

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY
EXPERIENCES OF VETERAN SPECIAL EDUCATORS

by

Jennifer Whittaker Boyd

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

This phenomenological study aimed to examine and describe the experiences of veteran special education (SPED) teachers in rural southwest Georgia school districts regarding their collaborative community network experiences within the field. Granovetter's (1973) social network theory (SNT) encompasses critical concepts of belongingness and connection about job satisfaction over time and throughout educational contexts and guided this study. A phenomenological approach involving teacher interviews, a focus group, and journal prompts was used to examine the experiences of SPED teachers on their social networks. Eleven veteran SPED teachers were interviewed using open-ended interview scripts developed to target the central research question. Convenience snowball sampling was used to find participants in the southwest Georgia region. Interview transcripts were analyzed using an open-coding approach to identify themes. Triangulation was employed across interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Five themes arose: (1) iron-sharpens-iron, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) cohesion, (4) fight or flight, and (5) anchors. Each theme aligned with the study's guiding central and sub-questions and offered qualitative insight into the condition of SPED community networks in southwest Georgia.

Keywords: special education attrition, burnout, protective factors, phenomenology, veteran special education teachers, social network theory

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, who has seen me through the trials and tribulations of my SPED career thus far and will continue to finish His work through me.

To my daughter, Annabelle, may you always have the courage to do the difficult things in life. We started this process together when you were in high school, and with your accountability, we were able to graduate together during your senior year of high school. God's hand is on your life. Your ability to supply accountability and come alongside me in this journey is true testimony of the call on your life to help others. You are my daughter and my friend. Without your patience and support, I would never have been able to fulfill this dream that has always been in my heart. May we always both be lovers of knowledge and the pursuit of it. We have done life as the package deal, just the two of us, and with God's grace, we have each reached a milestone. As we each begin this new chapter in our lives, may we remember daily that the path He has for us is beyond what we can think, know, or plan for.

To my parents, David and Lorena, who have supported my schooling from day one until now. The work ethic you both have shown with your lives has made me the woman I am today. Thank you that your lives are testimonies of the goodness of God in my life. May this be my last, and final, graduation from school. Thank you for being my rock and firm foundation through each of them.

To those beautiful individuals who chose to dedicate their time to this study. This study is dedicated to all special educators who have served entire and fruitful careers serving students with disabilities. Without your willingness, this would have remained a dream, not a reality.

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I would like to acknowledge Dr. Christine Saba and Dr. Ellen Ziegler for their support in completing this study. I appreciate the energy and focus you both dedicated to assuring I was successful in this process and able to meet the goal of graduation. Dr. Saba's consistent availability and willingness to connect on a deeper level is the essence of the finding of this entire study. Connectivity with passionate and dedicated professionals is infectious in the best way possible. I will forever remain grateful for the model she has given me to use going forward as a Godly supporter, encourager, and advocate for myself, my passions, and most importantly the prevailing of God's glory within my career in education.

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List of Abbreviations

College and Career Readiness Performance Indicators (CCRPI)

Students with disabilities (SWDs)

Emotional behavior disorder (EBD)

Professional development (PD)

Special education (SPED)

Social network theory (SNT)

Regional education service agency (RESA)

Formative influence timeline (FIT)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Finishing well encompasses a culmination of using all life's experiences with God to get to a place where Jesus may flow freely within the later stages of life (Clinton, 2012). While spiritual, this idea relates to the professional realm. Relationships are crucial to all realms of life, personal, spiritual, and professional alike. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine and describe the collaborative community experiences of finishing well for veteran special education (SPED) teachers at rural southwest Georgia schools. Effective, seasoned SPED teachers are a dissipating population who bring levels of expertise and life experiences to the field of SPED that are irreplaceable (Gomez, 2019; Nguyen, 2020; Sayman et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2021). The problem of SPED teacher attrition affects stakeholders across organizational levels (Grant, 2017; Mrstik et al., 2019). Wang et al. (2022) clarified that person-centered research is needed to complement the variable-centered research within attrition literature. There is much to be learned from those who have kept stamina, focus, and energy through the difficulties of such a challenging profession. The social, historical, and theoretical concepts associated with SPED teacher attrition will be discussed in the introduction. The problem of SPED attrition will fuel the purpose of examining the social networking experiences of those who still are dedicated to the profession. The significance of the study will be revealed, along with the guiding research questions, essential definitions, and a summary.

Background

SPED attrition across all grade levels involves social, historical, and theoretical contexts that have developed over time. Olson and Roberts (2020) claimed that the issues faced by special educators are institutional, social, and systemic and aligned to be explored with qualitative

methods. SPED has developed along a social continuum that mirrors legal requirements and reforms. The social, historical, and theoretical contexts offer insight into the problem of SPED attrition, which guides this study. Although they overlap in some ways, they each hold critical components to understanding the problem of this study.

Historical Context

SPED teachers have been fleeing the field for decades (Grant, 2017; Mrstik et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2020). Since SPED's start, the issues faced by SPED teachers have snowballed to affect stakeholders across all levels (Olson & Roberts, 2020). Affected stakeholders start at the individual student level and carry through each level, including parents, community members, school administrators, districts, states, and nations (Billingsley et al., 2020). For example, students with disabilities (SWDs) are consistently the most crucially affected when teachers leave the field (Billingsley et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Harris et al. (2019) highlighted the impact on the parents of SWDs regarding SPED teacher shortages. Additionally, states feel the repercussions as they are faced with the shortages that lead to decisions being made to place uncertified teachers in vacancies due to shortages of qualified candidates (Billingsley et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

SPED attrition is an issue that is not unique to America or even to developing countries. States have chronically experienced SPED teacher shortages over decades, which has denied SWD's opportunities that are entrusted to them through legislation (Peyton et al., 2021). The shortages have grown so intense that states have been assigned different levels of either high or low levels of shortages across the United States (US) (Peyton et al., 2021). Historically, the problem has evolved, as fewer teachers are entering SPED teacher preparation programs while the number of students served in American schools continues to grow (Cooc, 2019; Mason-

Williams et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021). These shortages continue to the present day (Nguyen, 2020). The earliest beginnings of SPED paved a road that has been necessary but remarkably bumpy in the progression towards concepts of equality in education as well. Advances, such as the push-in model and least restrictive environment, have been pushed out into practice haphazardly in a way that has created a seemingly confused current state within SPED (Wehmeyer et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020). Pair this with the disconnect of disparity felt in the field, and the stressors have become unbearable to even veteran SPED teachers (Harris et al., 2019).

The shortage of qualified SPED teachers shows the difficulty of the position. From the beginning, special educators have struggled to remain in the field past the initiation period compared to their counterparts (Grant, 2017). Historically, the research shows that teaching assignments and high-needs settings cause even more teachers to exit the field (Ansley et al., 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Peyton et al., 2021). As more teachers exit the field, human resources personnel are left scrambling to fill open positions through alternative certification routes or, in some cases, uncertified personnel serving SWDs (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021). The SPED profession has been categorized as one that involves multiple stakeholders and connections since its beginnings. These very connections are directly related to the social network experiences of personnel within their workplace (Page et al., 2021; Rahmati et al., 2018). This tragic history of the struggle to maintain qualified professions may be shifted with focused, purposeful, and systemic changes geared to improve the conditions of the profession.

Social Context

The topic of SPED teacher attrition has effects on many different levels. Primarily is the

impact on the SWDs who are meant to be served (Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). While well-intentioned, much of the idealistic legislation to level the playing field for SWDs has created incredibly tense work environments full of unrealistic, unattainable expectations on the employees who are expected to carry out the letter of the law (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). When negativity and discontent are present, it permeates the student's family, the teacher, the teacher's family, the department, and the school district at large (Hester et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2019). SPED teacher burnout at increased rates makes for socially undesirable networks because the already tense environment further intensifies the real physical and mental health concerns (Farmer, 2020). The issue of compassion fatigue comes into play once teachers reach this stage of professional fatigue and frustration with their careers (Henson, 2020). The culmination of pressures from the job creates negativity that is difficult to navigate without purposeful burnout protective factors in place.

Regardless of the roots of negativity, there are protective factors against SPED burnout throughout the research that reveal interventions that improve work conditions (Donahoo et al., 2018; Olson & Roberts, 2020). Administrative support, extracurricular involvement, and mentorships are protective factors surfacing through the literature (Conley & You, 2017; Desimone et al., 2014; Hussey et al., 2019; Mrstik et al., 2019). Socially, these protective factors are known; however, the continued shortage implies that they are not taken seriously nor implemented with fidelity in response to the problem. Teachers are undoubtedly a part of an extensive social network when viewing the massive number of stakeholders involved in fully educating SWDs (Page et al., 2021; Rahmati et al., 2018). The stakeholders involved in SPED attrition begin at the individual level, including the seemingly isolated persons impacted within a network. Stakeholders, such as the teacher, the student, the parents, and colleagues within a local

setting, are simply the frontline stakeholders in the social context of SPED attrition issues. The stakeholders compound exponentially, leading to systematic and organizational impact with seemingly disconnected external stakeholders that are often overlooked (Hart & Robinson, 2019; Page et al., 2021). Even those without children in school are stakeholders because the public funds that pay salaries come from the taxpayers, not simply a local human resource department (Hart & Robinson, 2019). These individual and system-level stakeholders are vital, as they form the foundation of the social networks that influence SPED teachers (Page et al., 2021).

All of these social interactions are valuable in the day-to-day mindset that SPED teachers portray as they carry out the roles and responsibilities of their job (Grant, 2017; Urbach et al., 2015). An analysis of the many networks in which a special educator exists may hold interesting perspectives that could allow current and future special educators to fulfill their roles.

Additionally, the exclusionary undertones that still exist regarding SPED in mainstream schools may be minimized so that SPED teachers are indeed a part of the more extensive system working for the good rather than a disconnected service provider from the greater goal of education at large (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Drew & Gonzalez, 2021).

Theoretical Context

Theoretically, teacher self-efficacy and burnout are typically viewed from a mindset theory lens (Zilka et al., 2022). Dweck and Leggett (1988) classified mindset theory in terms of personality and motivation in general. Mindset theory focuses on the outward manifestation of how one is versus the underlying deeper meanings behind motivations (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Quantitative approaches show causal relationships between the primary stressors associated with the job and overall satisfaction and self-efficacy (Allen et al., 2018; Malloy & Allen, 2007; Nuri & Tezer, 2018; Stites et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). The research points to the notion that job

satisfaction and protective factors are all tied to teachers' social-emotional conditions (Kumedzro, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). Research has shown that emotional intelligence is more necessary for those in the most challenging teaching positions (Anjum et al., 2020; Skura & Swiderska, 2021). All factors impacting teacher attrition are intertwined within a larger social lens that includes the daily interactions with the various challenges of the profession.

While these ideas all tie into constructs of self-efficacy, they fail to analyze the role that networks play in the phenomenon. Quantitative studies abound with significant factors, but without shared experiences, progress cannot be expected (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2018). Glazer (2018a, 2018b) went so far as to share that previous attrition and burnout literature tended to highlight novice teachers' experiences and highlighted organizational theories while failing to look at the veteran teachers' experiences. Glazer further articulated that one of three lenses is typically implemented in attrition research: organizational theory, self-efficacy theory, or rational choice theory. While these all are worthwhile lenses, digging deeper into the relational affective constructs surrounding SPED teaching is needed.

The relational ideals introduced by SNT will help to frame the value and importance placed, or instead not placed, on relationships and connectedness within the SPED community (Westaby et al., 2014). Analyzing perspectives through a new lens will allow for increased knowledge of how dynamic the field of SPED is. SNT has been used in exploring the induction phases of the teacher life cycle and ongoing relationships through professional learning communities (Bjorklund et al., 2020; Diehl, 2020; Hunter & Hall, 2018). Kim et al. (2017) applied the idea of social networks in their exploration of relationship quality over quantity within teachers' networks, and Meredith et al. (2020) used SNT to affirm that networks may impact burnout within teachers' communities. No study specifically used this theoretical lens to

look at the end of the teacher's life cycle. By applying SNT to a new population of teachers, those within their later years of the profession, perspectives could guide active change so that the issue of teacher attrition and turnover may begin to wane from the historical overview of the field. SNT has been used to evaluate teaching satisfaction and relationships (Diehl, 2020; Hunter & Hall, 2018; Kim et al., 2022). SNT can help interpret the perspectives of those who served entire careers in such a demanding field and finished on top of their game despite the many struggles and setbacks.

Problem Statement

The problem is that teacher turnover is a phenomenon that impacts educational institutions throughout the United States (Ansley et al., 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Meredith et al., 2020). SPED teacher attrition is a researched phenomenon with clear negative consequences both financially and structurally on districts across the country (Grant, 2017; Nguyen, 2020). Turnover creates unstable teaching environments, which exacerbate the profession's varied challenges in the areas of financial, instructional, and organizational costs (DeMatthews et al., 2022). Stress alone increases educators' mental and physical health concerns at alarming rates (Farmer, 2020). The problem is that SPED teachers face unique challenges that cause different types of stressors, leading to attrition, which negatively impacts all stakeholders involved (Aspelin et al., 2021; Bjorklund et al., 2020; Skura & Swiderska, 2021; Xie et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Connectivity and networking are keys to assuring continued professional growth (Cloud & Townsend, 2017). The idealism that many novice teachers bring to the field rapidly disintegrated under the complexity of responsibilities and role ambiguity (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Farmer, 2020; Paris et al., 2021; Urbach et al., 2015). Even experienced teachers within the field are now fleeing, leaving SWDs without

certified, experienced professionals to implement their Individualized Learning Plans (Blatt, 2016; Glazer, 2020a, 2020b). In regard to social networks, many of the identified risk factors identified within the literature regarding burnout are issues that could be mediated and improved with more solidified social networks in place to support SPED professionals (Cloud & Townsend, 2017; Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

Teacher turnover, in general, is a phenomenon that continues to intensify each year (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Farmer, 2020; Torres, 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). This intensity holds even more true within SPED, which continues to experience increased attrition and increased students served (Grant, 2017; Mrstik et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2020). SWDs are a unique population requiring a distinct type of teacher. Emotionality and compassion fatigue play distinct roles when working with students with extreme learning needs (Farmer, 2020; Torres, 2020). Role ambiguity is another primary concern among SPED teachers because of the multiple job responsibilities in addition to classroom teaching responsibilities (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Grant, 2017; Mihajlovic, 2020; Owusu-Bempah et al., 2018; Paris et al., 2021; Sayman et al., 2018; Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019). Students, parents, and schools are negatively impacted as SPED teacher turnover continues (Cornelius et al., 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2017) researched the idea that burnout could be contagious as well, meaning that, once one teacher displays burnout traits, those same traits will begin to bring the organization down as a whole by negatively impacting direct colleagues. Others tend to become more like what they are surrounded by in their daily actions, meaning that the negativity is contagious just as sickness may be. Research is clear that there is a particular emphasis on the specific roots or causes of burnout; however, research-to-practice gaps exist in the knowledge of protective factors that may improve the teaching condition and the implementation of such practices

(Ansley et al., 2019; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Mrstik et al., 2019; Nance & Calabrese, 2009; Nguyen, 2020; Sayman et al., 2018; Stites et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). School leaders' collective responsibility is to ensure that SPED teachers are adequately supported (Cornelius et al., 2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine and describe the collaborative community experiences of finishing well for veteran SPED teachers at rural southwest Georgia schools. At this stage in the research, finishing well will be operationally defined as remaining within the field (of classroom SPED teaching) for over ten years while maintaining passion, enthusiasm, excitement, and hopefulness for the field as a whole (Clinton, 2012). Social networks are the shared community and collaborative physical experiences with others within the workplace who assist with the execution of daily job demands (Tuomainen et al., 2012). Examining the phenomenon of veteran SPED teachers' experiences with social networks could shed much light on the historical and current context of the field of SPED.

Significance of the Study

This phenomenological study of social network experiences among veteran SPED teachers will contribute to the theoretical base surrounding SPED. Interviewing teachers towards the end of this journey, as opposed to the beginning, should shed new perspectives on those actively pursuing careers in SPED that may impact students for the duration of their time in the field. Approaching this phenomenon amongst specifically targeted participants with years of built-upon experiences will offer theoretical, empirical, and practical significance.

From a theoretical standpoint, the three theories associated with SPED attrition are organizational, self-efficacy, and rational choice (Glazer, 2020a). Studies have pinpointed the

presence of protective factors from a quantitative standpoint (Cancio et al., 2013; Goodwin et al., 2021; Hussey et al., 2019; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). However, simply identifying the presence or absence of factors, such as administrative support and mentorship, with a quantitative lens, fails to examine the underlying, deeper meanings embedded throughout the implementation of the various burnout protective interventions. Research has not looked at these activities and relationships through an SNT lens that deeply delves into the state of belonging and connectedness that God has wired within us (Cloud & Townsend, 2017; Colossians 2:19; Ephesians 4:16). Applying new theoretical approaches to known phenomena may increase the research base on SPED attrition. Applying SNT to veteran teachers' experiences with social networks has not been explicitly explored with this population.

Empirical significance will highlight the necessity of looking deeper into the hidden roles that social networks serve in the SWD community. The unique perspective that this phenomenological study will offer is that of relational importance within the professional setting (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Successful navigators of the field could review the problem of SPED teacher attrition to see how the people along the way played a role in lifelong success. Empirically, research has demonstrated that distinct factors contribute to increased job satisfaction (Donahoo et al., 2018; Zabel et al., 2020). Increased job satisfaction should signify increased intentions to stay within the field (Gersten et al., 2001). Those who have had positive experiences can share their knowledge to continue filling the research-to-practice gap regarding SPED attrition. Similarly, negative experiences will reveal common pitfalls, along with possible recommendations for future study in the area of veteran SPED attrition. The experiences and observations discovered in the lives of veteran SPED teachers will reveal new insights into more effective network support, professional development (PD), and burnout prevention interventions.

Additionally, the practical significance will be straightforward, as this study could contribute immensely to understanding teacher attrition within rural southwest Georgia, where SPED teacher shortages have existed for as long as the field has existed. Similar studies have been conducted with different population samples (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Conley & You, 2017; Hester et al., 2020). Targeting the southwest Georgia region will result in findings most relevant to the region of the study. On a larger scale, the local Regional Educational Service Associations (RESAs) continually implement training, proposed initiatives, and other responses because of the teacher shortages within the region. Understanding the shared experiences of veteran teachers from the region may allow human resource personnel to better recruit and retain teachers in the area due to increased knowledge of the things that make SPED teaching sustainable long-term. This study will contribute to the research base in terms of effective and ineffective strategies to prevent burnout within the SPED community, as there is currently a focus on the quantitative nature of the phenomenon rather than the qualitative underpinnings.

Research Questions

SPED veteran teachers within the southwest Georgia region have experiences that need to be shared to assure those future generations of teachers can sustain the stamina necessary to serve SWDs throughout their careers. Jesus himself was a person of questioning. He interacted through questions. The social-constructivist approach holds that all questioning should remain as open-ended as possible in order to make the interview the most enlightening, and through this process, researchers can listen to how people interact with their environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analyzing the collective perspectives from the vantage point of the end of a successful career may offer a new and unique lens through which to view SPED. A particular interest in

social dynamics could offer even deeper perspectives that will shape future movements within the field.

Central Research Question

How do veteran SPED teachers in southwest Georgia regions experience the phenomenon of professional community social networks?

Sub-Question One

How does the experience of SPED community impact SPED teachers in preventing burnout?

Sub-Question Two

What are the SPED community and collaborative experiences over the teaching life cycle?

Sub-Question Three

How do SPED communities add meaning to the SPED profession?

Definitions

The following definitions are relevant to the current study of social networks among veteran SPED teachers.

1. *Attrition*- Kelchtermans (2017) defined attrition as multidimensional. He shared that within the field of education, the idea of attrition deals with the necessity of assuring good teachers remain within the field rather than leave for reasons that are preventable (Kelchtermans, 2017). This definition considers the myriad of mitigating themes covered in the literature review section that manifest in good teachers stepping away from the classroom.

2. *Burnout* - Burnout is the state that follows a period of exposure to stress within one's profession and was introduced within the medical field of nursing in the 1970s. (Henson, 2020). The construct of burnout has been termed hazardous and significantly troublesome within the teaching profession and therefore merits further investigation (Pyhalto et al., 2021).
3. *Compassion fatigue* - Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon that occurs when disconnection exists between those who are being served, treated, or in this case, taught (Henson, 2020). It is a condition that is present and relevant in many helping professions, such as teaching, nursing, and other public service arenas. Henson shared that compassion fatigue encompasses many facets, including the emotional, spiritual, physical, and social areas of one's overall well-being.
4. *Finishing well*- Clinton (2012) shared that the notion of finishing well involves having lived and experienced enough life to give back entirely to the world around because of the wisdom and perspectives gained through the journey of living.
5. *Social network*- Social networks are the myriad of relationships with students, parents, colleagues, and other community stakeholders pursued and created by SPED teachers to carry out the functions of their job duties and fulfill intrinsic needs within the workplace (Tuomainen et al., 2012). Tuomainen et al. explored social networks within special education before the advances of the digital technologies of the present day. Because face-to-face interactions are the core focus of this study, a more dated definition is used so that the purpose remains the shared physical experiences of social networking as opposed to social networking sites and systems.

6. *Veteran SPED teacher*- Operationally defined for this specific study, veteran SPED teachers will be teachers who have spent a minimum of 10 years of their overall teaching career in a classroom SPED teacher capacity. Darragh and Boyd (2019) identified that 10 years was sufficient time to be considered a veteran teacher in a given field.

Summary

The problem of SPED teacher attrition was historically viewed from a forward design approach of research methodology. This study aims to flip the perspective and look back throughout successful professional careers rather than analyze the situation from within the earlier inception timeline of one's career. By understanding the positive and negative community and collaborative network experiences that veteran SPED teachers have to share, current and new generations of special educators could appreciate and understand the social network protective factors that enable success in the long term within SPED. Introspection into the learned, collective wisdom of veteran SPED teachers will fill the research-to-practice gap between knowing what should be done and assuring districts and systems are taking viable steps to shift the trajectory of the field of SPED for the better. In addition, qualitatively analyzing the collaborative network experiences of veteran SPED teachers will expand understanding of overall SPED attrition.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Effective seasoned special educators undoubtedly bring expertise and life experiences to the field of special education (SPED) that are irreplaceable (Gomez, 2019; Sayman et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2021). Clinton (2012) identified this as having finished well. Social network theory (SNT) involves the idea that everyone exists within a larger context, and the relationships formed with those around them have positive or negative effects at individual and system levels (Liu et al., 2017). This literature review will explore relational and other concepts associated with SPED attrition, turnover, and burnout. The literature review will present an overview of SPED attritions' impact, the concept of burnout as it applies to SPED, the effect of burnout in the SPED profession, and other relevant internal and external considerations. To make it to a successful and ultimate retirement within the SPED field, teachers require many intrinsic and extrinsic interventions (Feng & Sass, 2018; Grant, 2017). The literature review will include discussions of the factors contributing to burnout, and the protective factors found throughout the literature to protect against SPED burnout. A summary concludes chapter 2.

Theoretical Framework

The relational ideals introduced by SNT will help to frame the value and importance placed, or instead, not placed, on relationships and connectedness within the SPED community (Westaby et al., 2014). SNT has a mixed history of origins dating back to the 1930s, but it has developed out of the field of social network analysis, which focuses primarily on the mathematical constructs of network connections from a quantitative stance utilizing formulas, algorithms, and computer analysis software (Fredericks & Durland, 2005). SNT is described as utilizing the concepts of cohesion, centrality, and structural equivalence; this study will

emphasize the formal and informal relationships that form cohesion within organizational contexts (Liu et al., 2017). Additionally, cultural equivalence will be explored through targeted interview questions. SNT plays a relevant role in the informal learning processes in teaching communities, which is a primary focus of the central research question guiding the present study (Van Waes et al., 2018).

The primary theorists of SNT are Granovetter (1973, 2003, 2010) and Moreno et. al (1987), although more recent adaptations have been made to the original constructs. Granovetter applied social network analysis ideas to job placement and work-related contexts, which applies to the current study. Granovetter (1973) presented that the ties within agents, or actors, were what formed network strength. Moreno et al. (1987) added to the ideals of Granovetter, suggesting that lateral level relationships within organizations had the most influence on favorable network conditions. Others, such as Muijs et al. (2010) and Diaz-Pareja et al. (2021), have continued to emphasize that SNT deals with the very collaborative notions that networks or relationships are the foundation of functional individual and organizational health. A distinct shift in social network analysis research occurred in the 1990s, which led to a shift from a quantitative analysis approach to a more open and fluid theory for research uses (Liu et al., 2017; Carrington et al., 2012). Dynamic network theory was the newer view that social exchanges were more important than the structural components of the network analysis process (Westaby et al., 2014).

This study will utilize SNT by emphasizing the very things that SNT values in the first place, specifically the traditions of interpersonal relationship, cohesion, and structural equivalence that form the foundations of SNT (Scott et al., 2021). This study will take the ideas a step further to investigate the experiences that form the networks, rather than the sociometry or

anthropological aspects of SNT. This study will add to studies that have already begun to emphasize the value of the social components of individual success over time and positive organizational climates, such as Van Waes et al. (2018), who applied SNT directly to higher education settings, and Liu et al. (2017), who applied SNT in healthcare settings. Educational dissertation research studies have been conducted that are evidence of the relevance of this theoretical lens as a practical theoretical framework for viewing social networks and interactions within professional settings.

SNT is adequately fitted to explore the phenomenon of collaborative community and relationships within SPED because its primary tenants are connections from one central ego actor with those in their environment, which in this study are colleagues. Using SNT with this current study's sites and participants will reveal the impacts and experiences of network relationships in rural southwest Georgia schools amongst the SPED teaching community. Although others applied SNT to the induction phases of SPED, the present study will look at the opposite end of the teaching life cycle spectrum, adding to the theoretical applications over the entire life course of SPED teaching (Kim et al., 2017; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001).

Related Literature

Literature on teacher shortage is abundant across the disciplines (Cornelius et al., 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2021). Attrition research is specific to SPED in terms of causes and protective factors. Several issues exacerbate SPED teacher shortages (Billingsley et al., 2020). Topics of burnout, impact, and various internal and external considerations abound. Following an explanation of those topics, the review will shift to overviews of the factors attributed to burnout and the protective factors. Contributing factors to burnout are time within the field, workload, lack of support, isolation, and compassion fatigue, while protective factors presented

are spirituality, mentorship, social wellness, networks, and professional development (Ansley et al., 2019; Billingsley et al., 2020; Conley & You, 2017; Henson, 2020; Kanold & Boogren, 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Knoke & Yang, 2020; Maggin et al., 2020; Mishra, 2020; Olson & Roberts, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2021; Stemberger, 2020; Stites et al., 2021; Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

Special Educator Attrition and Impact

Attrition is an issue in all professional settings in America. However, when graphed quantitatively, teacher attrition is an extreme outlier indicating teacher attrition's impact to the national scene (Borman & Dowling, 2008). This means that most all careers follow a typical pattern regarding attrition and turnover, except for teaching, which is much higher than what is seen in all other professional settings. This finding revealed that the career that is the most startling in terms of attrition is often education. The ongoing national teacher shortage affects all stakeholders, but students with unique learning needs served through the SPED departments may feel this impact even more significantly. SPED teacher retention has been a problem for decades (Grant, 2017; Mrstik et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2020; Vittek, 2015). The topic of teacher shortages, in general, has held and continues to hold a place in the conversations at national and district levels, as personnel scramble to fill vacancies (Scott et al., 2021).

One explanation for this may be the preparation received for the job at hand. As teachers enter the profession, they are ill-prepared for the plethora of barriers and challenges that arise once in the trenches of classrooms (Theobald et al., 2021). A discrepancy exists. Despite the optimistic, positive views held in the beginning, education alone cannot overshadow the struggles when beginning in the field of SPED (Scott et al., 2021). Challenges have led to SPED teacher shortages that continue today (Nguyen, 2020; Sutchter et al., 2019). Unless schools

embrace the notion of nurturing those who are required to expend the most nurturing qualities, this phenomenon will continue to snowball (Malloy & Allen, 2007).

