacities (Ryan & Deci, 2018). When analyzing the theme of autonomy, nine of the 10 participants mentioned some aspect or category that fit under this theme. The separate categories that emerged within the theme of autonomy were self-fulfillment; ministry, purpose, or passion; setting limits or boundaries, and job opportunities or security. From these categories, the two most mentioned and identified were self-fulfillment and ministry, purpose, or passion. Several of the participants referred to the idea that they chose to be

in special education because of the feeling of fulfillment they received from helping their students. Five of the participants also specifically said they stayed because they felt like they were called to this job or because it was their purpose. They felt this position was what they were supposed to do with their life, so they were going to stick it out with the hope of impacting the lives of others.

These findings are directly related to the work of Ryan and Deci (2018) because the categories that emerged from the interviews are all founded on the idea of fulfillment or regulation of their own actions and experiences. According to SDT, when people feel their need for autonomy is met, they are motivated to work harder or, in this study, to stay in the profession. These teachers have remained in the special education profession out of their own volition because they felt called to do so; they believe it is their purpose; they have set boundaries to keep them here; and they have felt as if there is security in this profession. These motivational factors are directly related to the definition of autonomy as outlined by Ryan and Deci.

Competence. Ryan and Deci (2018) described competence as one of the most researched issues in psychology. Competence is defined by SDT as “our basic need to feel effectance and mastery. People need to feel able to operate effectively within their important life contents” (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 11). When interpreting data from the interviews on the theme of competence, it is important to understand that all 10 of the participants addressed some aspect of competence in their interviews. While one participant did talk about the importance of looking for solutions to problems and not focusing on the problems was a motivating factor that assisted her in staying in the profession, all 10 participants discussed how they were motivated by student growth,

progress, and success. They all expressed the importance of focusing on the good days and student growth; and by doing so, they were motivated to continue to do all they could for their students and their families. Student growth and success is an extremely important aspect of the findings of this study because it was one of only two categories that was expressed by all 10 participants.

According to SDT, when people do not feel as if they have had the opportunity to reach mastery, the need for competence will not be met and they will not be motivated to continue in the behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2018). All 10 participants explained they felt motivated to remain in the profession by focusing on the growth, progress, and success of their students. Seeing their students grow and knowing they were responsible for this growth has provided satisfaction and fulfillment for these educators. This satisfaction has provided the feeling of operating effectively that Ryan and Deci (2018) described as the outcome of satisfying the need for competence.

Relatedness. Relatedness means to feel “socially connected” (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Ryan and Deci (2018) explained that people feel relatedness when they feel cared for by others and when they are providing care to others. Relatedness is defined as, “a sense of being integral to social organizations beyond oneself” (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 11). Relatedness was the second theme mentioned by all 10 participants. Within the theme of relatedness, encouragement and relationships were identified categories. Both categories were also identified by Stewart (2017) as reasons elementary special education teachers remained in the profession. While encouragement was mentioned by four of the participants, relationships were mentioned by all 10. The participants all referenced the importance that their relationships with students, parents, and colleagues have played in

keeping them in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. Several of them mentioned they felt if other teachers focused on relationships and took the time to build strong relationships, it might increase the likelihood of keeping them in the profession longer. So, when interpreting the data produced in the interviews, it is important to understand the role relationships have played in the lives of these participants and look for ways to use that information to keep others in the profession.

According to the SDT, relatedness is experienced “both by feeling connected to others and by being a significant member of social groups, people experience relatedness and belonging, for example through contributing to the group of showing benevolence” (Ryan & Deci, 2018, p. 11). When discussing what has motivated these teachers to remain in the profession, all the participants referred to relationships and to those with whom they have made connections. So, based on the data resulting from the interviews, the need for relatedness is met through the relationships these teachers have made with students, parents, and coworkers. As the need for satisfaction of relatedness is met through these relationships, the teachers interviewed in this study have found their motivation and determination to remain in the profession have increased.

Collaboration and Planning. While collaboration and planning were not mentioned by all participants, it was identified in Stewart’s (2017) study and by four of the participants in this study as being a motivational factor keeping them in the classroom. When interpreting what the participants said in this area, the teachers who mentioned this category felt as if having a support system to work with has helped them. They all agreed that if they did not have a team of people to plan and collaborate with, they might not have made it in the profession. Lack of support is one of the top factors

special education teachers documented as a reason why they leave the profession (Conley & You, 2017). Two of the participants did point out that the team they collaborated with was not at their school and how beneficial it was to have teachers at other schools with whom to share ideas. For these teachers, having others they could go to and collaborate with regarding instruction and student behavior has played a positive role in motivating them to stay in the profession. Mulvahill (2019) cited a study conducted by the Learning Policy Institute showing when teachers had mentors and participated in collaboration with other teachers, their turnover rate was cut in half.

