

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EXPERIENCES OF VETERAN HIGH SCHOOL
SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO REMAIN IN THE PROFESSION

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers in an urban setting to remain in the teaching profession. The central phenomenon under investigation was defined as the events and incidents that influence the decision-making process of special education high school teachers who remain in the special education profession for more than 4 years. The study's central research question asked, How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their teaching experiences that influence their decision to remain in special education? The study used a qualitative phenomenological research design with purposeful sampling to identify 10 participants. The setting for the study was a large urban school district in the southeastern United States. The data were collected through interviews, one focus group, and a participant journal. The findings of this study illustrated that the principal motivator found was the passion for helping students and seeing their growth. Secondly, teachers often attributed their prior experience working in institutions with individuals with disabilities to their decision to enter the field of teaching special education students. Additionally, teachers recommended different strategies that can be used by the schools and districts to create a supportive environment for special education teachers. Lastly, strong social support helped them to navigate and stay in this field.

Keywords: job satisfaction, special education teachers, teacher attrition, teacher retention, theory of planned behavior, transcendental phenomenology

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Individual Education Plan (IEP)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The shortage of special education teachers is a growing problem in schools in the United States (Cowan et al., 2016; Grant, 2017; Mason-Williams, 2015; Samuels & Harwin, 2018).

Because of the shortage of special education teachers, many schools fill vacant positions with teachers without special education credentials, reducing the quality of educational services for students with special needs (King & Bounds, 2017). The problem created by insufficient special education teachers is compounded by a gradual increase in the number of students requiring special education services (Conley & You, 2017). A significant factor contributing to the shortage of special education teachers is a high level of attrition among new teachers.

Approximately 30% of special educators leave the profession in the first 3 years of teaching (Langher et al., 2017). The factors influencing special education teachers to leave the profession have been extensively investigated (Cancio et al., 2018; Conley & You, 2017; Cowan et al., 2016; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Landrum et al., 2019; Williams & Dikes, 2015). The studies, however, have not given a voice to the experiences of special education teachers who remain in the profession (Lesh et al., 2017).

Previous research has examined special education teachers with extensive tenure in the profession using a quantitative design (Andrews & Brown, 2015) or a qualitative design (Lesh et al., 2017), but no studies have examined the experiences of special education teachers who have chosen to remain in the profession. The phenomenological methodology provides an understanding of how individuals experience a phenomenon and why they react in specific ways (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the phenomenon is the decision of high school special education teachers, based on their experiences, to remain employed in the profession for more

than 4 years. The study provides information about the how and why of special education teachers' lived experiences related to the decision to remain in the profession.

Investigating the experiences of long-time special education teachers' lived experiences may have importance for teachers and administrators in developing policies to improve special education. The general research question of the study focused on understanding the lived experiences of special education teachers to gain insight into the factors influencing their decision to remain in the teaching profession. The subsections in this chapter include background, situation to self, the problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, research questions, pertinent definitions, and a concluding summary. The various sections provide additional insight into the nature of the study and its objectives.

Background

The shortage of special education teachers is a chronic issue for many schools, particularly for rural and urban schools with general staffing problems (Conley & You, 2017). The problem of shortages of special education teachers is of interest to various stakeholders, including school administrators, the parents of students with special needs, and communities because of the need to ensure all students receive an adequate education (Bettini et al., 2017; Vittek, 2015). The shortage of special education teachers has been attributed to high rates of attrition among new teachers (Grant, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Numerous factors contribute to special education teacher attrition including heavy workload because of administrative requirements (Williams & Dikes, 2015), personal abilities to cope with stress (Hughes et al., 2015), and the perception of lack of administrative support (Grant, 2017). The majority of the research, however, has focused on the reasons special education teachers leave the profession rather than the reasons special education teachers remain in the profession. This

study may add to the knowledge of the factors influencing special education teachers to continue in the teaching profession.

Any discussion of the factors influencing special education teachers to remain in the profession must take into consideration the general context in which teachers provide special education to students. The special education teacher faces contextual issues such as administrator requirements imposed by government regulators and relatively low levels of autonomy (Conley & You, 2017). However, teachers who remain in the profession often have positive experiences that are greater than negative experiences related to the difficulties they encounter in the teaching environment (Lesh et al., 2017). Positive experiences influence the decision of special education teachers to remain in the profession (Webb, 2018). The evolution of special education teacher resilience to the issues and problems encountered in the profession can better be examined through the historical, social, and theoretical contexts affecting teachers.

Historical Context

Education for students with intellectual and physical disabilities began to emerge in the American educational system during the 19th century, emphasizing physical disabilities because they were more obvious to educators (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). By the mid-20th century students with physical impairments or significant learning disabilities were excluded from the educational mainstream by placement in specialized schools or separate resource rooms with only significantly disabled special education students (Kirby, 2017). The expansion of special education services in the schools began with the passage of an amendment to the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act that required equal educational services to include students with disabilities (Lindstrom & Drolet, 2017). The need for special education services

gradually led to the development of special education instruction as an important branch of the teaching profession (Landrum et al., 2019).

The problem of special education teacher shortage has been documented in educational literature since 1985 and has been characterized as severe and chronic (Landrum et al., 2019; Williams & Dikes, 2015). In part, the continuously increasing demand for special education services resulted in policy changes that contributed to the shortage by increasing the administrative burden on teachers (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Over the past several decades a trend has developed in special education towards the employment of paraprofessionals to compensate for the shortage of special education teachers (Landrum et al., 2019). However, the use of paraprofessionals may not fully meet the needs of special education students.

Social Context

Special education teachers operate in the social environment of the school in which they routinely interact with a variety of stakeholder groups that include students, parents, colleagues, and administrators (Langher et al., 2017). The social interactions can be stressful for special education teachers because of competing demands among the stakeholder groups the teachers are required to balance (Robinson et al., 2019). Special education teachers are subject to changes in a policy imposed by government agencies that requires teachers to perform additional administrative tasks as required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 that can increase stress and undermine teacher morale (Glazer, 2018). Accountability practices in a school also place pressure on special education teachers by focusing on teaching outcomes rather than learning processes (Green & Muñoz, 2016).

The social environment of special education teachers is highly complex with role ambiguity common because of the different expectations of the stakeholders in the educational process (Lavian, 2015). Special education teachers consider student instruction as their primary role in the school, which includes collaboration with general education teachers in the inclusive classroom (Tzivinikou, 2015). However, special education teachers are also responsible for a substantial amount of clerical duties indirectly related to teaching such as the preparation of individual education plans (IEPs; Vittek, 2015). In addition, the role of the special education teacher includes a greater degree of collaboration with parents than is the case with the parents of students in general education. This is because of the role played by active cooperation between home and school to support learning (Lavian, 2015). The complexity of the social context for special education teachers can lead to stress for some individuals (Williams & Dikes, 2015). The strategies individual teachers use to cope with the complexity of the social environment in schools is a potential factor influencing special education teachers to remain in the profession.

Theoretical Context

The theories providing the foundation for this study are Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior and Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction. The theory of planned behavior contains the proposition that the intention to engage in a behavior is the best predictor of engaging in the behavior (Imran et al., 2017). A person assesses the risks and benefits of the behavior based on attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control over the behaviors (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). In the context of teacher retention, attitude towards the behavior reflects the assessment of the probability that leaving the teaching profession will produce the desired outcome such as increased satisfaction with employment (Soibchanba & Panday, 2016). Subjective norms are the attitudes of others towards the behavior

that can include the attitudes of family and friends towards remaining in the teaching profession (Fuller et al., 2016). Perceived behavioral control refers to the individual's beliefs concerning the amount of control over the outcome of the teacher engaging in the behavior of leaving the profession (Mintrop & Zane, 2017). Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence the intention to engage in the behavior (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016).

Herzberg's (1966) theory of job satisfaction contains the proposition that two factors identified as hygiene and motivator factors control job satisfaction. The hygiene factors involve external job characteristics while motivational factors involve internal motivators related to the job. The theory of job satisfaction is an important construct for explaining the development of the turnover intention among employees with low job satisfaction associated with low employee retention rates (Larkin et al., 2018). This study may add to the knowledge about the interactions between Herzberg's (1966) theory of job satisfaction and Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior with job satisfaction as one of the factors influencing the behavioral decision of leaving the teaching profession.

Situation to Self

I have both a personal and professional role in the research. I have been a special education teacher for more than a decade and have witnessed the difficulties in staffing and providing adequate student services resulting from low special education teacher retention. I am also aware of the various problems special education teachers encounter, often leading to stress and frustration that motivate some teachers to leave the profession. As a result, I developed an interest in understanding the reasons special education teachers remain in the profession. I am currently a special education teacher in a middle school setting.

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions include the ontological, epistemological, rhetorical, and axiological assumptions underlying the study. The ontological assumptions impact the understanding of the nature of reality and the actions taken by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My experience as a special education teacher has led me to believe that multiple factors influence teachers to remain in the profession that cannot be easily parsed or measured and vary significantly among individuals. Consequently, I believe that relativist ontology is best suited for this research. The relativist ontology presumes that the perceptions of individuals create reality to a varying degree (Stokes & Wall, 2014).

The epistemological assumption underlying the study is that knowledge is constructed through dialogue, interactions with institutions, and the social expectations of others (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Consequently, the researcher and the participants in a study co-construct knowledge through their interactions as a source of knowledge concerning the topic under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rhetorical assumption underlying the study is the use of personal terms and a literary technique for a narrative that can include the use of first-person pronouns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The axiological assumption in the study is that the researcher's subjective values and biases are important and will interact with the information provided by the participants of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

Research Paradigm

This study relied on the constructivist research paradigm. The constructivist research paradigm involves investigating the understanding of reality from the perspective of the participants in the study (Patton, 2015). The constructivist paradigm is based on the assumption that the understanding of the reality of individuals depends on their history, experiences, and

culture. The constructivist research paradigm can incorporate multiple perspectives and versions of reality (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The phenomenological research design is consistent with the constructivist research paradigm because it examines reality from the perspectives of the participants, uses experiential data to investigate a phenomenon, and considers the role of the researcher in the research process (Qutoshi, 2018).

Problem Statement

The general problem is a significant shortage of special education teachers existing in the United States that reduces the quality of education for students requiring special education (Cowan et al., 2016). The number of special education teachers in the United States decreased by 17% between 2007 and 2017 while the number of students requiring special education services increased by 1% over the same period (Samuels & Harwin, 2018). A significant factor contributing to the shortage of special education teachers is the low retention of teachers with only 70% of special education teachers continuing in the profession after the first 3 years of teaching (Langher et al., 2017). The specific problem is a shortage of veteran special education teachers in urban high schools to provide instructional continuity in special education services for students (Scott, 2016). The majority of current research has focused on identifying the reasons special education teachers leave the profession and has not extensively investigated how the experiences of special education teachers influence their decision to remain in the profession (Lesh et al., 2017). Identifying the experiences of special education teachers leading to persistence in the profession is important for understanding approaches for retaining special education teachers and alleviating the shortage of special education teachers (Lesh et al., 2017). Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, this study focused on giving voice to the experiences of veteran special education teachers and what influences them to remain in the

profession. The problem this phenomenological study sought to understand was how the experiences of high school special education teachers can contribute to the decision to remain in the teaching profession.

Purpose Statement

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers in an urban setting to remain in the teaching profession. The central phenomenon can be defined as the incidents and events influencing the decision of special education high school teachers to remain in the profession for more than 4 years. Two theories guided the study. The first theory guiding the study was Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. It explains the relationship between the attitude towards a behavior, subjective norms, the perceived control of the behavior, and the intention to engage in behavior such as remaining in the teaching profession. The second theory guiding this study was Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction as it explains the relationship between extrinsic factors, intrinsic factors, and job satisfaction that can influence the special education teacher's decision to remain in the profession.

Significance of the Study

The study may have significance for many individuals. Despite research examining the problem of special education teacher shortages, special education retention rates remain low (Cowan et al., 2016). This investigation of the lived experiences of veteran special education teachers may produce new insights for policies and practices that could improve the retention of special education teachers and thereby reduce shortages.

Empirical Significance

The study may have empirical significance because information concerning the reasons special education teachers remain in the profession is limited (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Because approximately 30% of special education teachers leave the profession by the end of their first 3 years of service, previous research has emphasized identifying the factors inducing special education teachers to leave the profession (Conley & You, 2017; Hughes et al., 2015). Hagaman and Casey (2018) noted that the knowledge of the factors leading to the retention of special education teachers remains limited and requires further quantitative and qualitative research. The study may fill a gap in empirical knowledge by using a phenomenological approach to identify the experiences leading special education teachers to remain in the profession.

Theoretical Significance

The study may add additional applications to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior and Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction. The research examined Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior concepts of attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control of the behavior as they relate to the decisions of special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession. The three constructs of the theory of planned behavior provided a framework for understanding the way the experiences of special education teachers contributed to their career decision-making process. The findings of this study may provide additional information about the applicability of the theory of planned behavior to explain mobility among special education teachers, which is an application of the theory that has not been well developed (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). This research also relied on the concepts of Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction to understand how the

experiences of special education teachers in their work environment contributed to the decision to remain in the teaching profession. Job satisfaction can influence whether a teacher remains in special education, moves to general education, or leaves the teaching profession (Vitteck, 2015). The theory of job satisfaction has also not been applied to the decisions of experienced special education high school teachers to remain in the profession.

Practical Significance

The study may also have practical significance by providing insight into policy and practice changes for schools leading to increased special education teacher retention. Despite extensive research concerning special education attrition, many schools have not adopted policies that have been successful in improving special education teacher retention (Vitteck, 2015). The information provided by this study may be useful for school administrators when developing strategies to encourage special education teacher retention. Robinson et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of school administrators understanding the interconnected factors influencing retention to encourage special education teachers to remain in the profession. The findings of the study may add to the general body of information concerning methods that schools can implement to retain special education teachers.

Research Questions

One central research question and three sub-questions guided this study. The questions were substantiated through the theoretical framework of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior and Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction. The central research question intended to obtain information about the experiences of high school special education teachers relevant to their decision to remain in the profession. The three sub-questions focused on eliciting information about experiences in specific areas of teaching special education

that may influence the decision-making processes of the teachers. The central research question was as follows:

How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe teaching experiences that influence their decision to remain in the field of special education?

The central research question framed the study. I wanted to provide an opportunity for special education teachers with more than 4 years of teaching experience to voice their experiences influencing their decision to remain in the profession. The question was intentionally made open-ended to allow the participants to guide the direction of the data collection process. The central research question also focused on gaining authentic descriptions of the experiences of special education teachers with more than 4 years of service and establishing my connection with the phenomenon and the research process as recommended by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological research methods. The central research question created a connection to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior by providing participants with an opportunity to express experiences affecting their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived level of control that influenced their decision to remain in the teaching profession. The central research question also linked to Herzberg's hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction by asking about the teaching experiences influenced job satisfaction that could inform the decision to remain in the teaching profession. The sub-questions were as follows:

1. How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their decision-making process related to remaining teachers in special education?

This sub-question was built on the central research question by allowing the high school special education teachers to describe how their experiences directly affected the decision to continue teaching special education. Andrews and Brown (2015) noted that special education

teachers who have experiences congruent with their expectations are more likely to remain in special education. This sub-question created a direct link to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior by obtaining information related to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived level of control that are part of the decision-making process before engaging in a behavior. This first sub-question provided an opportunity to describe how they have formed their attitudes towards special education teaching based on their experiences.

2. How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their experiences in the school environment related to job satisfaction?