While attrition is an issue nationwide, its impact is felt more in specific settings. High-needs schools, where disproportionate services are provided for students with disabilities (SWDs) compared to typical neighboring schools, experience attrition's impact more intensely (Ansley et al., 2019). Other researchers have affirmed that low-poverty rural districts feel the impact of SPED attrition more intensely than in more affluent districts (Bettini et al., 2020b). Increased student problems, unstable leadership, and reduced autonomy are possible reasons for the disparity in attrition between district types (Bettini et al., 2020b). Similar findings have been present in research by Billingsley et al. (2020). They shared that the issues SPED teachers face in poverty-stricken districts are quite different than what traditional teacher education programs prepare new teachers to face.

The personal decisions made to continue in SPED impact not only the teacher in limbo but the many students who would be a part of her future. Alternate to staying, special educators follow one of four pathways when leaving the field: moving, retiring, career changes, and transferring to different teaching positions (Menlove et al., 2004). Transfers from the SPED field have also become more common (Menlove et al., 2004). Transfers can be *leavers* or *switchers*, but regardless if they remain in education or move to other careers altogether, there is a lasting impact on students and the school culture at large (Nguyen, 2020). Sadly, it has been shared that competence and resilience increase with time, so when veterans choose to leave the field, they take levels of learned competency and resiliency that simply are not present in newly hired professional replacements (Xu et al., 2021). The loss of intellectual and experiential knowledge is detrimental because experience is only learned over time. When good teachers leave, the

consequences are many. No matter the leading factors to SPED teacher shortages, the effects on SWDs are the paramount concern (Sayman et al., 2018, Sutchter et al., 2019). Decreased achievement in the academic arena compound to result in less than desirable educational experiences for SWDs (Sayman et al., 2018). Unfortunately, many special educators experience burnout symptoms that ultimately lead to them leaving the field before maximum student impact is reached in their professional lives. Burnout is a highly researched phenomenon within the educational context.

Burnout Within the SPED Teaching Community

The concept of burnout is sufficiently researched within the literature (Kim et al., 2017; Lynn & Woods, 2010; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). Burnout can manifest as an actual entity that lurks in the hallways of schools and camps out in the common spaces where teachers frequently find themselves daily at their worksites (Kanold & Boogren, 2021). Burnout is one of the predominant causes of teachers leaving SPED (Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). It has been discovered that the phenomenon may be contagious as well, meaning that the burnout of one could trickle into those within their network to bring down the morale of entire social networks within school settings (Kim et al., 2017). The most commonly accepted measure of burnout was constructed, along with three components: emotional exhaustion paired with personal accomplishment and depersonalization (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). These constructs aligned with other researchers who identified a lack of accomplishment, exhaustion, and depersonalization (Hester et al., 2020). Analyzed data revealed that this burnout phenomenon appears to impact special educators at twice the rate of general educators (Sayman et al., 2018). This burnout occurs emotionally, physically, and spiritually across a multifaceted front (Nuri & Tezer, 2018). This multidimensional issue is a startling finding for any profession. It becomes

even more concerning when those impacted are the very ones serving the SWDs who need grounded teachers the most.

Teaching assignments are directly related to burnout rates, also, as those in the most challenging teaching assignments often burn out more quickly due to increased demands (Allen et al., 2018). As increases in demands become present, the importance of relationships and purposeful network identification become essential. Positive social relationships are pursued both formally and informally in order to create a protective buffer against burnout; this is especially true as special educators attempt to create positive work climates and cope with the stressors of navigating the multitude of relationships with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders (Soini et al., 2019). Regardless of SPED teaching assignment, the biblical construct of relational connection is paramount in staying grounded and focused. Networks fulfill this intrinsic human need.

Disinvestment is another term associated with burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014). Disinvestment implies simply going through the motions without the intrinsically fueled motivators for educational change. Relationships foster engagement and investment. Teachers must be fully invested in education's ultimate mission, and burnout is a predominant roadblock to this mission on local, state, and national levels. While burnout often leads to attrition, this is not always the case.

Many times, teachers who are burnt out are financially tied to the obligation of their chosen profession. While aware of burnout, many find no other professional options that meet familial and financial needs. In these cases, teachers continue to work in a state of turmoil (Kim & Buric, 2020; Meredith et al., 2020). Teachers continuing to work amid this turmoil might be more detrimental than the burnout itself, as they become risk factors themselves because of the

potential for sub-par instruction that occurs when attempting to persevere through a legitimate state of burnout (Garwood et al., 2018). Burnout is on the rise and is akin to playing with fire, as fire has the potential to harm, just as burnt-out teachers do, whether they mean to or not (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Concerning SPED, burnout can take on a legal risk, as teachers are accountable for Individualized Education Plan (IEP) writing and implementation. It does not matter how well-written and good-intentioned an IEP is; if the teachers in charge of implementing them are burnt out, it will simply be an empty, shallow effort, not a noble upholding of the legal document (Garwood et al., 2018). The daily implementation of fulfilling the IEP is more critical over time than the document itself. While salvation is the epitome of the Christian pursuit, the daily walking out of that salvation is essential. Burnout in SPED can take on a similar persona as contemporary, casual Christianity. When educators reach this level of disconnect for the greater good, the impact is felt throughout all levels: children, parents, schools, communities, societies, states, nations, and the world (Obiakor, 2021).

Impact of Veteran SPED Attrition

In terms of impact, there are negative consequences when a veteran special educator decides to leave the field. In relation to burnout, an overly stressed, potentially burned-out teacher loses instructional effectiveness (Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). Burnout manifests itself in the teacher and all other stakeholders in the process, as burnout is hard to hide behind a fake smile. As students reach certain ages, specifically middle school, they can intuitively tell when their teacher was having an off day or not, and when the off days begin to overpower the good days, students are conscious of this and can see and feel the impact of being in a classroom with a burnt out teacher, whether they understand the specifics of the

phenomenon at hand or just think their teacher is being moody (Kim & Buric, 2020; Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019). Bettini et al. (2020a, 2020b) elaborated that experience gained through working in the profession over time is a resource that is hard to quantify. In this study, identifying protective factors from veteran classroom teacher experiences in preventing burnout will help assure these veteran special educators receive the support needed to finish strong. An emphasis on beneficial networks will be a practical lens through which the current study will offer future suggestions.

Internal and External Considerations of Attrition by SPED Professionals

Increases in teacher turnover are not always as they appear initially, given the unique demands of the profession and the individuality of each teacher's professional and life experiences. Often, the students' neediness is credited with the decision to leave; however, this is not the sole factor impacting the decision. Undesirable, unsupportive working conditions paired with shear stress are more to blame than the students' level of need (Ansley et al., 2019). These findings imply that the issue is not as it appears at first glance and is far more complex and multi-dimensional. SPED teacher stresses have a combination of internal and external causes. Notions of social competence, emotional intelligence, and personality dispositions are strictly internally grounded (Skura & Swiderska, 2021; Xu et al., 2021). Regarding extrinsic considerations, types of support for special educators, such as loan forgiveness, scholarships, and financial bonuses, had no significant effects on retention (Feng & Sass, 2018). Money is not an answer or solution, as the ultimate factors are intrinsic and non-tangible. This interplay of intrinsic versus extrinsic is similar to the thought process that accompanies attrition decisions by many SPED teachers (Scott et al., 2021). Money may lead to increased persistence which focuses directly on the student outcome measures of the SPED profession.

Perceived workload, stress, planning time, and emotional exhaustion are mediating factors, along with work conditions, when teachers decide whether to stay or leave the profession (Bettini et al., 2017, 2020a). These appear to be issues that may be addressed at first glance, but this is not happening consistently, and teachers continue to flee at alarming rates. The factors that create risk are the same areas that hold answers to improvements in the field, making them double-edged swords of problems and solutions (Bettini et al., 2020b). Mental health symptoms are increasing among special educators compared to other professions (Zhang et al., 2020). There are definite hindrances to teachers' psychological well-being when in high-stress SPED positions (Paris et al., 2021). Intrinsic and extrinsic factors compound to take a toll on well-intentioned teachers. Knowing that the motivation to remain is partially an internal, inside job, examining the main ideas and factors leading to burnout will help target ways to combat the most prominent issues.

Factors That Might Contribute to Burnout

Knowing the myriad of components that come into play with special educators choosing to leave makes it evident that there are distinct components that contribute to the overarching themes. Structural, tangible ideas, such as the length of time within the profession, the excessive workload demands, and literal isolation, are extrinsic concerns (Page et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021). Also, perceived support and compassion fatigue constitute internal concerns that will be addressed as they relate to SPED burnout (Ansley et al., 2019; Bibi et al., 2019; Henson, 2020). The myriad of factors is intermingled and manifest uniquely for each SPED professional, hence the need for qualitative phenomenological studies like this. What is lacking in terms of these factors is the *why* behind their existence; it is clear they are all problematic (Garwood et al., 2018). When viewed separately, factors seem easy to fix, but the

interplay and overlap of many issues create situations where burnout is inevitable without specific targeted interventions and protocols in place (Cancio et al., 2018; Mrstik et al., 2019).

SPED Teacher's Time Spent Teaching

The literature revealed that there appears to be a supposed honeymoon phase within the teaching profession. Anxiety during the induction period is expected and must be endured to successfully transition into different phases (Stites et al., 2021). The notion of the first five years being a crucial period for teachers is heavily researched (Robinson et al., 2019; Stemberger, 2020). While tumultuous and stressful, those completing at least five years have increased chances of remaining for the duration (Robinson et al., 2019). Teachers with more experience in SPED had lower intentions to leave the field in a similar study that paralleled this idea (Conley & You, 2017). This phenomenon has also been held in other countries, such as Ghana, where those with more years of teaching experience within the special schools of their country reported higher levels of job satisfaction (Kumedzro, 2018). One possible explanation is that with time, teachers develop healthy coping mechanisms that allow them to reach retirement milestones (Nuri & Tezer, 2018). Interpersonal coping skills hold value in combatting burnout despite the teaching area (Pavlidou et al., 2022). Whether these discoveries are self-promoted or the result of systematic efforts to increase resiliency through the later stages of the teaching life cycle remains a mystery.

Along these same lines, it is evident that greater focus is placed on the induction phases of the teaching process in comparison to the sustaining and endurance stages of a work career (Glazer, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). The experiences a teacher begins to have from even the earliest days form a cumulative set of experiences that shape the teacher's outlook moving forward (Kim et al., 2022). From day one, each day matters, as it forms a steppingstone to future decisions

regarding the profession. New special educators are offered support via mentorships, and studies reveal an overall increase in the sense of community, preventing discouragement when regular check-ins are a part of the induction phase through mentorships (Desimone et al., 2014; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Mrstik et al., 2019). Even virtual classroom simulation designs and online coaching are being used to help assure new special educators are supported and ready to face the daily demands (Peterson-Ahmad, 2018). These virtual support experiences provided more personalized feedback and increased the remediation of concerns among participants.

When new to the profession, teachers are aware of the demands, and relational supports are purposefully put in place to ensure they may adjust, cope, and fulfill their work responsibilities (Sikma, 2019). The general assumption is that, once a teacher has proven herself, the supports diminish, and the teacher is left to actively develop her network of support to sustain the stamina needed in the profession (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). New special educators leave the field 2.5 times more often than general educators, with 8% leaving during their first three years (Williams, 2016). Multiple studies from Glazer (2018a, 2018b, 2020) revealed a new trend in which teachers invested in the field are also leaving. Various teacher life-cycle models may shed light on the timeline concerns of such a demanding profession.

The notion of career life cycles is common across professions, and research has explicitly centered on the life cycle of the teaching profession. There is a six-step cycle with distinct stages that are somewhat linear but also become blurred, depending on job assignment and relocation of schools. The phases of novice, apprentice, professional, expert, distinguished, and emeritus may happen at different times within a teacher's career (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). Clinton's (2012) notion of finishing well parallels the distinguished and emeritus phases of the cycle. These same

steps of the cycle have been called the wind-down phase of the career cycle, and it is very challenging to make it to this point in the teaching life journey (Lynn & Woods, 2010). As teachers progress through the teaching life cycle, support changes.

Workload Demands Within SPED

Obiakor (2021) articulated that “life can throw individuals multidirectional curve balls that are hard to catch” (p. 173). This analogy describes the uncertainty of demands facing SPED teachers on any given workday, as there is no predictive value in what the day may hold. Undeniably, the workload is the predominant factor that leads to SPED burnout (Xu et al., 2021). The unrealistic demands are reported throughout the literature predominately through qualitative accounts where special educators share their actual experiences with the juggling of demands (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Grant, 2017; Mihajlovic, 2020, Owusu-Bempah et al., 2018; Sayman et al., 2018; Ziaian-Ghafari, & Berg, 2019). Story upon story highlights the unending list of expectations paired with excessive after-hours’ time devoted to fulfilling the myriad of responsibilities under the umbrella of being a special educator.

Quantitative accounts echo and demonstrate numerically how job satisfaction due to workload demands interfere with effective teaching (Kumedzro, 2018). Common topics in each study are paperwork requirements, legal red tape, unrealistic expectations from colleagues and administrators, and overwhelming co-teaching expectations school-wide (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Grant, 2017; Mihajlovic, 2020, Owusu-Bempah et al., 2018; Sayman et al., 2018; Ziaian-Ghafari, & Berg, 2019). In addition, other studies have looked into the quantitative demographic variables of SPED attrition to reveal that high-poverty school districts add another layer of intensity to the responsibilities, demands, and informal roles served by SPED teachers (Billingsley et al., 2020).

Considerable attention has fallen to the workload demands that have resulted in the SPED profession due to the legislation passed and implemented. One example of such sweeping action is the standardization movement and the haphazard implementation without true conscientiousness of impacts on SWDs and the teachers charged with educating them daily (Soini et al., 2019). The initiation of Florida's standards movement was too fast paced, but the curriculum itself is in no way aligned to meet any of the needs of students whose uniquely diverse backgrounds fell outside of societal norms, especially those who were also served as SWDs through the schools (Cramer et al., 2021).

The inclusion era wave of educational reform has been well-intentioned but not without setbacks (Soini et al., 2019; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). The push toward inclusive education has many districts' hands tied in trying to meet inclusion requirements, while simultaneously assuring that grade level rigor is sustained that is often far above the academic working ability of the students in the classrooms (Cramer et al., 2021). The workload demands become even further blurred as SPED teachers must navigate the IEP writing process in light of the grade-level standards, as well as the academic ability levels of students. For example, an SWD served through a co-taught model in a high school chemistry classroom may be a non-reader with minimal mathematical understanding. Nevertheless, the burden of performance gains falls on a SPED teacher to demonstrate growth in a disparate learning environment.

These issues were related using words such as *quandary* and *predicament*, as they described the dire decision-making demand placed on SPED teachers daily, who attempt to remain legal yet still honor students' unique learning needs in classrooms across America (Cramer et al., 2021). SPED teachers and department heads are forced to make decisions that are not fair in order to meet state mandate quotas (Cramer et al., 2021; Peyton et al., 2021). The

SWDs are the ones who are left behind the most in these ambitious advances in the American educational institutions for growth (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017). Implementing standards-based instruction may intensify the tensions felt between SPED and general education relationships and add to the divisive mentality that remains in place in many schools (Cramer et al., 2021).

Lack of Support for SPED Educators

Along with workload, lack of administrative support is another primary factor contributing to burnout (Aldosiry, 2020). Administrative support was the most crucial factor impacting intentions to leave or stay within the profession (Conley & You, 2017). Interestingly, perceived support is sometimes all that is needed (Ansley et al., 2019). For example, a principal simply implying they care and are supportive is equally as beneficial to a special educator as one who follows through with actions to support his claim. While reportedly unconfident in managing their SPED teachers, administrators simply need to increase the time available to collaborate with special educators and their general education counterparts (Robinson et al., 2019). Bettini et al. (2020b) articulated that tested interventions are needed to improve administrative support of SPED teachers.

Poor administrative support is a common reason that many veteran teachers, who are experienced and invested in the profession, walk away, searching for other careers (Glazer, 2018a). Frequently, administrators are simply unaware of the chasm within the SPED community between the expectations and the reality of the day of a special educator (Bjorklund et al., 2020). Woulfin and Jones (2021) referred to this as the incongruence of beliefs about the fundamental roles and responsibilities that SPED teachers face compared to their general education counterparts. Interestingly, it is also clear that the opposite of poor administrative support is one of the protective factors. Support from those in charge seems crucial to either

contributing to or protecting SPED teachers from burnout (Aldosiry, 2020). Support is much like flipping a coin in that it either exists (heads) or it does not exist (tails). Either option has specific outcomes associated with it; administrative support protects, and the lack of administrative support increases risk factors contributing to burnout (Aldosiry, 2020; Glazer, 2018a; Robinson et al., 2019).

Considering this knowledge, the burden of administrative support rests on those in leadership (Aldosiry, 2020). Awareness of their support's importance is a first step in improving this burnout factor among SPED teachers. The knowledge that administrative support is crucial should encourage district personnel to invest time and energy to increase the supports they implement in their systems (Aldosiry, 2020; Glazer, 2018b; Robinson et al., 2019). Billingsley et al. (2020) spoke to this burden of responsibility for support, suggesting that not only should administrators step up, but districts should assure this happens. and SPED teachers themselves can be their own advocates in this process, taking specific actions that are purposeful and will result in improvements in work conditions and treatment. Advocacy is practiced on behalf of SWDs regularly, but SPED teachers must also advocate for themselves.

Isolation Within the Field of SPED Due to Role Ambiguity

SPED departments vary significantly from district to school level. However, regardless of the structure, there is a considerable sense of isolation felt by those who elect to work within the department. Isolation is present despite the knowledge that humanity is predisposed to meaningful connections with others (Kanold & Boogren, 2021). Most special educators have most of their relationships with other special educators, resulting in segmented mindsets where they may not fit in or belong within the general educators' networks (Page et al., 2021). Even at large schools with many special educators, there is a dual role mentality that takes form, in that

not only is a special educator to be a content expert but a support expert as well (Page et al., 2021). This duality of roles is often too much; some may simply switch into a survival mindset where they do what they can and leave it at that (Page et al., 2021).

Learning multiple, ambiguous roles is complicated for beginning teachers who feel even more isolated and alone than their veteran counterparts, despite support for them to learn the school culture and community (Grant, 2017). Special educators, throughout their career, are held to a unique set of standards that are difficult to fulfill because they force such duplicity of roles between the general and SPED requirements (Leko et al., 2015). Role confusion is one of the barriers that add to isolation concerns. In addition, relationship barriers are due to issues involving time and scheduling restraints, along with role confusion between colleagues and professionals (Drew & Gonzalez, 2021). All of these add to the overwhelming feeling of isolation that is associated with being a special educator in the first place. Special educators undoubtedly need to belong to the more extensive school culture network, but there is consistently a marginalization associated with special educators when viewed at a systemic level (Page et al., 2021).

Isolation Within the Field of SPED Due to Geographical Constraints

Simple geographical constraints, such as scheduling conflicts alone, sometimes inhibit SPED teachers from collaborative desire to interact with colleagues effectively (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). The isolation issue in SPED is also more prevalent in rural districts (Garwood et al., 2018). The isolation creates figurative and literal separation within schools and among teachers, which robs the collaborative, networking, and support needs of SPED teachers (Billingsley et al., 2020). The variety of service models used within school settings inadvertently creates a separation amongst staff. The sense of collaborative community in the workplace is

even more challenging when systems are disconnected and roles are misunderstood (Rahmati et al., 2018). Other sources describe this notion as belonging (Page et al., 2021). Teachers of students within self-contained settings have higher turnover rates, and they experience exacerbated concerns on top of those felt within collaborative settings (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Xie et al., 2021). The isolation felt when teaching self-contained could lead to this higher attrition rate. Similarly, teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders are most likely to succumb to the stressors of feeling alone in the world and subsequently leaving the profession (Adera & Bullock, 2010). When a teacher finds himself in a setting that no one else on campus may identify with, it is easy to fall into a state of isolation. Withdrawal can occur within any stage of the teacher's life cycle; time and experience do not prohibit the risk of isolation (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001).

Compassion Fatigue's Influence Among SPED Teachers

Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon that is described as a disconnection from those whom you are serving, treating, or in this case, teaching (Henson, 2020). It is a condition that is present and relevant in many helping professions, such as teaching, nursing, and other public service arenas. Within the medical field, compassion fatigue may manifest by doctors seeing patients strictly as lab experiments. Within a classroom, compassion fatigue may manifest as simply going through the motions of teaching a child without an acute awareness of the person there (Donahoo et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2022). Henson (2020) shared that compassion fatigue encompasses many facets, including the emotional, the spiritual, the physical, and the social arenas of one's overall well-being. Prayer may effectively reduce the compassion fatigue experienced by the special educators who are by nature compassionate, hard-working, and

typically very empathetic in their personality, making them more susceptible to compassion fatigue (Donahoo et al., 2018).

Emotional exhaustion is a more familiar descriptor of the idea of compassion fatigue. SPED teachers feel an emotional toll as they daily try to help students the best they know how, only to see minimal results (Garwood et al., 2018). The only suggestion offered was to focus on other types of progress, such as personal goal attainment in other areas to experience success and fuel the intrinsic desire to keep persevering. When results are not demonstrated numerically, teachers must find other areas in which to justify their daily efforts. Garwood et al. (2018) continued and warned that the emotional exhaustion felt by SPED teachers tied hand in hand with physical exhaustion and the tendency to forgo personal self-care.

The intrinsically based rationale of being called to teach sometimes precedes the extrinsic demands. Ruppap et al. (2016) interviewed SPED teachers and found that the paperwork and technical aspects are doable and possibly even the easy part of being a SPED teacher. Tasks, such as progress monitoring and writing IEPs, are easy compared to the more challenging aspects, such as helping parents accept the diagnosis and prepare for uncertain futures for their SWDs (Ruppap et al., 2016). The compassion necessary and the social-emotional demands are challenging to prepare any teacher to face. The emotional drain is not present or acknowledged and recognized until it is experienced first-hand. Despite this, awareness of individualized tendencies towards compassion fatigue must be recognized and accounted for within SPED. Burnout and compassion fatigue tend to develop side-by-side and merge towards the same negative end within the educational context. Due to this, administrators need increased awareness and training in pinpointing and intervening to alleviate burnout from ensuing in top-

performing teachers (Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019). This finding points directly back to the role of administrative support for the SPED teachers within their school.

Protective Factors to Fight Burnout Among SPED Teachers

Just as there are factors that contribute to burnout, synchronized factors attempt to alleviate or nullify the effects of workload, support, isolation, and fatigue within SPED. Literature focuses on these factors (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001; Xie et al., 2021). Logical steps, such as furthering education within the field, also hold some value (Ruppar et al., 2016). Therefore, it makes sense that the risk factors previously discussed merit themselves directly to intervention. If the risk factor is workload, then logic would have that hiring more personnel to share the workload demands should suffice as a possible solution to that specific area of concern.

Ideally, the recipe would hold that, if a teacher does these specific things, then job satisfaction will follow along with the coming joys of retiring, knowing that the race was not only run but run well, efficiently, and effectively until the end (Hebrews 12:1). Unfortunately, the stakeholders are too complex, and individuality is too beautiful for there to be a cookbook approach to staying content in a stressful work environment. The attrition issue is complex and involves many factors that overlap and intertwine in the decision to leave the profession altogether (Scott et al., 2021). Pyhalto et al. (2021) echoed this sentiment, sharing that there are definite variations from one person to the next regarding burnout risks despite the best proactive strategies to prevent such. Due to the unique nature of burnout throughout the career, excellence must be endorsed and supported through all phases of the teaching life cycle, not simply the initiation phase (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). Considering this, protective factors, such as spirituality, mentorship, networks, educator wellness, and ongoing professional development (PD), may protect, not necessarily prevent, burnout from affecting SPED teachers.

Spirituality as a Protective Factor Against SPED Burnout

Christian educators have a battery of tools of the spirit to fight the warfare that is part of working within such a legalized, high-needs subject area (LaBarbera & Hetzel, 2016). Social networks can include religious organizations, professional communities, friend groups, and family, all working in unison toward personal contentment (Mishra, 2020). Many Christian educators rely heavily on their spiritual core to face the demands of teaching. Regardless of the denomination, affiliation fuels spirituality. Obiakor (2021) shared that the profession of teaching “is a very spiritual and soulful job- anyone without a ‘good’ and compassionate heart will never be successful at it since it involves a human-to-human interaction” (p. 173). This statement is not to discredit nonreligious educators but to intensify the magnitude with which Christian educators heed the call to the profession. Direct positive relationships between reported job satisfaction and spirituality and a sense of collaborative community in the workplace were quantitatively discovered (Rahmati et al., 2018). This finding implied that the religious life of a teacher may, and very well should, spill into the professional realm in terms of the innate drive towards a greater good. Spiritual health is incredibly important for Christians, as they intertwine their personal faith with their professional teaching identities.

Spirituality encompasses many aspects that may impact professional practice. Specific practices, such as prayer, were statistically significant in decreasing feelings of and potentially combatting burnout (Donahoo et al., 2018; Zabel et al., 2020). Developing core spiritual strengths, such as edification, altruism, and servant leadership, hold vital ingredients to a balanced life across all fronts (Obiakor, 2021). The art of edification alone, even within a professional setting, can provide a welcome reprieve from the constant demands and constraints of the SPED profession. Qualitative accounts revealed that the desire to work in SPED is

ingrained in some teachers (Zabel et al., 2020). 1 Corinthians 10:31 shared that whatever you do, do it unto the Lord. Romans 12:7 specifies teaching as a spiritual gift given by God. Awareness of work as a mission for God, not simply a paycheck, is a protective factor to finishing the race. Researchers stated this as an increased sense of divine calling and draw to the profession that increases job satisfaction, but a Christian educator perceives this differently (LaBarbera & Hetzel, 2016). Spirituality undoubtedly plays a crucial part in the balanced social wellness model that Kanold and Boogren (2021) argued is necessary for complete wellness to bring one's best self to the classroom daily.

Mentorship as a Protective Factor Against SPED Burnout

Successful servant leadership comes full circle when the mentee may one day become the mentor (Clinton, 2012). This idea of being able to give back is a twofold phenomenon impacting the giver and the receiver within the relationship. It is important that a heartfelt desire exists for authentic relationships instead of random assignments (Obiakor, 2021). This means that simply assigning people without their intrinsic desire is ineffective. Dynamic network theory attests that different people pursue relationships for different purposes but that the creation and sustainment of any relationship hold to the organizational structure at large (Westaby et al., 2014). Becoming a mentor to younger teachers, whether officially or unofficially, may provide intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This is needed towards the end of a career so that a special educator may have a lasting impact on future teachers. Mentorship that is pursued because of the authenticity and soulful desire to value the growth of new teachers is transformative for both the mentor and the mentee (Obiakor, 2021).

Currently, 27 states mandate mentorship of new special educators, but there is such a shortage of veteran special educators that others have to fill these roles (Cornelius et al., 2020).

Although Sikma (2019) focused on novice teachers' experiences with the mentee process, there were clear undertones that those in the mentor roles were equally supported by sharing their knowledge from the field. Both parties reap benefits in mentoring relationships. Mentorship is one of the most potent protective factors to alleviate burnout and prevent attrition among special educators (Stites et al., 2021). Sadly, even new teachers report that the mentorship they receive upon entry into the profession has many areas that need improvement (Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

Special educators are equipped to be both formal and informal leaders within organizations by the unique nature of their job (Maggin et al., 2020). Similarly, mentorship opportunities may be casual or purposeful within school settings (Cornelius et al., 2020). The collaboration, communication, and flexibility necessary to carry out the demands of the job lend themselves directly to informal leadership within school settings, whether they want to or not (Maggin et al., 2020). Mentorship is an avenue that allows veteran teachers to impart their knowledge and expertise to the new generation. Effective mentors have the power to cause a teacher in turmoil to stay or leave, giving them long-reaching influential power and influence to sustain not only themselves but other effective teachers in the field (Williams, 2016). The relationships formed through mentorships provide relationship outlets to both new and veteran special educators. Through mentorship, the protective barrier of colleague relationships is fostered (Haydon et al., 2018). However, when the established factor of mentorship has vanished, social networks begin to fulfill the role that was previously held through the mentorship processes in place by schools (Kim et al., 2017).

Networks as a Protective Factor Against SPED Burnout

The term *network* is directly related to relationships within a school setting. Social networks exist to create the norms of society among members in terms of rules and expectations

through relationships with others (Knoke & Yang, 2020). Relationship skills are considered soft skills and difficult to teach individuals, as they are more often extensions of personality dispositions (Skura & Swiderska, 2021). All teachers and support personnel are interconnected to one another and to the greater goal of achieving the school's mission and vision. Social networks are as old as humanity (Knoke & Yong, 2020). The functions of these networks change over time in order to serve specific internalized purposes.