Perseverance. Finally, it is important to note that perseverance emerged as a new theme throughout this study. Seven of the 10 participants talked about how they had just made their minds up that they were not going to quit. It was a mindset that they were determined to persevere in the profession. There were no other motivational factors tied to their mindset of perseverance; it was just the idea that they were determined to stick with special education on the good days and the bad. They also discussed the importance of instilling this mindset of perseverance in preservice and induction teachers and helping them to see how impactful this type of mindset could be in keeping them in the classroom long term. Freedman and Appleman (2009) studied the factors that have kept special education and general education teachers in the classroom and the factors that have caused other teachers to leave. Their study found six reasons teachers remained in the classroom, and one of those reasons was directly related to the teacher's disposition and positive attitude toward education. Freeman and Appleman found that when commitment and perseverance were encouraged in preservice teacher training programs, those teachers were more likely to remain longer in the classroom. The seven participants in

this study who expressed the importance of having a mindset of perseverance explained that if you are focused on staying, you do not entertain the idea of leaving. You make your mind up that special education is where you are supposed to be, and you are going to stick it out.

Conclusions

Ryan and Deci (2018) wrote,

For many individuals, work not only represents a source of income for survival; it is also itself a form of self-realization and personal satisfaction. People search for careers that have meaning and that provide not only money but also a sense of purpose and fulfillment. (p. 533)

The data from this study support the idea that special education teachers who have persisted in the profession have done so because of a sense of purpose and fulfillment. This study set out to identify themes that motivate SC elementary self-contained special education teachers to remain in the profession. The categories that emerged in the interviews were then put into themes based on the components of SDT and other themes. Figure 2 displays the categories identified within each theme of this study.

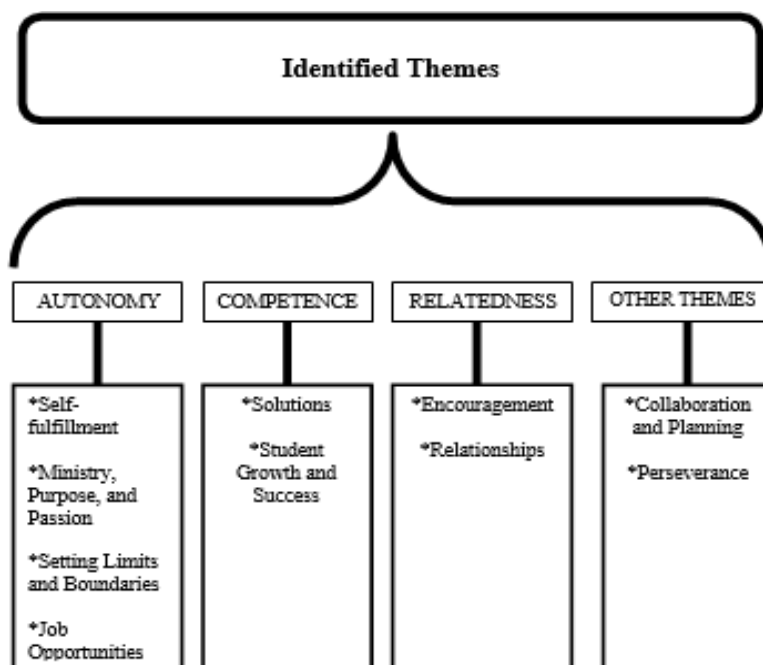
Figure 2*Identified Themes*

Figure 2 presents the data collected by themes. Collaboration and planning was a theme previously identified by Stewart (2017), and perseverance is a new theme that emerged in this study. When interpreting the data from the interviews of all 10 participants, the following conclusions can be made: All three components of SDT were found to be motivational factors that have kept SC elementary self-contained special education teachers in the classroom. Student growth and success is the top motivational factor that has kept elementary self-contained teachers in the classroom, and a positive relationship with students, parents, and colleagues is the second factor. Having a mindset of perseverance and not willing to give up has played a critical role in keeping these teachers in the classroom. Finally, having a team or a support system to collaborate and plan with has made an impact on these teachers. They have found this level of support to be a critical motivator that has also influenced their decisions to stay in the special

education classroom.