The second sub-question was built on the central research question by allowing the special education teachers to describe the way their experiences in the school environment influenced their job satisfaction. The school environment and the relationship with colleagues and administrators can have a significant effect on teacher job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The experiences of teachers in the school can also be related to the hygiene factors that diminish job satisfaction and the motivators that increase job satisfaction, which are elements of Herzberg's (1966) job satisfaction theory. This second sub-question provided special education teachers with more than 4 years of service an opportunity to discuss positive and negative experiences contributing to their decision to remain as special education teachers.

3. How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their experiences that could be useful for developing approaches to improve special education teacher retention?

This sub-question examined the experiences of special education teachers to gain insight into the way schools can adopt policies and practices to influence the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived level of control of special education teachers to support the decision to remain in

the profession. The external environment is a source of objective and subjective information that can influence beliefs that are the basis of the intention to act (Ajzen, 2015). Holmes et al. (2019) noted that "working in a culture and climate that promotes a positive attitude for teachers and students, and collaboration among the teachers were critical elements influencing teacher retention" (p. 29). Asking special education teachers about their positive experiences in the work environment allowed them to provide information that could guide others to develop teacher support policies to improve retention. This third sub-question was also influenced by Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction by examining some of the conditions in the work environment that can affect job satisfaction.

Definitions

1. *Attitude* – Attitude is the psychological tendency of an individual to evaluate an object through cognitive or affective responses to the object (Ajzen, 2015).
2. *Control* – Control is the belief of an individual that engaging in inaction will lead to an anticipated outcome (Ajzen, 1991).
3. *Hygiene factors* – Hygiene factors are a construct of the hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction involving the work conditions and policies beyond the control of individuals influencing job satisfaction (Crisci et al., 2018).
4. *Motivators* – Motivators are a construct of the hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction that involves aspects of the work environment stimulating intrinsic satisfaction in an individual (Crisci et al., 2018).
5. *Norms* – Norms are the expected behaviors established by a social group that can result in social pressures on an individual to conform to the behavioral expectation (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016).

6. *Resiliency* – Resiliency is the ability to cope with stress (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

Summary

This phenomenological study gives voice to the experiences of special education teachers with more than 4 years of service, allowing them to relate the factors that influenced them to persist in special education teaching. The general problem motivating the study was the shortage of special education teachers in the United States. This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers in an urban setting to remain in the teaching profession. Educators and administrators need to understand how the experiences of special education teachers contribute to the decision to persist in teaching to support the development of school policies and practices encouraging special education teachers to remain in the profession.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Many studies have examined the problem of retention of general education and special education teachers because of the high costs associated with teacher turnover and the disruption to the educational process for many students (Conley & You, 2017; Green & Muñoz, 2016; Gulosino et al., 2016; King & Bounds, 2017; Zhang & Zeller, 2016).

Some of the research has focused on the specific factors influencing the formation of the intention of special education teachers to leave the profession such as the perception of inadequate administrative support (Conley & You, 2017), burnout (Williams & Dikes, 2015), or the means of teacher certification (Omar et al., 2018; Redding & Smith, 2016). According to Langher et al. (2017), special education teachers are more likely than general education teachers to face challenging situations including higher teaching workloads and stressful custodial and managerial tasks that result in a higher attrition rate among special education teachers.

This chapter focuses on the theories used in this study that created a framework for understanding the decisions of special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession despite the difficulties they encounter. The theory of planned behavior as developed by Ajzen (1991) provided a framework for understanding how teachers make decisions concerning their careers. A teacher forms attitudes towards the teaching profession based on experiences, the social values of others, and the degree of control over activities in the profession. The hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction of Herzberg (1966) explained the way different aspects of teaching can influence attitudes towards the teaching profession. The decision-making process of special education teachers concerning remaining in the profession demonstrates the propositions found in both theories (Imran et al., 2017; Omar et al., 2018).

Extensive research exists that focuses on the problem of special education teacher attrition in the United States and around the world (Conley & You, 2017; Grant, 2017; Hughes et al., 2015; Kiel et al., 2016; King & Bounds, 2017; Tiwari et al., 2015). The conditions special education teachers encounter in the school environment can influence their attitudes towards teaching (Conley & You, 2017; Soibchanba & Panday, 2016). Previous research also provided evidence that factors such as high levels of stress and perceived lack of administrative support can influence the perceived level of control of special education teachers over their environment, leading some teachers to leave the profession (Langher et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). The subjective norms in a school concerning the role and significance of special education teachers also contribute to the decision to remain in the teaching profession (Hughes et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2017). In addition, an association exists between job satisfaction and teacher retention (Green & Muñoz, 2016; Omar et al., 2018).

In this chapter, I review the current literature on multiple topics related to the retention of special education teachers. I focus on the working conditions in the school that create stress for special education teachers as well as other factors that create barriers to special education retention. The majority of the current research adopts the position that interventions that reduce attrition are the optimal approach to reducing the shortage of special education teachers (Andrews & Brown, 2015; Cancio et al., 2018; Glazer, 2018; Grant, 2017; Green & Muñoz, 2016; Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). The literature review also attracts the attention to studies that provide information about factors encouraging teachers to remain in special education (Omar et al., 2018; Redding & Smith, 2016; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). This review of current literature provides evidence of the gap in the literature concerning the experiences of special education teachers which lead them to remain in the teaching profession.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides a systematic view of a phenomenon by articulating the relationship among variables and contains testable propositions on the relationship among variables (Subban & Mahlo, 2017). In qualitative research, the theoretical framework guides the research process. The following subsections discuss the application of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the motivator-hygiene theory of job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966) as they relate to the phenomenon of special education teacher retention.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior explains the actions undertaken by individuals that include decisions concerning the choice of profession and employment (Tiwari et al., 2015). The theory assumes that the process of determining whether to undertake an action is systematic and involves weighing the costs and benefits of the behavior (Ajzen, 2015). A fundamental proposition of the theory is that behavior is the result of the intention to engage in the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Attitudes towards the outcome of the behavior, subjective norms about the acceptability of the behavior, and the perceived control of the individual over the behavior function as antecedent variables influencing the intention to engage in a behavior (Larkin et al., 2018).

The model resulting from the propositions of the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior has a direct causal link between each of the three antecedent variables of attitude, social norms, and perceived control, and the independent variable of intention to engage in the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the model, the behavioral beliefs of the individual influence attitudes, the normative beliefs influence subjective norms, and control beliefs influence perceived behavioral control. The beliefs are subjective and can vary significantly among individuals (Steinmetz et al.,

2016). In addition, some degree of interaction occurs among the three variables (Sussman & Gifford, 2018). For example, social norms and perceived control can influence attitudes towards behavior. No specific sequence exists in the interactions among the variables.

Previous researchers have used the theory of planned behavior to construct a model to explain the formation of turnover intentions among teachers, with turnover intention as a predictor of the actual behavior of leaving a teaching position (Imran et al., 2017). Tiwari et al. (2015) used the theory of planned behavior to examine the beliefs of special education teachers about inclusive education. Subban and Mahlo (2017) relied on the theory of planned behavior to investigate the attitudes and behaviors of special education teachers concerning inclusive education. In the current study, I used the three propositions of the theory of planned behavior to guide the development of research questions and as a framework for organizing the data analysis. The propositions of the theory were also useful for interpreting the findings of the study.

Motivator-Hygiene Theory of Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a major construct explaining the decisions of individuals to leave a place of employment or a profession (Larkin et al., 2018). Job satisfaction is defined as the positive emotional state resulting from the evaluation of various aspects of a job (Ones et al., 2017). If job satisfaction is sufficiently low, an individual is more likely to seek employment elsewhere or leave a profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

The motivator-hygiene theory, sometimes known as the dual-factor theory, is based on the assumption that the factors increasing job satisfaction differ from the factors decreasing job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). Job satisfaction increases when the organization provides opportunities for the individual to meet higher-order needs such as achievement, career development, and recognition, which are factors identified as motivators because they motivate

people to work harder and to remain loyal to a company or a profession. The motivators satisfy the internal needs of the individual (Arifin, 2015). The hygiene factors associated with a job involve the external aspects of a job that meet lower-order needs such as compensation and working conditions. Once an individual perceives that the compensation, benefits, and working conditions are adequate, any further increase in the factor will not increase job satisfaction (Herzberg, 1966). Conversely, if an individual perceives compensation, benefits, or working conditions as inadequate, job satisfaction is likely to diminish. In the motivator-hygiene theory, the factors increasing job satisfaction are in a different continuum than the factors decreasing job satisfaction (Crisci et al., 2018).

Job satisfaction has a relationship with the intention to leave a job or a profession, particularly when variance exists between the expectations of the job and the experience of the job (Larkin et al., 2018). Hygiene factors such as working conditions and poor relationships with colleagues often have the greatest effect on lowering job satisfaction, including the job satisfaction of teachers (Ansley et al., 2019; Crisci et al., 2018; Newberry & Allsop, 2017). In contrast, the motivator factors such as recognition of achievement and responsibility have a significant effect on motivation and intention to remain in a job (Arifin, 2015).

The hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction has been used by researchers to investigate the job satisfaction of teachers, with adequate job satisfaction reducing the likelihood of a teacher developing turnover intention (Arifin, 2015; Crisci et al., 2018; Larkin et al., 2018). Crisci et al. (2018) investigated ways administrators could improve job satisfaction to increase teacher retention while Larkin et al. (2018) relied on job satisfaction as a moderating variable for the intention to remain in the teaching profession. In the current study, I used the propositions of Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction to understand the effect of

positive experiences on the attitudes of high school special education teachers that have led to their decision to remain in the profession.

Related Literature

The literature examining the decisions of teachers to remain in the profession is relatively sparse with the majority of research focusing on factors leading to attrition. The literature indicates that the way teachers cope with negative experiences inherent in teaching is critical for retention (Lesh et al., 2017). The literature has found that many factors contribute to negative experiences in the teaching profession including conditions reducing job satisfaction (Green & Muñoz, 2016; Gulosino et al., 2016) and educational policies interfering with teacher autonomy (Glazer, 2018). A subset of the literature concerning teachers' decisions to remain in the profession focuses on special education teachers. The literature investigating special education teachers has found that burnout (Langher et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2019) and the characteristics of the job (Grant, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018) influence job satisfaction and the formation of the intention to leave or to remain in the teaching profession. The following sections present information about research concerning the factors influencing teacher and special education teacher retention and attrition.

Teacher Retention

Retention of qualified teachers is a global issue, with most nations experiencing difficulties with ensuring a sufficient number of teachers continue in the profession to meet student needs (Craig, 2017; Geiger, & Pivovarova, 2018). The majority of the research examining teacher retention frames the issue of retention as a decision not to leave the profession despite numerous difficulties rather than as a decision to remain in the profession because of positive experiences (Dachille & Ruff, 2017). The research examining teacher retention is also

hampered by imprecise definitions of the concepts of retention and attrition that are often not used as dichotomous binary terms in the context of specific studies (Mason & Matas, 2015). Some studies consider retention as remaining in the teaching profession (Podolsky et al., 2019) while other studies consider retention as remaining in the same school (Newberry & Allsop, 2017).

Multiple factors influence teacher retention including the method of teacher preparation (Redding & Smith, 2016; Zhang & Zeller, 2016), good employment conditions and pathways for advancement (Mason & Matas, 2015), and the positive experiences of teachers in the profession (Thibodeaux et al., 2015). A factor influencing retention identified by veteran teachers is good relationships with colleagues and administrators (Mason & Matas, 2015; Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Webb, 2018). In addition, many teachers believe they have a calling to the profession that becomes a strong motivator for remaining as an educator (Dachille & Ruff, 2017). A correlation exists between the type of demographics of the school where a teacher trained and their subsequent perception of teaching effectiveness (Goldhaber et al., 2017). If the teacher worked in a school with a demographic similar to the demographics of the school in which they trained, they were more likely to believe they were effective and have positive experiences in the teaching profession. Using data from the School and Staffing Survey conducted in 2011–2012, Player et al. (2017) found that the two best predictors of retention were the person-job fit and the quality of leadership in the school. The person-job fit involves the way people match the resources and demands of their work environment, while leadership refers to the involvement and support of principals. The evidence from these varied studies suggests a relationship exists between teacher experiences and retention. Structural factors such as linking the compensation of

teachers to the performance of individual schools in standardized tests could also hurt retention, particularly in low-performing schools (Springer et al., 2016).

Approximately 25% of all teachers enter the profession through an alternative certification program that requires less coursework and less student teaching than the traditional route to teacher certification (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). A systematic review of studies examining the relationship between the type of teacher preparation and teacher retention showed that teachers attending a traditional 4-year preparation program were more likely to remain in the profession for more than 4 years than teachers entering the profession through alternative preparation and accreditation programs (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). The difference between traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs was greatest in the difficult-to-staff teaching areas such as mathematics or science. Descriptive and correlational research using data from a national survey determined that teachers entering the profession with alternative certification were less likely to remain in the profession when compared to teachers prepared with traditional 4-year programs (Redding & Smith, 2016). Many of the teachers with alternative certifications felt insufficiently prepared to teach because they took only one or two courses in practical teaching methods. Consequently, many of the alternatively certified teachers did not believe they had the training or the ability to perform effectively as teachers. However, in a systematic review of previous research, Billingsley and Bettini (2019) determined that the findings of previous studies were mixed concerning the relationship between certification and special education teachers. Demographic variables such as marital status and highest degree earned were associated with higher retention rates of special education teachers entering the profession through alternative certification programs (Omar et al., 2018). The findings of various studies suggest that teachers entering special education through alternative certification programs

may require additional training and administrative support to have the positive experiences necessary to support a decision to remain in the profession.

Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition occurs because of negative experiences associated with teaching that foster the intention to leave the profession (Dachille & Ruff, 2017). Teacher attrition is a phenomenon affecting both novice and experienced teachers, although the rates of attrition are lower for experienced teachers (Craig, 2017). The specific factors prompting teachers to leave the profession are varied and often interrelated (Podolsky et al., 2019). A rational economic model of teacher attrition adopts the premise that teachers will leave a position or a profession when an alternate job option can provide a better range of rewards (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). The rewards can consist of tangible benefits such as improved compensation and better working conditions or intangible benefits such as improved job satisfaction. Evidence also exists indicating that teacher attrition is higher in schools with a student body primarily from low-income families and schools characterized primarily by students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Springer et al., 2016).

A review of the literature identified various factors leading teachers to leave the teaching profession despite the desire to teach (Podolsky et al., 2019). Personal reasons were the most important reason and particularly pregnancy and childcare. Pursuit of a career outside of teaching perceived as a better fit for the individual was the second most common reason for leaving the teaching profession. Dissatisfaction with the school, the relationship with parents, and the degree of autonomy permitted to educators were also reasons for teachers leaving the teaching profession. The findings were similar to those of Mason and Matas (2015) for the reasons teachers leave the profession. Guerra et al. (2015) argued that teachers leave the profession based

on the four categories of factors consisting of individual teacher characteristics, personal reasons, teacher qualifications, and work conditions in the school. The findings imply that the personal characteristics of the teacher interact with experiences in the profession to influence the decision to leave teaching.

Seasoned teachers with extensive experience who leave the profession often perceive the conditions and requirements imposed by legal requirements and educational policies as interfering with their teaching methods (Glazer, 2018). Many seasoned teachers also believed that the policies imposed by government agencies undermined effective educational practices. Glazer (2018) found that changes in policies over time can influence the desire of teachers to remain in the profession. The findings may have limited usefulness for explaining teacher retention because the sampling involved teachers who left the profession in protest of new requirements affecting their professional autonomy. In addition, the data were collected using qualitative methods from only 25 participants and may not be representative of the attitudes and beliefs of other teachers.