SPED teachers seek three types of support for sustained productivity in the field. Social resources, physical resources, and internal resources are three areas that must be fully implemented (Bettini et al., 2020b). Social resources are fostered through healthy, inclusive school cultures. Support that is collegial within healthy school cultures feeds the need of teachers for connections and affirmation in their professional lives (Scott et al., 2021). Building relationships was credited as one of the best protective barriers for assuring special educators are content in their field (Olson & Roberts, 2020). Olson and Roberts shared that relationships create a foundation that sustains into the future and supports increased knowledge through connection and communication with others. Scripture would call this a cord of many strands, sharing that there is strength in camaraderie (Ecclesiastes 4:12). As simple as it seems, relationships lay the groundwork for flourishing in a challenging field.

Often, special educators form the closest networks with other special educators; however, there are infinite networks that develop throughout their careers. The social networks SPED teachers form with their colleagues have a more significant influence on their intent to stay than the relationship networks with administrators (Garwood et al., 2018). This specific discovery is likely because the quantity and quality of interaction are more regular and consistent in collegial relationships within the daily operations of a school. Deep, personal, and professional working

relationships result in numerous informal interactions that assist in developing teachers' career trajectories and philosophical development as they progress through the teaching life cycle (Webb & Welsh, 2019). The "serendipitous conversations" (p. 1) that result from the positive close networking with colleagues can fuel professional growth, which may also add to student gains. The relationships may increase the competence with which teachers can carry out their daily demands. The partnerships that special educators are frequently involved with have more power than others as they expand the walls of the school into the community and state networks at large (Cornelius et al., 2020). As trust is embedded within these networks, relational competence is further established to ground special educators (Aspelin et al., 2021). The idea that people are always first should permeate all aspects of a SPED administrator's approach to fulfilling the mission (Ansley et al., 2019).

Whether it is the relationship with the teachers, the parents, the support staff, or other service providers, the central assumption is that it should remain, above all, about the people, not the labels, test scores, or performance indicators. Authentic relationship is the key to success in all other areas (Dietrich et al., 2021; Fish & Morgan, 2021; Gershwin, 2020). Webb and Welsh (2021) took the relationship notion even further to suggest the strength found in an authentic and collaborative professional community within the workplace could spill over into personal connections that span the home and work boundaries. Collegial support was of great value in coping with the daily challenges of the teaching profession, and establishing specific networks for these relationships is worthwhile for districts (Medwetz et al., 2021). These varied relationships help special educators negotiate through the challenges faced at various stages of the teaching life cycle (Lynn & Woods, 2010).

Relational competence is the disposition used to describe the ability to relate to others through effective relationships (Aspelin et al., 2021). In making oneself better, the whole organization is impacted for the better. The idea of collaboration is wholly intertwined with network theories. The Council for Exceptional Children has standards that focus solely on collaboration with colleagues and outside professionals (Whitby et al., 2013). This relational networking between special educators and their colleagues, administrators, and others is vital in maintaining work satisfaction within the field (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). The social networks created and pursued serve as avenues for self-advocacy within SPED and could be approached within that mindset. Having a social network lens, with a shared focus on self and student improvement, may assist in creating spaces of community that SPED professionals often lack in their isolated fields (Webb & Welsh, 2021). In addition, SPED teachers are responsible for advocating for themselves and the things they need to improve within their own work conditions (Billingsley et al., 2020).

Collaboration and teamwork are paramount to help build the networks necessary to remain content and productive in the field of SPED (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2018). Relationships are key. Relationship stressors can be alleviated, but that action alone cannot ensure that teacher well-being is intact because of the complexity of individual experiences (Fox et al., 2020). Instead, relational school-wide community efforts can create cultures of relationships and community that are needed for well-being. Districts, along with individual schools, were responsible for fostering positive collaborative communities among all staff in addition to assuring new SPED faculty received specialized support that is above and beyond the scope of typical support structures in place (Jones et al., 2013). An extension of this idea is membership in professional networks or organizations as a protective barrier (Cancio et al., 2018). Using social

media platforms to support special educators holds credible value as well (Asghar et al., 2021). Attention to networks may assist in reviewing the status and quality of relationships within school buildings.

Additionally, extracurricular involvement outside the typical SPED classroom teachers' daily responsibilities could increase the overall contentment teachers feel and subsequently encourage them to stay (Mrstik et al., 2019). Tasks as commonplace as listening to music and dancing may provide protective barriers as well (Cancio et al., 2018). In a career where there is never time, it seems contradictory that doing more would lead to higher satisfaction. Even so, the networks developed through alternate service and engagement pathways, such as coaching, mentoring, and volunteering with projects, seem to be a protective factor. Frequently, SPED teachers are left to search for and seek their networks, whether professional or extracurricular (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). If nothing is available, the personal initiative must be demonstrated to assure networking needs are met outside of what a school officially offers.

Educator Wellness as a Protective Factor Against SPED Burnout

Educator wellness is a concept that has grown in popularity over the past few decades, as evidenced by the multitude of initiatives nationwide to assure educators are supported through professional development that surpasses curricular components. Educator wellness is a process, not a destination, that aims at four different dimensions of well-being, including physical, mental, emotional, and social health, combining towards an overall positive state of well-being (Kanold & Boogren, 2021). While beyond the scope and focus of the current research, it would be amiss not to mention the role that the COVID-19 pandemic has played in the current focus on educator wellness, especially in times of trauma response (Medwetz et al., 2021). Tragedy and worldwide trauma response on a global scale have exacerbated the need for educator wellness

initiatives within schools in America (Medwetz et al., 2021). Much like the complex interplay of risk factors, the idea of wellness is also a complex idea involving different areas. Kanold and Boogren (2021) devised a wheel of social wellness encompassing aspects within four realms. The four interconnected areas of comprehensive educator wellness are physical, mental, emotional, and social. These areas are all linked to the notion of social networks, which is the foundation of this entire study. Any educator's physical, mental, emotional, and social needs must be met to bring one's best self to the job daily; networks may support this. Positive social connections form the foundation of fulfilling the physical, emotional, and mental wellness needs (Kanold & Boogren, 2021).

Specific survival strategies are needed to cope with the demands of the teaching profession (Wang et al., 2022). When looking at the types of coping present in a survey of nearly 1,000 teachers, Wang et al. found that adaptive and maladaptive strategies are regularly used to face the daily demands placed on teachers. Their research also suggested that, while it is important to understand the frequency of coping strategy uses, it is equally as crucial that research shift to a person-centered approach to these. This would mean more qualitative inquiry into the rationale of coping strategies, as opposed to variable-centered approaches that simply quantify their prevalence. Simple initiatives and interventions, such as mindfulness implementation, can potentially increase educators' social wellness, which may cause reduced burnout and attrition. These types of interventions, which are self-motivated and applied, are very affordable, even free, because they are things that teachers elect to do from an intrinsically motivated stance without any monetary or financial investment from the district (Garwood et al., 2018). SPED teachers, by default, are wired to handle dilemmas and trained in dealing with issues with positive coping strategies for their students. As a product, many can transfer these

positive coping strategies to their inner lives and well-being in times of uncertainty (Medwetz et al., 2021).

Professional Development as a Protective Factor Against SPED Burnout

The protective factors of PD against burnout require specific, direct, and purposeful decision-making to implement. There are definite gaps in the PD offered to SPED personnel, despite the knowledge that such ongoing and collaborative effort directly impacts socialization and the professional identity among SPED personnel (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Targeted and purposeful PD has been shown to increase both the quantity and diversity of network ties among teachers (Garwood et al., 2018; Van Waes et al., 2018). Increasing the multitude of quality relationships may serve as a protective barrier against burnout, especially if the relationships formed as a result can cross into deep, meaningful relationships that expand beyond the walls of the classroom. PD holds the potential to foster these types of healthy connections and relationships, but only when implemented properly.

The PD process allows veteran teachers to continue pursuing lifelong learning ideals through self-reflection (Stemberger, 2020). Doing this forces teachers to recognize their intrinsic struggles and come to terms with ways to address strategies to improve themselves and their practices. Teaching through its multifaceted stages is a process of self-evolution over time, and PD, even at the later stages, is necessary. When PD is purposeful and targeted, it has the potential to help teachers transcend boundaries and barriers by broadening impactful professional networks (Van Waes et al., 2018). Often, the relationships and networks established through purposeful PD span years and careers, providing a sense of stability in an ever-changing field of education (Drew & Gonzalez, 2021; Webb & Welsh, 2021).

Alternately, many veteran SPED teachers have a view of PD as a form of punishment and simply another thing added to an already long list of unrealistic time demands on their daily schedules (Garwood et al., 2018). This line of thinking is because the bulk of current SPED PD targets concepts that are too streamlined to apply to daily practice or too broad to offer any relevance. Factors to assure that PD is welcomed and accepted could include scheduling PD based on what SPED teachers need rather than generic types that are a one size fits all approach (Garwood et al., 2018; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). In addition, PD that focuses on a culture of open communication, respect, and collaboration is needed so that role ambiguity concerns can be addressed school-wide amongst teachers so that departments have a mutual understanding of the roles each serve in the school as a whole (Alghazo & Alkhazaleh, 2021).

PD that is extended in duration, centers on collaboration and learning in context, and focuses on specialized content, may have the potential to benefit SPED teachers the most in terms of providing networks of targeted support within their schools, systems, and districts (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Extended duration PD is viewed as better than isolated PD, as it allows for more reflection and long-term growth among teachers. Woulfin and Jones did not quantify a certain number of sessions or hours necessary for an extended duration, but they describe the issues surrounding isolated training where no follow-up, reflection, or monitoring took place after the original PD session. However, these types of PD opportunities can quickly turn into the PD as a type of punishment mindset, as hours are lost to PD that could have been spent performing the varied other workload demands placed on SPED teachers (Alghazo & Alkhazaleh, 2021; Garwood et al., 2018; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). PD has the potential, like exercise, to improve an individual's quality of life. Much like exercise, without an innate desire for change and improvement, it will be despised as another task to put on the daily to-do list.

Another type of PD is the professional learning community (PLC). PLCs catering to the SPED community have the potential for increased collaboration and ultimate student outcomes (Billingsley et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022). These are simply another name for the same type of initiative and movement. Regardless of what it is called, it has protective qualities against burnout when it is specific to SPED and the field's uniqueness.

Summary

SPED teacher attrition is a complex phenomenon that has plagued schools since its inception. Attrition's impact is deep-seated and crosses many fronts. Concepts of job satisfaction, burnout, and workload dynamics each hold essential pieces to understanding the dilemma faced when retaining effective special educators. Keeping all stakeholders in sight, it is clear that the issue merits attention and further research. While the literature is robust with interventions and supports available to new SPED teachers during the induction period, it declines after the initial phases of induction, suggesting a considerable gap in SPED support across the teacher life cycle. In addition, there is an evident research-to-practice gap regarding the practical application steps necessary to finish well within SPED.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine and describe the collaborative community experiences of finishing well for veteran SPED teachers at rural southwest Georgia schools. Teacher attrition consistently impacts SPED at an increased rate, and understanding the nature of the challenges is necessary to combat the problem of teacher turnover (Ansley et al., 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Glazer, 2020b). Phenomenological studies intend to glean an understanding of the very essence of specific experiences by studying participants who have experienced the phenomenon firsthand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). SPED teachers with decades of experience share the phenomenon of social networks throughout their careers. Following are the research design and rationale, positionality stances, procedures, data collection plan, and analysis strategies for this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations surrounding the study are presented before the chapter summary of crucial elements of the research methodology.

Research Design

Social science research involving education is studied with various research designs, each of which is utilized for specific reasons depending on the nature and purpose of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research follows several methodological pathways or designs that aim to provide detailed descriptions of qualitative nature as opposed to its numerically and statistically heavy quantitative counterpart (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The literature base is robust with quantitative studies identifying protective burnout factors and topics of interest; however, these approaches lack the deeper understandings gathered through qualitative analysis of lived experiences. Qualitative research is

best suited to investigate the themes that will emerge as multiple SPED teachers and administrators share experiences through interviews.

The phenomenological approach focuses on the shared stories of participants (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Phenomenological studies are common within social sciences and sociology and apply to educational research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological studies have been used successfully within the field of SPED (Glazer, 2018a, 2020; Page et al., 2021; Stemberger, 2020). Attrition is a complex issue involving many factors and constructs (Glazer, 2018a). This study focuses on the phenomenon of shared experiences of social networks in the SPED community. Phenomenological research is the best design to study the social network experiences of veteran SPED teachers because it targets a specific phenomenon that cannot be easily measured with quantitative, numerical measures but requires analysis of the shared stories and experiences of SPED teachers.

When reviewing the research-to-practice gap that exists in the literature, it is clear that there is a need for this type of study. Individual versus institutional emphasis on teachers is a gap in the research that this study will aim to fill (Glazer, 2020b; Lynn & Woods, 2010). Focusing on the shared experience of veteran SPED teachers will provide a more individualized focus on teacher attrition. Kim et al. (2022) added that the shift had been towards a group mentality rather than individualized teacher support. Refocusing on the experiences of veteran SPED teachers will honor the recommendations to listen to those in the field, which is a definite protective factor against burnout (Hester et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017). Van Manen (2017) articulated that phenomenology is not intended to provide answers or specific solutions but to add to the knowledge base surrounding phenomena. Interpretation of the experience is not the focus, as examining the experiences is the core motivator for research. This study aims to do just that by

applying new theoretical lenses to the phenomena and a targeted focus on the experience of relationships.

This study will follow the hermeneutic approach of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1997, 2017). Hermeneutic tradition deals with embedded meanings rather than straightforward descriptions of the surface-level meanings of life experiences (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Utilizing this hermeneutic approach will allow for interpretations to be considered that underlie the stories themselves. Wojnar and Swanson (2007) shared that hermeneutic and descriptive approaches each have a place within the qualitative realm and that knowing the purpose of the study will help guide which of the two is best suited. Since the focus of this study will be to make sense of the phenomenon by looking at various perspectives, the hermeneutic approach is the best fit. A simple description of the phenomenon would qualify for a different approach. However, the interview questions aim to find meaning behind answers and responses as opposed to straightforward answers to simple questions.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do veteran SPED teachers in southwest Georgia regions experience the phenomenon of professional community through social networks?

Sub-Question One

How does the experience of SPED community impact SPED teachers in preventing burnout?

Sub-Question Two

What are the SPED community and collaborative experiences over the teaching life cycle?

Sub-Question Three

How do SPED communities add meaning to the SPED profession?

Setting and Participants

The phenomenon of social networks within SPED is prevalent in all academic settings. Following are explanations of both the sites and participants of the present study. Each is described along with literature support for site and participant selection. The rationale is included, along with justifications for both.

Sites

The region of interest in this study was rural southwest Georgia. Rural and underprivileged districts experience the most issues surrounding the attrition of SPED teachers than other neighboring schools (Allen et al., 2018; Glazer, 2020a; Hester, 2020). Representation came from multiple school systems, since veteran teachers had worked in more than one specific district within the region. The Georgia Department of Education has split the state into 16 distinct regions serviced through various Regional Educational Service Associations (RESAs). The regions present in this study was the southwest Georgia RESA and Coastal Plains RESA.

District permissions were actively sought for participant recruitment in these two regions. Schools of varying sizes were represented in these regions and are further described upon participant recruitment specific site permissions, and consent. Regional offices in these areas provide services to assigned district public schools and teachers in the surrounding counties. This region is representative of many rural districts in the southwest, making it an ideal area for a study such as the present one. The schools most impacted through SPED attrition issues are the underserved, rural, lower socioeconomic districts of which the southwest Georgia region is representative. See Table 1 for overviews of the sites used in the present study. As evidenced

below, the district sites used in this study fall under the lower socioeconomic umbrella, which is most impacted by SPED attrition (Allen et al., 2018; Glazer, 2020a; Hester, 2020). District 2 is the most economically disadvantaged of the three sites, with 100% of students being labeled as disadvantaged. The other two sites are at or above the state average of 56% as well, demonstrating that each site qualifies as being within a lower socioeconomic setting. Additionally, each of the schools falls below the state performance rating school, signifying similarity across district sites.

Table 1

Site Demographic Information

	Total Enrollment	Per Pupil Expenditure	Economic Disadvantage	SWD Population	CCRPI Rating
Alpha District	836	\$12,739	56 %	10.9%	64.5
Beta District	12990	\$12,286	100%	11.3%	65.8
Gamma District	8616	\$11,308	86%	12.6%	70.6
Georgia		\$10,910	56%	12.6%	75.9

Note: All information is from 2021 except for the CCRPI scores, which are all 2019 data.

Due to size, Alpha District is geographically located on a solitary pre-k through 12 campus that serves all students. Beta District is served through multiple high schools, multiple middle schools, and over 15 primary school sites. Gamma District has one large high school, junior high, and middle school facility that are filtered into by 13 primary school sites throughout the county. Districts are served in either of the two RESA regions that were the target population of the present study. Though different in size and structural configuration, all districts shared similarities in per pupil expenditures, College and Career Readiness Performance Indicators (CCRPI) Ratings, and SWD population. CCRPI ratings are used in the state of Georgia and

created using a complex design involving performance indicators across many areas. These ratings form an overall score or grade for a specific school or district that is assigned by state accrediting agencies. Higher scores denote higher performing schools.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of teachers with over ten years of successful classroom experience within the SPED classroom settings of southwest Georgia schools. Steffy and Wolfe (2001) introduced a six-stage life-cycle model that would classify participants as within the distinguished or emeritus phases of teaching. Eleven teachers, along with regional directors or supervisors, were selected to obtain multiple and varied experiences of the phenomenon of the role of social networks within SPED. Inclusion criteria was self-identification within one of the last two of six stages of the life cycle of the teaching model to assure the experiences shared were from consistent participants who had transitioned successfully through the first four stages of the teaching cycle (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). The rationale for focusing on teachers and administrators in these stages of the teaching cycle is that those who make it to these phases have a more robust and lengthy set of experiences regarding social networks within the field than new induction teachers who are still developing in their careers.

Researcher Positionality

As a mid-career SPED classroom teacher, it is clear that the times are rapidly changing and that the tension felt within the SPED field has changed over the past ten years. Teachers are leaving the field more quickly than they are entering it. Within my career journey, I have formally and informally mentored many teachers who simply leave the profession as soon as the induction process is complete for general education jobs. The decline in quality SPED teachers is

felt more powerfully in rural districts in southwest Georgia, where qualified and certified teacher candidates decrease, and student needs continue to rise. As a Christian educator, this study will undoubtedly feed my spirit as I navigate the middle portion of my academic journey within the classroom. This intrinsic fueling will grow my faith as I continue this journey. Revisiting the earlier assertion that qualitative research has transformative power, I hope this research will serve as more than simply a dissertation requirement but will somehow impact the region where I grew up and will continue to work (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Social constructivism parallels the Biblical worldview I approach the world with daily. Jesus Himself was a person of questioning. He interacted through questions. The social-constructivist approach holds that open-ended questioning is the best because, through open sharing, educators may listen to how people interact with their environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through the questioning process, researchers are allowed and encouraged to interact with participants as part of the process. Interacting through this construct will hopefully allow for rich communication for data analysis.

Additionally, the notion of a psychosocial approach to work will allow for free exploration into the shared experiences of SPED teachers, as they conceptualize their own work experiences over their careers (Graydon, 2020). There is a direct parallel with a Christian's desire to model their life and actions after Jesus. When someone does something well, it is worthwhile to mimic that behavior in our own lives. Mimicking or modeling after others is not to minimize our unique individuality in Christ but to have a strategic roadmap to follow as educators journey through the teacher life cycle. Jesus was the Great Teacher, but here on Earth, there are saints among us who have found ways to succeed and finish strong within their professional lives.

Interpretive Framework

A social constructivist mindset is commonly utilized within phenomenological approaches, such as the present study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Webb and Welsh (2019) described qualitative research as a method in which the researcher interprets and attempts to make sense of specific phenomena as an observer of the phenomena that are the focus. Becoming an interpreter of more profound meaning is the goal of the social constructivist paradigm. An effort will be made to do this as interview data are analyzed for common themes that arise. Exploratory in nature, there was not a traditional notion of precisely what would be discovered, which added to the excitement and novelty of this study. Staller (2013) explained that qualitative research studies such as this must thoroughly identify the epistemological and ontological assumptions. She shared that tensions between these manifest even more so in qualitative than quantitative settings (Staller, 2013).

Philosophical Assumptions

Farrell (2020) articulated that humanity has much to learn from the experiences of others. Yet, we fall short in learning within these contexts and simply rely on what we can read in text or other media platforms. This overarching assumption is relevant within the present study because it is clear what the quantitative data reports on the phenomenon of teacher attrition. However, the missing link is the connection back to how or why the experiences or factors lead to teachers leaving. Finishing well is a biblical concept outlined throughout the scriptures. Jesus was a relational being, and the focus on relationships in this study will honor a Christian worldview. Simultaneously, it will allow for exploration into the unknown through questioning and storytelling, which, again, flow throughout God's teachings.

Ontological Assumption

Ontologically speaking, there are going to be several perspectives that will manifest through interviewing special educators within the region. I attempted to bracket my own experiences within the field to be able to compile and report on the varied perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A Christian worldview grounded all aspects of this study. While general themes were identified and reported, the main focus of this study was to show respect to the individual and unique experiences of those interviewed, each of which comes from the embedding culture, history, and context unique only to them (Webb & Welsh, 2019). Fichtner (2014) acknowledged that understanding individual perspectives was paramount in relationships. Relationships are plentiful within teaching, and acknowledging the variety of perspectives is necessary both on a universal and personal scale. The reality of the complexity of the human experience through networks will remain at the forefront.

Epistemological Assumption

Being an insider to the population of focus, I determined to understand the epistemological views of those I interviewed. Through the data collection process, I did have direct experiential connections to the experiences described by participants. Despite these connections through shared experience, I remained aware that I was researching the collective experience, not my perception of my personal experience. Epistemology concerns itself with what educators know about the world (Farrell, 2020). Personal views and beliefs varied among participants based on life experience, and this notion was respected throughout the study. When viewing success, for instance, some teachers may define retiring as a success, while others will define positive peer reviews or student outcomes as measures of success. Just as there are a variety of forms of knowledge, success will have to be operationally defined and understood with the full awareness that participants will have their underlying philosophical assumptions

that may not mirror my own. While complete objectivity was desired, this was doubtful, considering my vested interest in the phenomenon. The present study's facts were the veteran SPED teachers combined experiences and the themes that arrived through their storytelling.

Axiological Assumption

Being within the middle stages of my career in SPED, I am at the crossroads of opting for status quo survival mode or truly thriving within the SPED community. Axiological assumptions involve a researcher being able to place themselves within the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth shared that the axiological assumption allows a researcher to include their values and experiences in collaboration with the interpretations gathered from other research participants. This active participation is part of my draw to phenomenological qualitative research initially. Even so, bracketing oneself from the raw data is pertinent in any qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Being a part of the research is vital for me to grow personally and professionally through this process.

While submersion within the study was desired, qualitative research leans towards subjectivity, making it crucial for mechanisms to be in place, such as epoché and bracketing to honor the need for objectivity throughout the qualitative research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Seeing the impact firsthand of the stress of this position on myself and my colleagues makes me passionate about understanding the underlying interpretations that will come from listening to others' collective stories and experiences within this field. My bias is that I seek self-improvement first and foremost so that I may become a teacher who can continue to influence the SPED community for the latter portion of my career. I recognize that the first part of my career has been viewed from a blurry perspective, much like what is spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13:12 when explaining how we often do not see things clearly until a much later

time.

Researcher's Role

While in my 15th year in the SPED classroom, I fear burnout is closing in on my horizon despite a strong prayer life to ward off the enemy attack. Involving and embedding myself with a network of successful, passionate individuals will help assure that I can finish strong within the field I feel called to so strongly. Utilizing this phenomenological approach will allow me to remain in the field of SPED while hopefully allowing for insights that could assure that the profession's condition can improve moving forward. As a classroom-level teacher, I will not be in positions of authority over any participants in the study. As a teacher in the region, I may have past, professional, and colleague relationships with some participants. If this situation arises, I will have to be conscientious. Being a current member of the very phenomenological circumstance that I am attempting to investigate will require me to remain separated in my own stories, as I am connected with participants throughout this process through the shared experience I am trying to examine.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explained that the researcher's perspective in a qualitative interview would dictate the knowledge sought. The knowledge I seek is for my self-preservation and for others navigating through the various life cycles and stages of the teaching profession. Neuubauer et al. (2019) shared that phenomenological research may inform and reorient phenomena. Through this process, my foundations were reoriented as I gleaned from the experiences of veteran SPED teachers. It was necessary that I fulfilled the role of the participant and a conduit, as I made sense of the interview data collected through this process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Self-awareness of my role was paramount throughout the study to

provide a thorough overview of themes regarding the phenomenon of social networks with finishing well within SPED.

Procedures

The procedures of this study were implemented to glean insight into the study's central questions and sub-questions directly. Qualitative interview procedures were implemented as this research study's primary data collection method. Focus groups and journal entries were also implemented in that progression. Appropriate safeguards and protocols regarding permission, recruitment, data collection, and data/document analysis were in place. Following are discussions of the topics mentioned above.

Permissions

Site approvals from three separate districts within the RESAs were received. The phenomenon of interest involved adults who are of the age of consent. By interviewing adults instead of minors, the IRB process was streamlined somewhat from a study involving underage students (see Appendix 1 for IRB Approval). As a courtesy to my current school, I presented my proposal to the school board and requested written support from them, in addition to anything required by Liberty University's IRB. Fortunately, there were no local IRB barriers that inhibited permission from being granted for this study. Gatekeepers of my current school were notified in June 2022 of the scope and intent of this study. Several teachers at the current teaching site met the qualifications for this study. In addition, one SPED director was interviewed during the 2022-2023 school term. The two RESA directors of the surrounding region were also notified by June 2022, as they were utilized in the recruitment processes of eligible participants. The informed consent templates for participants can be located in Appendix E.

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool of this study was veteran SPED teachers from Alpha District, Beta District, and Gamma District, which fell within the two southwest RESA areas, being the focus of the study. The sample size was intended to include 10 to 12 active educators who had a minimum of 10 years within SPED classroom teaching positions. Eleven participants were ultimately included. For qualitative phenomenological studies, Guest et al. (2013) recommended that a minimum of six participants be included, since the goal is the depth of knowledge over the breadth of knowledge. Guest et al. explained that saturation is the key to knowing how many participants are necessary for in-depth interviews. Interviews should continue until such saturation occurs, which often surpasses six. Those serving in a non-classroom capacity qualified if their experiences were still recent and relevant to classroom experiences, which was the focus of the research questions within this phenomenological study. The phenomenon of interest is the experience of social networks of veteran classroom SPED teachers, and including any other far removed roles within the sample would not align with the phenomenon of interest. Convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling methods were used to identify and recruit various interview participants.

The first sampling layer was emailed recruitment interest forms (see Appendix C) to SPED personnel through the three school sites' SPED directors. Site permissions sent to districts are available in Appendix B. As part of the initial screening form, teachers were informed of the purpose of the study, any associated risks, and asked if they qualify as being in the final two phases of Steffy and Wolfe's (2001) teaching cycle, being asked if they had ten or more years of classroom experience. The initial screening form is available in Appendix C. A follow-up email eliciting participation was sent seven days after the initial mass email. Convenience sampling was used, as the local districts assisted in dispersing initial interest surveys. While not random,

convenience sampling is proper when participants are desired who are close to the researcher (Gall et al., 2007). Since some interviews would be conducted face-to-face, this strategy would ensure participants were within driving distance of the researcher. Using purposefully selected participants is used regularly in qualitative exploration (Perold, 2012).