Limitations

Limitations of a study are defined as “what the researcher cannot do (elements outside of their control)” (DiscoverPHDs, 2020, para. 6). Limitations of this study included whether the participants gave their honest feedback when answering the questions. I could not control the honesty of the feedback the participants provided. Even though the participants were encouraged to express their own feelings, not knowing me may have influenced the participants to only share portions of their stories and not all the details.

Another limitation of the study was the aspect that all the interviews were conducted via Zoom. All the interviews were virtual due to COVID-19 and the locations of some of the participants. While the interviews were videoed, I was unable to meet face to face with the participants. This fact may have limited my ability to observe body language and to develop relationships with the participants.

The number of participants may have also limited the study. There were 10 participants included in the study, and even though SC is divided into three geographical regions, there were only participants from two of those regions. A larger number of participants and participants from more varied locations across SC may have produced different themes, recommendations, and suggestions.

The final limitation of this study was that it only included elementary self-contained teachers from SC. No resource teachers, inclusion teachers, middle school teachers, or high school teachers were included in this study. Interviewing these teachers may have offered different data due to the nature of their different classrooms. Finally,

teachers were only from SC. Including teachers from different states may have also provided different themes based upon their different needs and lived experiences.

Recommendations and Suggestions

As part of the interview process, the participants were asked for recommendations of ways to motivate preservice and induction teachers to persist in the classroom. The recommendations they provided were also split into themes based upon the identified factors that have motivated the teachers to persist in the classroom.

Student Growth and Success

Based upon the research from this study, one suggestion would be for administrators and college professors to focus on student growth and find ways to support special education teachers to do so as well. Administrators and college professors can support teachers by teaching teachers how to use informal data collection procedures to document small increments of growth rather than focusing on student deficits. Amatea et al. (2013) addressed the importance of special education teachers focusing on the strengths of students rather than their needs. Amatea et al. found that focusing on student strengths can increase the amount of time a special education teacher persists in the classroom.

Relationships

The data from this study found positive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues was the second motivational factor that has kept the participants in the study in the classroom. Stewart (2017) and Alford (2018) found relationships to be a factor that increases self-efficacy and keeps special education teachers in the classroom. Building relationships is another area where administrators and professors can provide support to

help foster these relationships. One important way to assist in building relationships among teachers is by providing them with mentors who are trained to handle the specific needs or situations a special education teacher may experience. Goldrick (2016) recommended mentors should teach the same area and grade level as the induction teacher to assist in teacher retention. Mrstik et al. (2019) wrote that mentoring may be one solution to the problem of special education teachers leaving the classroom. Roster (2019) also suggested that providing social and emotional support through mentoring to beginning teachers could increase special education teacher retention in the future.

Collaboration and Planning

Collaboration and planning was identified in this study and in Stewart's (2017) study as one of the factors that motivates teachers to remain in the profession. Administrators can provide the opportunity for new teachers to collaborate and plan with other teachers as one way to increase teacher retention. Vittek (2015) found that it is not uncommon for first-year teachers to experience feelings of loneliness and isolation. Goldrick (2016) stressed the importance of mentor teachers being given time during the school day to collaborate and plan with new teachers. This act of collaboration and planning can increase the feeling of support a new teacher experiences and in turn may increase teacher retention. Goldrick also suggested that lack of support and lack of time for collaboration may increase the likelihood of teachers leaving the profession early in their careers.

Perseverance

Perseverance was a new theme that arose from this study. Seven of the 10 participants in this study discussed the importance of having a mindset of perseverance

and determination to remain in the profession. Singh (2011) noted the importance of teachers having a strong personal commitment to personal ethics in the profession. Administrators and professors may increase perseverance by exposing new teachers to others who also share this mindset. Professional development on how to persist in the special education classroom would be one way for administrators to encourage perseverance among new teachers. Hughes (2019) found special education teachers who were provided meaningful professional development experienced higher levels of job satisfaction. Training in the importance of having a mindset of perseverance and how to maintain this mindset may increase teacher retention. Harris-Looby et al. (2017) identified six factors that encourage special teachers to persist in the profession and found that a personal commitment or perseverance was one of those factors. By encouraging a mindset of perseverance from the very beginning, special education teachers may decide to persist in the classroom beyond the 5-year mark.

Recommendations for Future Research

While interviewing the participants, several topics that could be of value in the future emerged. First, a larger study of special education teachers across SC as well as including resource and inclusion teachers may provide further data as to why these teachers have remained in the classroom.