The key factors fostering a positive attitude among teachers and the decision to remain in the profession are student success, the type of subject matter, and enjoyment of teaching (Thibodeaux et al., 2015). The expectations for student performance in some subjects such as English as a second language or state-tested subject areas were associated with a negative outlook towards teaching because of the difficulties with meeting inflated expectations. The findings of Thibodeaux et al. (2015) are similar to the findings of Whipp and Geronime (2017) identifying a correlation between teaching expectations and the experience of teachers in the decision to leave the profession.

Using a single case study method, Towers and McGuire (2017) investigated the factors leading a mid-to-late career teacher to leave the profession. The researchers assumed that some teachers at this stage of their careers experience tension or conflict between their careers and their personal lives that challenge their resilience and prompt the decision to leave the teaching profession. The findings of the case study suggested that a more experienced teacher may face a crisis in identity concerning self-perception of the role as a teacher when compared to the type of teacher they expect to be in the future. The challenge to the identity as a teacher undermined the commitment to continue in the profession. Because Towers and McGuire used only a single case, the findings may not be representative of the experiences of other teachers.

Physical safety is another factor that can lead to the decision of teachers to leave a specific school and leave teaching (Williams et al., 2018). Threats by students against teachers can contribute to stress and the perception that the school environment is unsafe. In addition, the perception of the risk of student violence can reduce the effectiveness of teachers. Teachers tend to transfer from schools with a higher incidence of discipline problems to schools with a lower incidence of discipline problems and may leave the profession if a transfer is not possible (Harrell et al., 2019). The rate of discipline problems in a school influences the working conditions and influences the degree of satisfaction with teaching.

Special Education Teacher Retention

A strong correlation exists between the perception of insufficient support from administrators and the formation of the intention to leave the teaching profession among special education teachers (Conley & You, 2017). The perception of insufficient administrative support leads to a negative attitude towards teaching that facilitates forming the intention to leave the profession. Special education teachers consider a principal who understands special education

and the needs of the classroom as the single most important factor influencing teacher retention (Kasper, 2017). The perception of low administrative support among special education teachers is also a factor contributing to teacher burnout that can lead to an intention to leave the profession (Langher et al., 2017). Using a sampling of 364 special education teachers from multiple states, Robinson et al. (2019) found that the perception of low administrative support was associated with lower job satisfaction as well as burnout. The implications of the various studies concerning perceptions of low administrative support in special education suggest that it is an antecedent variable fostering a negative attitude towards teaching.

Relying on survey data, Perryman and Calvert (2019) found that a match between the expectations of the teachers when entering special education and their actual experiences in the profession was an important factor for retention. The findings suggest that the teacher preparation programs and the amount of exposure to actual special education teacher conditions are critical for teacher retention. Many prospective teachers opt for a career in special education based on experience with individuals with special needs either personally or as part of the teacher education process that creates expectations about the role of the special education teacher (Desutter & Lemire, 2016). When a teacher has experiences in the profession congruent with their past experiences, they are more likely to remain in the field of special education.

The relationship between special education teachers and paraprofessionals providing support for the teachers can also influence teachers' experiences in the profession (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017). Using data obtained through interviews and a survey, Brown and Stanton-Chapman (2017) determined that the role of the paraprofessional in the special education classroom is often ambiguous and defined by the situation and the degree of trust between the teacher and the paraprofessional. The findings also implied that the special

education teachers who relied heavily on paraprofessionals for classroom instruction had more time to perform administrative tasks. Brown and Stanton-Chapman concluded that principals and other administrators should attempt to ensure that special education teachers maximize their use of paraprofessionals to reduce the burden of the teacher workload.

Students threaten and assault special education teachers more often than general education teachers, resulting in negative experiences and reducing special education teacher retention (Williams et al., 2018). Based on data obtained from a national survey, Williams et al. (2018) found that special education teachers do not believe they receive sufficient administrative support when assaulted or threatened by a student. In addition, special education teachers are often not informed about students who have previously committed violent acts against teachers.

Attitudes Towards the Teaching Profession

Attitudes involve the prevailing tendency of an individual to respond favorably or unfavorably to an external object such as the teaching profession (Soibchanba & Panday, 2016). Attitudes develop gradually based on experiences in the teaching profession and involve an affective or emotional component consisting of feelings towards the profession, a cognitive component of beliefs towards the profession, and a behavioral component involving behaviors towards the profession (Zaidi, 2015). Attitudes can influence behaviors towards others and the way individuals perform the tasks associated with their profession (Kenadi, 2017). To remain in the teaching profession and to be an effective teacher, an individual should have a positive attitude towards the roles and responsibilities of a teacher (Soibchanba & Panday, 2016). A relationship also exists between competencies in teaching and a positive attitude towards the profession (Korthagen, 2017).

Teachers enter the profession with the motivation to have a beneficial influence on students that creates a positive attitude towards teaching (Veldman et al., 2016). The experiences of teachers in the profession, however, contribute to the formation of an attitude towards teaching that can remain positive or gradually become negative, and negative attitudes are associated with leaving the teaching profession (Thibodeaux et al., 2015). The development of negative attitudes towards teaching can lead to behaviors that reduce the effectiveness of a teacher's interaction with students, which results in a cycle that reinforces negative attitudes (Kenadi, 2017). Teachers compare their expectations to their observations and experiences to form new attitudes that can be either positive or negative with a positive attitude associated with increased teacher retention. In addition, teachers experiencing negative emotions such as anger towards students are more likely to form a negative attitude towards teaching (Koenen et al., 2019).

Relatively little research has been conducted to assess the attitudes of veteran teachers (Kenadi, 2017). Attitudes towards students and the teaching profession are dynamic and may change over time based on experiences after entering the teaching profession (Whipp & Geronime, 2017; Zaidi, 2015). No correlation exists, however, between the age of the teacher and attitudes or between the qualifications and training of the teacher and attitudes (Soibchanba & Panday, 2016).

A positive attitude towards teaching is important for teachers to persist in the profession, which has an association with a sense of self-efficacy and satisfaction with the teaching job (Blackburn et al., 2017). A positive attitude towards the daily activities associated with teaching is also associated with higher job satisfaction and improved teacher retention rates (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Through a review of related literature, Zaidi (2015) found mixed evidence that the

attitudes of teachers towards the profession become more favorable over time. Some research examined by Zaidi (2015) suggests that experienced teachers have learned methods to interact effectively with students and colleagues that result in positive experiences that foster a favorable attitude towards teaching. Other research reviewed by Zaidi (2015), however, found no correlation between teacher experience and attitudes towards teaching.

Subjective Norms

Subjective norms involve the perception of the individual regarding the social pressure to perform or not to perform a specific action (Cera & Furxhiu, 2017). Subjective norms create intrinsic motivators that drive special education teachers to continue remaining in the teaching profession because they involve the perception of the social pressures associated with performing or not performing a specific behavior (Benoliel & Barth, 2017; Fuller et al., 2016). A teacher forms normative beliefs about different behaviors including the decision to leave the teaching profession based on the norms and values of others around them (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). Each school has its climate that includes the values and norms of teachers and administrators with all school staff expected to conform to the norms (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). In addition, parties from outside the school such as the government or parents can create social pressures on teachers to conform to expectations about instructional practices and the tasks required of a teacher (Subban & Mahlo, 2017). Professional development programs are additional means of communicating norms and values common to the teaching profession that represent a form of teacher socialization (Korthagen, 2017).

With data obtained through a survey of 602 elementary teachers in one city, Fuller et al. (2016) found that the organization-wide norms and expectations have a significant influence on the attitudes and decisions of individual teachers. Benoliel and Barth (2017)

noted, however, that the effect of organizational norms on an individual may vary across cultures, with teachers from individualistic cultures less influenced by organizational or social norms. Through an investigation of online social networking sites for teachers, Kelly and Antonio (2016) concluded that teachers co-create professional norms. The interactions among teachers when discussing the profession create a consensus on the values and norms associated with education. The professional community expects teachers to conform to the group norms and values as a condition of remaining in the profession. Consequently, the professional consensus of norms, values, and expectations for behavior has a significant influence on teachers' normative beliefs that affect their subjective norms.

Special education teachers often place a high value on their position based on the assumption that they are benefiting students in need (Kasper, 2017). The belief concerning the social importance of special education teachers is a factor influencing teachers to remain in the profession. Special education teachers form subjective norms concerning professionalism and the value placed on their position as teachers based on the institutional culture of the school (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Hughes et al., 2015; Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Hughes et al. (2015) found that the principal and other administrators of the school have substantial influence over the institutional culture and the subjective norms concerning the importance of special education. Based on the findings of their case study, Newberry and Allsop (2017) concluded that the social norms concerning education and the culture of the school can change over time. Consequently, the normative beliefs of a teacher can become incongruent with the culture of the school and the social norms of the professional community, weakening the intention to remain in the teaching profession.

A relationship exists between values and the intention to remain in the teaching profession with the competing values framework useful for assessing the effect of school climate on values (Gulosino et al., 2016). The competing values framework contains the assumption that different types of values and norms form four models of school climate consisting of a rational, internal process, open system, and human relations model. The various models establish the norms and social pressures for teacher performance. The analysis found that the retention of teachers is lower in schools when an imbalance exists among the four models with excessive emphasis on one of the models. Gulosino et al.'s (2016) findings imply that the school administrators have some degree of control over the subjective norms that can influence the decision of teachers to remain in the profession.

The research directly examining the relationship between the subjective norms of special education teachers and the decision to remain in the teaching profession is sparse. Tiwari et al. (2015) used a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the normative beliefs of special education teachers towards students. The findings identified a variety of beliefs about the special nature of the students and the responsibility of the special education teacher to educate all students with special needs. The findings of Tiwari et al. concerning special education teachers are similar to the findings of Mahwinney and Rinke (2017) that identified guilt as a factor leading some experienced general education teachers to leave the profession. The guilt arises from a sense of failure when they compare their perceived performance with students against the expectations created by the social norms for the effectiveness of a teacher. The findings of Tiwari et al. and Mahwinney and Rinke support the conclusion that teachers form normative beliefs about their effectiveness based on the opinions of other teachers and society that create

subjective norms to form a standard for personal behavior. The failure of teachers to meet the standard produces feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

A strand of research has investigated the proposition that teacher attrition is associated with the failure of individuals to form a self-identity as teachers create a conflict between experiences and the norms concerning teacher attitudes towards the profession (Lindqvist & Nordanger, 2016). The identity formation process involves an ongoing and dynamic process whereby an individual routinely attempts to integrate values with experiences. A divergence between experience and values can challenge and potentially change an individual's identity as a teacher. Schools that foster positive experiences for teachers that converge with the individual's values and expectations for the profession have increased teacher retention.

Perceived Control of Special Education Teachers

The perception of control of teaching tasks and the teaching environment among special education teachers is variable with perceived control an important element for teacher retention (Mintrop & Zane, 2017). Many of the situations special education teachers routinely face such as student misbehavior and the possibility of violence directed at teachers reduce the perception of control over the teaching environment (Donahoo et al., 2017). A high level of discipline problems in a school also has a relationship with the perceptions of the teachers of their level of control over the teaching process (Harrell et al., 2019). Retaining autonomy in decision-making for matters directly related to instructional methods and content also affects the perceived control of teachers (Webb, 2018).

The perception of special education teachers having little control over their work environment creates substantial stress for special education teachers because of the competing demands of students, parents, and administrators for results and meeting deadlines (Kiel et al.,

2016; Ryan et al., 2017). The way special education teachers cope with stress and control issues can be critical for the decision to remain in the teaching profession (Ryan et al., 2017). Kiel et al. (2016) analyzed the stress-coping characteristics of special education student teachers using data obtained with an instrument based on the Scale of Dysfunctional Attitudes and the Irrational Attitudes Inventory. The findings indicated that the participant anticipating work with special education students had a higher level of dysfunctional cognition in the areas of internalization of failure and dependency on others. The findings implied that some special education teachers without innate stress coping resources may require additional support to avoid experiencing excessive stress when faced with inevitable difficulties associated with an inability to control all outcomes in the teaching profession. In contrast, Ryan et al. (2017) found that factors external to the individual such as a positive school culture could mediate the effect of stress on the individual.

Burnout

Burnout is a condition characterized by the three dimensions of emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and inefficiency (Abos et al., 2019). Emotional exhaustion is the feeling of inability to offer more to others, cynicism or depersonalization involves distancing from work or colleagues, and inefficiency is the sense of not performing work tasks to certain standards or expectations (Abos et al., 2019). Burnout among teachers is associated with a loss of a sense of control at work and the desire to escape from the work situation (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Burnout among teachers is also associated with disengagement from students which can reduce the quality of teaching (Abos et al., 2019). Teachers experiencing negative emotions in their interactions with students are more likely to become disengaged with teaching (Koenen et

al., 2019). In addition, a correlation exists between teachers who perceive inadequate support from administrators and colleagues and burnout (Ford et al., 2019).

Chronic stress among teachers leads to burnout (Nuri et al., 2017). Teacher stress is caused by "the experience by a teacher of unpleasant emotions resulting from aspects of the work" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017, p. 17). Stress is part of the general experience of teachers of the emotional climate in a school that includes emphasis on student performance outcomes (Newberry & Allsop, 2017). Ryan et al. (2017) noted that the quality of the school culture and general pedagogical climate is a reflection of the quality of the relationships among teachers and administrators and can mediate the effect of stress on special education teachers. Through correlational research examining the relationship between burnout and retention of special education teachers, Williams and Dikes (2015) found that stress increases with the number of years in the field of special education. The stress is cumulative and can lead to burnout over the long run unless teachers have strong coping mechanisms to improve resiliency. Langher et al. (2017) found a positive correlation between the perception of administrative support among special education teachers and lower levels of burnout in the emotional exhaustion and cynicism dimensions. The existence of a correlation between perception of administrative support and efficiency, however, was modified by teacher training and professional background. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2019) determined that perceived lack of administrative support fostered the belief of lack of control over the teaching process and was an antecedent variable for burnout. In contrast, a school climate that fosters increased teacher participation in decision-making correlates with lower levels of teacher burnout and increased teacher retention (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Some teachers rely on online communities for finding support in the form of advice and encouragement that may be lacking in their workplace, but the degree to which

external support is a substitute for administrative and collegial support in the workplace is unclear (Kelly & Antonio, 2016).

Accountability and performance requirements can hurt teacher experiences in the profession (Colnerud, 2015; Mintrop & Zane, 2017; Towers & McGuire, 2017). Mintrop and Zane (2017) collected data from 21 special education teachers using interviews to explore the approaches used to meet the requirements of high stakes testing used for accountability purposes. The analysis of the data indicated that the need to meet testing standards created significant stress for the teachers because of the increased importance of teaching to increase test scores rather than teaching fundamental skills to students with special needs. As a result, many special education teachers did not believe they were meeting their professional responsibilities to students. Increased emphasis on accountability also places additional pressure on teachers that can challenge their identity as effective teachers (Towers & McGuire, 2017). A conflict between job requirements and personal beliefs about ethics and professionalism in teaching can result in moral stress (Colnerud, 2015). Teachers are often subject to a conflict in loyalties because of requirements imposed by the school system and their duty to educate students (Towers & McGuire, 2017).