If necessary, snowball sampling would then be used to target potential participants should there not be enough responses through initial email inquiry. Baltar and Brunet (2012) identified that snowball sampling is applicable for qualitative research that is exploratory in nature and attempts to describe the phenomenon. This study on social networks among veteran SPED teachers falls under these parameters. Noy (2008) added that, while sometimes frowned upon in academia, convenience snowball sampling allows for unique perspectives from targeted participants, which is the goal of the present study. Once one veteran SPED teacher was identified, they were asked to suggest other possible participants who met the requirements. Convenience snowball sampling was used to target potential participants, as it is helpful when populations are hard to reach (Gall et al., 2007). Baltar and Brunet (2012) shared that this type of sampling is relevant when targeting specific subgroups of populations. Considering the specific nature of this study to examine such a targeted subgroup of SPED teachers, traditional sampling methods did not suffice. The scope of the sample is a particular pool of participants, as they have the most remarkable shared experiences regarding the phenomenon. Informed consent was granted by each interview participant verbally and in writing.

Baltar and Brunet (2012) supported that digital social networks are sometimes helpful in recruiting hard-to-reach populations. Digital social networks were to be the last and final level of recruitment if minimum participant recruitment could not be met through traditional face-to-face networking measures. While veteran SPED teachers are not necessarily hard-to-reach, they are

not as common as teachers in general; therefore, it may be necessary to implement these new types of participant recruitment virtual possibilities in order to find hard-to-reach participants who are fewer in number (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Ideally, teachers will come from different schools and grade levels but have the same shared experience of ten years within the SPED classrooms of the southwest Georgia setting.

Data Collection Plan

Multiple sources of data collection assure triangulation of results within qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individual interviews, journal prompts, and structured focus group interviews were utilized for this study. The journal prompts were implemented explicitly before focus groups so that individual opinions and perspectives were in place before group discussions. Focus groups in and of themselves may hinder what is reported otherwise. Focus groups were the final data collection piece to assist with culminating the data collection process. Following are outlined descriptions of each method of data collection to be implemented. Data collection components and analysis plans were in place to understand that the very nature of hermeneutic phenomenology is to glean insight as it presents itself, not as it is objectified (van Manen, 2017). Van Manen cautioned against holding preconceived notions that the findings or results will be what is initially anticipated at the onset of the research process. Due to this, open-mindedness was essential.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Individual interviews are helpful in obtaining targeted information on a variety of topics. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) articulated that using interviews is crucial when the explored issues are complex in nature. Unlike traditional survey research, phenomenological interview research allows for flexibility and adaptability in the process as fitting for the research

questions and the flow of the interview itself (Webb & Welsh, 2019). The two primary goals of phenomenological interviewing are exploring experiences while developing conversations about the meaning of those experiences (Lauterbach, 2018). The questioning techniques used in the semi-structured interviews attempted to glean the underlying interpretations of the shared experiences. This approach was relevant in the data analysis portion of determining themes throughout interview participant data. Van Manen's (1997) six-step process of phenomenological inquiry was mirrored in this study. Following the steps laid forth by previous researchers assured that this study followed an upright pathway. This idea of mirroring others who have given us good examples is similar to this study's underlying theme; we should aim to mirror those who have finished well ahead of us. Questions were asked to target the central research question, along with the sub-questions one, two, and three. Van Manen (2017) shared the importance of assuring that interview questions are aligned with the specific phenomenon that is being researched rather than haphazardly being asked in unstructured manners.

Phenomenological research is the research of experience, and as such, the unit of analysis is the stories gained through the research interview (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Lauterbach, 2018; Tavory, 2020). While Lauterbach (2018) demonstrated the need for multiple types of interviews, such as think-aloud and stimulated recall, to assist in the depth and richness of data collection, the semi-structured format was used in this study. This format allowed fluidity in the interview progression while providing a scaffold of targeted experiences to inquire about within each interview. The same fluidity offered through semi-structured interviewing assured that the hermeneutic tradition of an ongoing back-and-forth conversational flow was sustained throughout the interview process (Koch, 1995). Additionally, digressions in the interview were appreciated, as they often led to productive insights (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This

idea is similar to Eakin and Gladstone's (2020) claim that outliers can reveal much about a topic even within qualitative contexts.

In the case of distance concerns, Zoom video conferencing was utilized for the data collection portion. Archibald et al. (2019) found that participants often prefer the convenience offered through online formats rather than face-to-face interactions. Their data supported that Zoom is the next best thing to face-to-face in terms of quality of interactions, citing that telephone interviews or written interviews eliminate the observance of non-verbal communication cues that are essential factors of the interviewing protocol analysis. Eakin and Gladstone (2020) explained that everything is data: the expressions, the pauses, the tone of voice, and the body language, all of which can be assessed through virtual meetings such as Zoom.

Interview Questions

- 1) How would you describe the best community interaction you have had over the course of your career with your professional colleagues? (ice breaker/grand tour question)
- 2) Explain what this specific experience did to support and encourage you in terms of your career. (SQ3)
- 3) Describe an experience where you felt misunderstood by your professional colleagues in terms of your role as a SPED teacher. (SQ1)
- 4) Describe your closest, most influential relationships that have impacted your career. (CRQ, SQ2)
- 5) Describe a specific experience with professional, formal social networks (professional learning community, professional development, school-mandated training). (CRQ)
- 6) How did this experience support or add meaning to your professional identity? (SQ3)

- 7) Describe a specific informal or extracurricular social network experience that impacted your professional career (activities, clubs, organizations, interests outside of formal classroom instruction). (CRQ)
- 8) How did this experience support or add meaning to your professional identity? (SQ3)
- 9) Compare and contrast the SPED community and collaborative support you received during your first five years of teaching and your last five years. (CRQ, SQ2)
- 10) Describe a season when you felt excluded, disconnected, or separated from your colleagues inside your SPED department. (CRQ, SQ1)
- 11) Describe a specific experience where you felt isolated or disconnected professionally in your overall career as a SPED professional. (SQ1)
- 12) Explain what administrative support looks and feels like for you as a SPED professional. (CRQ, SQ1, SQ3)
- 13) Describe an impactful experience, good or bad, with administrative support over the course of your career. (SQ1)
- 14) Describe a specific influential mentoring experience from throughout your career. (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3)
- 15) How did mentoring experiences impact you directly? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ3)
- 16) What else can you add about networking experiences over your career within your SPED community? (CRQ)

The questions above aligned directly with the research questions, literature foundations, and theoretical social network lens applied within the study. Following the grand tour question, per Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation interview questions sought specific experiences that aligned directly with the central and sub-questions. All questions were intended to explore

the specific personal and professional network experiences of SPED teachers, which tied into the central focus of the study. Questions 2 and 5 were intended to provide clarity on SQ2, which dealt with changes in networks over the course of time. Support and subsequent networking experiences of SPED teachers fluctuate over the teaching life cycle (Conley & You, 2017; Kim et al., 2022; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001; Stemberger, 2020). By inquiring about the positive and negative experiences, it became clear if there were any patterns of networking experiences over time. The questions were intended to provide rich data on the collaborative and community experiences shared among veteran SPED teachers. Listening to the voices of the teachers themselves is paramount in being able to design any type of effective interventions moving forward (Billingsley et al., 2020). Targeting specific protective and risk factors through purposeful questioning assured alignment with the literature and central research question. It should be noted that due to the exploratory nature of the interview questions, participants sometimes provided answers that were relevant to SQs or ideals not initially identified or aligned with the particular question.

A concise pilot study was implemented with a special educator with nine years of experience to assure clarity of questions. Suggestions were implemented, and the order of the questions was altered to allow for a logical flow of inquiry to cover each sub-question. Additionally, questions were dropped or altered that did not tie directly to the central and sub-questions using a social network approach. Committee recommendations to align the questions directly to the literature review topics were implemented as well to assure data alignment with both research questions and current literature based on SPED attrition.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Creswell and Poth (2018) shared that there is typically a three-stage process within qualitative literature that involves collecting the data initially, coding and analyzing the data, and presenting the themes and findings of the data collection and analysis. Each of these steps was performed in this study. The data analysis spiral included these steps along with other components, such as memoing, classifying codes, codebook development, and interpreting findings. Textual, structural, and essence descriptions were utilized. Thematic analysis is the active, not passive, pursuit of pattern identification within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Braun and Clarke identified six phases of thematic analysis that served as the guiding plan for the thematic analysis portion of data synthesis. Software programs are common in phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite the popularity of these programs, manual coding was utilized in the present study to encourage submersion within the data (Basit, 2003; Daniel & Hartland, 2018; Elliott, 2018, Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Interview and focus group transcripts were manually created within Microsoft Excel so that theme statements could be copied and pasted into discussions of arisen codes and themes. While this proved tedious, it allowed for more insight and direct immersion into the data while allowing for other notations of nonverbal cues, such as expressions, mannerisms, and pauses to be embedded as well. It should be noted that themes were pulled from across all questions and from all participants, as that is the essence of phenomenological triangulation. Simply summarizing answers to each topic with a thematic focus fails to synthesize the shared experiences (Elliott, 2018).

Journal Prompt Data Collection Approach

Qualitative studies are intended to collect data that are not easy to collect as quantitative numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation requires three data collection methods, and in this study, one of those will be document analysis in the form of a journal prompt

(Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Social network theory (SNT) involves relationships and networks within professional settings, which is difficult to ask in a subjective manner (Liu et al., 2017). Although participants were asked about their relationships, during the interviews, it is evident that such a serious question may require more think time to articulate an inclusive response. Because of this, a journal prompt was designed to ask the participants to list and describe the relationships that had been the most influential in their continuance within the field of SPED (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Knoke and Yang (2020) spoke of the willingness of participants to be responsible for judging what should and should not be included and warned that often things are simply forgotten that may be relevant. Allowing for an untimed, free response was intended to assure participants could openly share and express their relationships, including the importance of each of them, along with the role they had played. The journal prompts were administered via a Google Form to allow for the convenience of completion by research participants.

Journal Prompt 1 (see Appendix F) asked teachers to create a timeline of their teaching career for background information and to assist with understanding life cycle progressions. Steffy and Wolfe (2001) shared that the teacher life cycle consists of six stages. Experiences vary as teachers transition from induction to emeritus stages within the process. Formative influence timelines (FITs) are helpful in allowing complete freedom and authority for research participants (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). Initially, a model FIT was going to be displayed with an unrelated hypothetical actor, and participants were to use it to complete their FIT for submission. Following a review, it was decided that this type of scaffolding would help sway participants' responses and therefore was determined only to be used if participants requested an example guide.

Ego actors, who are the participants themselves, were asked to list their specific influential relationships regarding their professional lives per Knoke and Yang's (2020) recommendations for actor identification within social networks. Jones and Donmoyer (2021) asserted that FITs are a useful tool that provides participants with complete creative and expressive control of the information sharing process. They added that this measure is useful when the aim is for depth and breadth of outcomes rather than a simple quantitative focus. Most importantly, FITs are most suited for demonstrating changes that occur over time, as they ask a participant to purposefully reflect over a specified time, which in this case was their teaching career. The scaffolded FIT prompts were divided into middle, beginning, and end to ensure that participants included experiences over the entire course of their career rather than simply what was most current in their memory. Journal Prompt 2 (see Appendix G) took place following the focus group and individual interviews and included an overall summary of the process, with a focus on the ebb and flow of networks over different seasons of the teaching life cycle (Kanold & Boogren, 2021; Knoke & Yang, 2020).

Journal Prompt Data Analysis Plan

Journal prompts were analyzed utilizing the same constructs as the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The experiences of relationships were easy to follow through the written representations of different peoples' roles and influence within the participant's individual experiences within SPED. These varied perspectives added to the data analysis spiral process that took place, as multiple data sources overlapped and coincided across topics, questions, and prompt responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Journal prompt one was completed ahead of the interviews and focus groups so that the interview and focus group procedures could be altered should new perspectives arise that would benefit from individual or

group discussion. Subsequently, prompt two served as a final reflective piece at the end of the data collection process.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus group formation took place following the individual interviews and the initial journal prompts because those provided a collectively shared forum that could increase the depth and perspectives of the study participants. Baillie (2019) shared that focus groups are an excellent supplementary data collection tool to interview data collection. She advised member checking through individual follow-up still be utilized, along with transparent explanations of the purpose of the focus group's intentions (Baillie, 2019). Zoom video conferencing was used to eliminate the geographical and time constraints of participants in various regions (Archibald et al., 2019). One focus group was held face-to-face with participants within the Alpha district. Utilizing questions that mirrored the main topics of the research questions, participants further shared and explored the relational components of those who were the most impactful in their careers and why those people held such impact. Semi-structured focus groups were led in the directions necessary to obtain data saturation of the following concepts and topics. Webb and Welsh (2019) assured that the researcher's role is to utilize the knowledge gained in preparation to turn the inquiry or questioning processes into something meaningful and worthwhile. Vertical and horizontal networks and relationships played a crucial role in allowing this collective experience through focus groups to assure that togetherness and cohesion were respectfully offered to participants.

Baillie (2019) shared the importance of purposeful focus group formation to maximize the participant's synergy following individual sessions. This purposeful formation ensured appropriate representations were present in each focus group session. The focus groups provided

insight into a more realistic setting of the types of interactions and collaborations present in day-to-day school operations compared to the formal, semi-structured one-on-one setting. Focus group transcript data was coded along the same structure as individual interview data to ensure triangulation across a variety of sources is present.

Focus Group Questions

- 1) When you hear the phrase “professional burnout,” what is the first thing that comes to your mind and why? (SQ1)
- 2) Briefly share your most considerable praise regarding collaborative and community networks within the SPED profession. (SQ3) When did this occur? (SQ2)
- 3) Briefly share your most immense heartache regarding collaborative and community networks within the SPED profession. (SQ2) When did this occur? (SQ2)
- 4) Describe the primary personal relationships that have played the most significant part in your job satisfaction over time. (CRQ, SQ2)
- 5) Describe the primary professional relationships that have played the most significant part in your job satisfaction over time. (CRQ, SQ2)
- 6) Looking over your teaching career, which season did you identify with as being the most content and pleased with your work as a SPED professional? (SQ1, SQ3)
- 7) Describe the role that networks with others played in that season. (SQ2, SQ3)
- 8) Explain a time you personally felt the impacts of teacher turnover within SPED. (SQ1)
- 9) Explain a circumstance where you have seen burnout manifest in yourself or your colleague(s). (SQ1)
- 10) What would an ideal social network look like to support your daily work? (SQ3)

11) Does anyone have anything they would like to add about the topic? (CRQ)

Brief introductory paragraphs were presented in an email prior to the focus group so that participants' time was honored with unique experiences instead of credentials and demographic concerns. This eliminated the need to use time learning about one another's background and allowed for submersion into shared experiences. Questions 1-3 were intended to relax the group and assure a sense of comfort in sharing all types of experiences in the group setting. Questions targeted the specific social network experiences common among veteran SPED teachers. No questions in the focus group focused directly on SQ2; however, elements arose in data that were relevant to the changes over time in social network experiences. Journal Prompt 1 specifically targeted the historical developments of social network experiences of the teaching life cycle, which corresponded with questions 6 and 7 of the focus group experience. Finally, questions 8-9 aligned directly to SQ1 and sought to know how social experiences overall add to the understanding of burnout's impact within SPED.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The transcription from the two focus groups was analyzed for common themes and underlying interpretations of topics that arose in the discussions. Since the focus groups were held after initial interviews, subsequent questions and transitions were embedded as guided by the findings. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explained the importance of group dynamics in any interview process. Due to this, memoing of the researcher's observations of the focus groups was completed within 24 hours of focus groups so that descriptions of the group dynamics were preserved that may not manifest through transcribed verbal data. Memoing allows for the transition from concrete to conceptual within data analysis and might take on flexible forms depending upon the researcher and study (Birks et al., 2008). While traditionally a

tool used for grounded theory, memoing is relevant in all qualitative studies, as it encourages complete data submersion of the researcher into the research process (Birks et al., 2008).

Data Synthesis

Data organization, theme reduction through coding, and data representation are the three steps Creswell and Poth (2018) shared for data analysis progression. Thematic analysis is one of the most common but least understood approaches due to its unique nature (Elliott, 2018; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Lochmiller, 2021). The strength of qualitative research is in the analysis portion, which doubles as the most challenging step in the research process (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). Throughout this study, memoing was ongoing to formulate a running perception of shared experiences. Memoing following the actual transcriptions of all interviews allowed for the coding of data into themes, categories, and subcategories. Though they hold value, simply relying on the frequency counts of codes fails to embrace the analytical aims of interview research (Elliott, 2018; Lochmiller, 2021; Pokorny et al., 2018). Instead, researchers must engage in an ongoing process of decision-making and sense-making regarding the data being analyzed (Lochmiller, 2021). Sechelski and Onwuegbuzie (2019) recommend beginning with word counts and keywords in context and transitioning into the search for classical content, constant comparisons, and discourse. With the many types of analysis available, researchers should select analysis based on the study's focus rather than allow the data to guide the interpretive, analytical processes utilized.

Birks et al. (2008) shared that memoing is useful throughout the entire research process, as it serves as a type of journaling without effect or emotional connection, helping to assure relevant insights are not forgotten throughout the lengthy data collection process and analysis. This strategy assisted with data spiraling allowing for themes to emerge across collection

measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Van Manen (2017) advised that it is incorrect to assume that themes will automatically emerge, adding that understanding and insight cannot be guaranteed if a simple step-by-step sequence is followed in the methodology; it is too complex and multifaceted. Kiger and Varpio (2020) explained that the process is recursive and non-linear. Because of this, an open mind was necessary to explore the multiple data collections of this present study. Approaching analysis as a craft that involves a creative and open-minded analytical presence versus a step-by-step approach is the best strategy to add value to the data collected through qualitative measures (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020).

Due to the sample size, manual coding was utilized to ensure complete data saturation. The interviews, journal prompts, and focus group data was used to triangulate the themes and contents that arose in the study. A more well-rounded analysis was possible using the individual, collective, and journal prompts. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that systematic procedures should be addressed from narrow to broad scope in order to assure that the questions of what and how are addressed appropriately through significant statements that lead to themes. Transcript information was used to craft stories that will allow readers to make their own informed decisions about any claims made about the data. Crowther et al. (2017) explained that, through participants' detailed stories, we are allowed glimpses into the phenomena that may be lost in other data analysis techniques. They recommended using excerpts from the transcript that are verbatim within the analytical write-up, as opposed to summaries or second-hand retellings (Crowther et al., 2017). Triangulation is the art of merging data from multiple measures into common themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lochmiller (2021) paralleled themes to songs, with quotes being the lyrics that create them. Sharing the words or lyrics will ensure that detailed,

thick descriptions that go beyond the surface level are present, which is the aim of a qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Gobi (1985) provided the relevant models for trustworthiness within phenomenological research. However, Webb and Welsh (2019) held that there are no standard universal criteria to determine trustworthiness with qualitative studies because it is so intrinsically unique. Because the researcher is often a participant in the phenomenon of interest, bias is automatically assumed (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). The following topics are merely terms synonymous with relative quantitative terms, such as internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. While the qualitative researcher may go to great lengths to attempt to create the conditions to achieve all four of these trustworthiness criteria, in the end, it is the reader who makes the final subjective determination of the extent to which the qualitative researcher achieved trustworthiness in their study. Following are discussions of how trustworthiness was pursued in the present study.

Transferability

Transferability within phenomenological research has to ultimately be reserved to the reader's discretion due to the unique individualized perspectives that are analyzed within studies (de Leeuw et al., 2022). Thorough, rich descriptions by the researcher will paint a picture that a reader could then use to determine transferability to other similar settings. Because of the authenticity of phenomenology as a collective experience, it is impossible to predict or determine that a different setting will share the same results. The human condition is too complex, and the social networks are too diverse for a researcher to make such naïve claims. The data collection

methods, however, will be transferable to other settings with participants whose experiences may or may not differ from the participants of this study.

Credibility

Credibility in interview research is often established through embedding specific, succinct quotes from participants throughout the results and discussion portion of the reporting (Webb & Welsh, 2019). By sharing specific quotes directly, the fear of faulty assumptions is lessened as readers could make their conclusions based on the participants' exact words. When the researcher and participants collaborate in the discussion and analysis of the data through member checking, a balanced account that respects the credibility of those interviewed while allowing for researcher interpretive liberties will be in place. This study will utilize member checking per Creswell and Miller's (2000) suggestion to use it along with peer debriefing. Member checking will also ensure that credibility is maintained in the descriptions presented. Member checking will be implemented after interview transcription, journal prompt transcriptions, and the relevant portions of focus group transcription so that each participant can ensure that their meanings are precise and accurate. Marshall and Rossman (2015) explained that peer debriefing occurs amongst colleagues during the research process. These informal exchanges will be utilized whenever roadblocks are met throughout the research process. Fellow employees who have completed their doctoral journeys, along with experienced SPED personnel, will be utilized for this aspect of the process.

Dependability

Dependability will be encouraged by creating a detailed audit trail. Although typically utilized with grounded theory studies, an audit trail will assist in demonstrating the rigor and transparency of the decision-making processes of any qualitative study (Bowen, 2009). The

decision-making processes will be clearly articulated through subsequent sections of the report so that readers may follow the physical and intellectual processes. The steps taken to recreate the study will be explained in a way that replication could take place. Committee reviews from Liberty University will aid in assuring that methods are articulated clearly enough that replication could be achieved.

Confirmability

Memoing and bracketing were used to assure that the data collected and presented are accurate to the participants and free from excessive researcher bias (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation utilizing three different types of data collection will also assure that no individual analysis overshadows the collective themes present through each collection measure. Additionally, reflexivity, or self-reflection, was in place throughout the research process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). Berger (2015) shared that reflexivity looks different depending on the researcher's relationship to the phenomenon of interest and that cases where the researcher also shared the experience have a different set of cautions than researchers who are uninvolved and disconnected from the phenomenological experience of focus. Additionally, it allows the researcher to interpret the implied content within stories and be more sensitive to certain aspects of the data that would not be comprehensible to a true outsider.

Ethical Considerations

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) pointed out four main ethical concerns regarding qualitative research: reduced risk of harm, protection of information, informed consent, and reduced risk of exploitation. Each of these four concerns was addressed within the present study. Site permission was granted by the schools where participants were employed. Informed consent was articulated in interviews, as well as in written format. Participation was voluntary, and any

transcripts or recordings will be destroyed after three years. Confidentiality was utilized. Pseudonyms were assigned to study sites and individual participants so that confidentiality could be ensured. Data files were password protected and will be kept for three years from the completion of this study, after which time they will be destroyed. Risks and benefits were shared in the informed consent document. Risks were minimal and presented no potential harm to participants outside of what would be considered normal. Benefits were adding to the research base and having experiences and voices heard regarding SPED attrition and social networks' impact on the field. The study was designed to target a population that should not have any associated risks with sharing their experiences. Any subsequent ethical concerns that arose during the study were swiftly addressed through IRB consultation if necessary.

Summary

Phenomenological research is ideal for considering relationships within SPED because this type of research focuses on richer understandings rather than attempting to solve grand, large-scale societal problems. (Webb & Welsh, 2019). This design choice allowed for a variety of modes of data collection to be synthesized to arrive at overarching themes and commonalities across participants' shared experiences. Crowther et al. (2017) explained that hermeneutic phenomenology allows for a fluidity that will allow the data to shape and form the results that need to arise from triangulation across multiple sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central research question and sub-questions provided rich data to be analyzed in chapter four. In doing this, it was assured that the lived experiences of veteran SPED teachers live on in the literature. Education is a "discipline founded on attending to, and building upon, the knowledge and experience of others," and through phenomenological research, there are benefits gained from

the insights of the shared experiences that may lead to improvements in the state of the field as a whole (Farrell, 2020, p.1).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine and describe the collaborative community experiences of finishing well for veteran SPED teachers at rural southwest Georgia schools. Chapter Four thoroughly describes the participants in narrative and table form. The themes, including (1) iron-sharpens-iron, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) cohesion, (4) fight or flight, and (5) anchors that arose, are presented in both table and narrative formats to show how each was gleaned from data sources. Relevant in vivo excerpts that formed the themes and subthemes connected with the central and sub-questions are included. Outlier data is discussed as it relates to the data collection findings. Responses to each research question are presented. The chapter ends with a summary.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited according to procedures outlined in Chapter Three. Following emails sent to all district SPED personnel, convenience snowball sampling was utilized across the three southwest Georgia school districts. While the first plan was solid and purposeful, it quickly became clear that relying on the good-heartedness and academia of strangers to start involvement was not present. Because of this, convenience snowball sampling had to be implemented per Chapter Three explanations and discussions. For example, as teachers were interviewed, they would ask me if I had thought about talking to high-quality colleagues from another school. Hannah, an early participant from the Alpha district, shared, “She may be someone you want to talk to,” and offered to “give her (other) friend a call,” resulting in three participants from what was initially one person’s involvement. This kind of word-of-mouth recruitment happened on three separate occasions. It resulted in some high-quality participants

who, due to relationships with current participants, were interested in involvement and followed through with data collection.

Although not identified as a specific theme, it is relevant to note that of the 11 participants, only a tiny handful entered SPED with credentials in place. Naomi, Deborah, Rachel, and Sarah joined with SPED credentials. The majority had to complete other tests or alternate certification routes once hired. Some, like Miriam, went back to school to take required courses, while others, including Ruth, Mary, Martha, Hannah, and Elizabeth, all did alternate certification routes once they saw that SPED was their passion. Ester entered education to find that she “fell in love with that (EBD) student population” specifically. Hannah said, “I went in that room, and it all just fell into place.”

Ruth was headed to the Midwest for an Indian Reservation when she was called, claiming, “I hadn’t even applied for the position that he was giving me.” However, she unpacked her car and stayed to begin her teaching career in Southwest Georgia. Beginning her career in 2007, Ester shared that she was “in general education, but I knew that I wanted to be special education after my student teaching experience.” Mary, too, had a similar experience of finding out through student teaching that SPED was her best fit. She shared,

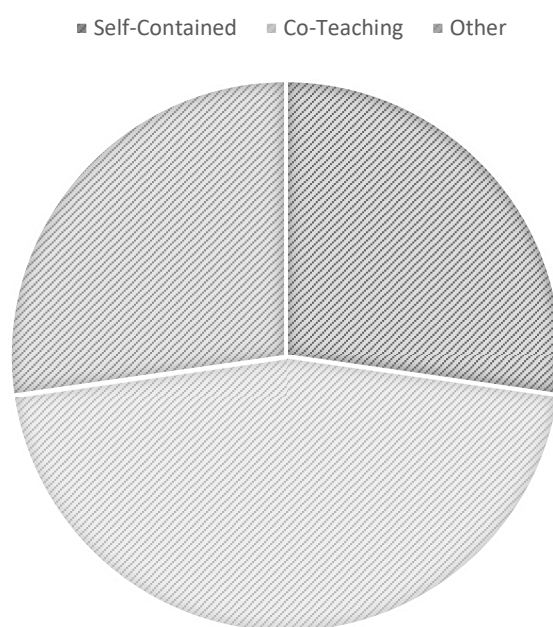
During my student teaching, I realized that this was the route I wanted to take. Luckily, when I applied for teaching jobs, I was honest and expressed that although my degree was in Middle Grades Education, I preferred to teach special education. I was hired my first year as a special education teacher, and I was certified in this area the same year.

Miriam started as a SPED paraprofessional, and her SPED director informed her, “I’m going to apply for a provisional for you and go ahead and put you in this classroom” in a teaching capacity considering her earlier degree and experience within the field of social work.

Figure 1 outlines the participants' teaching roles and assignments. For identification purposes, those found in administrative roles have recently transitioned out of the traditional classroom within the past two years. Choosing only these types of administrators was purposeful to ensure that there was still a fresh perspective from being in the trenches of classroom teaching in their experiences. Participants fell into one of three identified teaching setting categories, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Teaching Settings



Note. “Other” included two school site department heads and a regional program specialist.