Another area of further research that may provide impactful information would be a study on the influence supportive administration has had on keeping special education teachers in the classroom. There were teachers in this study who discussed positive relationships and high levels of support from their administration, while there were others who had negative experiences. Further study on the impact of supportive administration

and administrators knowledgeable in special education law, students, and instruction may provide further information on motivational factors that keep special education teachers in the classroom.

One final area for further study would be the impact that inclusion and mainstreaming children with disabilities has had on influencing people to become special education teachers. Several of the participants in the study decided to enter the field of special education as children from experiences they had with other students in their schools or their own family members. Participant 6 suggested that studying the impact that inclusion during childhood has on influencing adults to go into special education or fields related to persons with disabilities could be a future study when looking at why people become special education teachers and what keeps them in the profession.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to identify the motivational factors that have influenced SC elementary self-contained special education teachers who have remained in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. The results of the study indicated student success and growth; positive relationships with parents, teachers, and colleagues; a mindset of perseverance; and having a team or support system to collaborate and plan with as the top four reasons the participants in this study have been motivated to stay in the profession. As I conclude this study, it is my hope that this study can assist administrators, teachers, and higher education professors when planning the educational program and support system for preservice and induction teachers. It is also my hope that the findings of this study may provide insight and suggestions as ways to support elementary self-contained special education teachers in ways that will motivate

them to stay in the profession beyond the 5-year mark.

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Appendix A
Social Media Post

I am looking for SC elementary, self-contained, special education teachers who have been teaching more than 5 years to participate in a doctoral research study on the factors that motivate teachers to persist in the profession. If you meet this description or know of special education teachers who do and would be interested in participating in this study, please contact me at jmills8@gardner-webb.edu or message me here on Facebook (Twitter or LinkedIn).

Appendix B

Recruitment Email to Possible Candidates/Copy of Google Questionnaire

Date:

Dear _____,

My name is Judith Mills and I am a doctoral candidate in Gardner-Webb University's School of Education. Thank you for your interest in participating in a research study exploring the lived experiences of SC elementary self-contained special education teachers who have persisted in the profession beyond the 5-year mark. Currently, a shortage of special education teachers exists, and the purpose of this study is to look at the motivational factors that have kept teachers in the classroom when many other have left during the first 5 years of employment. I am hopeful that I will be able to identify factors that have kept teachers in the classroom and then use that information to keep others from leaving the profession. Please complete the attached google form, and if you meet the qualifications for the study, I will contact you to set up an interview, conducted either face-to-face or via zoom. Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Judith A. Mills

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1FORZliXfd_eUmWXESSvm0CIGiUYS_rF3bSs55W51kPE/edit

Participant Information Form C

Please provide information and insight about your experience in the elementary self-contained special education classroom in South Carolina.

Are you currently teaching in an elementary school self-contained classroom in the state of SC? *

Yes

No

What is your current teaching position? *

Short answer text

How many years have you been an elementary school self-contained special education teacher? *

Short answer text

Are you certified to teach special education in the state of SC? Multiple choice

Yes ✕

No ✕

Add option or [add "Other"](#)

Required

Are you willing to participate in two one-hour interviews either face to face or virtually (via zoom)? *

Yes 1

No

Appendix C

Data Collection/Interview Plan

Data Collection/Interview Plan

1. Post recruitment post on social media outlets
2. Set-up and hold initial interviews/Complete Informed Consent form
3. Transcribe and code interviews
4. Hold 2nd interviews
5. Transcribe and code interviews
6. After data is analyzed, send member-checking email
7. Make any revisions based on member input
8. If necessary, hold follow-up interview or email to review revisions from member checking

Appendix D
Informed Consent

**Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form**

Title of Study: *WHY DO THEY STAY? A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE MOTIVATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA ELEMENTARY SELF-CONTAINED SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO PERSIST IN THE CLASSROOM*

Researcher: Judith A. Mills/Doctoral Candidate/School of Education

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand the motivational factors of South Carolina elementary self-contained special education teachers who have stayed in the special education classroom for more than five years.

Procedure

What you will do in the study: As a participant of this study, you will participate in two one-hour interviews, either face to face or via zoom, about your experience as a special education teacher. The interviews will focus on the motivational factors that have kept you in the classroom. The interview will be recorded for data collection purposes. You may skip or chose not to answer any questions. Your name will not be used in my report, and other identifying information will not be reported. I will assign you a pseudonym and your data will be reported by this pseudonym. After the data is collected, you will receive an email of the transcripts and my notes in order for you to make sure that your thoughts, opinions, and experiences are adequately represented.