Nuri et al. (2017) collected data from 70 special education teachers using the Maslach Burnout Inventory to determine if differences existed between teachers reporting burnout and teachers not reporting burnout concerning demographic variables and the perception of self-efficacy. The findings indicated that the incidence of burnout increased with experience in the profession, which is a finding similar to that of Williams and Dikes (2015) concerning the cumulative nature of stress leading to burnout. Nuri et al. (2017) also determined that teachers

with a larger number of reported working hours had a greater sense of self-efficacy that fosters resiliency, reducing the incidence of burnout.

Job Characteristics

Job characteristics hurting the experiences of teachers are related to the general workload (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Guerra et al., 2015; King & Bounds, 2017). Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) considered the workload of teachers to be excessive with teachers in the United States expected to instruct for more hours and have less time for planning when compared to teachers from other nations. Because of these policies, teachers perceive they have little control over their work environment. Guerra et al. (2015) found that the job design of special education teachers is the cause of many of the negative experiences leading teachers to leave the profession. The special education job design includes an excessive number of meetings and the need to provide services to students with diverse disabilities, requiring different instructional strategies.

In research by King and Bounds (2017) to identify the factors special education teachers consider leaving the profession, the area that was the greatest concern was the amount of paperwork. The Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act requires various reports for each student receiving special education services. The cumulative amount of time to prepare reports has special education teachers working after hours and during the weekend and takes away time from the teachers' own families. The excessive caseload was also a major reason that special education teachers leave the profession. Special education teachers are often overwhelmed by the number of IEPs they are required to prepare for students with extremely varied disabilities. With qualitative research collecting data from focus groups of special education teachers and administrators, Hagaman and Casey (2018) also determined that workload and large numbers of

IEPs were important factors prompting special education teachers to leave the profession. Using quantitative methods with data from a survey, Williams and Dikes (2015) found that high caseloads had an association with high levels of stress among special education teachers, leading to the decision to leave the teaching profession. The findings are similar to those of Billingsley and Bettini (2019) from a systematic review of research that indicates a negative correlation between caseload and special education teacher retention. The mix of various types of disabilities assigned to a special education teacher can also increase stress and influence the decision to leave the teaching profession (Kasper, 2017).

Further evidence that the workload of special education teachers is a significant barrier to retention comes from a survey of British teachers that found that the excessive amount of work is a significant reason for leaving the profession (Perryman & Calvert, 2019). The findings indicated that after several years in special education the workload, the outcome expectations, and difficulty with maintaining a personal life resulted in teachers considering other career options. An appropriate caseload and adequate time to perform administrative tasks are generally associated with the ability of teachers to maintain a work–life balance that results in positive experiences contributing to teacher retention (Blackburn et al., 2017).

A case study prepared by Grant (2017) examined the factors leading special education teachers to leave the profession after the first year of teaching. The findings determined that the characteristics of the job and the teaching climate were key factors leading to the decision to leave the teaching profession. Some of the job characteristics new teachers found particularly difficult were the need to establish a co-teaching relationship with reluctant general education teachers, insufficient time to perform necessary tasks, and ambiguity in special education policies and procedures promulgated by the school by the district. Harrell et al. (2019)

determined that the composition of the student body can have a significant effect on the teaching climate in schools with significant discipline problems.

Role ambiguity is often a characteristic of special education teaching (Colnerud, 2015; Rock et al., 2016). Rock et al. (2016) found that special education teachers were often required to teach in a variety of settings including self-contained special education classrooms and co-teaching in general education classrooms. The special education teachers also had to collaborate with other professionals as part of a team. The special education teachers were also expected to provide direct instruction to students with many different types of disabilities. Role ambiguity can create ethical dilemmas, increasing teacher stress (Colnerud, 2015).

Job Satisfaction of Special Education Teachers

Research investigating the relationship between job satisfaction and special education teacher turnover has found high levels of job satisfaction associated with high teacher retention (Hughes et al., 2015; Omar et al., 2018; Rock et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Job satisfaction in education involves the interrelationship of multiple factors including the perception of compensation adequacy, physical working conditions related to comfort and safety, task structure including workload and supervision, and the organizational culture (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Many of the factors leading to higher job satisfaction are within the control of principals and school administrators such as providing support for teachers, creating a positive and supportive culture in the school, and ensuring teachers can maintain an appropriate work-life balance (Arifin, 2015; Blackburn et al., 2017). Principals can control the job design for a special education teacher, which refers to the scope of the tasks the administrators expect the teachers to perform and varies among schools (Ansley et al., 2019). In addition, the social climate in the school can have a significant effect on job satisfaction because of the informal

recognition that teachers may receive from their colleagues (Fuller et al., 2016). The attitudes formed by teachers based on their experiences in a school and the profession, in general, can also have a significant influence on job satisfaction (Capri, & Guler, 2018).

Another factor increasing job satisfaction among special education teachers is the opportunity for professional development (Rock et al., 2016). Professional development increases the skills of special education teachers for dealing with difficult situations that can lead to stress. Professional development also enhances a teacher's sense of growth in the profession, which is a positive experience contributing to the decision to remain as a teacher. A school environment encouraging learning through interactions with colleagues is also associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and retention (Holmes et al., 2019). Teachers who build relationships with colleagues are more likely to develop loyalties to the professional community in the school. In an analysis of ongoing teacher education, Korthagen (2017) noted that professional development connecting teachers with the personal aspects of teaching and relationships with students tends to increase job satisfaction. The personal relationships formed during teaching foster a stronger sense of commitment to an organization and the teaching profession.

The job satisfaction factors of perception of adequate compensation, teaching support, teaching preparation, and intrinsic motivation were associated with higher levels of teacher retention (Omar et al., 2018). The research, however, was limited to special education teachers identified as career switchers and entering the profession through alternate teaching certification programs. A similar study by Ansley et al. (2019) determined that administrative support, relationships with colleagues, job design, and positive relationships with students and parents positively correlated with the level of job satisfaction among special education teachers.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) found a relationship between stress, burnout, and job satisfaction based on survey data from 546 teachers. As stress increased, job satisfaction decreased. The model produced by the research also found that the resources provided by administration such as teacher mentoring and support reduced stress and led to higher job satisfaction. The research is limited in usefulness, however, because the sampling involved only Norwegian special education teachers with the possibility that the support programs for teachers differ from those in the United States. Nonetheless, the findings are consistent with those of Thibodeaux et al. (2015) concerning the negative attitude and lower job satisfaction among teachers of subjects that did not receive adequate support from administrators. Concerning mentoring, however, the findings of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) about the benefits of mentoring contradict the conclusions of Mrstik et al. (2019) concerning the lack of effect of mentoring on the retention of special education teachers. In addition, a systematic review of literature conducted by Billingsley and Bettini (2019) found only sparse evidence that a relationship existed between mentoring and the decision of special education teachers to remain in the profession.

A quality relationship between teachers and students satisfied the higher-order needs of teachers, increasing job satisfaction (Veldman et al., 2016). When teachers enter the profession, they have aspirations concerning their ability to positively influence students through educational efforts. Meeting the aspirations in their job experiences fosters a sense of achievement and self-efficacy, leading to higher job satisfaction and a positive attitude towards teaching. In contrast, policies such as increased administrative requirements that draw teachers away from the educational relationship with individual students reduce job satisfaction. The findings of Veldman et al. (2016) are consistent with the conclusion of Ansley et al. (2019) concerning the

importance of relationships with students for improving job satisfaction and the influence of job satisfaction on teachers' attitudes towards the profession. Among special education teachers, experiences generating negative emotions towards students reduce satisfaction with the teaching profession (Koenen et al., 2019). In particular, interactions generating the emotions of anger or helplessness foster negative relationships with students and lower job satisfaction. When the cumulative stress generated by negative experiences approaches the level associated with burnout, teachers experience low job satisfaction (Capri & Guler, 2018).

Teacher beliefs about the attitudes and motivations of students in a subject area correlate with job satisfaction (Salehi et al., 2015). Salehi et al. (2015) found that when teachers believed that students were motivated and had a positive attitude towards learning, teacher job satisfaction increased. The findings are based on data collected from 201 teachers with a survey questionnaire. The findings provide support for the conclusions of Ansley et al. (2019) concerning the importance of relationships with students for job satisfaction, with beliefs about student attitudes and motivation a component of the teacher–student relationship.

Lesh et al. (2017) conducted one of the few studies investigating the factors motivating veteran special education teachers to remain in the profession. Using data obtained from interviews, the researchers found that the rationales for remaining as special education teachers were the belief that teaching was a calling from above, the desire to stand up for the underdog, perceiving students as their children, and the desire to stand in defiance of apathetic administrators. The findings of the study are consistent with the motivators of job satisfaction theory with the role of special education teachers in satisfying a higher-order need of the individual. The findings of Lesh et al. are consistent with the findings of Dachille and Ruff

(2017) among teachers remaining in the profession, indicating that teaching is a calling with teachers having special responsibility for educating children.

Strategies to Improve Retention

The issue of special education teacher retention is complex with no single solution appropriate for all situations (Holmes et al., 2019). Strategies to improve retention include increases in compensation and benefits (Cowan et al., 2016), stress reduction programs (Donahoo et al., 2017), and increasing interactions between principals and teachers to improve the perception of support among teachers (Ford et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2019). Strategies to reduce attrition among special education teachers focus on increasing compensation that is based on the assumption that the level of compensation is inadequate, given the amount of effort required from special education teachers (Cowan et al., 2016; Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Shifrer et al., 2017). The evidence to support compensation as a retention strategy, however, is mixed. Cowan et al. (2016) noted that a bonus for special education teachers willing to work for a specified period at hard-to-staff schools has resulted in a 17% reduction in special education teacher attrition in North Carolina. Based on the hygiene component of job satisfaction, teachers are unlikely to view the increased compensation as an adequate motivation to remain in the teaching profession. Another approach associated with increasing compensation is the use of a student loan forgiveness program for special education teachers in Florida discussed by Cowan et al. (2016). Swain et al. (2019) investigated the use of a retention bonus in Tennessee for teachers in special education and other subjects in schools difficult to staff; these researchers found an association between the bonus and improved outcomes on standardized tests. An analysis of the use of a \$5,000 teacher retention bonus in Tennessee found that the bonus did not have a significant effect on teacher retention in hard-to-staff schools (Springer et al., 2016). In

contrast, correlational research by Shifrer et al. (2017) found that compensation levels have no relationship to the retention rate of special education teachers. The finding demonstrates that compensation increases alone may not be sufficient to improve special education teacher retention. Podolsky et al. (2019) also found that compensation was not a major factor in teacher retention decisions. Colson and Scatterfield (2018) also found that compensation incentives in hard-to-staff schools had a mixed effect on special education retention, suggesting that factors other than compensation often have a strong effect on the decision of special education teachers to transfer schools or to leave the profession.

A consideration explaining the mixed evidence concerning the effectiveness of increases in compensation for retaining teachers may be the significant differences in pay and benefits for teachers among the states (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Some states offer teachers low salaries when compared to other professions, with an increase in compensation likely to improve teacher retention in those states. However, the compensation structure for teachers in many states focuses on the recruitment process rather than retention, thus contributing to attrition after teachers gain massive experience (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Programs in Florida providing financial incentives for teachers to enter and remain in hard-to-staff positions such as special education had unintended consequences (Feng & Sass, 2015). The financial incentives consisted of student loan forgiveness and a retention bonus after teaching for a specified number of years in special education. While the programs increased the number of teachers remaining in special education, the researchers concluded that the teachers did not have the same level of qualifications as the teachers leaving the field. The conclusions of Colson and Scatterfield (2018) in a study examining the effect of compensation on retention

indicated that a policy of treating all teachers identically concerning retention bonuses leads to the retention of ineffective teachers.

Mason-Williams (2015) recommended ongoing intensive training programs as a strategy to improve special education retention. The recommendation was based on survey data that many special education teachers feel insufficiently prepared to deal with the issues encountered in special education. Ongoing intensive training for special education teachers is intended to address issues such as teachers entering the field through alternative certification programs. Learning through interactions with colleagues can also improve the preparedness of teachers that enhance the teaching experience (Holmes et al., 2019). Learning through networking with colleagues can include programs to develop skills necessary to collaborate with general education teachers in the inclusive classroom (Rude & Miller, 2018). Involvement with extracurricular activities to reduce stress was also an important factor for the retention of special education teachers identified by Mrstik et al. (2019). In addition, programs providing additional administrative support for teachers can also lead to increased retention (Ford et al., 2019). Support for special education teachers of students with low-incidence disabilities is also important for promoting job satisfaction and retention of teachers (Rude & Miller, 2018).

Another approach to the retention of special education teachers is encouraging routine use of prayer and mindfulness to reduce stress (Donahoo et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2019). Mindfulness involves an intentional and nonjudgmental evaluation of the experiences of the current moment (Sun et al., 2019). The approach is based on the assumption that compassion fatigue, stress caused by continuous preoccupation with meeting the needs of students with special needs, eventually affects special education teachers. Using a randomized controlled trial, Donahoo et al. (2017) found that stress reduction techniques involving prayer and mindfulness

reduced compassion fatigue and stress among special education teachers. De Sterke et al. (2015) also recommended the use of mindfulness to promote well-being among teachers which may be associated with higher rates of special education teacher retention. Many school systems could benefit from employing outside mindfulness coaches to assist teachers with developing a sense of well-being through the regular practice of mindfulness techniques.

Summary

The literature review focused on the theoretical framework of the study using the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the hygiene-motivator theory of Herzberg (1966). Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior is based on the proposition that attitudes towards the outcome of the behavior, subjective norms about the acceptability of the behavior, and the perceived control of the individual over the behavior influence the intention to engage in a behavior. The intention concerning behavior is the best predictor of engaging in the behavior (Larkin et al., 2018). Herzberg's hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction contains the proposition that hygiene factors such as compensation are external to the individual and can reduce job satisfaction if perceived as inadequate. The motivator factors are internal to the individual and involve a sense of achievement or recognition from others that can increase job satisfaction.

The literature review determined that a substantial amount of research has been conducted examining the factors influencing teachers to leave the profession and particularly within their first 3 years of service (Goldhaber et al., 2017; Redding & Smith, 2016; Thibodeaux et al., 2015; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). The research concerning special education attrition in the first 3 years of service has identified multiple factors influencing the decision to leave the profession, including insufficient administrator support (Conley & You, 2017) and a mismatch between expectations about teaching and actual experiences (Perryman & Calvert, 2019). The

literature review also found that the experiences of teachers can influence their attitude towards the profession with attitude an important influence in retention decisions (Kenadi, 2017; Veldman et al., 2016; Zaidi, 2015). In addition, subjective norms about teaching can influence the decision of teachers to remain in the profession (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Benoliel & Barth, 2017; Fuller et al., 2016). The literature also indicated that the experiences related to perceived control over the teaching and educational process are important for forming the decision to remain in the teaching profession (Donahoo et al., 2017; Kiel et al., 2016; Mintrop & Zane, 2017). Burnout is a symptom of cumulative stress associated with a lack of control found among special education teachers because of the pressures from students, parents, and administrators (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Various strategies such as the use of mindfulness can reduce the incidence of burnout among special education teachers (Sun et al., 2019). The literature also found that job satisfaction is the result of positive teaching experiences and can influence the decision to remain in the profession (Hughes et al., 2015; Omar et al., 2018; Rock et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

The literature review found that relatively little is known about the factors influencing special education teachers to remain in the profession. The majority of the research concerning teacher retention has focused on general education teachers (Craig, 2017; Geiger, & Pivovarova, 2018; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). In addition, there is no precise definition of teacher retention that can mean retention at a school or retention in the profession (Mason & Matas, 2015). Another area about which relatively little is known is how the positive experiences of special education teachers can support their decision to remain in the profession. Dachille and Ruff (2017) noted that positive experiences contribute to the decision of teachers to remain in the profession, but their research did not focus on special education teachers.