Deborah

Deborah was an energetic SPED teacher who enjoyed the fresh new perspective brought by colleagues she interacted with daily. Her passion for special education was student centered and she saw herself staying in the classroom for years to come. She served as the lead SPED teacher at her school site and appreciated the positive administrative support and availability of

her leadership experience. She was drawn to others with positive personalities and outlooks toward education. She appreciated those who put children first and gravitates to others with similar teaching philosophies about student expectations and accountability. Deborah was highly content in her current position and foresees a long future as a SPED professional in this region. Having worked with a multitude of general education teachers in her tenure, she had benefited from the learning experiences that come with adapting to a variety of personalities and teaching styles. Deborah radiated positivity and was an example of the conscious decision to highlight the good in the day-to-day to endure and overcome the setbacks when they arose. Her system of support at the time of this study included several individuals at various levels who she interacted with regularly and shared,

My math co teacher has become my best friend so she is probably my closest and then I have a new ELA teacher who I really can reach out to about things in the classroom and then our special ed. director this year just came out of the classroom and she was kind of our compliance person before that and so she's a text away.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth came from a family of educators and easily fell into the field of teaching only to find special education to be her niche for her initiation and professional seasons of her career. She had experience working within the SPED departments of many schools, to include online teaching academies, over her career. Elizabeth had experienced positive community support in most of her school settings and discovered a correlation in administration with SPED experience having a more clear understanding of her role as a SPED professional. Elizabeth obtained alternate certification for SPED, but more recently completed her master's degree in this field. Despite continuing credentialing in the field, Elizabeth battled regularly with the notion that a

different teaching assignment within general education may offer more peace of mind and a less intense workload than what is common to SPED teachers. Elizabeth remained passionate about advocacy for the misunderstood students who learn differently and require unique support in comparison to the traditional schooling approaches. The grass may be greener in other teaching positions, but Elizabeth trusted the timing in changing fields in her career. She knew the difference she made to the kids she worked with was worthwhile but was overwhelmed with the intensity of documentation and paperwork requirements that rob her of her passion, which is being present and attentive to her students daily. Elizabeth shared that support was experienced when she could “feel like I can be an individual and I can be independent, and I can know my job description” and that “the right balance” of criticism and support must be present.

Ester

Ester was a special education professional who served in elementary, middle, high, and even secondary settings. Although serving in a lead teacher role within a massive high school with over 200 SWDs during this study, she did serve for many years in classrooms as a co-teacher. Her passion from the beginning was and continued to be students with emotional behavioral disturbances. She identified with their being misunderstood and enjoyed the opportunity to find strategies to improve positive behaviors. A lifelong learner, Ester completed in-depth research on this group of students. In her lead teacher role, she believed the people you work with can make this work enjoyable and even fun. Her interview was the only one in which the word fun was used in regard to the field of SPED. Support had been varied in her tenure, but she recalled being new to the profession in a large rural setting yet being supported adequately by the county director through monthly face-to-face training sessions to learn more about the field and expectations. Ester had worked quickly through the phases of the teaching cycle to have

landed in a position that allowed her expertise to affect the special education community of not only her school site but her entire district. When she was in a leadership role, she recognized the necessity of support for her teachers and appreciated mentorship within the schools to help balance the demands of the profession. Her personality and philosophy come through in her sharing:

The field of special education is tough. You need people around you who you can trust and who make the work environment comfortable and fun. There are many dark and difficult days, from students dying to ongoing student abuse at home, to working every weekend to stay ahead on paperwork, so you don't lose instructional time doing paperwork instead of teaching your students. The people who you work with can make or break your experience and consequently your length of time in the field.

Hannah

At the time of this study, Hannah was within her first transfer into a special education director role following an eclectic background working in several districts in a variety of settings. The variety of settings added to her knowledge base and passion for special education. Her fueling for sustainment in the field was the students, which she served for over 10 years. Like Ruth, Hannah briefly left the field to work with a separate service agency for a couple of years only to return to the classroom. A self-proclaimed tenacious advocate for SWD's, Hannah constantly ensured she thought before she spoke so that she was understood, and her passion was not misinterpreted as harshness. Hannah recognized the value of collaborative and supportive colleague relationships understanding that often those that are in the trenches are the only ones who truly get it and can supply the support needed to endure the daily challenges and demands of the profession. Hannah saw herself staying in the field for many years to come as she still had

children in school and enjoyed the benefits that come with working in the same setting as her own personal children. Her positive outlook was clear in her sentiments.

I am driven by being the voice of those who need an advocate. When families are frustrated, hurt, or defeated, because their child is not considered the norm, I find the motivation to step in and make sense of the unknown. I look for those moments of success and take that as a job well done. There is an intrinsic drive in special educators to see others succeed at whatever ability level they reside, and the beauty in that is unmatched.

Martha

Martha was approaching her 20th year in special education and brought a wealth of perspective to the discussion thanks to varied work experiences. Having started her career in larger traditional public settings, she had happily settled into a variety of roles at her current teaching site, where she intended to remain. Martha credited her general education colleagues, along with a few SPED colleagues, as teaching her the most important lessons that have supported her success as a teacher. A passionate advocate for students with more severe learning disabilities, she relentlessly advocated for students on her caseload while purposefully recognizing the balance that must remain within professional settings that also breach into personal relationship dynamics. Having specific experiences of support helped her hold steadfast to the things she felt were best for her professionally and personally. While looking forward to retirement in 10 years, she enjoyed the opportunity to daily do something she was passionate about as a career. Battling isolation and the effects of working within such a segmented field had been an ongoing issue, but she continued to fight the good fight with the support of her colleagues and a keen sense of independence and drive. Martha looked forward to retirement

sharing, “I’m not quitting, you know, I got all that time in . . . , and there’s no way I would leave his job.” Martha was an advocate for not only her students but herself as well.

Mary

Mary was a special educator with 10 years of classroom experience. In her career, she had taught at two different districts within the Southwest GA region. Her passion and dedication to the field were clear in her pursuit to always better her skills in the areas of IEP writing, collaborative planning, and networking amongst the colleagues she respected in all of her school settings. She had reached a place where she was content and happy within her field, and despite administrative encouragement for leadership certification, she intended to stay in the classroom for the next few years. A shift from a larger public school setting to a smaller, more intimate charter setting had alleviated many work frustrations and added to her contentment at the time of this study. Her struggles were in line with those held in the research about unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings, and lack of voice in some settings (Cramer et al., 2021; Peyton et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). She learned the field in a hands-on approach as she entered with Middle Grades Math and Reading certifications. A co-teaching classroom during her student teaching assignment was her first taste of SPED. After quickly becoming certified as a special educator through taking proper tests, she later obtained her master’s degree in Special Education. While being asked to teach general education briefly, she quickly recognized her passion for SPED and returned to co-teaching as a teaching assignment. As a past mentor to new teachers, Mary was the epitome of a lifelong learner, and her rich and varied experiences bring fresh perspectives to the importance of the collaborative necessities and administrative support needs within this field. She shared that, “I truly believe that coworkers are key. Everyone comes with their own experiences and backgrounds that provide insight into helping build a better program

and teachers.” Her time management skills in terms of the paperwork part of the job had added to her experiences over time.

Miriam

Miriam was a co-teacher who took the legal implications of her job very seriously. She fully understood and prioritized ensuring that her students in general education classroom settings had the accommodations and supports they needed in place to experience success. Having worked most of her career in one school setting, Miriam saw and appreciated the perspective and insight that came when those with outside experience became part of her collaborative special education community. Miriam named one specific anchor relationship that had been critical to her 19 years in the field. A professional relationship had spanned into a personal friendship that supplied consistent and needed support. Miriam was intending to step away from the classroom role into something different as soon as her children graduated, as the stress and overwhelming nature of progress monitoring and paperwork had gotten out of control over the years. Miriam had a unique perspective of the impact of systemic change on her own personal progression through the teaching life cycle, having worked within a school that had grown immensely from a one building institution to a multi-campus environment, with many more employees and personnel. The experience of structural growth had allowed her to view firsthand the benefits that colleagues with varied work experiences brought to her school setting. Miriam looked forward to being able to take a role within the schools that was easier to manage once her personal children graduated. She shared that she would “definitely want to do something else in about three years: I’ll go down there (elementary setting) and be a paraprofessional or something...I need less stress.” Even so, she worked passionately daily to

meet her students' needs and ensured that general education counterparts do the same, per student IEP compliance.

Naomi

Naomi was a time tested seasoned SPED professional who was in her 31st year as a special educator. The length of her years of service had allowed for her to work in nearly all settings and service models. Naomi's reputation among the teaching community was incredibly positive with all who had worked with her in the past, speaking highly of her passion and love for her kids. Naomi's perspectives perhaps offer the most aligned responses to the original research questions and theoretical basis of the present study. Having stood the test of time, Naomi recognized that relationships are everything within this line of work. She reported that it does not matter how superb the teaching strategies and methods, one must remain identifiable with their clientele and colleagues, so that students can best be served and supported for long term success. Although she saw fault in many of the so-called educational advances of SPED, she had remained dedicated and continued to bring her best self to work and perform to the best of her abilities daily for the sake of her students. Naomi's heart for self-contained settings, which is typically one of the hardest to staff positions, spoke volumes of her heart and compassion for our SPED student population. Naomi was a model of what lifelong service to the SWD community of students is. Over her lengthy career she recognized the value of comradery and collaboration and had seen its impacts.

With regular ed. and special ed. teachers, that when they're not supported at the beginning of their career and they...we all have it tough, regular ed .and special ed., but it does help for somebody to come alongside you and say, "Hey, I went through that too. I have no idea what I'm doing", you know?

Rachel

Rachel was a fierce SPED teacher who had experienced the impact of failed support in SPED settings. Rachel chose to go into special education from the beginning and was disheartened by the trend at the time of this study to simply fill SPED positions with whoever applies. Even entering the field purposefully, she was ill-prepared for her induction season and had to learn on the go and on her own, as substantial support was not present. Her support needs had changed through the years, but she had ultimately relied on self-initiative to get the answers she needed. Like many other participants, she had work experience in several school systems and could tell the difference support plays in the ability to continue to work in such a challenging field. As a junior high co-teacher, she was specialized in one content area and had been for several years. The negative factors of paperwork, behavior management, and unrealistic expectations were causing her to ponder switching to either a new school system or out of field for a general education assignment. Rachel had worked long enough to remember the times when it was not as hectic as it became. With all the new legislation and red tape, the joy of working with SWDs was becoming overshadowed by expectations placed on her by the school to become a miracle worker. Rachel was hesitant to interview, thinking that her perspective may have been jaded, but her perspectives helped to show the positive and negative impacts of professional community networks within SPED. Her fear was that things were changing and not in a positive manner. She said it was, “not like how it used to be...Like together, like we sat down, we talked about all our kids. We worked out how do we need to best serve them? What do we need to do?” The unrealistic demands were clear as she shared her experiences. The only day she really was even able to sit at her desk was the one day per month the school allowed for a

progress monitoring day. Otherwise, she was all over campus each day with barely any time to sit down.

Ruth

Ruth was a soft-spoken yet invested special educator who was serving students with emotional behavior disorders in a separate school setting at the time of this study. Having worked in elementary special education and middle school settings, she was assigned to a small but demanding class of middle school students with distinct behavioral needs. Her position was part of a large network of schools but strategically was in a setting outside of the general education environment, which led to physical isolation from the SPED community of other like-minded teachers to cling to for support and edification. While having paraprofessional support, the bulk of the responsibility for working with her students' rested upon her shoulders as collaborative support was sparse. Having stepped away from a career in children's ministry, Ruth returned to the classroom, as it was a good fit. Still, she pondered leaving education if something else happened to arise that was comparable in benefits, salary, and matched her interests. Specific instances of fear paired with administrative misunderstandings had changed her experiences in the classroom. Fortunately, she was also able to reflect on her career and see what good support systems look like as there had been specific individuals who had her back and supplied the support necessary for sustained contentment. Ruth shared that, although not specifically articulated, the isolated and segmented nature of her positions seemed to create a sense of disconnected discontentment. Ruth shared that while SPED support was lacked, she had to:

Rely on co-workers to support me in the field of special education. I have taught in resource classes, inclusion, and in separate classes, so I have needed to rely on those who have been in those classes at the school to help me navigate my way.

Sarah

Sarah started her teaching career in her late 20s, yet stayed dedicated over 20 years later, even in semi-retirement. Sarah retired from interrelated vision related teaching to step into a role where she oversaw supplying the very support that is the focal point of this entire study. The nature of Sarah's teaching assignments and responsibility made for long seasons of teaching in system level, physical isolation. Through these seasons, individual drive led to developing very purposeful relationships with the students she served through the years. Unlike many teachers, her students would be on her caseload for most of their school careers, making her almost a family member to many of her student's families. She was able to form a strong network of like-minded professionals in her field to help support her along the journey. While specific individuals were paramount in her successful career and dedication to students with disabilities under her care, she was an independent self-advocate who had always sought out her own connections and support systems due to the structural barriers of the roles she had served. Keeping a positive attitude and perspective as an island had not always been easy and had led to some interesting outsider looking in experiences that will be covered in this chapter four. Sarah's professional contentment was experienced through a positive network experience outlined below:

These girls always had my back and they still do. In fact, they have become my best friends. We bonded over the love for our students and a shared belief in doing our job well, the way it needs to be done, despite the fact that it was hard, very few teachers were

doing it, and we received almost no support. Whenever anyone was having a bad day, they'd just send out a text saying, "after school IEP meeting." We all knew that meant emotional support was needed, and we'd meet at the Mexican restaurant after work for a...vent session.

Table 2

SPED Participants

Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Assignment	Grade Level
Deborah	11	Specialist	Co-Teacher	8 th
Elizabeth	11	Masters	Co-Teacher	Middle Grades
Ester	14	Doctorate	Department Chair	High School
Hannah	15	Masters	SPED Director	All
Martha	19	Specialist	Self-Contained	All
Mary	10	Masters	Co-Teacher	9 th
Miriam	22	Bachelors	Co-Teacher	Middle Grades
Naomi	30	Specialist	Self-Contained	Pre-K
Rachel	12	Masters	Co-Teacher	8 th
Ruth	14	Masters	Self-Contained	Middle Grades
Sarah	25	Masters	Program Specialist	All

Results

Initial first-round coding was conducted on all data pieces to allow for triangulation across sources. The initial journal prompts produced 67 open codes, interview transcripts produced over 500 codes, focus groups produced similar codes to the interview, and follow-up journals produced an additional handful of codes. No new codes were developed in the focus groups that had not already arisen in individual interview sessions.

Regardless of how teachers ended up in the SPED setting of southwest Georgia, there were obvious themes that arose through discussions of participants' career experiences over time. Relevant themes related to the research questions, along with salient quotes and related codes are presented (see Table 2), followed by narrative accounts of themes and relevant subthemes of the study.

Table 3*Initial Themes Gleaned Across Data Sources*

Theme	Salient Quotes	Relevant Codes
Iron-Sharpens-Iron	<p>“she renewed my love for teaching” “passion is oftentimes contagious” “surrounded by good people” “a room with people who were phenomenal” “they keep me coming day after day”</p>	<p>Expertise, Contagious, Well-Respected</p>
Interpersonal Relationships	<p>“to be acknowledged” “showed personal interest in my own life” “felt like I could call him” “ask questions and expect to receive total answers” “advice on how to handle situations”</p>	<p>Approachable, Accessibility, Timely Text Away, Turnaround, Compassion, Empathy, Trust, Gestures, Small Acts, Hands On Administration, Gen Ed Colleagues, SPED Colleagues, Parents/Community, Students</p>
Anchors	<p>“played a huge role in my teaching career” “respect her more than anyone else I've ever worked with” “I really feel a strong connection” “couldn't have done it without her” “the one teacher that I'm really close with”</p>	<p>Anchor, Friendship, Encourager,</p>
Cohesion	<p>“had a lot in common outside of school” “had to learn to work together” “having a team of highly specialized SPED teachers who I can collaborate with” “I was close to everyone” “they're real close knit and stuff”</p>	<p>Vent, Out of School, Closeness, Isolation, Physical Space, Collaboration, Together, Meetings, Consistency, PD</p>
Fight or Flight	<p>“that's why I want to do something different...., my sanity and my stress” “this will be my last year SPED” “it's not worth it” “definitely found my sweet spot” “absolutely love what I do” “always had our backs”</p>	<p>Flee, Leaving, Intrinsic Drive, Burnout, Compartmentalize, Efficacy, Grass Greener, Inexperienced Personnel, Retirement, Sweet Spot, Induction</p>

Chaos, Learn as Go,
Experience,
Expertise,
Mentorship, Life
Cycle, Love,
Teamwork, Varied
Work Experience,
Back Up, Heard

Theme 1- Iron Sharpens Iron

It quickly became clear through interviews, that the impact of who you are surrounded by is undeniable within the field of SPED. An emphasis of all of Liberty University's academic programs is on the spiritual components of continued education and betterment. Challenged to pick anchor verses in earlier courses, Proverbs 27:17 became one such verse for me. I saw how lonely and isolated the doctoral journey was and began to slowly recognize that leaning into my Liberty University community gave me the strength and sense of community to face the journey with others rather than as an island. Proverbs 27:17 shares that "as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (King James Version). The notion of iron sharpening iron is a scriptural precept that was obvious through the shared experiences in this study. Although it was not coded initially as a tentative theme, the more participants shared, the more clearly this theme arose to the surface.

Participants credit specific relationships with helping form them into the teachers they were. Relationships were especially relevant during induction seasons. Participants reported being drawn to colleagues who mirrored their approach to teaching SWDs. The participant with the most classroom experience, Naomi, had the clearest recollections of the importance of relationships within this profession. She shared, "It is very important really. It's more important to me than being educated," crediting that it is all "relationship driven. That that's what this

whole thing is. The older you get, though, you really realize that.” Time teaches this priority of people over tasks. It seems as if there were negative and positive aspects to this theme. Just as positive influence can encourage, those less-than-desirable influences and experiences are deterred.

Positive

From participant interviews, being surrounded by others you respect and admire is a surefire way to grow as an educator. This is applicable across all stages of the teaching life cycle. For example, Sarah shared that “my original SPED director led to my confidence and knowledge base in special education” and was a lifelong positive influence throughout her career. This is the counterexample to the research findings on “burnout contagion,” which says that the negative characteristics influence SPED teachers the most in their daily interactions (Kim et al., 2017).

Hannah shared that SPED teachers “are generally very passionate about doing what is best for students” and credits that “passion is oftentimes contagious.” She added that “surrounding myself with people who know what they do matters and makes a difference supports me in the field.” Another teacher, Deborah, echoed that sometimes even one solitary person can have the potential to “renew my love for teaching and rekindle the fire beneath me to fight for my students’ educations.” Ester agreed, adding that “the people who you work with can make or break your experience and consequently your length of time in the field.” Mary shared that her “coworkers with the most experience” are positive influences “because they are the ones I learn the most from when I need guidance or help.” Clinging to colleagues who are experts in the field was important to Sarah, who shared that she “began to learn about other professionals’ areas of expertise and collaborating with various team members to meet the needs of the child as a whole rather than just focusing on one particular area.” This tangible experience of iron

sharpening iron created an atmosphere where Sarah felt like “this was the first time that I felt like I was really part of a collaborative group of special education professionals.” Positivity and passion are contagious, and being around passionate colleagues with similar teaching philosophies fuels one’s desire to continue in the profession.

Negative

Even when positive relationships and interactions are not present among work colleagues, there is much to be learned. Three participants pointed out that they had colleagues who taught them specifically how not to behave as SPED professionals. Martha shared that her return to self-contained settings was the result of “co-teachers in inclusive settings... taught me how not to be.” After several years of trying to advocate for accommodated and differentiated co-taught environments, she opted for a self-contained position where she had autonomy and authority over curriculum and instructional methods, and expectations for SWDs with more intense learning needs. Martha addressed how being in a variety of co-taught settings showed her whom she did not want to be as a teacher. Miriam shared similar sentiments in that for every positive co-teaching partnership, there are those that are not positive and force you to be determined to advocate even more for what is right by SPED students.

Sarah had a unique experience in being surrounded by SPED professionals who simply did not share her dedication, teaching philosophies, and work ethic. In one account she recalled her experience:

Sadly, I found that teachers tended to bring those around them down professionally... teachers began to get lazy in every school... Looking around me feeling like the people I worked with were looking for the easy way out, failing to put forth effort, not valuing

their students or the importance of what they were doing, was absolutely heartbreaking and hard to watch on a daily basis.

She continued to share that the lack of individual drive and dedication created a domino effect that was also seen through mentoring relationships in her county. Sarah's difficulties in finding like-minded colleagues were part of what led her to a different type of position where she could still serve SWDs and follow her passion. This was like Martha, as she left the co-taught settings for a self-contained setting where she would not have as many daily frustrations with colleagues who did not value the SWD community as she did. Iron-sharpens-iron was a theme that surfaced in positive and negative contexts. As shown above, Sarah was a prime example of a participant who experienced both sides of this phenomenon in her career. There is a balance of positive and negative present. Physical constraints, such as master schedules and settings of classroom locations, played into this theme. These two barriers were negatively described by participants as influencing their ability to learn and grow from other SPED colleagues. In either case, the influence of others was very impactful in firsthand experiences of SPED community in the region of interest.

Theme 2- Interpersonal Relationship

The original purpose of this study centered on figuring out how social networks and collaborative networks are experienced in the SPED community. Multiple codes arose within the data suggesting that relationships were varied across many different stakeholder groups. The following were codes that fell under this theme: approachable, accessibility, timely, text away, turnaround, compassion, empathy, trust, gestures, small acts, hands-on administration, gen ed colleagues, SPED colleagues, parents/community, and students. Because of the complexity of relationships, subthemes were developed. Stakeholder relationships arose as a subtheme. This

was due to the specific experiences shared about diverse types of relationship experiences among SPED teachers. Additionally, as experiences were shared about networks, the ideas of authenticity and availability surfaced repetitively, as participants shared specific impactful experiences from their careers in SPED. Availability was one of the most frequent first codes surfacing at least once in each of the 11 interview transcripts. Interpersonal relationships are related to the central research question guiding this study and the overall SNT theoretical framework foundational to it.

Authenticity

Authenticity was the first subtheme under interpersonal relationships. Although not directly used in any of the transcript data, the theme of authenticity resonated when SPED professionals were sharing experiences of their interactions throughout their careers. Authenticity is rooted in the codes of approachable, compassion, empathy, trust, gestures, and small acts, all of which point to the heartfelt nature of some relationships when compared to others. Being a part of a supportive SPED community involves being authentically cared about through specific, tangible actions. These types of authentic exchanges may be replicable for any SPED workplace setting. Above all, being treated as a person outside the professional realm held incredible importance. Three teachers in one district had developed authentic relationships that transcended classroom experiences because of the extracurricular involvement of their children. Elizabeth appreciated it when her past directors or lead teachers would come by her classroom or office to check in for small talk or work concerns rather than going to them for connection and communication. The two-way effort was vital to her. Naomi, a veteran with 30 years' experience, shared that when people do that, “you just feel comfortable and respected,” and you know that you can be your authentic self with them without fear of judgement, ridicule, or scolding. Naomi

was particularly complimentary of administrators who showed authentic interest in her life outside of teaching and would ask about her family and topics outside of the school walls. Sarah shared a similar experience from her induction season on how this availability was experienced.

One day my mentor teacher walked in to find me with my head on my desk crying as my class, which consisted of five rowdy teenage boys (two EBD, three learning disabled), acting wildly and playing in my room. No questions asked. No judgments made. She just walked in and took over and told me to go take a break. There was no coddling, questions, or sympathizing that day or the next. She just asked me if I was okay, and we went on. She didn't need to ask questions. She knew how hard that group was and how hard life as a first-year teacher was. She made me feel supported without humiliating me or belittling me through kind intentions.

Ruth shared that one of her earlier assistant directors offered regular availability even when he was no longer officially assigned to provide that sort of support. Even though there were site level people assigned to her, she was able to rely on him because of their professional relationship that had developed before he transitioned to director. To this day, he works part-time for their district but is still available to her and other classroom teachers for guidance and advice as needed. He allows his expertise to continue to help the district and current classroom teachers because of his continued availability to those who he directed in years past. This personal choice to remain available is impactful to the SPED scene in that district.

Also, knowing that your work colleagues valued your obligations to your family spoke volumes to all participants, each of whom is a mother herself. In a spirit of transparency, Hannah, who was a mother of three, shared, "I could never have a year-round job" and enjoys shared breaks from the school year with her children. Authenticity manifested through the

prevalence of deep relationships that crossed professional constraints into genuine friendship. Sarah was complementary that her crew were who kept her sane within SPED for so many years. She laughingly shared, “Now some of my colleagues are what help me keep my sanity.” Their relationship started due to physical location and convenience, but the aligned values resulted in a relationship that supplied support, as well as a willingness to endure the daily demands. Their interactions involved activities outside of the traditional workday. Martha had this type of authentic relationship with her paraprofessional, who became an authentic work colleague and friend through their shared experiences serving students in a self-contained setting. This experience leads fluidly into a later subtheme of availability named in the study.

Availability

A second subtheme of interpersonal relationships was availability. Availability was an idea that was a common topic discussed by all participants. Some were praiseworthy of the availability of administrators, while others were critical of the misunderstandings and lack of involvement of their school and district level administrators. Several were able to work long enough and under enough leaders to see both manifested over the course of their careers. This administrative availability was experienced through physical and electronic types of experiences. Naomi was incredibly open that over the course of her 30-year career, she had worked under both types of leaders, sharing that she had known opposites in terms of availability. She shared a recent experience to offer a comparison to past experiences. As a self-contained teacher of non-verbal students, she had a challenging but rewarding workday facing her daily. By the end of the day, her director was consistently present and proactive, showing authentic care and compassion for both her and her students. Naomi explained,

Well, the fact that she is hands on. She actually takes my kids with me to meet the momma every afternoon, you know. I've had an experience at the elementary school across the highway. And I mean, it was like it, not now, but administration in the past. And it was like they were almost in an ivory tower. Like they were so...unapproachable, and if they... if you went to him with a question you feel like they should have answered for you, they were not helpful. Whatsoever. So they would look at me like why are you asking me this?

In her recollections, this type of active presence and involvement was even more common in the earlier years of her teaching career when administrators had more time to be active in the schools outside of simply showing up for observations. Miriam, another teacher with over 20 years of experience, shared a recollection, as well of times in the past, when “there was administration walking around” rather than being tied to their offices all the time.

Hannah shared openly that she appreciated being heard and supported by available administration without being ousted. She shared,

It's never “oh, here, she is complaining again”. It's “ahh, OK, you're right. Let me just remind the teachers.” So there's some support. There is support with making sure the kids get what they need. It just sometimes needs to be brought to light...I appreciate that always and I do appreciate anytime any of the special ed directors or when I was in Florida. Anytime I went about any complaint or something that concerned me, there was immediate action and that that's been across the board I feel. There is a turnaround that's really swift when we go to administration regarding anything having to do with our special ed. kids.

Ruth, a teacher in an EBD classroom, shared one of her frustrating experiences with an administrator who was basically unseen until observation time. She recalled a specific experience where she felt misunderstood and held to an unrealistic standard. She shared that she had an administrator come in like the last 10 minutes of the school day to do an observation. I'd already had a kid, you know, have a meltdown. So my schedule is already off. And because of that, my kids are stringing beads, which was appropriate for those self-contained students, and so he wanted to write it down that they weren't doing what they were supposed to be doing at that time, plus that that was not appropriate for those students. And yeah, yeah. I guess I'll always remember that because I just thought that was. I mean that's... Yeah, that was appropriate for them.

The sense of defeat was relevant in her tone sharing the experience. That same administrator never visited her class to know the level or types of students she was handling for seven hours a day in a self-contained EBD setting. However, she could recall other school settings where the district personnel were available and only a phone call or email away to assist with needs or frustrations as they arose. Administrators who walk the walk and supply tangible actions to prove their availability was important to her and all others in the present study.

Each participant named this availability and presence as important in feeling supported in their daily work. Whether in terms of feeling heard within a reasonable period through email or other digital forms of communication, or being available through face-to-face interactions or texts, administrative availability was a support necessity to all 11 participants. Deborah mentioned, "I could pick up the phone or open an email or type up a quick email and know that I was going to get a response that supported me and answered my question." It looked different for each participant but resonated in all shared experiences. Rachel's experience was SPED support

staff who “would come in, and at any time we need. They come in and sit down with us...you would just call them, and they would show up and anything you needed.” Miriam shared, “if I have to go to administrator, they pretty much listen to me,” and articulated how they made time to address her needs in a hands-on way. She recalled experiences where her director

would go back sit down and look through everything whether it took her going through it with, you know, fingers and eyes...or whether it, you know we really went through a couple of court cases in the past and administrators would be like we've got, we're going to handle this, bring this to my office, and we're gonna sit down.

Availability to talk through challenging professional or personal decisions was articulated across all participant transcriptions. These types of hands-on availability to assist in times of need rather than ignore, avoid, or minimize the issues at hand are invaluable to SPED teachers in feeling supported.