Time Required

It is anticipated that the study will require approximately 2-3 hours of your time. The interviews will require one hour each and it may take about another 30 minutes to an hour for you to review my transcripts and notes.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

Confidentiality

Identifying information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this pseudonym will be kept in a *locked file*. When the study has been completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. The recordings of our interview will also be destroyed upon completion of all aspects of the study. The final dissertation will be made available to other parties for the purpose of further research; however, all personal information will remain anonymous.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand why some special educators choose to stay in the profession beyond the 5-year mark when many others choose to leave. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

Payment

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Right to Withdraw From the Study

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your audio (or video) recording will be destroyed.

How to Withdraw From the Study

If you want to withdraw from the study at any time, please notify the researcher and you will be withdrawn immediately. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact jmills8@gardner-webb.edu

If you withdraw from the study, all interview data connected to you will be destroyed immediately.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Judith A. Mills
EdD Candidate
School of Education, Gardner-Webb University
Researcher telephone number: XXXXX
Researcher email address: jmills8@gardner-webb.edu

Faculty Advisor name: Dr. Jennifer Putnam
Faculty Research Advisor
School of Education, Gardner-Webb University
Faculty Advisor telephone number: 704-406-2015
Faculty Advisor email address: jputnam2@gardner-webb.edu

If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.

Dr. Sydney K. Brown
IRB Institutional Administrator
Gardner-Webb University
Telephone: 704-406-3019
Email: skbrown@gardner-webb.edu

Voluntary Consent by Participant

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me. I agree to participate in this study.

_____ Date: _____
Participant Printed Name

_____ Date: _____
Participant Signature

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix E

Initial Interview Protocol

Initial Interview Protocol

Research question: What factors have motivated elementary self-contained special education teachers from South Carolina to remain in the classroom for more than 5 years?

Introduction: Hello. My name is Judith Mills. I'm a doctoral student at the Gardner-Webb University. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I think this conversation will take about 1 hour. There are no right or wrong, desirable, or undesirable answers. Please feel free to express your opinions, whether they are positive or negative. I just want you to openly share with me what you really think and feel. I am also a special education teacher and I want to assure you that our conversation will remain confidential. You may also choose not to respond to any or all the questions without an explanation. You may also decline to participate in this interview without any consequences. I will assign you a number and your information will be reported by your number.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to identify the motivational factors that have caused elementary self-contained special education teachers in SC to persist in the classroom while other have left within the first five years.

Recording: I would like to **video record (if meeting virtually) or tape record (if meeting face to face)** the discussion so that I do not miss anything you have to say. Would that be all right?

TURN ON RECORDER - Now that the recorder is on, do I have your permission to record our conversation? Do you have any questions before I begin?

Questions:

1. Review/Update the information from the google form.
2. Please share about your own education experience. Where you went to school? Where you received your teaching credentials?
3. What made you go into the field of special education? What (if any) personal experiences influenced your decision to go into special education?
4. How would you describe the different roles/expectations for special education teachers? How do you complete all these roles/expectations?
5. What would you say are the top challenges special education teachers face?
6. Have you ever considered leaving the special education profession? If so why? What factors kept you from leaving?
7. What would you say are the top challenges special education teachers face?

8. How do you personally address these challenges in order to keep you from leaving the profession?

9. How has COVID impacted your classroom?

10. Has COVID caused you to consider leaving the classroom?

11. Why have you stayed in the special education teaching profession?

12. If you could give advice to preservice special education teachers, what would you tell them or what advice would you give them that might influence keeping them in the special education classroom?

Member checking: Review the main points to summarize your interview with the participant to ensure you have the correct understanding for their answers.

Appendix F

Member Checking Email

Date:

Dear _____ ,

Thank you for being a participant in the study titled, Why They Stay? A Qualitative Study on the Motivation of South Carolina Elementary Self-Contained Special Education Teachers Who Persist in the Classroom. In order to strengthen the reliability and validity of the study, I would like to give you the opportunity to review my transcripts and notes to ensure that my perceptions of the transcribed interviews are accurate. If you would like to make any changes, suggestions, or have any questions or concerns, please contact me via email at jmills8@gardner-webb.edu. within the next 7 days. I want to make sure that I present accurate data from our interviews. Once again, thank you for your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Judith A. Mills