A significant gap exists in the literature of investigations into the reasons veteran teachers decide to remain in the profession. Dachille and Ruff (2017) surveyed the reasons graduates of a single university decided to remain in the teaching profession, but the findings do not reveal the complexity behind special education teacher retention decisions. Lesh et al. (2017) also examined the motivations of veteran teachers for persevering in the profession using participants associated with a single university. The findings of these studies did not relate to how the experiences of special education teachers contributed to their job satisfaction or their decision to remain in the teaching profession.

Another gap in the literature is the absence of studies investigating the attitude of experienced special education teachers and the experiences leading to the maintenance of a positive attitude towards teaching. Although Soibchanba and Panday (2016) as well as Zaidi (2015) researched attitudes of teachers towards the profession, they did not specifically focus on special education teachers. The majority of existing research in this area also investigates the attitudes of pre-service and new teachers rather than experienced teachers. The experiences of special education teachers influence their attitude towards teaching and their decision to remain in the profession.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers in an urban setting to remain in the teaching profession. I focused on high school teachers in an urban school district in the southeastern part of the United States as the study population. The research aimed to understand the experiences of a subgroup of special education teachers that have not been previously researched. Gaining insight into the experiences of veteran special education teachers can help identify factors to increase special education teacher retention and address the shortage of special education teachers (Lesh et al., 2017).

Chapter Three contains a presentation of the details of the design of the study, including the research questions, the setting, and the participants in the research. The chapter also contains a description of the general procedures used in the study and my role as a researcher. The chapter includes a description of the data collection through interviews, one focus group, and the participants' answers to written prompts. The final sections of the chapter contain information about trustworthiness in the research process and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Design

In this study, I investigated the experiences of veteran special education teachers which lead them to remain in the profession using a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research. I selected a qualitative approach because I sought to understand the meaning that special education teachers attach to their experiences. Qualitative research is suitable when the objective is to understand the meaning that individuals attach to a human or social problem

(Creswell, 2017). A qualitative research method is also compatible with the constructivist paradigm that is based on the ontological assumption that individuals construct their understanding of reality based on their culture, history, and experiences (Flick, 2009). A qualitative method is also suitable for the investigation of topics subject to the influence of many different variables that are difficult to identify and measure (Silverman, 2017).

I selected a phenomenological research design for this study because my objective was to understand the lived experience of the participants. Moustakas (1994) pioneered the use of phenomenological research design that was derived in part using the concepts of transcendental phenomenology of the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Moustakas (1994) focused on the concept of *noema* which considers the phenomenon of an object experienced by an individual to differ from the objective reality of the object. The concept of *noesis* involves the act of experiencing the phenomenon in a way that brings the phenomenon into consciousness. The transcendental approach to research also depends on *epoche*, the setting aside all preconceived ideas to allow the true meaning of the phenomenon as experienced by others to emerge. *Epoche* precedes phenomenological reduction and is the analysis of the phenomenon as it is experienced. Imaginative variation is then used to identify possible meanings by using imagination to vary the frame of reference. The data can then be synthesized to determine the meaning attached to the phenomenon and the essence or basic quality of the phenomenon. This study examined the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon, specifically the experience of teaching special education for more than 4 years. The phenomenological research design can reveal information concerning the effects of experience on decision-making in the context of the topic under investigation (Vagel, 2018).

Moustakas (1994) implied that the use of transcendental phenomenology is appropriate when the purpose of the research is to explore and describe the shared experiences of a phenomenon. The underlying assumption in the approach is that differences exist in the understanding of a phenomenon based on the way people experience and interpret the phenomenon. In this study, the objective was to understand the shared experiences of special education high school teachers which led them to remain in the teaching profession. The phenomenological methodology reflects the experiences of the participants in their everyday interactions in the teaching environment and their understanding of the complex meaning behind the interactions.

The use of the phenomenological approach in this study involved the collection of data from engagement with participants in the field who have experienced the phenomenon of teaching special education for more than 4 years. The approach also recognizes the broad philosophical assumption in the phenomenological design that includes the premise that an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation differs among individuals (Moustakas, 1994). As a result, the information can be useful for developing authentic policies and practices influencing the phenomenon based on the way individuals experience the phenomenon.

Current research into teacher attrition and retention supports the use of transcendental phenomenology (Lesh et al., 2017; Tiwari et al., 2015). Lesh et al. (2017) used a phenomenological research design to understand the experiences of veteran teachers in special education. Tiwari et al. (2015) relied on phenomenological methods to understand the beliefs of special education teachers about aspects of their work. The optimal way for me to collect the data necessary to answer the research questions of this study and to fill the gap in the research was to use a transcendental phenomenology research design.

Moustakas (1994) indicated that transcendental phenomenology requires the triangulation of multiple sources of data. The triangulation of data provides evidence to answer the research questions. As I collected the data and began the analysis, the themes in the data became more apparent, providing information to answer the research questions. Moustakas (1994) also recommended maintaining a journal to bracket the researcher's beliefs and views out of the study. The journal is an important part of the transcendental phenomenological method to ensure the findings do not reflect the beliefs and views of the researcher.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Central Research Question: How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe teaching experiences that influence their decision to remain in the field of special education?

Sub-Question One: How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their decision-making process related to remaining teachers in special education?

Sub-Question Two: How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their experiences in the school environment related to job satisfaction?

Sub-Question Three: How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their experiences that could be useful for developing approaches to improve special education teacher retention?

Data Collection

The data collection methods for the study included 10 individual interviews, one focus group, and participant responses to two written prompts. The three sources of data were intended

to obtain information about the phenomenon of interest, specifically the experiences of veteran special education teachers that influenced them to remain in the teaching profession. Data triangulation can strengthen a study by providing information from different sources or perspectives (Patton, 2015). I used data triangulation to substantiate and confirm the information about the experiences of the participants.

Interviews

The individual interviews used a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions. The semi-structured approach asks each interviewee the same initial questions but allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions in response to the interviewee's response. The semi-structured, open-ended interview approach is intended to collect rich data about the experiences of the interviewees (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Interviewing is commonly used as a data collection technique in phenomenological research because it provides a format allowing interviewees to discuss their experiences in detail (Vagel, 2018). The interview process followed the recommendation of Moustakas (1994) for creating an informal atmosphere to allow the questions to be answered expansively, which brought clarity to the phenomenon under investigation.

The interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform at a time convenient for the interviewee. I opted to conduct interviews via Zoom because the tool is cost-effective since it is free to use, it saves time spent on traveling to meet the respondents, and it is a reliable source of conducting interviews because every participant is presented on the other side (Olliffe et al., 2021). Most importantly, video interviews can be recorded via the Zoom platform (Olliffe et al., 2021). The interview guidelines called for me to maintain a neutral position towards any statement made by the interviewee including control of body language to avoid biasing the

interviewee's responses. The interviews took approximately 40–45 minutes. The interviews were recorded by two recording devices, which ensured accuracy and freed me to interact naturally with the interviewee (Fujii, 2018). The transcribed data resulting from the interviews were member checked for validity.

Patton (2015) indicated that the standardized open-ended interview begins with carefully designed questions related to the research questions of the study. The interview questions related to the central research question of the study and the three sub-questions. They focused on the four dimensions of how teaching experiences influence the decision to remain in the profession, how the teachers describe their career-related decision-making process, how teaching experiences related to job satisfaction, and how teaching experiences could be useful for improving special education teacher retention.

I developed the interview questions through an examination of the literature concerning special education retention. The objective of the interview questions was to obtain accounts of personal experiences, anecdotes, and stories that could provide an extensive description of the experiences influencing the participants to remain as special education teachers. Following is a list of the questions that were used in the interviews (also see Appendix F):

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. What experiences led you to the field of special education?
2. What are some of the experiences that led you to remain in the field of special education?
3. What are some of your most memorable experiences with students?
4. What are some of your most memorable experiences with colleagues?
5. How have your experiences as a special education teacher measured up to your expectations of the profession?

6. How do your experiences influence your career decisions?
7. How do your experiences influence your attitude towards special education?
8. What is your experience of the way others view your profession as a special education teacher?
9. What is your experience of control over your teaching methods?
10. What are some of your experiences as a special education teacher that you find most satisfying?
11. How would you describe your experiences with the support you receive from administrators and colleagues?
12. Please describe your experiences with family and friends concerning your career in special education.
13. What are some of your experiences as a special education teacher that you find least satisfying?
14. What experiences have you had as a special education teacher that can shed insight on strategies schools can use to retain special education teachers?
15. Please describe your experiences with coping with the stress associated with teaching in special education.
16. What experiences with professional development have been influential in your decision to remain a special education teacher?

The interview questions elicited information related to the experiences of the interviewee.

Moustakas (1994) noted that the language of the interview question should facilitate full disclosure of the experiences of an interviewee. The first question was intended to prompt the interviewee to begin thinking about the way experiences influenced their decision to become a

special education teacher (the central research question). Various experiences influence the decision of individuals to enter special education, including experiences with special needs individuals (Desutter & Lemire, 2016). Questions 2 through 4 were also related to the central research question because they elicited information about the experiences influencing the interviewee's decision to remain in the field of special education. The experiences of special education teachers in the workplace influence their decisions to remain in the teaching profession (Lesh et al., 2017).

Questions 6 through 9 were related to Sub-Question One that focused on examining the relationship of experiences of special education teachers to the decision-making process concerning remaining in the profession. The questions elicited data regarding experiences related to the theory of planned behavior. Ajzen (1991) indicated that attitude, social norms, and perceived control influence the intention to engage in a behavior. Questions 10 through 13 obtained information related to Sub-Question Two that focused on the way the experiences of special education teachers relate to job satisfaction. Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction contains the proposition that experiences in the workplace can have a positive or a negative effect on job satisfaction. The questions also obtained data related to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. Questions 14 through 16 obtained data related to Sub-Question Three that focused on the experiences of special education teachers that could be useful for improving special education teacher retention. Identifying strategies to provide special education teachers with positive experiences can help improve teacher retention (Rude & Miller, 2018).

After each interview, a transcription of the recording was created. I also listened to the recording, compared it to the written transcription, and submitted the transcription to the interviewee for member checking.

Focus Group

One focus group was conducted to collect information from special education teachers with more than 4 years in the profession. The purpose of the focus group was to collect detailed information from the participants in a setting that encouraged interactions among peers (Carey & Asbury, 2016). The focus group was suitable for qualitative data collection because it could identify major themes related to the topic under investigation (Patton, 2015). The data collection process involved questioning, facilitating discussion among the participants, and some activities to stimulate reflection and discussion.

The focus group took place after the conclusion of the school day. I offered the participants up to three different focus group times to accommodate their schedules. Some of the members were not able to join in any of the proposed times. For the two proposed times, there were only two members available, which would not have been suitable for a focus group. There was just one time in which at least six members were available. Therefore, the focus group was conducted using these six members. Participants in the focus group were the same participants that took part in the interviews; I acted as moderator for the focus group.

The first step performed in the focus group was explaining the purpose statement to the participants to provide a concise and clear rationale for the research session and to convince the participants that their participation would make things better in the present field of study. I developed a process guide, which included the group questions that I used to conduct the focus group. The process guide also included the session outline, which was distributed to the participants. This session outline comprised the rules of participation, a detailed purpose statement, and the discussion format that we utilized. The opening activity of the session outline

was also an important step because it acted as the icebreaker and kept the dialogue going. As mentioned earlier, I acted as the team facilitator to play the leading role in the discussion.

As the facilitator, I was responsible for the outcome of the session. On arrival of the participants, I welcomed and provided informal introductions to encourage conversation. I later reviewed the guide and outlined processes to explain the purpose, agenda, ground rules, and expectations of the focus group. Six participants were allowed a few minutes to review the discussion questions quietly, after which I proceeded with the discussion by asking each question to each participant within the entire group one at a time. To keep the discussion going, I remained neutral and watched participants' body language for signs of agreeing or disagreeing with what was being discussed. After the focus group session, I thanked the participants for their time and contributions to the meeting and told them what follow-up to expect.

The focus group lasted approximately 2 hours with six members and was recorded by two devices with the permission of the participants. I transcribed the recorded data as soon as possible for the interview and focus group. Later, I asked each participant in the focus group to review the transcriptions of their part of the discussion for accuracy. In addition, I listened to the recordings several times to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences related to remaining in the teaching profession. The recordings and transcripts are stored in a locked location. I made notes about the focus groups in my reflective journal as part of the process of bracketing my personal biases and concepts.

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions (see also Appendix G)

1. What made you select special education as a teaching specialty?
2. What are the most important positive experiences you have had as a special education teacher?

3. What experiences have led you to remain in the field of special education?
4. What is your attitude towards teaching special education?
5. What do others think about your profession as a special education teacher?
6. How much control do you have over the way you teach special education?
7. What experiences have increased your satisfaction with special education?
8. What experiences have decreased your satisfaction with special education?
9. What were the positive aspects of your work environment in the school?
10. What were the negative aspects of your work environment in the school?

Question 1 was related to the central research question as it sought information about the motivations of teachers for selecting special education as a career path. Previous experience with individuals with disabilities and the desire to help others in need may be motivators for teachers to select a career in special education (Kasper, 2017). Questions 2 and 3 were also related to the central research question as they asked about the experiences influencing the participants to remain in the field of special education. Teaching experiences can be an important influence on the decision of teachers to remain in special education (Lesh et al., 2017). Questions 4, 5, and 6 elicited information about their experiences related to their decision-making process and the theory of planned action. Attitude, the opinions of others, and the perception of control over the work environment can influence the decisions of teachers to remain in the profession (Vagi & Pivovarova, 2016). Questions 7 and 8 provided information that was useful for answering the second sub-question of the study. Job satisfaction influences the decision to remain in a profession or to seek new opportunities outside the profession (Larkin et al., 2018). Questions 9 and 10 obtained information to answer Sub-Question Three concerning experiences for developing policies to improve special education teacher retention. Because of the complexity of

issues associated with special education teacher retention, variability can exist in the way positive and negative experiences influence the decisions of teachers to remain in the profession (Holmes et al., 2019).

As a moderator, I followed the recommendations of Patton (2015) to ensure all participants had sufficient time to discuss their viewpoints by asking questions of each participant and preventing any one participant from dominating the discussion. I maintained a neutral response towards any ideas or opinions expressed by the participants. I also prevented the conflict from arising among the participants. Probing follow-up questions were necessary when participants were reluctant to voice an opinion contrary to group consensus (Carey & Asbury, 2016). I used probing questions to ensure the participants articulated their actual opinions in answer to a question.

Participant Writing Prompt

Written responses to prompts given to the participants provided a third source of data for the study. See Appendix H for the instructions for this data collection tool. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that writings by participants in a study can be a source of data with the participants providing data in addition to the information shared during an interview or focus group. The participants received the written prompts via SurveyMonkey after the interview. I asked the participants to take approximately 15 minutes per prompt to answer the questions in writing and return the answers to me within 1 week. Five participants completed the written prompts. Once the 1-week time limit was up, I sent a follow-up to one participant who had not completed it. The last participant completed the written prompts at that time.