Stakeholder Relationships

The third subtheme of stakeholder relationships was evident across all participant interactions. Teachers wanted to, at once, discuss the student's importance in their choosing to remain within SPED. There was not a single participant who did not bring up the student relationship, even though the study itself emphasized adult colleague interaction and social collaborative networks (Koenen et al., 2019). Elizabeth openly shared, “I think I just have a passion and desire for working with students who don't fit in the box, who don't fit societal norms.” Hannah shared that she “truly loves the relationship I have with students” and credits, “that relationship fuels me to keep doing what I'm doing” because they “are the most important relationships” from her perspective. Sarah recalls involving her students in her own life so much

that “it was like they were a part of my family, you know. I really did love them...and I wanted to be a part of their lives.”

Extracurricular involvement allowed three participants to be involved with students outside their normal teaching realm. The specific activities of softball coach, Boy Scout advisor/assistant, and cross country coach were beneficial in helping SPED teachers have a school wide identity amongst the entire student population. Elizabeth shared about extracurricular involvement.

Things like that have helped me, especially here, get to know students who aren't necessarily special education(served) but in the classes. So I think building those relationships has been really helpful just because it... Students see me around, and they know they can trust me and come to me. And I'm not just helping just “these” kids. They see me as contributing to the school.

Connecting with these students outside of those served through the SPED department also resonated with others. Hannah shared that there is almost a celebrity status that came along with being a coach within her school setting. She shared, “When you show up and you're not expected to show up, there's a difference” made with students, their families, and other stakeholders. Her sentiment follows.

I feel like that makes me feel like almost famous. You're like, oh hey, you can't go anywhere without someone knowing who you are. I definitely enjoy doing all those things, it definitely adds to the motivation to stay involved and keep pushing.

Other stakeholder categories that surfaced readily were those of general education colleagues, SPED colleagues, SPED administration, school level principals, and parents. These codes surfaced over 75 times across all data categories. Each stakeholder grouping had pros and

cons associated, but the quality, quantity, and presence of a varied system of stakeholder relationships added to the experiences while creating more stress. It is remarkably like the iron-sharpens-iron theme in that they can be either positive or negative, but either way, they are present parts of the collaborative and social networking systems of SPED teachers.

Deborah, Elizabeth, and Ester all saw a positive relationship between administrators who had specific SPED experience. Deborah commented on a “new director in place” within her district who had “come from a special ed. background” and found that that type of experience when “they’ve been in the classroom...it’s a lot better.” When asked to clarify, her sentiment was, “they know where we are coming from, the things we go through, and so they’re more open to our ideas and finding ways to help” not only teachers themselves, but the SWDs served in the process. She later reiterated those types of SPED experienced administrators “know what we go through, and they are looking for ways to improve our experience as teachers and help us find ways to teach better.” Elizabeth, too, recognized that “the support is different” when you have an administrator with experience within their career as a SPED teacher themselves. Ester echoed that if “a principal has SPED in their background,” that “it makes a huge difference.” Fortunately for Ester, each of her school sites has had administrators with this SPED background, unlike one of Elizabeth’s administrators who she shared “didn’t have any [SPED] experience and didn’t even know what our job was!” Rachel, too, had the disheartening experience of working under “two department heads who knew nothing about SPED. I mean like *no* [emphasis added] SPED background at all” and was relieved when someone finally took over who was from the trenches and better able to identify with and support their staff.

Theme 3- Cohesion

Cohesion is a central tenant of the theoretical framework of this study. Cohesion was the third theme of the study. SPED teachers in this study find value in belonging to a group of like-minded colleagues. This belonging can be described as cohesion. Subthemes related to cohesion were identified as camaraderie and collaboration. Each of these subthemes supports the feeling of cohesion in positive work environments where SPED teachers can thrive. Codes were gathered across journal prompts, interviews, and focus groups to show essential components of each subtheme below. Camaraderie includes positive and negative subheadings, and collaboration is presented collectively with all experiences clumped together.

Camaraderie

The first sub-theme of cohesion was camaraderie. This subtheme was gleaned from the collective individual codes of friendship, vent, encourager, out-of-school, closeness, isolation, and physical space. Camaraderie may exist among any variety of work relationships. Ester shared that it may “not be people doing exactly what I was doing,” but it existed across the varied relationships at the workplace. Like many other themes, this one had two sides. One was the experience of positive camaraderie through closeness with colleagues, while the other was the sense of isolation and disconnect due mainly to structural and physical barriers in place. Both are shown below.

Positive. Positive camaraderie experiences were shared by all participants. The most notable code aligned with this subtheme was that of specific go-to individuals. Many participants quickly named individuals in the field who were instrumental in their success and sustainment. Camaraderie relationships were most found in available and authentic leaders who pushed teachers to their personal best and supported their daily efforts. Sarah described the closeness she felt with one professional colleague, sharing that she was:

An icon in the special ed. world. She was probably the most influential person in my professional life. I respect her more than anyone else I've ever worked with. She was always there for me, professionally and personally. She demanded my best, and by God, I wanted to give it to her.

Participants from the Alpha district regularly referenced a long-term director who was readily available to provide not only leadership but genuine comradery and authentic relationship with her staff. One shared that there is no way she would have made it without her. Another echoed that she can just be honest with her, even though she is the boss. A third, Martha, shared, "Like you are my boss, but you are also who I go and cry to (laughing) you know?" These real exchanges with those in authority added to a spirit of comradery in facing the daily demands of the job. This spirit helped combat feelings of isolation because of feeling seen, heard, and validated by those you respect in your midst. A single person helped supply cohesiveness across a department when they were supportive and encouraging to their staff. This was shown by leaders in both the Alpha and Gamma districts.

Negative. Terms such as "an island," "red headed stepchild," "overlooked," "one man show," and "left out" came up in interviews. Rachel shared that "it wasn't until we all started complaining and fussing that we feel like the redheaded stepchild and so they started making sure that we all had desk" because previously SPED teachers in her district had no personal space of their own in the school. Much of the time, these sentiments were held because of scheduling or structural and physical constraints that were in place. Rachel shared, "It's bad. We don't even see each other anymore" when sharing about her interactions with other SPED colleagues at her school site. Instead, she leaned into her general education department to fulfill her needs. Martha explained that connections with colleagues were challenging because "our

planning periods don't align, and our lunches don't align." A lack of available time impacts camaraderie experiences.

Another structural example was teachers in self-contained rooms were often positioned away from other SPED teachers, based on facilities, making them feel ousted by their location. Both self-contained teachers at the Alpha District had rooms that were across campus from the general education setting. Martha shared that "I was housed in the lunchroom...in the closet...they had carpet on the walls to block out...the noise," while Naomi was in a small classroom space with no windows away from all fellow SPED colleagues. When questioned about relationships on campus, Martha was transparent that "I don't really know what to say about the people because I swear this year, I don't see anybody." Instead, she relies heavily on her assigned classroom paraprofessional for support daily in the absence of other colleagues she used to be closer with professionally. Miriam, along with Hannah, often feel that general educators "they don't get it," so clinging to those within the SPED community is particularly important. Miriam shared that, throughout her 20-year career, she has only occasionally been able to truly connect with her general education colleagues.

The self-contained teacher in the Beta District, Ruth, was at a separate school. The school itself provided services to a student population of SWDs. This meant she was separated from all general educators or others within a regular school setting who could offer outside perspectives and camaraderie about the teaching journey. Ruth shared that while at one time she did "have one person I can talk with about some of the things, yeah, but most of its pretty independent," meaning she faces her daily trials alone now because "it was a work relationship, but I mean, I'm not at her school anymore." In addition to this, scheduling discrepancies make it nearly impossible for many teachers to have any time to feel camaraderie with their colleagues. After

interviewing Martha, it became clear that without planning periods, or without shared planning with those who a teacher works the most closely with, it is nearly impossible to create opportunities for collaborative camaraderie. Some had offices in closets, classrooms across campus, and little to no planning time. Hannah shared she “had a closet, like a literal closet, I had in someone's room. They didn't have space and so they made that, but I was OK with that.” A lack of time and physical closeness to others created negative comradery experiences because there was no time in the day to connect with others. Interestingly, even when schools provided scheduled meeting times to foster this camaraderie, it was not felt as much as the purposeful and intentional camaraderie of teachers’ daily interactions. Mary felt that most of the meetings she was subject to were targeting specific individuals rather than supporting her as a SPED professional. Rachel echoed that these monthly SPED meetings were just another requirement on an already full plate of responsibilities.

Collaboration

Collaboration was another subtheme that formed the theme of cohesion. Collaboration was noted in most all data collection pieces as an integral part of the sustained teaching within such a challenging field. Miriam explained it as “we're going to support each other, and we're going to have each other's back.” The codes associated with collaboration appeared over 35 times throughout all interview transcripts, along with most journals and focus groups. When contemplating the importance of collaboration amongst the SPED community, Sarah shared:

I feel like if we ALL step up and do our best, all of our jobs are easier, you know, we're a team, we've got to work together and if everybody does their job, then everybody's job is easier and this job is hard enough, so, you know, why wouldn't we want to make it easier on all of us?

Participants relied heavily on their colleagues with more diverse educational and career backgrounds to help with navigating the daily demands of the profession. Hannah shared what she learned through her induction phase by being around people with more experiences. When reflecting, she recollected the following experience:

I think our biggest thing is go to school, learn what you need to do, you've had some student teaching, now go throw it in a room, yeah, so practice that, but I think the hands-on approach and the people you surround yourself with, that's I think where you learn the most.

Similarly, Mary, Rachel, and Sarah all articulated specific collaborative experiences with colleagues important during their induction phase. The lack of sufficient support makes the awareness of productive collaboration a requirement from the first classroom experiences. Mary shared that, "I had one or two I was working with who taught me so much because they had done it before, you know." Deborah explained that, as a co-teacher, "working with different teachers with different teaching styles has helped me grow as an educator" in part because collaboration forces her "having to adapt and figure out my place in *their* classrooms and make them *our* classrooms." Collaboration was also heavily present, as Rachel shared how she, along with two colleagues, learned the process on their own in an earlier district. Her experience with self-initiated collaboration is outlined through her specific experience. She shared,

I had no clue what I was doing, never written an IEP, I mean. You know, first year I had no clue. Nobody sat down with me and showed me how to do anything. Finally, I just I had to go ask (which he was new that year too). I mean, he was an experienced SPED teacher, but he came from Washington State, so he was having to learn how to write Georgia IEPs too. So we just both had to sit down together. There were only three SPED

teachers. All three of us were brand new SPED teachers except for him, which he basically was considering, and so we finally just had to all sit down together and say, “let's do this together” because none of us knew what we were doing. Nobody from the board came to help us nothing...It was just here you go.

Experiences in this area were varied, as shown by another participant, Ester, who recalled working in a large, urban Atlanta district, but still receiving support. Her induction experience follows;

The special ed. director...would come once or twice a month and do trainings with just us. So, it was very small, it was very intimate, and to be learning it, like looking back, I cannot believe that the director did that because I know how busy she is, and I can only imagine how busy she must be, just given how litigious it can be up there. So, for her to do that and to... to work that into her schedule and commit to, you know, playing games with us so we learn the terms or, you know, whatever it might be. She really held, or not held our hand, but she really taught us in in a direct manner what we needed to know and that made a huge difference.

Comparing these two opposite examples should make it clear how each teacher's journey is unique. These experiences shape the positive and negative and help teachers develop their perspective toward their field.

Collaboration is related to working together, which was brought up in other interviews. The notion of sitting together with others in a collaborative spirit to learn was important to teachers within such a chaotic field. IEP specific collaboration was a specific topic that came up across two interviews. Both Mary and Elizabeth shared past experiences with peer review processes that were helpful. Mary said that “my coworkers, they taught me so much about where

things should fit in an IEP, so that was helpful those peer reviews.” Elizabeth described the need explaining,

I think something that would even benefit us here would be before we send in IEPs and feel like they're marked all over and we're being graded, just to have that one person, who you're looking over the others IEP and say, “hey, this is what I see” I think that would benefit any SPED teacher no matter their level or experience. Just to have another set of eyes.

Mary commented that “when we would work together,” that it “really made a huge impact when we had like two people reviewing everything, so feedback was coming from them rather than top down. I mean working together at the same time.” She felt that she learned more from doing things than listening to someone tell you how you should do them, as is the case in many PD experiences from her past. Sadly, without being required, these intensive types of collaborative peer reviews are not prioritized. These two experiences were some of the only ones where school mandated efforts were seen as worthwhile and valued in terms of supporting collaborative SPED efforts.

Collaborative experiences were more commonly carried out informally and not through school mandated professional development, as is clear in Rachel and Hannah’s experiences. In fact, often the structure of mentorship in place to provide the induction collaboration framework was ineffective. Elizabeth did not learn much from her induction mentorship, sharing openly that, “she was as new as I was, only in her second year teaching, so I learned little that year. It was just something, yeah, it was just... that wasn't a great situation.” Rachel recalled “I think my mentor was a general education teacher so that, that really didn’t help me much.” Ester had a unique perspective as an administrator, and even when partnerships were not good, it helped her

manage her workload but did share that, “I can already tell there’s a difference with the partnerships that good” but at the same time acknowledged “partnerships that are not as great” even though the mentor process is a stipend assignment within her district. Ruth acknowledged the importance of mentors being paired with similar teachers so that there is a better understanding of the nature of the needs of the mentee. She said, “a co-teacher can’t always understand, you know, a separate class teacher, and you need somebody doing the same thing.”

When collaboration was lacking, it appeared that SPED teachers practiced self-initiative to find like-minded individuals to band together with to make the most of their careers. Ester articulated, “people are important, so you really have to be surrounded by good people.” Sarah mentioned the self-initiation necessary in her position.

Once I became itinerant, I became my own person. I was a department of one. There was no other me, and so everything I did, I did on my own, and I sought it out on my own.

But yeah, all that, I mean, it's self-initiated.

Despite the solitude of her position, she still sought out others to connect with professionally and even invested time and energy in relationships with colleagues outside of the classroom day to ensure she felt the support necessary.

Similarly, participants sought out the collaborative relationships they needed for whatever they may be facing in specific seasons. For example, Elizabeth shared how she had one colleague who she relied on for behavioral support with students, another that was more or less her go to for everything, and yet another who she had a personal friendship with that stemmed from initial academic collaborations. Martha banded together with her paraprofessional, sharing “she's my main person, my parapro; she's the one that has to listen to it all- we are the perfect balance.”

Theme 4- Fight or Flight

The fourth theme that arose through the coding process was fight or flight. The conscious decision to remain within SPED is individualized and develops over time. Interestingly, even those who have settled into current positions of professional contentment could recall times when they had to have a reprieve from the chaos. Both Hannah and Ester shared that they had seasons where they stepped away from SPED positions in public schools to serve in separate roles. Hannah worked a couple of years in adult higher education through the Job Corps. Her decision to move back into the public school system was partly because of the benefits offered to her, as a mother of three. She appreciated the shared schedules with her personal children and availability to them during their formative school years. Ester responded to her first self-proclaimed burnout by taking a collegiate position, where she worked with students with disabilities at that level. Ester was open in sharing that,

After 4.5 years of self-contained K-5 EBD, I needed a break. I was exhausted. I transitioned into a college setting that offered a program specifically designed for SWD. This job gave me time to catch my breath and gave me great insight and experience at the post-secondary level.

Upon returning to public education at the middle school level, Ester was “very grateful for being able to get back into it,” sharing that “it (EBD) was much more manageable at the middle grades level.” Both ladies were happily content with their transition back into K-12 education, and each had quickly worked their way into leadership roles within their districts. Having experienced flight first-hand helped both understand the phenomenon and ensure their staff was adequately supported to counter the risks of burn-out. Another participant, Sarah, who

serves in an administrative role at the time of this study, offered the following unique perspective on those who she has seen step away from SPED.

I do think a lot of it has to do with your support, and I can only speak from the county I came from. Everybody is overwhelmed in their own ways, and I think that when you're not supported by your administration in the way that you need to be supported, and you're not listened to or, um, validated, it's easy to leave and do something else.

Transitional Support

One subtheme under fight or flight was transitional support. Sadly, none of the participants felt fully supported over their teaching careers. Many shared the faults they experienced of broken support in their formative years, sharing that they had to figure out everything independently of school sponsored support. Ruth said, "It was sort of just a learn as you go thing for me," and Ester shared, "I was just kind of thrown to the wolves." Rachel echoed that, "it's kind of you are on your own" and explained that they basically said, "I don't care what you teach, how you teach, as long as (the students) show up and I don't hear from them. So, yeah, that was interesting." She continued sharing the disheartening realization:

It's horrible to say it this way, but I don't think they really cared about the population and what they did because their philosophy was, they knew they weren't going to really pass anyway, so just do what you got to do just so we can get them out of here.

This view was held by superiors during her crucial induction season when she needed to be surrounded by like-minded colleagues.

The mentorship process of each participant was varied, but three shared similarly that it was not helpful. Elizabeth shared learning nothing during her first year under a mentor who was almost as new to the district as herself. Ruth outlined how she had seen where mentors are

mismatched in such a way that the teachers assigned are not able to offer the needed support. For example, when general education teachers are paired with self-contained teachers, being a mismatch. The mentorship experience during induction was more about finding school facilities and personnel than in-depth support with the intricacies of the job. Ruth expressed,

I've had a mentor... you know, and I was a mentor for somebody... it wasn't like, I mean, we talked about sped stuff, or what exactly what we needed to do, but it was more like going through the process because the school had to say we had "that" training...it was just sort of like, "well, here's where the bathroom is at the school" or "here's where you know the secretary's office is"...those kinds of things.

Another frustrating experience with the mentorship process shared by Sarah was when she saw repeatedly the ineffective pairings of mentors and mentees. A status quo mentality seemed clear to her as "young enthusiastic teachers that have the ability to be great teachers" got paired "with mentors that don't do things the way they should be done." Of the represented districts, two had paid stipends as part of the mentorship assignment process, but regardless of whether the process was formal or informal, there were extreme deficits in the support provided daily in the trenches. Hannah, a director in the Alpha district, commented that

Special ed. teachers are already pulled so thin with schedules and pulled a million different directions with 14 different needs of 14 different students on your caseload, so when you are told, here's one more thing to add to your pile... I love the idea, but it doesn't always come to fruition the way you see it in August; it doesn't carry out.

As time progressed, teachers reported their support needs and left the surface-level questions about how to do the technical aspects of the job. Over time support needs become more in-depth and transcended technicalities into rationale. For example, rather than needing to

know how to write an IEP, teachers begin to want a deeper understanding of the rationale behind the document. Three participants explained this. Sarah shared of one assigned mentor after a transfer between school districts that “she didn't really help me, and I didn't really need it.” This sentiment was common, as expertise was developed from time working within the field. Rather than needing an assigned go-to person, the idea of an actual network of support grew. Being able to have readily available administrators and directors was how teachers experienced support in the later seasons of teaching. The idea that no one should ever feel alone arose in three interviews. Support was felt through collaborative relationships, present and proactive leadership, and collegial support. Ester sought out her own support networks throughout the seasons of her career. Those in the traditional classrooms tended to rely on anchor relationships to feel support in the later seasons of their career.

It seems once rooted in the specifics of the SPED role, teachers could branch into support networks based on either needs or the physical spaces they were assigned. Ester supported this, stating “vicinity or access is important. Special education teachers are extremely busy individuals, so those you work with often are the professional relationships that contribute to overall satisfaction.” This idea was mirrored in Sarah’s sharing about a specific “teacher across the hall” who “offered me so much love and support and understood the hardships I experienced.” Ester echoed, “Even the teacher across the hall...I've always been surrounded by good people.” Elizabeth made mention as well of those who serve the role of physical “teacher neighbors” who were there to help support her along the journey. Proximity was highlighted in several accounts, with those in neighboring classrooms being a first line of support for teachers.

Site Loyalty

The second subtheme under fight or flight was site loyalty. Although the phrase “site loyalty” was not articulated, it was clear that, when teachers felt supported in their work settings, they developed a greater sense of loyalty to the school. Of the participants in the study, over half were from one district. Those in that district seemed to experience a collective sense of contentment about their district. Three of the teachers had been at a specific school site for over 15 years because of the benefits offered in that setting. Hannah reported,

There's a level of trust there because I guess the school carries such a good reputation, that parents they almost are kind of like, “OK, you think that's the way it is? Then OK, we're going to do it that way.”

Other teachers reported that their decisions to leave specific teaching assignments in districts were because of the way they either were or were not treated. Experiences were shared that revealed when there is not sufficient support in place, there is an increased chance of leaving in search of a different setting where the collaborative community is better developed. One experience shared by Mary was about being used repetitively as substitute teacher coverage:

They just pulled me, you know, and one other one who were the good ones; they wouldn't pull the ones who weren't doing anything anyway, so it was just bad. I finally just started taking my days when they would try to do that. I was under all kinds of stress over there. It just ticked me off. That wasn't my job, but here they were, making me cover classes and not serve kids, and what was I supposed to do? It sucked.

Being treated in such a manner made it easy for her to transfer districts over the past summer. She had not been pulled in her new teaching setting and was relieved by the simple respect shown by allowing her to remain compliant in serving her students in her general education co-taught settings. Her stress level had greatly reduced, and she felt she was in an

environment where she can thrive as a SPED professional. Small gestures, such as that, can be impactful when weighing the pros and cons of working in a particular school or district. Having colleagues and administrators who understand the legalities of the SPED role, and do not overextend teachers, was paramount for participants. Once teachers settle in and develop their needed support networks and collaborative communities, they can sustain consecutive years of employment because even on the bad days, they feel and see the support they need in tangible ways to endure the hardships and continue as SPED teachers.

Theme 5- Anchors

The fifth theme of the study was anchors. SPED teachers named anchor relationships most commonly with administrative colleagues in their careers. Ruth shared “a special education director has been one of the most influential relationships” in her career, recalling his availability and helpfulness in times of need. All participants within the Alpha district shared how their past director was a person with whom they could be their authentic selves. They did not have to portray themselves as having it all together or be ashamed of sharing struggles both professionally and personally with her. In focus group discussions, Martha and Miriam shared how “having that psychology back behind her, you could free talk too. It's not professional all the time it's.... You talk to her about personal and trust her with that.” Martha shared through her journal that the same anchor relationship “played a huge role in my teaching career.” Miriam explained in her individual interview:

I couldn't have done it without (her). I wouldn't have wanted to do it without her. I probably wouldn't have stayed in it this long without knowing her. I probably would have been long gone on to do something else.

Their relationship spans over 20 years. Hannah, from the Alpha district, reported, “I really feel a strong connection” to that same individual. Sarah was complimentary of her anchor relationship in journal, interview, and focus group experiences, sharing, “I respect her more than anyone else I’ve ever worked with. She was always there for me professionally and personally” and added that “I will forever be grateful for all she has done for me.” Their relationship spanned decades.

The presence of colleague anchors was common as well. Another long-term anchor relationship was shared by Ester in sharing an experience with a colleague and told, “We were together for about seven years, she really helped.” Hannah recalls a colleague that she “started with her...close to ten years ago,” and they are still in close contact. Deborah shared that she had a highly valued anchor in one of her colleagues, sharing she is “the one teacher that I’m really close with.” Elizabeth had a similar experience with a colleague, sharing, “I’m really close to her. I would consider her, you know, a best friend. She’ll tell me if I’m doing something, you know, inappropriately or that’s not really benefitting the kids needed.” She and other participants valued the conversational openness that crosses from professional topics into genuine friendship.

Outlier Data and Findings

The nature of qualitative research is that it is non-prescriptive. Themes arise according to the data without preconceived ideas. Even so, there are sometimes themes that arise that catch the researcher off guard. The following findings fell within this area and merit discussion, as they hold interesting ideas that are worth noting. While flight was included in the original themes discussed above, it should be noted that the flight mentality was not one that was expected, considering the length of service of participants. Compartmentalization arose across interviews as well as an unanticipated ideal considering the SNT lens of connections that guided this study.

Flight Mentality

The first assumption going into the present qualitative study was that, since teachers survived the first three teaching phases of Steffy and Wolfe's teaching life cycle, they were intent on remaining. Data via multiple participant experiences disproved this notion, revealing that even those who are still in SPED after many years regularly weigh their options and long for retirement or a different role that will result in decreased work-related stress. Most of them commented on unrealistic demands, increases in legalistic red tape, and lack of administrative support in those contemplations. Rachel pointed out that within SPED, "there's no way we can teach and do this [paperwork] at the same time. I mean you know there's two jobs in one, and you can't do it." Elizabeth remembered when she "had a lot of flexibility" when it came to serving her kids but continued, "that's just not the case anymore."

Elizabeth, Ruth, Miriam, and Rachel all openly shared that they regularly ponder stepping away. Their explanations were that it simply was too much pressure and responsibility. Rachel said, "it's not worth it...this will be my last year SPED," and Elizabeth ponders transferring to general education regularly, sharing, "maybe that's more flexible...maybe *that's* the place to be" because of different paperwork and documentation requirements. Additionally, she sees how general education teachers have more planning time, even though they do not have to manage a caseload. Miriam was open that "I want to do something different" to help with "my sanity and my stress." Elizabeth expressed, "I just have a desire to do something different. I haven't quite figured that out." Ruth expressed she has had seasons where she wants to "get out of teaching" altogether in search of a better career fit elsewhere.

Compartmentalization

A second relative outlying theme was that of compartmentalization. Balance was mentioned by Ester as a constant struggle despite her professional and distinguished personal reputation within her region as a stellar SPED advocate and professional. Other classroom level teachers shared that, with time, they were able to truly leave work at work and preserve their personal and professional balance. This compartmentalization is counter to the theoretical framework of connectedness across all arenas of one's life. Ruth, Naomi, and Miriam all shared that, while they spent years lugging work home, with time they realized that the work could wait another day. Ruth said, "The older I get, the less I bring home," and recollected earlier years when she felt pressured to carry work home to stay on top of deadlines. She said:

I wish I could go back and tell myself it's still going to be there and I'm still going to have the time to get it done because I used to take it all home, and I mean spend lots of hours and then I will drag it home and not get it done, and then I could say "why do I bring it home and I'm not even getting done. I'll just take the bag back to school" so I finally just leave it there.

She acknowledged that she finally knew it was going to be there waiting on her when she got back the next day, and that she could prioritize her family time outside of work hours. Miriam shared her suggestion to help with the situation:

We need to have an extra hour to do paperwork, so we don't have to take it home, but I do not take it home every day. I used to. I could crank it out, but now it's... there have been years I have taken a lot home...so I can remember 16 years ago taking paper home, yeah, every day.

She continued to explain that she now knows it will be waiting for her the next day, and she does “try not to worry about stuff anymore,” but there is still paperwork pressure that has intensified throughout her career. Naomi, too, credits time with teaching her that, “you do the best you can and then you leave it here and you go home, and you have to compartmentalize.”

Interestingly, there were also no evidenced stories of faith and religion playing a role in the professional experience of teacher participants. Again, this compartmentalized approach to professional life fell outside of my preliminary assumptions that all things work together. Research studies that highlighted prayer and faith practice's role in enduring teaching hardships was simply missing in the participants' shared experiences of my study (Donahoo et al., 2018; Obiakor, 2021; Zabel et al., 2020). While there were a few participants who took part in activities outside of the school day through extracurricular involvement, there were an equal number who avoided after hour commitments at all costs to reserve their family time outside of work. Ester commented that coaching “was an incredible outlet” and “great... it helped with balance...and keep it all in perspective.” However, when her personal family situation changed, she prioritized her own children over the experience of coaching.

Research Question Responses

Journal prompts, interview, and focus group questions were all aligned to provide thematic data on the original research questions guiding this phenomenological study. Of the five themes initially developed, they are aligned below according to which research question they support. Some themes cross over into various questions due to the nature of their meaning. Each question has associated themes discussed below.

Central Research Question

How do veteran SPED teachers in southwest Georgia regions experience the phenomenon of professional community social networks? The participants' perspectives are that SPED is a dynamic field made better by positive professional community experiences. Deborah reported that she had the opportunity of recently crossing paths with a general education co-teacher within her professional community and added that "working with her has renewed my love for teaching and rekindled the fire beneath me to fight for my students' educations." Hannah was complimentary of the contagious effects of surrounding herself with passionate colleagues, and over her teaching career has "found that special education teachers are generally very passionate." She was easily able to name those "people who were phenomenal" throughout her journey. Ester acknowledged that being "surrounded by good people" was paramount in contentment.

These motivating and inspiring types of experiences are supported throughout each identified theme and subtheme presented in the results. Professional community is experienced in both formal and informal ways in the southwest Georgia region. Teachers tend to gravitate to others who "had a lot in common outside of school". Additionally, there is a draw to like-minded colleagues in terms of student expectations and teaching philosophies. Sarah explained the experience with her core support network as being drawn together due to "shared belief in doing our job well, the way it needs to be done, despite the fact that it was hard, very few teachers were doing it." Elizabeth shared that she gravitates more towards those who are like her "having similar values and views when it comes to holding kids to high expectations."

Interpersonal relationships that are characterized by authenticity and availability are influential. Hannah shared, "There's a different bond you have with people who are in the trenches with you." Deborah, a site lead SPED teacher in one school said that a positive outlook

is paramount to enduring the hardships of the profession articulating, “I’m exhausted, but I love my job and my coworkers,” especially those who hold students to ambitious standards like she does. A band of like-minded colleagues was a protective factor across several participants’ experiences. One element of this is the personal perspective SPED professionals have toward their professional and personal life. Deborah outlined that, “I try to have a really positive outlook on life. I try to see the best. You have to come to work you have. You have to do your job. So yeah, I just, I really might as well enjoy it.” Her optimism is inspiring.

Sub-Question One

How does the experience of SPED community impact SPED teachers in preventing burnout? The themes and subthemes of availability, authenticity, and camaraderie are where the most evidence arose in preventing burnout. Having like-minded SPED professionals face the highs and lows was irreplaceable. Ester articulated that, “Sometimes you know when you're in it, you need those people who are outside just to bring that expertise in that you might be missing or not seeing.” She continued to add,

These people, they turn into your friends because they see, we've all seen each other, you know, there are hard times: pregnancies, deaths and, you know, just. It's just it's very nice to have those people in your life...people you enjoy going to work with.

Hannah was clear that “the burnout’s real” and credits “exhaustion and fatigue” along with “the general consensus is that it’s overwhelming” and “it doesn’t end.” She specified that you must be able to identify with those “in the trenches” because others simply do not understand the nature of the career in the first place. Sarah shared that the burnout is accompanied by questioning.

I think it's, uh, a constant questioning, a constant, we're going through; am I making a difference? Why am I here? Why do I do this? It's hard! You don't get respect half the time from the kids, half the time from other teachers or your administration. You know, sometimes we feel like you're, you know, on a boat all by yourself. You're your own island, and you say, Why am I doing this? Nobody, *nobody*, [emphasis added] even notices what I'm doing, and does what I do make a difference? There's definitely burnout. There's definitely questioning. You have to dig deep to reach inside, and you know figure out why you stay.

Rachel claimed that burnout described her perfectly, saying it's "my life at the moment" and continued sharing, "yeah, I mean, if I could turn in my resignation today, I would." Martha commented that, "I've been burned out" while laughing and shared that her "goal is 11 years," which is when she is eligible for retirement. She is fighting her burnout daily but sees an end in sight, which gives her newfound drive to finish strong. Hannah passionately shared her insight.

Your husband doesn't know how hard you work. Your kids don't know how hard you work. You know how hard you work and some days you feel defeated, so to have like little reminders of what you're doing really makes a huge impact.

For her, these reminders come in the form of collegial support through the trying times that surface sometime daily within the job. Elizabeth shared that it is about "getting to know people and building relationships... in and outside of the classroom." Ester added to this sentiment by sharing how her consistent and positive work relationships "keep me coming day after day." Those working alongside are impactful in fighting burnout.

In a more vertical consideration, those in administrative roles hold equally important roles with the SPED community in combatting burnout among their teachers. When teachers feel

supported, they can combat the natural burnout tendencies. Teachers value the experiences of feeling “like I could call him,” “ask questions and expect to receive total answers,” or get “advice on how to handle situations” without ridicule, confirmed teachers’ worth within their school settings. Sarah epitomized this notion of professional respect being shown when sharing about a particular assistant principal who showed care through specific actions:

She checked on me often and showed me a lot of grace. She sent me to the doctor when I was injured by a student with no questions asked and didn't scold me for the unorthodox methods I used when working with my kids. Once again, she understood the hardships of the job, and let me know that I and my safety were important to her.

When SPED teachers can experience and discover these types of horizontal, colleague relationships paired with supportive administrative relationships, the desire to remain in the field of SPED is fostered. Knowing that administration “always had our backs” was irreplaceable.

Sub-Question Two

What are the SPED community and collaborative experiences over the teaching life cycle? Transitional support and fight or flight were themes relevant to this sub-question. Few participants felt adequately supported in their induction phases and, instead, relied on on-the-job learning and self determination to navigate their career. Informal networks with other teachers provided initial support. Additionally, support needs change over the teaching life cycle shifting from “surface level type stuff” in the early years, to more in-depth types of questioning and support needs in later parts of the career (Deborah, Interview). Mary summarized this notion sharing,

I'm not scared to ask questions (now). Back then I thought if I asked questions they would think some kind of way, but now I feel totally comfortable going to whoever to

ask for advice, help, or whatever. It's easier to reach out because I know what I need to know. Back then I was just trying to learn everything, so I didn't really even know how to ask the right questions.

Experience in the field helps teachers feel more secure in approaching others with needs. Hannah was clear that, with time, she has learned “I can choose the battles” and focus on the positives instead. Deborah shared this sentiment, adding that “as my knowledge grows... I feel like I need less support, and I need different kinds of support.” She referenced a past supervisor and shared, “She could probably tell you when we talked together years ago, I was this timid little mouse,” but now “we're grown up...and it's more questions about deeper things... than just that surface stuff.” When expertise is developed, collaborative experiences shift. Additionally, the support perceived when one reaches the fight or flight stages of decision making makes all the difference in deciding whether to stay or find new career options.

Sub-Question Three

How do SPED communities add meaning to the SPED profession? The themes and subthemes of anchors, interpersonal relationships, collaboration, and camaraderie are relevant to this sub-question. Participants develop site loyalty based on the added meaning of SPED communities in their work settings. Site loyalty is developed partly through effective stakeholder relationships amongst involved parties. Participants each pointed out the significant role of not only the students, but the families, community members, general education colleagues, administrators, and district personnel in terms of influential stakeholders in the SPED profession. Ester described the challenges of SPED and explained the value of “having a team of friends who are also highly specialized special education teachers who I can collaborate with” in her daily work. When these relationships are all running within positive and supportive parameters,

site loyalty begins to form in which teachers still are content and stay in specific schools for years due to feelings of contentment and belonging to the greater teaching community.

A critical part of site loyalty is validation and feeling heard as a SPED teacher. Supportive SPED communities help SPED teachers “to be acknowledged” and to combat the faulty assumption held that, “We just forget that special education teachers are teachers,” too. When others take the time and initiative and show “personal interest in my own (personal) life,” teachers feel valued as individuals who are then able to sufficiently pour back into their school and students. Similarly, the experience of continual learning, alongside your SPED colleagues, is important, as shared by Miriam that, “You learn together and then you make mistakes together. Yeah, that's part of it.” Ruth echoed that she, too, had to “learn how to work together” with different colleagues throughout her career. Being able to learn together and know that support is available both horizontally and vertically is important.

Elizabeth and Hannah commented on the vertical support they felt in professional development opportunities provided by their district. Hannah said, “I feel like they're always pushing professional learning opportunities out so that if we want to grab onto something, we can” and Elizabeth was excited about an upcoming experience. She commented, “The upcoming professional development through RESA, on IEP and eligibilities, I've never done anything like that before, so I would like to do that.” Formal PD experiences were limited, and both Elizabeth and Martha could only recall restraint training as PD experiences outside of the school, and it was a school-based requirement for SPED at the time. Other than that, Elizabeth was able to share that “crazy, it's crazy” when reflecting on the lack of SPED specific PD over her career. Her sentiment was that SPED is a challenging field, but districts still do not offer relevant PD opportunities. Having the school support PD without forcing it is important to teachers in feeling

valued as individuals. PD is a two-edged sword though, as sometimes SPED is clustered with general education for PD at the school level, and this is not impactful. Martha shared that she has found that PD off campus is “a waste of time. The people who teach them haven’t been in a real classroom like in a while,” which limits their credibility to teachers still in the classroom.

Elizabeth shared that, “You have some meetings and you just kind of tune out because it is things that really don’t apply to you” when reflecting on PD trainings, elaborating that, “I don’t like that. It’s hard to pay attention when stuff doesn’t actually apply to you.” Ruth, too, agreed in sharing that PD was always done whole school with general educators, and she “never found that really helpful for us as a SPED department” because “it didn’t pertain to what we were doing.”

Miriam suggested that PD is most effective at the school level. She explained:

I think it's better to sit down with your group like we do once a month with SPED teachers in your school, or your SPED director, or your school psychologist and talk about the laws, things that are new. Students in your realm, in your, in YOUR setting that you're in. I think just going up there and sitting and listening to, yeah, somebody that's not in the classroom is, it's not good.

When support is in place, teachers, like Ester, can confess that they too have “definitely found my sweet spot” within the SPED community. Deborah explained it in these terms of a supportive SPED community and its impact:

I think it makes my job more enjoyable. It makes me feel like I’m either successful or I’m able to find success because I can find answers to questions when I need them. I have the help and support I need.

Ester’s sentiment is relevant as well. She shared, “I love what I’m doing. Like, I absolutely love it! I feel like I was made for it.” These incredible experiences show that supportive SPED

communities that address teachers PD and personal needs add meaning to the profession and individuals. In describing her experiences, Ester summarized community and network support sharing that it was “crucial and fundamental to my success of being in the field of special education for so long” despite the challenges of the role.

Summary

Substantial themes arose connected to the current state of the SPED community in the southwest GA region. These themes were (1) iron-sharpens-iron, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) cohesion, (4) fight or flight, and (5) anchors. Themes all point to the incredible importance that connectivity plays within SPED. SPED demands are varied and consistent. Positive colleague interactions, both vertically and laterally, help combat burnout by fulfilling needed support to teachers as they face daily demands. These themes each point to specific aspects of belongingness and intent to stay in the field. Each theme is grounded in multiple participant responses. All themes tie together to provide how the phenomenon of professional community is experienced by those in the field. Each theme ties clearly back into the overarching central research question guiding the study, and several align clearly with the theoretical framework that shaped the study, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine and describe the collaborative community experiences of finishing well for veteran SPED teachers at rural southwest Georgia schools. A hermeneutic phenomenology consisting of triangulated data collection methods was implemented to complete this study. Eleven participants' experiences were analyzed that addressed one central and three sub-questions guiding the study by using social network theoretical (SNT) framework. In interpreting the data, it was clear that Biblical precepts rang true throughout the identified themes. Jesus was, above all, a relational being and valuing relationships was a central tenet of his earthly and eternal ministry. As a believer, my faith has been stretched, as I have recognized the relationships that Jesus modeled in his day-to-day ministry. His miracles and wonders took place with regular, everyday people much like us all. My study looked directly at this type of connectivity that still exists within humanity. Everyday experiences shed light on connections and impact the greater purpose of teachers. This chapter includes a discussion of thematic findings, interpretations, and policy implications. The theoretical and empirical interpretations and the limitations and delimitations of the study are discussed. My recommendations for future studies will be made prior to the chapter's conclusion.

Discussion

Five relevant themes surfaced over the triangulated data sources used in this study. The themes of (1) iron-sharpens-iron, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) cohesion, (4) fight or flight, and (5) anchors are discussed as they relate to the theoretical foundations of the study introduced in chapter 2. Each theme was aligned to target either the central or sub-questions that guided this study. Thematic findings are presented with literature sources, as well as experiential support

gleaned from the current study's data. Scriptural underpinnings are embedded as well that align with discovered themes and interpretations.

Interpretation of Findings

The intent of this study was to understand the phenomenon of SPED teachers finishing well, using journal prompt responses, interviews, and focus groups to collect the data. Finishing well is a concept introduced by Clinton (2012) and encompasses getting through the early seasons of life and arriving to a season of utmost contentment and satisfaction. Finishing well within SPED is a challenging task, as shown by the mass exodus of teachers from the field (Billingsley et al., 2020; Grant, 2017; Mrstik et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2020). The themes of (1) iron-sharpens-iron, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) cohesion, (4) fight or flight, and (5) anchors were each essential in addressing the guiding central and sub-questions of the study.

The central research question guiding this study was how veteran SPED teachers in southwest Georgia regions experience the phenomenon of professional community through social networks. In addressing this question, all themes and subthemes were related to explaining the experiences of SPED teachers. Participants highlighted a variety of highs and lows over their careers. Participants with varied work experiences in more than one district brought more varied perspectives to the table and were able to name the positives and negatives of the SPED profession because of their ability to compare how different districts provided support to the SPED community. This is reflective of the research, supporting the notion of expertise and life-experience's role in molding effective veteran SPED teachers (Gomez, 2019; Sayman et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2021). All 11 participants had worked in different school settings over their career and, of the three who had settled for over a decade, a strong professional community of SPED social networks was present. Commonalities arose about influential, anchor relationships,

authentic and available leaders, and collaboration while working daily to fulfill the responsibilities of the profession. Most participants required added think time to be able to articulate impactful relationships throughout their career. This suggested that many had not put thought into or tried to explore the role of social networks as it related to their experience as SPED teachers.

The first sub-question dealt with the experience of SPED community's impact on SPED teachers in preventing burnout. In response to this question, SPED teachers rely on their colleagues to help them process the daily demands of the profession. Whether through informal vent sessions or through collaborative sit-downs to complete the tasks being asked, teachers who have persevered recognized the need for a supportive community of colleagues in facing the demands. Those in leadership roles and those serving in classroom capacities acknowledge the intensity of demands and the inability to handle them alone. While two participants had experienced burnout and left SPED, both returned with a newfound sense of balance that they were able to offer to their colleagues, along with those under their leadership in later seasons. Awareness of the reality of burnout was important, and several admitted being actively battling it at the time of the study. Burnout apprehension existed, despite having invested over ten years within the field, and developed the necessary work ethic to balance the multitude of demands placed on them. The dread of burnout was no stranger to participants. The challenges and burnout risk factors discussed in chapter 2 surfaced again as stressors that had to be navigated daily.

The second sub-question addressed the SPED community and collaborative experiences over the teaching life cycle. Expectedly, participants' support and collaborative experiences varied over their careers. Induction seasons were interestingly not as supportive as was thought

necessary. Only one of the participants interviewed was completely positive about her induction years, while most recalled being thrown into it without much guidance or targeted support. Instead, these SPED professionals learned on the go and by any means necessary once placed in classroom teaching assignments. Learning within the classroom was the case with both traditionally certified SPED teachers and those entering via alternate certification routes. Teachers with more years of experience had each developed their own system of support and productivity that supported them wherever they were on their journey. Those with between 10-15 years of teaching experience were still viewing the career as a career where the primary focus was for students rather than a multifaceted career that involved colleagues and those relationships with other stakeholders in addition to simply SWDs. Just as SPED teachers advocate for students, this same advocacy was the presence of a SPED community who helped to counterbalance the feelings of isolation. Isolation due to structural, physical, and time constraints, is often unavoidable, making seeking supportive SPED communities more important. This isolation aspect was disheartening but surfaced in the literature review. Even so, hearing firsthand how this phenomenon was experienced was heartbreaking, as was the case when one teacher shared of being attacked by a student and no teacher being around to help protect her. Isolation was epitomized in that specific experience. Finding like-minded individuals with similar teaching philosophies toward SWDs supplies a sense of belonging in an educational culture that, at times, has cliques among general education content departments and other service providers. Whether SPED communities are fluidly in place or developed by individual initiative, they were crucial to a positive professional experience.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Chapter 4 revealed five themes that arose across multiple data sources. By analyzing the specific experiences of 11 participants, five overarching themes were found. Among these are (1) iron-sharpens-iron, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) cohesion, (4) fight or flight, and (5) anchors. The following interpretations include aligned SNT framework concepts with themes from participants' experiences of the phenomenon of collaborative community experiences in finishing well within SPED in southwest Georgia.

Theme one dealt with the notion of iron-sharpens-iron, stemming from Proverbs 27:17. Negative and positive perspectives manifested in this theme. Surroundings are influential to individual perspectives of the meaning of their work. Being around those who edify your professional pursuit is important. On the other hand, there is potential for contamination of work ethic and drive when around colleagues whose values do not align. Burnout contagion is relevant here, as those who are suffering from burnout can inadvertently bring down those around them (Kim et al., 2017). The gravitational pull towards like-minded others was clear across participant experiences. Similarly, distancing oneself from those who do not edify along the journey was clear in shared experiences.

Theme two was interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships included the specific subthemes of authenticity and availability, as these were two constructs common across shared experiences. The authenticity and availability of leaders, as well as colleagues, was paramount for teacher participants within this study, experiencing the feeling of support in their professional lives. In atmospheres where these quality relationships thrived, site loyalty was developed, as teacher participants chose to stay in their present work settings to face the continued demands that are part of a SPED professional's daily life. A subtheme of interpersonal

relationships was various stakeholder relationships. The social context of SPED attrition pointed out the many and varied stakeholders, and many of these surfaced in participants' experiences within this study. Positive relationships with students, families, colleagues, and outside service providers were highlighted across shared experiences. Positive relationships may increase positive work climates for SPED teachers (Soini et al., 2019). Relationships are key to feeling supported.

Theme three was cohesion. Cohesion was suggested when teachers shared about their professional colleagues who they were the closest to, both inside and outside of work. Cohesion pointed to the purposeful social network connections sought to help balance work demands. This theme was gleaned directly from the three tenants of SNT introduced in Chapter 2 (Liu et al., 2017). Moreno et al. (1987) extended Granovetter's original SNT ideals, suggesting that the lateral relationships within organizations had as much power as the vertical relationships within organizations. This theoretical foundation was supported in the present study, as participants highlighted administrative, vertical relationships with the same positive view as lateral, collegial relationships in the workplace. Cohesion was broken into subthemes of camaraderie and collaboration. Camaraderie centered more on non-academic outcomes, while the collaboration subtheme dealt directly with work-related responsibilities and the delegation and teamwork necessary to carry out the many responsibilities within the SPED field of instruction. Although, like the earlier theme of iron-sharpens-iron, cohesion related more to the casual, surface-level interactions among leaders and colleagues in school settings. Iron-sharpens-iron developed from the experiences of deep and valuable interactions within the SPED community. The differing levels and meanings of the themes are reminiscent of literature findings of the various intrinsic,

and extrinsic needs teachers have (Feng & Sass, 2018; Grant, 2017). Collaboration serves extrinsic needs, while camaraderie targets intrinsic needs of teachers.

Theme four was fight or flight. This theme surfaced in response to sub-question 2 of the study, which examined experiences over the teacher's life cycle. Fight or flight was an ongoing internal dialogue for some participants. The subthemes of transitional support and site loyalty were extensions of this theme. While support needs change over the teaching life cycle, it appeared that a conscious awareness of one's own needs and appropriate self-advocacy as a professional helped to combat the desire to leave SPED for other professional opportunities. Research was truly relevant to this theme (Menlove et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2021). Each of these two studies portrayed the impact felt when veteran SPED teachers left the field and the impact on schools in the aftermath. While beyond the scope of this study, there were a couple of teachers who were actively considering becoming “switchers” or transferring out of the field in search of more realistic job demands that would be easier to manage (Nguyen, 2020). The idea that there may be different teaching positions with better opportunities was present in several participants' shared experiences.

The fifth and final theme was anchors. Through journal responses, interview transcripts, and focus groups, participants could easily identify their professional colleagues who grounded them within the field of SPED. The most important relationships were those anchor relationships. SNT found that different relationships are created to serve specific purposes, such as task completion or emotional support. Relationships offer mutual support for different end goals (Bettini et al., 2020b). Relationships often crossed lines of professional relationships into lifelong mentorships and authentic friendship, with involvement in one another's educational teaching journeys. Meaningful relationships can transcend from career into personal life (Webb

& Welsh, 2019, 2021). These anchor relationships can transform individuals, which in turn transforms communities at large (Cornelius et al., 2020). These closer, more intimate relationships are reminiscent of Jesus's disciples, who were crucial in his earthly ministry. They were intentional and purposeful relationships that supported his ultimate mission on Earth. Authentic relationships are key to success across all fronts, and professional SPED anchors support this depth of relationship (Fish & Morgan, 2021; Gershwin, 2020).

Double-edged factors: The Bible contains several mentions of the term double-edged sword, and the most well-known one is Hebrews 4:12, which says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (*English Standard Bible*, 2001/2016). This idea of double edginess is an effective way to think about the risk and protective factors that surfaced in this study. While evidence of some factors was isolated, such as role specific burnout, others, such as support and collaboration, presented as two sides of the same weapon. Just as weak collaboration and support could destroy drive and initiative, sharp counsel in the form of collaborative support had the potential to edify and strengthen the desires of teachers to remain in the field. Only one participant in the study brought up church and shared that it was a compartmentalized aspect of her life. Even so, the scriptural insights that I gleaned as an outsider viewing the experiences were eye-opening and inspiring.

When forming the themes within Chapter 4, it was obvious that the risk and protective factors outlined in the existing literature are still relevant to the current SPED scene. The issues of isolation manifested within the literature review were confirmed in this study, especially in terms of burnout factors. For example, EBD was one of the most often left teaching assignments, and one of the participants only lasted four years before burning out in her elementary EDB classroom, switching careers briefly for a reset (Allen et al., 2018). Another study confirmed the

participant's teaching experience in this study about EBD burnout risk as well (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Three other participants experienced SPED specific burnout and shifted types of teaching assignments within SPED in search of a better fit for themselves.

Double edgedness was manifested in experiences about support. Lack of administrative support was revealed in the literature review as a factor contributing to burnout (Bettini et al., 2020b; Conley & You, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019). Participant experiences confirmed the importance of administrative support, as was reported in thematic development of this study. Namely, interpersonal relationships pointed specifically at the value brought by leaders who were authentic and available in their interactions with teachers. Experiences were shared repeatedly of how administrative availability was experienced in the day-to-day work setting, whether it be through quick email responses, personal asides about family, or physical availability and presence in the actual teaching classrooms of the school. The thing credited as a risk factor for burnout manifests as an experiential protective factor praised and valued in the study. When support is lacking, contentment is hindered, but when support was present and thriving, SPED teachers can endure hardships much more easily because they feel that someone is on their side and has their back at the end of the day.

Another double-edged concept that surfaced through the literature and current findings centered around mentorship and transitional support concerns. The literature review placed mentorship as a protective factor (Scott et al., 2021; Theobald et al., 2021). However, upon interviews, it seems that the mentorship experience was more of a pitfall than a protective factor. While the two participants who mentored did feel flattered to be asked to do so, it was not an experience that proved impactful past a surface level type of collegial relationship. Instead, the topic of mentorship brought back floods of accounts of faulted or negligent mentorship

experiences from the induction phases. There are a multitude of barriers faced for beginning SPED teachers and even those with the proper credentialing enter feeling unprepared for what they are facing (Theobald et al., 2021). Mentorship serves a crucial role, especially in the beginning. This sentiment was articulated by many participants when recalling specific experiences. Participants could vividly recall the lacking support of their initial mentorship experiences. One was able to positively recall a beneficial relationship, but all long-term shared the sentiment that it was just something the school was doing to check off a requirement. Rather than focus intently on their needs, mentors shared logistical and surface level information that did not serve long-term purposes but met short-term school mandated requirements for new teachers to be assigned a mentor. Whether the fault was jaded mentors or mentors who did not have special education experience, the experiences were similar, in that mentorship efforts fell short of what was needed in support. Education alone is not adequate in preparing SPED teachers for the realities of their career (Scott et al., 2021). Mentorship, which is intended to fill this gap, is an area that needs sharpening by policymakers so that it can be restored to the literature foundation of mentorship as a protective factor against burnout.

Connectivity. Ties within organizations play a huge role in the strength of the organization (Granovetter, 1973). While participants did not seem to initially place much value in their connections at work, as they continued to share experiences, some realized the value that others had played in their career success. Perhaps the busyness and daily demands of SPED are to blame (Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019.) There is no time left to reflect and acknowledge those in the path who were daily making it more bearable. Many participants were in a state of frustration and turmoil, as was shown by the four who were actively anticipating new employment or near retirement as an opportunity to escape the chaos and stress of SPED.

This is an example of teaching in auroi (Brunsting et al., 2014). Even these individuals could identify and recognize the value of connections and networks in their sustained teaching.

Exhaustion manifested in several participants' shared experiences (Hester et al., 2020). Connectivity with others was one way that this exhaustion was continually endured to remain in the field. Connection with the students was paramount for several teachers, while others recognized the value their colleagues played in combating the ongoing exhaustion and frustration with their professional careers. Camaraderie and collaboration help connectivity to those at work who can understand the struggles associated with the SPED profession. Connections create support for SPED teachers. Those with richer, diverse experiences within SPED can offer types of support and connection to SPED colleagues that are not quantifiable, but instead a result of years of experientially gained knowledge and insight (Bettini et al., 2020b).

The Lurking Giant. Burnout can be symbolized as a lurking giant within teaching. Kanold and Boogren (2021) shared an interpretation to understanding the phenomenon of burnout that was interesting to apply to this study. They described burnout as an entity that was ever present within the field of teaching in general. Participants in this study all had experiences to share about their awareness of the giant of burnout. Some lost the battle for a time, others were currently in the battle and acknowledged its impact on their career, and others simply tried to avoid the lurking giant of burnout. Those who had come to terms with the phenomenon the most seemed to have grappled with the reality of the issue and were not afraid to acknowledge its power to suck the life from teaching.

Maslach's burnout constructs named specific components of burnout that were shown in the present study (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Depersonalization was part of this constant struggle faced by participants. The theme of fight or flight was related to the internal battle with

burnout faced within the SPED community. The love and passion for serving SWDs balanced the scales in favor of continuing in field for participants. Even those who were contemplating leaving because of specific burnout components were complimentary of the impactful relationships with students and specific individuals who had walked alongside them in their SPED journey up until the present.

Goliath was a Biblical character who was described as a giant in the book of 1 Samuel. He was defeated, in an earthly sense, through stones. Teachers have ammunition in fighting the giant of burnout by securing quality relationships that can be used to defeat the enemy. Defeating the “giant” of burnout within SPED is made easier by collaborative community networks. The Bible would call these *brothers in arms*. Ephesians 4:16 speaks of each part of the body doing its own work, which is necessary if a giant is to fall. Within the SPED context, network community relationships form the parts of the body that can withstand burnout in individuals. Strength is found in relationships with others when in battle against the silent enemy of burnout.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 is clear, “Though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (*English Standard Bible*, 2001/2016). Banding together with fellow colleagues gives strength to teachers to face their daily demands. Even when teachers are not viewing the battle through a scriptural lens, the applicability of the Bible’s teachings about camaraderie and collaboration are clear. In carrying one another’s burdens, the law of Christ is shown in a fallen world that compartmentalizes faith into a separate entity despite its reality to every moment of life. The law of Christ centers on relationships. We love God more than anything else, and then love others as we love ourselves. A willingness to carry others’ burdens is seen as love in action for fellow man and shows the law of Christ in action.

Implications for Policy or Practice

This study supplies several implications for stakeholders moving forward. Policy implications, as well as practice implications, will be discussed to include improved mentorship programs, targeted professional development opportunities, and teacher equity practices at the school level. As with any study, implications have been gleaned from a specific region and may not be applicable in urban settings that face differing SPED community experiences due to their size and structural policies. Discussions of the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law are worth mentioning in terms of implications for policy.

Implications for Policy

One of the clearest implications for policy is the mentorship process for new SPED professionals. Beginning SPED teachers have unique challenges, and mentors serve a crucial role in this phase of teaching (Sikma, 2019). SPED teachers must be matched to willing and competent counterparts exemplary in SPED for quality induction experiences to occur. Random assignments do not ensure this. Veteran SPED teachers have a wealth of experience to share with their newer counterparts (Bettini et al., 2020b). Haphazard attempts that meet an induction program protocol and checklist do not offer the level and intensity of support needed for new teachers to SPED. State-wide initiatives could be implemented, but district-level attention to detail and assignment may be where the focus should lie moving forward. Warnings from participants regarding the random assignments of their mentors suggest that districts may need to assign mentors with greater intentionality of the impact they will have on new teachers. Simply assigning whoever is willing to serve may not be the right solution. On the other hand, forcing it upon teachers who are not vested in the process may not suffice either. While 27 states currently

mandate mentorship as part of the induction process, it is still unclear why these programs are not proving effective in teacher retention (Cornelius et al., 2020; Vittek, 2015).