Research Setting

The site where the study took place was in the high schools of a large urban school district in Georgia. The schools in this district serve approximately 42,000 students with 10% of the student body receiving special education services. High schools in the district have an enrollment of approximately 19,000 students. The district was selected for the research because of the 11 high schools in the district that provided enough special education teachers to recruit the 10 participants needed for the study. The high schools included in the study are delimited to schools with teachers providing special education instruction to students in both inclusionary classrooms and separate special education classrooms. I selected high schools for the study because high school special education teachers often face a higher degree of stress when dealing with more mature students and have a higher degree of burnout leading to attrition in the teaching profession when compared to special education teachers in other school settings (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

The school district employs approximately 1,000 special education teachers and paraprofessionals with a student–teacher ratio of 15:1. The demographic composition of the high schools in the district is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Composition of the School District

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
African American	52
White	32
Hispanic	9
Asian	3
Living Below Poverty Line	10

An online platform “Study find” was used to find the target population of 10 participants in Georgia. The study population was targeted by posting the study posters on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn sites. The interested participants were recruited using the strategy discussed in the procedures section.

Participants

The sample pool consisted of all certified high school special education teachers in the school district with more than 4 years of experience in the profession, estimated to be approximately 900 teachers. I used a purposeful sampling approach to identify a total of 10 participants for this study. The purposeful sampling identified individuals who were able to provide information that illuminated the topic under investigation in the study (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were (a) teaching special education for more than 4 years; (b) currently teaching special education in either inclusionary or separate special education classes; and (c) teaching high school special education exclusively for more than 4 years. The exclusion criterion for the study was individuals below the age of 21 and above the age of 65. The criteria were based on the evidence that the greatest risk of attrition from special education teaching occurs in the first 4 years of service (Conley & You, 2017). Special education teachers with more than 4 years of service can be considered veteran teachers (Lesh et al., 2017).

Procedures

I obtained permission to conduct this research from the office of the superintendent of the school district. Then, I received approval to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University before I started collecting any data from the participants (see Appendix A).

After obtaining approval from the IRB, I completed a brief pilot study before collecting data to improve reliability and to ensure the questions for the interview obtained the necessary information. The pilot study involved a small-scale use of the data collection instruments and procedures to determine if modifications to the design or procedures were necessary (White & McBurney, 2013). In the pilot study, I interviewed one teacher who met the inclusion criteria of the study and conducted one focus group consisting of three teachers who met the inclusion criteria of the study. I used the interview questions and focus group questions proposed for the study. Based on the results of the pilot study interview and focus group, I made changes to the questions and changes to the techniques used to collect data relating to the relevance of these questions to the objectives of the study and the problem under inquiry. After the interview, one question was found to be redundant and was removed (What experiences are the most influential for the decision to remain as a special education teacher?). An online platform “Study find” was added to recruit the target population.

After completing the pilot study, and after failing to acquire enough participants through district emails, I solicited special education teachers from the high schools in the district to participate in the study through Study Find. The schools participating in the study provided a list of special education teachers and their emails. Using the email list provided by the schools, I sent a recruiting email to potential participants using a recruitment letter (see Appendix B). Within this recruitment letter, there was a link for a screening survey the potential participants were asked to complete (see Appendix C). After reviewing the screening survey, I sent an email to those participants I selected based on the inclusion criteria for participation in the study. I considered gender and race or ethnicity factors when selecting participants to ensure diversity among the participants. I also included the IRB-approved Consent Form as an attachment in the

email, with instructions to complete the consent form and return it to me. I also sent an email to those individuals completing the screening survey I did not select (see Appendix D).

I arranged to meet with the selected participants at a time and place convenient for each interviewee. An IRB-approved consent form was collected from each interviewee before beginning the interview (see Appendix E). I asked the initial questions with follow-up questions based on the answers of the interviewee to the initial questions. I recorded the interviews using two recording devices to ensure the quality of the recording. The interviews were transcribed as soon as practical after the conclusion of the interview. After all the transcripts were available, they were sent to the interviewees for member checking. The member checking provided the interviewees with the opportunity to review the information in the interview to make corrections or clarify the information presented in the interview, increasing the trustworthiness of the data (Patton, 2015).

In addition to interviews, I held one focus group meeting consisting of six teachers. The focus group was conducted using Zoom at a time convenient for the participants. The focus group has the strengths of obtaining information from a diverse group of participants and provides an opportunity for the participants to interact with each other, which can enhance the quality of the data (Stewart & Shamdesani, 2014). The discussion during the focus groups focused on questions and activities intended to obtain information about the experiences of special education teachers which led them to remain in the teaching profession.

I collected additional data through detailed responses to two written prompts for the interviewees via Survey Monkey and asked the participants to write about their experiences in special education.

The Researcher's Role

As a special education teacher, I have had an ongoing interest in gaining a better understanding of the reasons special education teachers remain in the profession. I fit the criteria of a veteran special education teacher used in this study and have my own experiences that have led me to remain in the profession. I also recognize that the experiences of other teachers differ from mine. From this perspective, the choice of a phenomenological research design was consistent with my interest in learning about the way the experiences of other special education teachers have influenced their decision to remain in the profession.

My role in the study was to act as an interviewer during the interview component of the data collection and as a moderator during the focus group component of data collection. Consequently, I interacted directly with all the participants during data collection. In addition, I analyzed the data by interpreting it to obtain answers to the research questions. Patton (2015) noted that qualitative researchers should recognize their voice in the research process and the potential for creating bias in the participants and the data analysis process. I maintained a reflexive journal in which I recorded my feelings and views about the research process (see Appendix I). The journal helped me bracket out my feelings about the research to reduce the possibility of my bias influencing data collection and data analysis.

The school in which I am employed was not a part of the research. I have no tie to any of the schools that were used in the study with the schools situated in various school districts. I did not solicit any individual to participate in the study with whom I have had a professional or personal relationship in the past.

Data Analysis

The approach used to analyze the data from the interviews, the focus groups, and the written prompts was the recommended data analysis process for use with phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994). Before beginning the data analysis, I asked the participants to review the transcripts of their interviews and their part of the focus group for accuracy to ensure member checking as part of the credibility of this study.

Epoché is an important step for phenomenological data analysis that requires the analyst to refrain from judgment concerning the meaning of the data (Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1994) noted that *epoché* involves "freedom from suppositions" (p. 85). During the data analysis, I attempted to separate my beliefs and suppositions from information provided by the participants about their experiences as special education teachers. I kept a reflexive journal during the data collection and data analysis portion of the study (see Appendix I). In the journal, I described my feelings and perceptions about the process and the information provided by the participants. By using the journal, I was able to keep my views and perspectives separate from the participants' experiences in special education.

Horizontalization, the first step in phenomenological data analysis involves treating all data equally (Moustakas, 1994). I began horizontalization with an initial coding of the data using an open coding process with NVivo software. The open coding involved the identification of the codes or essential statements articulated by the participants in the study. I made the final decision as to whether an identified code was an accurate expression of the experiences of the participants. I examined the codes for each participant individually and then grouped the codes to create themes and subthemes. In the common grouping, I treated the information of each of the

participants as equally important for developing the themes. The codes are presented in Table 3, along with the themes and subthemes in the results section in Chapter Four.

Developing the themes involved organizing the data into thematic groups based on frequently used words or expressions (Moustakas, 1994). In identifying thematic groups, I made an effort to maintain impartiality towards the expressions used by the participants. In addition, I eliminated any recurring or irrelevant data.

The process of coding and identifying themes in the data provided the foundation for constructing a narrative of the experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). The narratives included textural descriptions that relied on verbatim information provided by the participants in the study. The objective of the process was to capture the essence of the participants' experiences as closely as possible (Patton, 2015). I considered the experiences of each of the participants separately to allow their perspectives to build a better understanding of how their experiences led to the decision to remain in the field of special education.

I used imaginative variation in the analytic process. The objective of imaginative variation is "to grasp the structural essence of experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35). I used imaginative variation to vary the frames of reference and to examine the data from different perspectives. The outcome of the process was designed to combine the textural description of what the participants experienced and the structural description of how they experienced the phenomenon associated with their decisions to remain in the teaching profession.

The final stage of the data analysis was to create a composite description that included the understanding of the experiences of all the participants in the study. The final description required the integration of all the data to reveal meaning in the experiences as understood by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). I based the final analysis on reflection, collaboration with the

participants, and careful consideration of the data provided by the participants concerning their experiences. The data collected from the interviews and the focus group were combined to create meaningful themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is used to assess the rigor of qualitative methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is an indicator of the amount of confidence that can be placed in the findings based on the objectivity of the methodology and the ability to replicate the findings (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness is composed of the elements of credibility, dependability and conformability, and transferability.

Credibility

Establishing credibility requires demonstrating that the representation in the study of the participants' views and reports of experience are accurate (Nowell et al., 2017). I established credibility through triangulation of data sources using three separate sources of data from interviews, the focus groups, and written prompts posed to the participants. I also established credibility through member checking by sharing the transcripts of each participant's interview and their part of the focus group with them to correct errors and to provide additional information as recommended by Flick (2009). Prolonged engagement in the field also helped me to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established prolonged engagement through lengthy interviews and a focus group.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability involves establishing that the research methodology is logical and has clear documentation to trace the actions taken while collecting and analyzing data (Nowell et al., 2017). I established dependability by an external audit of the research process including the data,

findings, and interpretations as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (2016). Confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached (Tobin & Begley, 2004). I conducted the external audit to ensure that the accuracy of the study findings was in line with the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

On the other hand, confirmability refers to the degree to which the study findings of an inquiry can be confirmed by other researchers (Nguyen et al., 2021). In qualitative research, researchers tend to assume that they bring a unique perspective to the research process. In most cases, confirmability is concerned with the establishment of the fact the data and the interpretations of a study's findings are not figments of the researcher's imagination but a derivative of the data (Nguyen et al., 2021). For the case of this qualitative research, I ensured confirmability by adopting a reflexive attitude during the process of collecting and analyzing the data. I adopted this attitude by reviewing my background and position and ensured that my view did not influenced the research process. I also recorded the topics that were unique and interesting during the research process. This process was conducted by the use of reflexive journals that helped me to reflect on what happened in the research process in line with my interests and values (Nguyen et al., 2021).

I used two independent individuals, one who had a focus on analytical-qualitative research, and the second who had a concentration on content and technical writing. Both individuals read and reread the manuscript in its entirety. The first author complimented me for the work well done in retrieving and analyzing the themes to the best of my ability and recommended minimal changes that I subsequently corrected. The second author gave insight on

making changes related to basic composition skills, including word choice, sentence structure, paragraph development, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of the findings to apply to similar cases (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, transferability would be the ability to apply the findings to special education teachers in other schools. Transferability can be established through thick description that involves including information about the context of the participants that enables others to determine if the findings apply to their context (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). I have provided thick descriptions of the context of the participants during the description of the interviews and the focus group in Chapter Four. The audit trail (Appendix J) provides the rationale for various decisions in the study that contributed to transferability if another researcher wishes to replicate this study.

Ethical Considerations

The study did not create a risk of physical or psychological harm to participants. The study did pose a risk of breach of confidentiality that could lead to adverse employment consequences if a participant made negative comments about the school or colleagues. The approach for ensuring the confidentiality of the participants was to identify all schools and participants by pseudonyms and to redact any information that could lead to the identification of the participants by innuendo. Any individual or organization transcribing data signed a confidentiality agreement. All recordings, transcripts, and other materials related to the study were kept in a secure location accessible only to me. All electronic materials related to the study will be destroyed 3 years after completion of the study. Informed consent is another ethical consideration. Participants in this study provided informed consent by completing an informed

consent form (see Appendix E). The informed consent form described the purpose of the study, roles of participants, risks, strategies to minimize the risks, voluntary nature of the research, right to withdraw at any time without penalty, absence of compensation, and my contact information (Ruane, 2016). All participants completed a consent form before I began collecting data.

Summary

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research method to understand the factors influencing the decision among special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession. I used purposeful sampling based on a set criterion to select individuals with knowledge specific to the topic under investigation. Data were collected from interviews, two focus groups, and participant journals. The data were analyzed by the use of the Moustakas method. Various aspects of this study included methods such as thick description and prolonged engagement in the field that helped to establish trustworthiness. I used the following methods to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and ensure that all participants signed a consent form before data collection. After obtaining the consent form, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant. The interview data I collected was saved by their pseudonym instead of their names. The data were stored in password-protected computers with no access to anyone aside of the research personnel.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers' decision to remain in the teaching profession. The central phenomenon of the study was the decision of high school special education teachers, based on their experiences, to remain employed in the profession for more than 4 years. This chapter includes the participant descriptions; the data, presented by theme; subthemes; and research question responses.

Participants

Ten special education teachers teaching in high schools with more than 4 years of experience were recruited for this study. Convenient sampling was utilized for purpose of recruitment. The recruitment was terminated at 10 individuals because of the repetition of the concept, thoughts, and ideas. Six of these individuals took part in the focus group discussion, where they answered the questions, along with debating and interacting with each other in response to the questions. The reason for the non-participation of the other four was their unavailability during the timings that suited the majority of the members. Their pseudonyms and other information about the participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Demographic and Collected Data of the Participants*

Teacher Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Number of years of teaching	Participated in a focus group?
Abelia	Female	African American	9	Yes
Aliana	Female	African American	7	Yes
Charlton	Male	African American	6	Yes
Danila	Female	African American	8	Yes
Hayley	Female	African American	9	No
John	Male	Caucasian	10	No
Jules	Female	African American	4	Yes
Karen	Female	African American	13	No
Linda	Female	Caucasian	6	No
Miata	Female	African American	9	Yes

All participants had different motivations and passions for their interest in special education. Their early experiences and core principles contributed to their individual choices. Their personalities are defined below.

Abelia

Abelia is very passionate, and she credited her passion for special education to her students and their creativity. She described her students as “superhumans” with varied capabilities. Her preferred approach to teaching is constantly modifying and reimagining the curriculum to meet the needs of different populations of students.

Aliana

What struck me about Aliana is her calm and composed demeanor. Her love for special education shone through. She particularly enjoys devising new methods to better reach out to students' needs. One of the ways she did that was to create a scoring system based on students' tests, by which they were then grouped into four groups from the most gifted to the ones who needed the most help, with customized learning methods to suit their needs.

Charlton

Charlton's effective and to-the-point approach and personality lend themselves to the field of special education. Especially given his experiences as a paraprofessional, he had developed communication skills to support students with special needs. These communication skills have helped him in becoming a special education teacher.

Danila

Danila presents herself as a very dedicated professional. During her teaching career, she had to deal with multiple students with aggression issues. She was often physically hurt while attending to students, which resulted in a lack of support from her family, but it is only her passion that drove her to continue special education.

Hayley

Hayley is very self-driven. She possesses a calm and composed attitude towards her work. She uses scientific methods such as behavioral interventions to teach and help students learn daily life skills. She has been working with general education teachers to expand interactions between special education and general education students, resulting in substantial positive outcomes such as students with disabilities who often help with basic science experiments.

John

John's career goal was to have a position that is goal orientated and detailed, and special education has allowed him to have that. He prides himself on his organizational skills and credits them with helping him to be an effective teacher. He ensures every student gets ample attention, whether he is helping them cultivate life skills or grasping the subject matter thoroughly.

Jules

Jules is assertive and vocal about the needs of the students and teacher. Her motivation to be in special education is driven by the dream to become an advocate for her students. She equally wants to help teachers explore, find, and utilize the resources to provide their students with the best experience possible within the field of special education.

Karen

Karen is very passionate about special education. Her work goals go beyond merely meeting the needs of students in the classroom. She wants to help students apply the skills they are learning in life outside of the school building. Her objective is to bring out the best in them and to contribute to their general well-being.

Linda

Linda has a very empathetic and diligent personality. Her interest in special education emerged from her early personal experiences with non-verbal individuals who were unable to articulate their needs. She had an incident in which a non-verbal individual tore his room apart just because he was unable to make others understand that he had a headache. Because of these experiences, she became very passionate about bringing out the artistic side in her students to help them communicate.

Miata

Miata strongly believes in self-sufficiency, and she strives to help her students with the same. It was for this reason that she pursued a PhD, to learn more about behavioral and other interventions to assist her students to become independent. She adheres to the notion that their independence will allow them to become contributing members of society.

Results

This section presents the study data thematically. The codes were extracted from the individual interviews, participants' written prompts, and the focus group. Themes and subthemes were then created by combining various codes from all data sources. This helped to extract the essence of the provided data.

Theme Development

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the codes are provided below in Table 3. The themes include motivation, strategies, and support. The theme of motivation included student progress and learning, early experiences, job satisfaction, and deterrents. The theme of strategies included coping mechanisms, specialized training, and retention strategies. Finally, under the theme of support the subthemes of support as a success strategy, lack of support, and lack of a knowledgeable staff emerged. It is also imperative to note that the data did not present any outliers. Table 3 presents the codes, themes, and subthemes of the study. Following Table 3, each theme and its associated subthemes are discussed.

Table 3*Codes, Themes, and Subthemes*

Codes	Themes	Subthemes
Knowledge	Motivation	Student progress and learning
Development		Early experiences
Success		Job satisfaction
Thinking		Deterrents
Rewarding		
Breakthrough		
Paperwork		
Manners		
Students		
Behaviors		
Paraprofessional		
Delightful		
Curriculum		
Budget		
Parents		
Acknowledgment		
Meditation	Strategies	Coping mechanisms
Alone time		Specialized training
Exercise		Recommended retention strategies
Hire		
Department		
Panel		
Expertise		
Communication		
Meetings		
Requirements		

Codes	Themes	Subthemes
Assistance	Support	Support as a strategy for success
Believe		Lack of support
Encourage		Lack of knowledgeable staff
Babysitting		
Administrators		
Family and friends		
Understanding		
Expectations		
Professionalism		
Concerning		
Training		

Motivation

Students are the primary motivation behind teachers choosing to enter and remain in the field of special education. Multiple factors play a role in incentivizing teachers to remain in special education including, but not limited to, student interaction, a passion for teaching, and prior experience related to the field of special education. The principal motivator found was a passion for helping students and seeing their growth. Teachers described their experience with students as being extremely satisfying and rewarding. In the view of Danila, expressed through her written prompt, she described when she took her students to the school cafeteria: “The boys had the skills to walk down the hall, stand in line and wait, order their breakfast, walk to a table and sit down and eat.”

Student Progress and Learning. Teachers described their special education students as “loving to learn” and “superhumans” and described their growth in the classroom as one of the main motivators in remaining in the field. During his individual interview, Charlton said,

“Experiencing students’ growth and assisting them to meet their education endeavors is the biggest reason for me staying in special education.”

Most teachers explained that their primary goals in the classroom were to see their students become more independent and self-sufficient and to meet their academic goals. This was generally achieved by breaking the lessons down into achievable goals, and teachers reported a high degree of satisfaction when the students grasped, remembered, and applied the topics learned. The most important approach towards behavioral lessons was through setting expectations and creating opportunities for students to interact with other students, both within the school and with other people outside of school. Many students were observed to have gained the confidence and social skills to interact with people during lunch, in daily living, and in advocating and taking ownership of their actions. The smallest behavioral growth experienced by students often impacted their social and familial behavior in a significant manner, helping them develop confidence in their abilities. Teachers also recognized their role in providing behavioral guidelines for their students that may or may not be taught in their homes, thus shaping early learning, establishing routines, and teaching appropriate behavior. Hayley asserted during the focus group discussion:

Seeing the impact that I can make in their lives and their family’s lives, and seeing the progress they can make, even if it's something really small. But they become independent or more independent in toileting or violent behavior and just seeing the impact that makes on them and their families. Seeing them growing confidence has been keeping me in the field.

Early Experiences. Many of the teachers attribute their prior experience working in schools with individuals with disabilities to their decision to enter the field of teaching special

education students. The majority of the participants started their journey as a paraprofessional. During those periods, they found the children to be capable and creative, which drove their passion for providing the resources needed to help the students learn most effectively. During her individual interview, Abelia mentioned:

I always remember when I would substitute teach, that I was drawn to work with those kids because I always feel they are capable, they can learn, they learn differently. I was drawn to kids with exceptionalities because of their challenges.

Job Satisfaction. A contributor to job satisfaction in the teachers was observed to be the control they had over the class and teaching method design. Teachers in self-contained classrooms typically received a high degree of autonomy over their lesson plans and class design. A smaller class size added to this flexibility. This enabled them to create their materials, customized learning approaches, and offer incentives based on student needs and motivations. Aliana devised learning methodologies based on student ability, grouping students of similar learning levels together. This allowed her to provide individual attention to students based on their learning abilities using separate materials and approaches for each group. On the other hand, Charlton explained during the focus group discussion that job satisfaction was the key ingredient that made him continue offering his services to special education students. During his individual interview, he also added that the element of job satisfaction enabled him to conduct additional research regarding the educational aspects that students did not understand.

Teachers in interrelated classrooms reported a lesser degree of autonomy over their teaching methods, due to the scope of the curriculum and focus on end-of-course testing and student goals. Many teachers cited this as a reason for switching from interrelated teaching to

self-contained teaching, to ease the pressure on themselves and the students alike. In her written prompt Abelia said:

In a self-contained classroom, there's a lot of control you have over how you teach, when we get it, how much time you have to teach a concept, there is a lot more flexibility. However, when you are interrelated, it's so hard to give the kids the time they need because a lot of times we are on a scope and sequence that you got to get through, you only have this much time, and it's one of the reasons why I left interrelated because I just felt like it's too much on the kids.

Miata supported this by stating during the focus group discussion, "Now I am co-teaching, so I would say my control is not as flexible as it used to be, as far as the self-contained setting because we're more so focused on the end-of-course testing."

Deterrents. The biggest deterrent to the acquisition of knowledge by special education teachers reported by the participants was the sheer amount of paperwork expected of them. Most of the teachers believed it took away from time that could have been spent teaching or providing support to the students, with some describing the paperwork as "excessive" and "redundant." Many teachers also listed overbearing parents as being inconducive to a stable learning environment. Demands made by such parents often forced them to spend an excessive amount of time documenting and providing specific attention to a particular student, taking away from providing equal teaching to the entire class. In Aliana's written prompt, she wrote, "You find yourselves with the paperwork and all the rest of demands of class pouring into this kid and this parent. It takes away from providing the whole class optimal instructions, you know an equitable class."

Funding and budget issues were also a negative experience for teachers, with many reporting that they had to frequently make their case to their administrators for an increased budget. Some reported an inequitable distribution of the funding for special education, having to oftentimes pay out of their pocket for general activities that were essential for student learning. During the focus group discussion, Miata said, “There is a lack of support and a true budget. Even with the curriculum between learning a lot of that entail U.S. spending money.”

Strategies

Special education is a demanding field, and veteran teachers have developed various strategies to cope with the stress. Additionally, teachers recommended different strategies that can be used by the schools and districts to create a supportive environment for special-education teachers. Hayley said during her individual interview, “If I had someone, more of a specialized knowledge and could be more of a support and an advocate for us, especially in those meetings where the parents are being extremely demanding.”

Coping Mechanisms. Meditation, exercise, and work–life balance are some methods that teachers utilize to cope with the stress and anxiety caused by the job. Some of them even included meditation sessions as a class activity, to make it a part of their daily routine. John wrote in his prompt, “You leave the school building, there is a filter, anything happened that day, that was rough on you or a little unusual, it stays in the building.”

Recommended Retention Strategies. Having a designated department or an individual with a special education background who can help advocate for teachers during the IEP meetings and can help in finding resources, funding, and training opportunities for teachers would be useful. According to these special education teachers, instead of having an individual with no special education background as a leader, the department can use a panel of special education

teachers from within the school to support the department's endeavors. Miata quipped during the focus group discussion,

They need to have a panel of us to provide them with a realistic view of the reflection of what's going on in the actual county. Why don't you use my expertise instead of paying someone who is not in touch with our students?

They also expect more support and appreciation from the administrators for their diligence.

During her individual interview, Karen expressed her view regarding the administrators: "Be more supportive and give us the resources that we need, also the space to do what you hired us to do and trust our expertise in there, protecting your teachers, and also appreciation, everyone likes to be appreciated."

Specialized Training

Teachers complained about the lack of specialized training. They said that the present professional development training is geared more towards general education teachers rather than special education. During her individual interview, Karen said, "The kind of training that I have been having does not gear towards a lot of special education things that we need." Jules also advised during her individual interview that specialized training helped in acquiring job knowledge: "Conduct training almost monthly enabled me to acquire additional teaching elements that were helpful in the classroom setting."

Support

Almost all teachers agreed that strong social support has helped them to navigate through various aspects of the special education curriculum and stay in this field. Many of them have family members or friends in the teaching field who motivated them to remain in the field despite various barriers. In her prompt, Hayley wrote, "My grandmother is like, oh, it takes such

a special person to do what you do and I'm so proud of you. My sister has always been supportive."

Additionally, good colleagues are also one of the important factors influencing their decision to stay. Teachers support each other with unfamiliar situations or tasks, share their concerns, and create an encouraging environment. During her individual interview, Miata said, "I relied on my colleagues, and they were very supportive and to this day they are supportive. Not just in the educational sector, but we talk about so many different things, we talk about future planning."

Lack of Support. Teachers showed concerns regarding unsupportive administrators. A majority of the leaders and administrators did not have a special education background and thus they failed to understand the dynamics of special education teaching and experiences. In her individual interview, Danila said, "I think administrators see us as a headache. They see us as something they have to put up with." Their coworkers are often ungrateful for their services and diligence. Hayley said during the focus group discussion, "I had an administrator tell me I was a glorified 'babysitter' and I had the easiest job in the building, which is insulting and frustrating." During her individual interview, Miata supported this sentiment by saying, "Administrators need significant improvement."

Lack of Knowledgeable Staff. The majority of participants including Hayley, Charlton, Miata, Jules, and Karen agreed that there was a lack of proficient or skilled staff including administrators, leaders, and paraprofessionals. These teachers agreed that the lack of competent paraprofessionals has added to their workload due to having to teach another teacher while taking care of a class full of students with special needs. During his individual interview, Charlton said:

I have a para, who is brand new to education and she never worked with students with disabilities. So, I am teaching her the ins and outs of working with students with disabilities and helping her to understand their cognitive level, how to comprehend and how you can just have to break everything down. So, it's almost like having another student.

The teacher participants also agreed that there is a lack of educational resources and training for paraprofessionals before they enter the special education field, and this is something that needs to be fixed in this field. Charlton explained during the focus group discussion, “There is a lack of educational resources for the paraprofessionals.”

Research Question Responses

This section presents the responses of the teacher participants to the central research question and the three sub-questions to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession. The central phenomenon under investigation was the events and incidents that influence the decision-making process of special education high school teachers who remain in their profession for more than 4 years.

Central Research Question

How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their teaching experiences that influence their decision to remain in the field of special education?

Veteran teachers in special education mostly described their experience as being satisfying and enriching, driven largely by the desire to see students succeed and be productive members of society. The biggest driving factors were the visibility of growth and change in students, positively impacting their ability to interact with people and situations. Teachers cited

their students as being the primary reason for continuing as special education teachers, with many finding fulfillment in the interpersonal relationships developed with their students and their parents.

Sub-Question One

How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their decision-making process related to remaining teachers in special education?

Teachers in special education attributed their control over classroom teaching as being important for remaining in special education. Some teachers who had previously been in interrelated classrooms listed the lesser degree of control and increased focus on student testing as reasons for switching to self-contained classes. Many reported that their early experiences as paraprofessionals influenced their desire to be in education, having observed students excel when provided the requisite attention and resources. This was amplified in special education, where even the smallest changes provided significant results in reaching academic and behavioral goals. Finally, a minor but important factor veteran teachers cited in choosing to remain in special education was the support and appreciation received by their peers, family, and social circle.

Sub-Question Two

How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their experiences in the school environment related to job satisfaction?

Factors from the school environment that contributed to job satisfaction were the small class sizes, the autonomy they had over teaching methods and materials, and the support they received from their colleagues and paraprofessionals. Teachers believed the class sizes helped them pay individual attention to their students, making for an optimal teaching experience. Many

teachers emphasized open communication and support from their school as being integral to a healthy working environment. However, excessive paperwork was unanimously believed to be one of the biggest deterrents to job satisfaction, with teachers finding some aspects of it to be redundant, and agreeing it took away from time better-spent teaching or planning classes. Other factors such as inequitable distribution of available funding and lack of administrative support were also listed as being counterproductive to their ability to teach.

Sub-Question Three

How do high school special education teachers with more than 4 years of service describe their experiences that could be useful for developing approaches to improve special education teacher retention?

Veteran teachers described the lack of specialized training as being detrimental to teaching effectively. Most of the current training programs are geared towards general teaching, with a distinct lack of resources for special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Some teachers mentioned being given the responsibility of training paraprofessionals without having adequate training themselves and advocated giving paraprofessionals a nearly equivalent amount of training. Many teachers also believed the presence of a departmental resource to support funding requests and training opportunities by teachers would be beneficial to increase their efficacy. Some teachers recommended using a panel of teachers, as opposed to outside sources, to support student-specific endeavors, allowing them to leverage their knowledge of their students. Other aspects that teachers felt could boost teacher retention included providing opportunities and space for teachers to do their job without administrative interference, while also extending appreciation for their work.

Summary

Veteran special education teachers are motivated by their passion for helping students achieve their potential, especially by their creativity and willingness to learn. They also place a high value on the relationships built with students and their families, citing it as a contributor to their job satisfaction. While some teachers' families are not very supportive of their careers due to the stress and frustrations involved, many enjoy the support and admiration of their families and social circle.

Outside of the classroom, teachers identified the support of their peers and administrators as being critical to a conducive working environment, with many finding it difficult to devote adequate time to teaching due to the paperwork and administrative hassles they are required to go through. They recommended various strategies to build greater teacher retention, such as specialized training and teacher feedback for departmental efforts.

All in all, while teachers continue to remain in special education driven by their students and the departmental support and autonomy they receive, several steps need to be taken to make their work more impactful and encourage more teachers to join and remain in the field of special education.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This chapter presents the interpretation of findings, conclusions, and recommendations relating to the results presented in Chapter Four. The problem under investigation is the significant shortage of teachers for special education in the United States, which has often resulted in a reduction in the quality of education for students who are in need of special education. According to Samuels and Harwin (2018), the number of special education teachers in the United States decreased by 17% between 2007 and 2017 while the number of learners who needed special education increased by 1% during the same period. The specific problem being addressed by the present inquiry is the shortage of veteran special education teachers in schools in urban settings to provide instructional continuity in special education. This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession. The central phenomenon under investigation was defined as the events and incidents that influence the decision-making process of special education high school teachers who remain in the special education profession for more than 4 years.

Discussion of Findings

This section interprets and describes the significance of this study's findings concerning the research information that already exists regarding the problem being investigated. This section further explains new insights and understandings that emerged during the research inquiry.