Mentorship guidelines will need to be research-based and passed down from the state level for local districts to understand the importance of the mentorship process as it relates to SPED. Induction experiences are paramount in a teacher's overall outlook towards education, thus making them crucial in terms of long-term teacher contentment and intent to remain in SPED (Kim et al., 2022). The research is clear and continues to grow in support of worthwhile mentoring programs for new teachers (Desimone et al., 2014; Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Mrstik et al., 2019; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). One participant in the study explained that it was hard to do what was best in this area. Teachers need mentors in similar roles to mentor them, which makes for a complicated situation because those who are needed to serve as mentors are already overworked, to begin with, and adding more to their daily requirements could backfire. This study adds a qualitative view of the deficiencies in SPED mentorship and shows how these failed experiences stick with participants for decades.

Without state level laws, the likelihood of districts changing their practices is slim. This is clear by the shared experiences of the participants in this study. Consistency and reliability were only present in one teacher's induction experience. Understandably, so much of the legislative push is toward student achievement and teacher support is overshadowed. Adequately supported teachers will be more productive in all areas of self and student performance (Sayman et al., 2018). Without such support, psychological well-being may continue to decline among SPED teachers (Paris et al., 2021). This was shown by two participants in the current study who spoke of their own sanity regarding SPED's impact on their well-being. Support for SPED teachers needs to cover the entirety of the teaching life cycle. Veteran SPED teachers need

support to avoid the new trend of invested teachers stepping away from the field (Glazer, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). SPED cannot afford a continued exodus of quality teachers. The revolving door of induction and training only to lose SPED teachers to general education or other professions is draining on departments that need stability and experience of staff.

The idea of the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law is one worth consideration. SPED is regulated by targeted mandates and regulations. Because of this, teachers are often at a loss for how to fulfill their responsibilities under the legal pressures in place. Examples were present that described how SPED paperwork and requirements were too much to handle. A specific example from this study was a teacher who was struggling to gain proper certifications to teach Georgia Alternate Assessment content to high school students with more severe disabilities. Because of legalities, she will likely have to step away from her students after next year when her provisional certificate expires. The letter of the law is that, to teach high school content, one must be certified in that area. In the SPED realm, this means that a resource or small group teacher in a high school setting may have to obtain certifications in every content area offered to students. It is incredibly unrealistic to ask any teacher to be certified in every content area, especially at a 9-12th grade level, when that teacher is working daily with students who are predominately non-readers focused on life skills and independent adaptive goals. The letter of the law is correct that SWDs need highly qualified teachers, but the spirit of the law should allow for local flexibility based on the student populations served. Without flexibility, teachers who are passionate about resource and small group student populations may be ultimately kicked out of their classrooms, which are often the hardest to fill, and replaced with warm bodies who are able to jump the letter of the law hoops but may lack the compassion necessary to work with that

population. Administrative responsibility and advocacy for what is best for their school sites come into play in situations like these (Aldosiry, 2020).

Implications for Practice

Within local school settings, it is necessary that schools recognize the isolation that occurs because of the nature of SPED responsibilities. Disconnect is experienced by SPED teachers (Page et al., 2021). SPED teachers reported that they had differing requirements that did not align with those of colleagues. One teacher in this study articulated it perfectly, sharing that, while her colleagues were never exclusionary towards her, she never experienced a sense of belonging to the teaching community as a whole because of the discrepancy in roles and expectations set by the school itself. Intrinsic needs are harder to pinpoint and supply support. Extrinsic planning time is needed, but it is harder to understand the internal needs of a SPED teacher to balance the job demands through network support. Because of this, school initiatives should target the extrinsic support needs that SPED teachers have regarding their daily work as a first line of defense (Scott et al., 2021). Creating fluid, open communication about the daily demands and expectations of SPED professionals is needed. This can be done through regular involvement of SPED personnel in school-wide decision-making. SPED needs consistent involvement in decision making processes, as the SWD population needs advocacy, not afterthought. Decisions must be made considering the SPED community up front, and in a proactive rather than reactive manner. The administration is responsible for ensuring SPED involvement (Aldosiry, 2020). These cultures of closeness were described in multiple studies as crucial to contentment in SPED (Billingsley et al., 2020; Garwood et al., 2018; Webb & Welsh, 2021; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). The administration is ultimately responsible for setting the tone in terms of cultures of closeness within their buildings (Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019).

While collaborative planning and purposeful professional development will be beneficial in the sites studied, sites may differ in their support needs for induction teachers. The initial and ongoing SPED collaborative experiences teachers have within SPED help to shape their teaching philosophy and identity as SPED professionals moving forward (Kim et al., 2022). Perhaps schools are responsible for creating atmospheres conducive to connectedness across campus. The Council for Exceptional Children names collaboration as a specific standard that SPED professionals and schools must ensure this collaborative spirit is alive and thriving in schools (Whitby et al., 2013). School site administrators should involve all stakeholders in plans involving the collaborative support needs of their sited SPED professionals (Jones et al., 2013). Participants throughout this study highlighted how inapplicable their PD experiences were to the actual work they were doing. By involving SPED in planning for these experiences, districts may be able to ensure specific collaborative support needs are addressed on an individualized site basis. PD opportunities, while available, are not always relevant to the specifics of SPED. Several participants described being embedded with general education PD experiences. This resembles a one size fits all approach that does not target specific SPED concerns. Being clumped into content area PD with general education teachers provides content ability, but it does not address the specific needs of SPED professionals in their multidimensional job roles within schools. Research aligned with this study's current findings, as with many different studies, highlighted the value of purposeful, targeted PD for SPED professionals (Alghazo & Alkhazaleh, 2021; Garwood et al., 2018; Van Waes et al., 2018; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). PD specific to community support for SPED specific requirements may be necessary and may need to be embedded into the master schedule regularly. Schools may need to purposefully devote common time in the schedule for these types of support measures to be carried out regularly

(Drew & Gonzalez, 2021). Whether this is professional learning days monthly, as one represented district does, or monthly department meetings, there perhaps should be targeted opportunities for aid and support ongoing (Stemberger, 2020). Isolated training during pre-planning does not suffice (Van Waes et al., 2018; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Ongoing support structures need to be in place at the school and district levels, as suggested in this study as participants described them. This support should sustain into all seasons and not simply target induction phases, despite the experiences shared that suggest that this is exactly what is occurring. Participants did not feel supported as purposefully as they needed throughout their careers. Participants supported this in their shared experiences or random training that did not have anything to do with them but were simply meetings for the sake of meetings. Some argue that veteran teachers automatically acquire necessary coping mechanisms to handle the demands of their jobs; however, this was not consistent in this study (Nuri & Tezer, 2018). Even those near retirement sometimes longed to escape SPED for different career options. Support structures in the form of SPED community networks may help protect veterans from this desire.

Teacher equity is another important practical implication for districts. Participant experiences highlighted being used to cover classes, having reduced planning times, and using excessive time at home to fulfill work obligations. These types of activities may make SPED teachers feel less valued as equal stakeholders within their school. While coping strategies are developed over time to deal with the SPED demands, schools can take more active approaches in protecting their teachers from burnout risks (Wang et al., 2022). There is no misunderstanding when looking at schedules and seeing actual discrepancies in planning time or outside responsibilities. SPED teachers having less planning is not fair. This was supported in three participants' shared experiences, one of whom intended to leave SPED at the first opportunity

available in part to this discrepancy in teacher treatment. SPED teachers having greater non-instructional responsibilities and duties is not fair. Lunch duties, car and bus duties, or hallway supervision are examples of non-instructional tasks that often fall onto SPED teachers in some district settings. One participant was stretched so thin that she never even went to her office except the one day a month provided in her district for paperwork. When schools provide adequate planning times to SPED teachers that mirror what is afforded to general education teachers, SPED teachers perhaps may feel validated and appreciated as equal stakeholders in the school. Workload demands are the predominant burnout rationale given across multiple literature sources (Mihajlovic, 2020; Sayman et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2021; Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019). Since factors are known, practical steps may be necessary to ensure that the technical aspects of the job do not overshadow the heart involved in this line of work. Adequate and fair planning time could be a step in the right direction.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The current study corroborates with much of the research regarding SPED teaching brought forward in the literature review in Chapter 2. The intensity of demands and how that relates to feelings of burnout was clear in most all participants' shared experiences. Additionally, the value of supportive leadership was promoted throughout the interviews and focus groups as vital to feeling supported within SPED. Theoretical and empirical implications are presented.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, it was easily obvious the role that interpersonal relationships and connections play in the development of supportive SPED community networks in southwest Georgia. These discoveries are outlined below. SNT involves the positive and negative interactions with other individuals in daily settings (Liu et al., 2017). The present study

aligns perfectly with this idea that those in our midst have the power to improve or destroy our mindset toward what we do with our professional lives. Theme one of this study, iron-sharpens-iron, is a prime example of this idea. Also, the participants shared experiences with administrative support and mentorship practices revealed this construct of either protecting from burnout or adding to it. SNT has only been used sparsely within SPED literature to date but has been more common in educational settings.

This study supports the importance SNT places on the quality of relationships over the number of relationships. This importance falls under the intrinsic motivators of relationships and connections (Feng & Sass, 2018; Grant, 2017). Participants shared how they had to seek out specific connections to fulfill relational needs at their work settings. This unique perspective of purposeful network connections aligned with Granovetter's (1973) original SNT claim that agents form network strength. Moreno et al. (1987) extended the theory to highlight the value of lateral and vertical connections, both of which manifested through shared experiences in the present study. Participants were balanced in their reliance on lateral, collegial, and vertical administrative relationships when it came to naming those who helped fulfill the support needs to combat burnout in SPED. Social, physical, and internal resource needs are present within SPED teachers, and SNT provides an outlet through which all resource areas are addressed through meaningful network connections with others (Bettini et al., 2020b).

SNT's emphasis on centrality was highlighted in this phenomenological study by encouraging central ego actors to identify their specific community support network experiences (Liu et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2021; Westaby et al., 2014). The self-reflection necessary for participants to place themselves structurally within a network of individuals was able to increase the awareness of the importance that those connections held in the ability to sustain a lengthy

career in SPED. Relationships are foundational in SPED career contentment (Olson & Roberts, 2020). Seeing themselves as the central nodes in a more extensive web of SPED connections was something that participants did not have time to acknowledge outside of purposeful, targeted questioning. This cohesion, as part of a larger support community, is described in literature (Van Waes et al., 2018). These collaborative notions are the essence of SNT's central tenants and importance towards system-level organizational health, as well as individual-level health and contentment (Muijs et al., 2010; Diaz-Pareja et al., 2021). The present study places SNT in the SPED literature as a logical match to analyze connectedness and relationships within SPED communities. While others applied the theory within higher education and nursing settings, this study looks at secondary settings (Liu et al., 2017; Van Waes et al., 2018). This study aligns seamlessly with other doctoral studies that focused on utilizing SNT within school-based settings. It also extends research that targets the induction phases of teaching instead of the later seasons of the teaching life cycle (Kim et al., 2017). SNT was a relevant and proper lens for the current study, as it focused on the very connections paramount in the experience of teacher support as felt through collaborative support communities.

Empirical Implications

Empirical significance is concerned with the actual experiences as they occurred apart from theoretical underpinnings. For the present study, terminology was described differently for the focus to remain consistent. For example, social network theory was defined instead as collaborative community networks so that participants could realize and recognize that the relationships they were a part of served a much greater purpose than was initially considered. By presenting the underpinnings of SNT into more commonly understood language, participants were able to analyze their own relationships so that I could then interpret those experiences to

form themes and recommendations moving forward.

Experiences that had depth allowed me to see the underlying precepts at work in a variety of network connection experiences. For example, in analyzing shared experiences, themes arose about authenticity in relationships. This finding alone teaches those of us still in classrooms that interactions must remain intentional and purposeful if they are to support the profession. The positive experiences and pitfalls that were revealed in the current study allow for learning to take place of what may or may not work to improve the daily conditions of SPED teachers. Understanding the value of supportive network communities is necessary for teachers to resist burnout and remain teaching despite the demands present.

Empirical significance manifested in several areas of the current study. The impact of veteran SPED attrition was confirmed in the present study. The impact on both local and national scenes was confirmed in this study (Bettini et al., 2020b; Kim et al., 2017; Lynn & Woods, 2010). Participants in this study shared that they relied heavily on veteran SPED personnel to fulfill their daily support needs. The veteran SPED teachers and personnel were who they learned from the most over the course of their careers because of their availability and authenticity. It was easy to lean on these colleagues in times of need. Additionally, two participants revealed how disheartening it was when vacancies were filled by unqualified or dispassionate teachers who do not value SPED as a profession, but simply view it as a means to an end to get their foot into the door of education the easiest way possible. Teachers in classrooms may be frustrated when local districts place random teachers within SPED roles for reasons not student-centered. Each participant serving in an administrative role spoke of the challenges in keeping good teachers within SPED due to the increased demands placed on them. Unqualified new hires may potentially contaminate a profession that would be better suited by

retaining quality teachers so that haphazard replacements are not necessary.

Another alignment between the literature and the present study was within risk factors and protective factors. All participants in the current study articulated stressors that were consistently found in the literature as factors leading to burnout (Ansley et al., 2019; Page et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021). This study both corroborates and extends several of the protective and risk factors outlined in the literature review. One protective factor that arose in participants' experiences within the present study was time spent teaching (Robinson et al., 2019). Another affirmed risk factors were workload demands (Adera & Bullock, 2010; Aldosiry, 2020; Bjorklund et al., 2020; Conley & You, 2017; Grant, 2017; Mihajlovic, 2020; Owusu-Bempah et al., 2018; Sayman et al., 2018; Ziaian-Ghafari, & Berg, 2019). Support needs and isolation were other affirmed findings in the present study (Garwood et al., 2018; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Woulfin & Jones, 2021; Xie et al., 2021). Themes stemmed from each of these in the literature and experiential-based findings.

The literature revealed that SNT had been sparsely applied in an educational context (Diaz-Pareja et al., 2021; Muijs et al., 2010). Using SNT to focus on veteran SPED teachers' collaborative community experiences extends the earlier research (Liu et al., 2017; Van Waes et al., 2018; Wilson, 2022). Diving into the value added by collaborative community experiences is different than simply talking about the pros and cons of the profession from quantitative or qualitative perspectives (Garwood et al., 2018). Deeply evaluating the importance and value of influential people was novel for participants.

Another comparison between the literature and the present study was perseverance within the field due to the absence of better options (Kim & Buric, 2020; Meredith et al., 2020). Researchers held that teachers might feel trapped, and this was a sentiment shared by two

participants who felt like it was too late to follow alternate career pursuits. Instead, they are enduring the chaos until their retirement, which is in near sight. Other teacher participants shared that, as mothers, teaching was a logical profession that aligned with their familial responsibilities, and that other jobs, though desired, did not offer these scheduling benefits. This weighing of pros and cons is what was described in the literature as the dynamic nature of staying or leaving the field of SPED (Scott et al., 2021). Each participant's experience was unique, despite commonalities.

This study has tried to fill a gap in the research that exists about qualitative experiential networking accounts of veteran SPED teachers. Research to date has simply interpreted experiences at a surface level, failing to recognize the importance of the interconnected experience through an SNT lens (Scott et al., 2021). Allowing the focus to be centered more on adult relationships than student relationships is new (Pham et al., 2018). Examining how these colleague relationships supply support against burnout is a new perspective. The biblical perspectives and alignments of iron-sharpens-iron and relationships creating strength are unique to the literature, as secular writing focuses on the factual descriptions without a spiritual groundwork for understanding innate human tendencies.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations and delimitations were present in this study. Limitations and delimitations are not to be confused. Limitations occur by chance, while delimitations are controlled. Each is outlined below.

Limitations

Of the participants recruited via convenience snowball sampling, all were female. Because of this, the male perspective, which could be completely different, was not able to be

reported. All participants were Caucasian as well. These limitations were not expected but quickly became obvious, as participant recruitment got underway in the southwest Georgia region. Participant recruitment relied on word of mouth. Random sampling was not possible to gather participants. Participants each came with varied backgrounds, with some having transferred among several districts, while others worked in one or two districts but had settled into a specific work site where they were supported. This variability in work experiences over districts created depth in experiences that were not originally expected. Using willing participants who met the qualification of 10 years in SPED still resulted in a varied participant pool.

Delimitations

The primary delimitation of this study was the inclusion of only teachers with 10 or more years of direct classroom SPED teaching experience. This was a purposeful decision that was based on research about the teaching life cycle (Steffy & Wolfe, 2001). Of the six seasons, I felt that those towards the end of the cycle would have richer perspectives due to their experiences over time than newer teachers who were still solidifying themselves as professionals within the field. In addition, there are several current studies that focus on the induction seasons (Kim et al., 2017; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001).

Also, a delimitation in the present study was the focus on high-needs, rural school settings where I have spent most of my career working. Research studies outlined the impact of SPED attrition in these types of settings compared to larger affluent settings (Ansley et al., 2019; Bettini et al., 2020b). This delimitation was purposeful to align with my firsthand experiences in the field of SPED. After consulting with the dissertation chair, the decision was made to omit inclusion of one willing participant described as the anchor relationship of three current participants.

Delimiting her inclusion allowed for the focus to remain aligned with the initial research and sub-questions guiding the study. Using her as a twelfth participant would have thwarted the original intent of the study, as anchor relationships was not explored in the literature review nor predicted as a possible thematic finding of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Teacher shortages within SPED have been around for decades and are not going away, therefore research must continue that focuses on identification of specific interventions that can improve retention (Scott et al., 2021). The present study has brought to light an increased awareness of the impact of transfers between schools and districts on the specific experiences of collaboration. Possible extensions of the ideals brought forth in this study should find specific sites where SPED collaborative communities are healthy, and further investigate those dynamics. The current study was a collection of different teachers navigating their work careers throughout different work sites. A case study approach could reveal the protective factors unique to those ideal SPED communities that was not possible in the present study of teachers across a variety of settings.

Considering several of the findings of this study, it may be valuable to look more deeply into the relationship functions that are present in a teachers' work sphere from a quantitative nature. Sociometry focuses on quantity of connections, and it would prove interesting to see if there are correlations between certain types of work relationships and functions with job satisfaction and intent to remain in field.

The current study had limitations and delimitations that suggest future avenues that may need exploration. In addition to varied gender and races, purposefully targeting those in specific seasons may supply more common experiences than what was present in the current study. The

scope of my study did not provide a large enough sample to interview teachers in their last five years of teaching. My initial focus had to be restructured to name veterans as anyone with 10 or more years of classroom experience. It was clear, however, that those within the 10-15-year range did not mirror those closer to retirement with 20 or more years of gained classroom experience. The perspectives were similar, but the depth of understanding of relational importance seemed to develop over time. Moving forward, researchers should use a narrower cutoff to supply more targeted experiences. Additionally, researchers should try to utilize more randomized sampling methods to gain participants. My study was not representative of the racial or gender makeup of society. All participants of the present study were Caucasian females.

Involving mixed methodologies to discover participants' world outlook as it relates to combatting burnout with SPED would be beneficial. My study revealed that individuals' general worldview seemed to influence how they dealt with collaborative SPED communities at work. For example, those with general positive life outlooks perceive support through a completely different lens than those who are battling burnout daily. In quantitative approaches, each protective factor explored in the literature review could be assessed in relation to burnout. From a SNT sociometry standpoint, it would be possible to review SPED interactions and relationships through a quantitative lens and simply see if there were correlations between the number of work relationships and burnout indicators. Involving a dynamic network theoretical lens would prove to be a novel approach to analyzing the value of SPED social exchanges from a strictly qualitative versus network analysis approach (Westaby et al., 2014).

Because of the surfacing of the theme of anchors within my study, it may be beneficial if researchers could pinpoint these solitary individuals who serve as anchors within their school site to discover what personality traits and practical practices led to their stability and strength within

the field of SPED. These individuals epitomize this study's initial focus of finishing well within SPED. Anchor relationships are the foundation upon which successful careers can flourish. These specific individuals would be challenging to find but would undoubtedly offer volumes of insight and perspective into the SNT underpinnings of SPED in terms of involvement with others. The theme development of anchors was one of the most surprising and impactful personal findings for me moving forward as a researcher and teacher leader in SPED. The anchor individuals are fascinating. A case study on these individuals may be beneficial to explore.

Conclusion

SPED teaching is an overwhelming profession, even for those with years of experience. SPED communities provide support to those who are dedicated to the SWD student populations of southwest Georgia classrooms. Supportive administration, close anchor relationships, and being surrounded by positive co-workers with similar philosophies are invaluable to SPED teachers. Historically, SPED has been an isolated field that is oftentimes viewed as a disconnected outside service provider rather than a fluid extension of educational institutions.

This study used hermeneutic phenomenology to glean from the experiences of 11 educators and administrators who have proven themselves competent and successful within the SPED communities of southwest Georgia. Through journal prompts, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, five themes were found that play a part in the SPED community network experience. These were iron sharpens iron, interpersonal relationships, anchors, cohesion, and fight or flight. Through data analysis, it was clear that the social networks participants may provide the support needed to face the daily hardships of a challenging profession. Participants lean on their colleagues and friends to remain dedicated and combat burnout. To support this collaborative community network, districts are encouraged to increase focus on induction

experiences for SPED teachers, create welcoming environments of inclusion for not only students but teachers as well, and provide necessary and targeted PD experiences over the SPED teacher life cycle that can address the legitimate needs of such a specialized line of work. Burnout is a complex issue that is unique to individual experiences (Scott et al., 2021). Prevention is not possible, but schools can ensure protective factors are embedded into their schedules to meet the support needs of SPED teachers and increase their teaching life expectancy, which will benefit SWDs for years to come.

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Appendix A

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 2, 2022

Jennifer Whittaker
Christine Saba

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-126 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES OF VETERAN SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Dear Jennifer Whittaker, Christine Saba,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Site Permission Email and Letter for District Personnel

Date

Recipient

Title

Address 1

Address 2

Address 3

Dear [School Official's Name],

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a philosophical doctorate degree in Special Education. [The years I have spent with you all here have been pivotal in my teaching career, and I wish to somehow give back through intentional research that will benefit the state of the field of special education.] The title of my research project is "A Phenomenological Examination of the Collaborative Community Experiences of Veteran Special Educators," and the purpose of my research is to examine the role of collaborative and community network relationships in persistence within our field that consistently endures staffing shortages.

I am writing to request your permission to contact members of your organization to invite them to participate in my research study. Participants must have completed a minimum of 10 years teaching in the special education classroom teacher capacity and self-identify as having surpassed the induction phases of the profession. The preliminary screener will need to be mass emailed to your 2022-2023 special education staff. Once I am able to recruit teachers with ten or more years of classroom teaching experience in special education, I will be able to handle the remainder of the research obligations.

Potential participants will be asked to complete [this attached screener](#) for eligibility purposes. The study will consist of an individual interview, two brief journal prompts, and a focus group experience. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants will be welcome to discontinue participation at any time. Results will remain confidential, and findings are aimed at improving professional development and special educator support systems in our districts. I will be more than happy to share this research with your leadership team upon completion.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by to me at this email [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience to return to this email. I intend to get this underway prior to the start of this upcoming school year, pending university approval.

Sincerely,

Name
Title
Phone

Permission Letter Document

Dear Jennifer:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled “A Phenomenological Examination of the Collaborative Community Experiences of Veteran Special Educators,” we have decided to grant you permission to contact our special education faculty and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- We will provide our membership list to Jennifer and she may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in her research study.
- We grant permission for Jennifer to contact special educators in our school district to invite them to participate in her research study.
- We will not provide potential participant information to Jennifer, but we agree to send her study information to our special education teaching staff on her behalf.
- We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[Official’s Name]

[Official’s Title]

[Official’s Company/Organization]

Appendix C

Initial Screener

Study of Veteran Special Educator's Experiences in southwest Georgia

Consent and Screening Form

Required

1. Consent documents will be sent via personal email.
 - Yes, I agree for consent to be emailed should I qualify for the study.
 - No, I do not agree for consent to be emailed should I qualify for the study.
2. I am a current, classroom-certified special education teacher for the 2022-2023 school year.
 - Yes
 - No
3. I have taught in a classroom special education teaching capacity for _____ years over the course of my career.
 - 0-5
 - 6-10
 - 11-15
 - 16+
4. Steffy and Wolfe (2001) identified stages of the teaching life cycle. Please select which best describes where you self-identify on this scale
 - Novice-** preservice and induction stage
 - Apprentice-** the stage where you are getting a feel for things within education settings and gaining independence
 - Professional-** stage in which self-confidence is developed and established in the content area(s)
 - Expert-** stage characterized by consistent positive job performance reviews over several years- this is the ideal phase districts strive to have teachers operate within
 - Distinguished/Emeritus-** stage during which grand contributions have been made to the profession at large, serve as mentors, involvement both inside and outside the school on educational issues
5. I teach in _____ county. (Please specify your district.)
6. I am interested in learning more about how I can participate in this study.
 - Yes
 - No
7. If yes, please provide email address below.

Appendix D

Teacher Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student at the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to examine the collaborative social experiences of long-term special educators in Southwest Georgia, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be current, certified special educators with 10 or more years of direct classroom experience teaching in Southwest Georgia who self-identify as having survived the induction phases of the teaching process. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete two journal prompts (5-15 minutes each), one semi-structured interview (30-60 minutes), and a focus group experience with other special educators (30-60 minutes). Member checking will be utilized to ensure all information provided is screened by participants prior to use in the research report. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please [click here](#). You may also contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] for more information.

A consent document will be provided via email if you express interest in participating in this study. The consent document will contain additional information about my research. It will be provided in separate email correspondence following the initial screening process. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the study beginning.

I look forward to the opportunity of learning through your experiences gained in the field of special education over your career.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Boyd Whittaker
High School Special Education Teacher
[REDACTED]

Appendix E

Participant's Informed Consent

Title of the Project: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES OF VETERAN SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Whittaker Boyd, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a certified special educator with ten or more years of classroom experience. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of long-term special educators in the area of collaborative community. Professional and personal relationships that have assisted in your long-term decision to remain a special educator will be important topics.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Journal Prompts: Two brief (5-15 minute) electronic journal prompts will be completed at the beginning and end of the study.
2. Individual Interview: A 30-60-minute semi-structured interview (face-to-face or via Zoom) will be scheduled at the participant's convenience. The interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.
3. Focus Group Experience: A 30-60-minute focus group experience will be recorded via Zoom, in which collaborative sharing will be explored.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits you should expect to receive from taking part in this study are having their voices heard about the career you have opted to remain in for your career thus far.

Benefits to society include your experiences becoming a part of the larger research base that exists in relation to special educator retention and interventions against burnout.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation or through Zoom conferencing, allowing for privacy.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer Whittaker Boyd. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers

are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix F

Journal Prompt 1

Journal Prompt 1

Formative influences timelines allow for individuals to reflect on segments of their lives in a purposeful way. The following scaffolds will assist you in completing a brainstorming overview of the relationships that have been the most influential over the life cycle of your teaching career. Feel free to use abbreviations for names of colleagues, administrators, or specific individuals you mention as influential. These responses will help guide the upcoming interview, during which you will share additional experiences regarding social networks and relationships within special education. Think in terms of the beginning, middle, and current seasons of your teaching career as you share.

1. My induction period into special education teaching began in the _____ school term. During this time, the most influential relationships were _____. One specific social experience I recall about this period was when _____. (Scaffold provided if needed, open responses encouraged).
2. During the last three years of my teaching experience, the most influential relationships have been _____ because _____. A specific example of one of these social experiences was when _____. (Scaffold provided if needed, open responses encouraged).
3. During other seasons of my teaching career, the following individuals or network experiences have supported my continuation within the field of special education. (Scaffold provided if needed, open responses encouraged).

Appendix G

Journal Prompt 2

Journal Prompt 2

Please use the space below to respond to the following prompts. Answers are not required for all four prompts, however, the more information you are willing to provide, the greater the impact of your experiences.

When you submit this form, the owner will see your name and email address.

1. Describe this research experience from a personal perspective.

2. How has this research experience changed how you view networks and relationships in regards to your success within special education?

3. What is your main takeaway from this experience? Why?

4. Please add any additional thoughts, experiences, or insights that could add to this study of social network experiences among veteran special educators.