Summary of Findings

The interpretation of the findings was based on the themes that were extracted from the transcripts of the participants' interviews, the focus group transcripts, and the written prompts. The codes that emerged from the data were combined to create themes and subthemes imperative for interpretation in this section. They also aided in discovering findings that were based on the objectives and aims of the study. Later in this chapter, these findings will be compared with the findings of existing literature and the theoretical framework that was used to guide the study.

Motivation

According to the results of this study, the principal motivator for teachers to remain in the special education field was the passion for helping students and seeing their growth. Under the theme of motivation, special education teachers described their experience with students as being extremely satisfying and rewarding. The reward and satisfaction experienced were due to the multiple factors that played a role in incentivizing teachers to remain in special education, including, but not limited to, student interaction, a passion for teaching, and prior experience related to the field of special education.

Student Progress and Learning. The participants of the study described their special education students as “loving to learn” and “superhumans.” They also explained that the growth and progress of students in the classroom setting acted as one of the key motivators for teachers in special education to remain in their profession. Moreover, the teacher participants agreed that their primary aim in the classroom setting was to ensure that their students met their academic goals by becoming more independent and self-sufficient. This finding aligns with results from a study by Lesh et al. (2017), who documented that special education teachers believe that

teaching is a calling from above, desire to stand up for the underdog, perceive students as their children, and stand in defiance of apathetic administrators.

The findings of this study are consistent with the motivators of job satisfaction theory where the role of special education teachers is satisfied by a higher-order need of the individual (Ajzen, 1991). This finding is also consistent with the findings of Dachele and Ruff (2017) who stated that teachers often choose to remain in the field of special education, thereby demonstrating that the teaching profession is a calling with teachers holding special responsibilities for educating children. Their most important approach towards the behavior of students was through setting expectations and creating opportunities for them to interact with other students, both within the school and with other people outside of school. This finding was also demonstrated in the written prompts by Linda, who stated that her experience was satisfying and enriching, driven largely by the desire to see students succeed and be productive members of society.

Early Experiences. A majority of the teacher participants started their journey as a paraprofessional and alleged that their decision to enter the special education field was primarily due to their prior experiences of working in institutions where they dealt with individuals with disabilities. This finding is consistent with findings by Billingsley and Bettini (2019), who found that there was a correlation between self-belief, mentoring, and the decision of special education teachers to remain in the profession. Self-belief and mentorship played vital roles in their choice to remain in the field of special education because these teachers believed in their ability to overcome challenges encountered in the process of teaching special education students. Moreover, these teachers believed that they could act as mentors for students with special needs to help them confront the educational challenges they faced. Hughes et al. (2015) added that the

social perception in schools regarding the role and significance of special education teachers also contributed to the decision to remain in the teaching profession because other teachers and society at large perceived their role in special education as challenging.

Job Satisfaction. According to the results retrieved in this study, the teacher-participants in self-contained classrooms reported having a high degree of autonomy over their class design and lesson plans. This status enabled the teachers to create their materials, customized learning approaches, and offer incentives based on student needs and motivations. This finding aligns with those of Gulosino et al. (2016) who asserted that dissatisfaction with the school, the relationship with parents, and the degree of autonomy permitted to educators were also reasons for teachers leaving the teaching profession. Retaining autonomy in decision-making for matters directly related to instructional methods and content also affects the perceived control of teachers (Webb, 2018). Teachers in interrelated classrooms reported a lesser degree of autonomy over their teaching methods due to the scope of the curriculum and focus on end-of-course testing and student goals. Many teachers cited this as a reason for switching from interrelated teaching to self-contained teaching, to ease the pressure on themselves and the students alike.

Deterrents. According to most of the teachers who participated in the interview process, the biggest deterrent for the teachers to remain in the special education field was the sheer amount of paperwork expected of them. Moreover, most of these teachers believed this deterrent took away the time that could have been spent teaching or providing support to the students. Further, some teachers described the paperwork as “excessive” and “redundant.” In addition, many teachers also described overbearing parents as being inconducive to a stable learning environment. This finding was supported by King and Bounds (2017) who found that the amount of paperwork was the greatest concern cited by special education teachers who were considering

leaving the profession. Funding and budget issues were also a negative experience for teachers, with many reporting that they had to frequently make their case to their administrators for an increased budget.

Strategies

The teachers recommended different strategies that can be used by the schools and districts to create a supportive environment for special education teachers. The following subthemes are discussed under “strategies.”

Coping Mechanisms. The participants in this study cited meditation, exercise, and work–life balance as some of the ways that special education teachers use to manage stress and anxiety caused by the nature of their job. Kiel et al. (2016) supported this finding by noting that some special education teachers without innate stress coping resources may require additional support to avoid experiencing excessive stress when faced with inevitable difficulties associated with their inability to control all outcomes in the teaching profession. In contrast, Ryan et al. (2017) found that factors external to the individual such as a positive school culture could mediate the effect of stress on the individual.

Recommended Retention Strategies. In the view of most of the teacher-participants, instead of having an individual with no leadership or background in special education, the department could hire a panel of special education teachers within the school to support the department’s endeavors. Rude and Miller (2018) demonstrated that intensive training for special education teachers is intended to address issues such as teachers entering the field through alternative certification programs. Learning through interactions with colleagues can also improve the preparedness of teachers and enhance the teaching experience.

Specialized Training. Many of the participants complained about the lack of specialized training amongst the school staff by stating that the present professional development training is geared more towards general education teachers rather than special education. For this reason, Mason-Williams (2015) recommended ongoing intensive training programs as a strategy to improve special education teacher training to improve teacher retention. The recommendation was based on survey data revealing that many special education teachers felt insufficiently prepared to deal with the issues encountered in special education without sufficient specialized training.

Support

In line with the results retrieved from the data found in the present study, support plays an integral part in the decision of special education high school teachers to remain in the profession for more than 4 years. The following subthemes were discussed under this theme.

Support as a Strategy to Success. Most of the teacher participants held the conviction that strong social support aided them in navigating and remaining in the special education profession. Many of them had family members or friends in the teaching field who encouraged them to remain in the field despite various barriers. Moreover, supportive colleagues were also one of the important factors influencing their decision to stay. Teachers support each other with unfamiliar situations or tasks, share their concerns, and create an encouraging environment (Rude & Miller, 2018). Omar et al. (2018) substantiated this finding by stating that teachers entering special education through alternative certification programs may require additional training and administrative support to have the positive experiences necessary to support a decision to remain in the profession. Through additional training and administrative support, teachers and staff can acquaint each other with the strengths and weaknesses of their colleagues

and use them to achieve positive outcomes in the process of serving special education students (Omar et al., 2018).

Lack of Support. Most participants were concerned with the lack of administrative support since most of the leaders and administrators do not have a special education background, and thus, fail to understand the dynamics of special education teaching and experiences. Robinson et al. (2019) supported this finding by documenting that perceived lack of administrative support fostered the belief of lack of control over the teaching process and was an antecedent variable for burnout. In contrast, a school climate that fosters increased teacher participation in decision-making correlates with lower levels of teacher burnout and increased teacher retention.

Lack of Knowledgeable Staff. Many of the participants reported that there was a lack of proficient or skilled staff including administrators, leaders, and paraprofessionals. In addition, the teacher-participants stated that the lack of competent paraprofessionals added to their teaching responsibilities because they had to teach another individual while taking care of a class full of students with special needs. The participants also stated that there was a lack of educational resources and training for paraprofessionals before they entered the special education field. They believed that the limited number of knowledgeable staff such as paraprofessionals was a challenge that needed to be addressed to reduce the burden of additional responsibilities on teachers. A study by Omar et al. (2018) supported this finding by stating that the role of the paraprofessional in the special education classroom is often ambiguous and defined by the situation and the degree of trust between the teacher and the paraprofessional. Omar et al. also illustrated that the special education teachers who relied heavily on paraprofessionals for classroom instruction had more time to perform administrative tasks. These researchers further

concluded that principals and other administrators should attempt to ensure that special education teachers maximize their use of paraprofessionals to reduce the burden of the teacher workload (Omar et al., 2018).

Implications for Policy or Practice

The findings of this study may be impactful for policy or practice for schools leading to increased special education teacher retention. Even though extensive research concerning special education attrition is in existence, many schools have not adopted policies that have been successful in improving special education teacher retention. One of the significant findings of this study is that special education teachers described their students as “loving to learn” and “superhumans” who motivated them to keep teaching. School administrators could use these findings to come up with frequent special education teacher outreach programs and meetings to encourage teachers to remain in this field regardless of the challenges they confront while teaching students with special education needs. This knowledge can also be used by school administrators to convince these teachers that students with special needs are human, too, and demand attention and love like other students. This finding may be useful for school administrators when developing strategies to encourage special education teacher retention. School administrators can use this finding to motivate teachers who lack the drive to teach students with special challenges by changing their negative views of these students to those who are superhuman. The importance of school administrators in understanding the factors influencing retention to encourage special education teachers to remain in the profession has been widely studied and understood.

In the context of the implications for policy formulation, some findings of the present study may be significant to special education authorities, educational government authorities,

and school administrators in special schools. These authorities may use these findings to formulate policies that may prolong the length of stay of teachers in special schools, make the teachers more comfortable in their line of duty, or make them more dedicated to their jobs. For instance, this study found that the lack of proficient or skilled staff including administrators, leaders, and paraprofessionals is evident in special education schools. Through this finding, policies may be formulated to ensure that additional training is given to the staff, administrators, paraprofessionals, and leaders in special education schools to equip them with more skills and knowledge to manage various aspects experienced in these institutions.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This section discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of the present study. When considering the theoretical implications, the research findings will either confirm a theory or debunk it (Ajzen, 2015). If the study findings are in line with a particular theory through which the research was based, then it is confirmed (Ajzen, 2015). On the other hand, empirical or practical implications are often based on reasoning or logic. They tend to be valuable to individuals in some professions such as science, medicine, and nursing (Ajzen, 2015).

Empirical Implications

This study has empirical significance because information concerning the reasons special education teachers remain in the profession is limited. Because 30% of special education teachers leave the profession by the end of their first 3 years of service (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), previous research has emphasized identifying the factors inducing special education teachers to leave the profession. Hagaman and Casey (2018) also documented that the knowledge of the factors leading to the retention of special education teachers remains limited and requires further quantitative and qualitative research. The findings of this study filled a gap

in empirical knowledge by providing evidence demonstrating reasons why special education teachers choose to stay in the profession for more than 4 years. These findings complement knowledge from existing empirical literature regarding the factors that compel special education teachers to remain in the field of special education for more than 4 years. For instance, findings by Towers and McGuire (2017) illustrated that job satisfaction, mentorship, induction programs, and administrative support are some of the factors leading to the retention of teachers in the field of special education.

Theoretical Implications

This study adds additional knowledge to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior and Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction. This research examined Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior concepts of attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control of the behavior as they relate to the decision of special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession. The three constructs of the theory of planned behavior provided a framework for understanding the way the experiences of special education teachers contribute to their career decision-making process. The findings of this study expounded on the applicability of the theory of planned behavior to explain mobility among special education teachers, which is an application of the theory that has not been well developed. Mobility in this context is associated with the willingness of special education teachers to remain in the field of special education for more than 4 years. This research also relied on the concepts of Herzberg's (1966) hygiene-motivator theory of job satisfaction to understand how the experiences of special education teachers in their work environment can contribute to the decision to remain in the teaching profession.

Limitations and Delimitations

This section discusses the limitations and delimitations concerning the present study. Limitations are defined as the shortcomings, conditions, and influences that cannot be controlled by the researcher that place restrictions on the methodology and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). On the other hand, delimitations are the choices made by the researcher, which should be mentioned. Delimitations describe the boundaries that have been set for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Delimitations

The choice of the study population to be represented and the sampling method used to acquire the participants for this inquiry presented a delimitation. In the county where the study took place, the schools in that district serve approximately 42,000 students with 10% of the student body receiving special education services. High schools in the district have an enrollment of approximately 19,000 students. The district was selected for the research because of the 11 high schools in the district that provided enough special education teachers to recruit the 10 participants needed for the study.

Limitations

The study embraced a sample of 10 participants to represent a population of high school special education teachers in a large urban school district in Georgia. Even though I was able to gather findings after a successful research process, the sample may be too small to retrieve findings that represent the true thoughts, opinions, and behaviors of all high school special education teachers in the state. A larger sample size may have more accurately represented the voices of all special education teachers, thus representing the population under study. This leads to the generalizations aspect since the findings retrieved from the sample of 10 participants will

be assumed to be the general thoughts, behaviors, and opinions of all the high school special education teachers in the state.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study aimed to describe the persistence of veteran high school special education teachers in a large urban school district in Georgia. Specifically, it sought to describe the environmental fit, mindset, and motivational factors that encouraged their persistence in a challenging educational environment. Replicating this study in suburban and rural public school districts in Georgia that have non-fully accredited schools would be beneficial to the educational community. Suburban school districts are found in areas adjacent to or surrounding a city, and rural school districts are found in areas with smaller populations (Castro, 2014). These school districts could have a different population make-up and different socioeconomic status, which could impact the study results. Replicating this study in other types of school districts in Georgia would help all educational stakeholders develop a complete understanding of the challenges and the differences in the challenges teachers face in urban, suburban, and rural school districts, why teachers remain despite the difficulties, and how they overcome these difficulties to continue to persist in their chosen environments.

The described research study could also be replicated using veteran or novice teachers who have decided to leave their challenging educational environment. Replicating the study using participants who left their environment after persisting for some time would help identify what factors encourage teachers to leave and what can be done in challenging educational environments to ensure teachers are encouraged to persist. Replicating the study using teachers, veterans, and novices who left the described environment would help educational stakeholders understand if there is a correlation between the factors that promote retention and the factors that

promote attrition, helping them develop a deeper understanding of what needs to occur in educational environments to ensure that teacher retention is being promoted.

Completing additional research on the persistence of veteran teachers in urban, fully accredited public schools in Georgia could help identify the differences and similarities in what helps increase teacher retention in the different educational environments. It could also help identify if certain characteristics of teachers allow them to persist in different types of educational environments. The educational community could also benefit from this study being replicated in the states surrounding Georgia and other regions in the United States. The described study was completed in eastern Georgia. Different states within the country have populations with differences in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Other states also have different accountability standards for schools, different requirements for educators, and different resources, which could impact teachers' persistence in the described environment.

Lastly, a quantitative research study could be completed on the impact of teachers' persistence on student success in a large urban school district in Georgia. The methodological limitations of qualitative research prevent the findings in this study from being generalized from the sample to the population of veteran special education teachers. It is recommended that quantitative research be undertaken to expand the application of the findings in this study and assess their generalizability. Quantitative research using a sufficiently large, random sample of veteran special education teachers and a validated instrument may be used to confirm or disconfirm the findings in this study and their generalizability. If the findings in this study were confirmed through quantitative research, the applicability of the recommendations based on them to the broader population of high school teachers would be strengthened. It was a further methodological limitation in this study that the transferability of the results to other populations

and settings must be confirmed on a case-by-case basis pending quantitative confirmation of the findings' generalizability. It is recommended that the study be replicated using samples of elementary and middle school veteran special education teachers to assess the transferability of the findings in this study. Replication of this research using samples from related but distinct populations has the potential to indicate refinements that might broaden the applicability of the findings and recommendations in this study.

Conclusion

The aim of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession. The central phenomenon under investigation was defined as the events and incidents that influence the decision-making process of special education high school teachers who remain in the special education profession for more than 4 years. Despite research examining the problem of special education teacher shortages, special education retention rates remain low. In the present study, several key findings emerged from the study that may have significance for many individuals in the field of special education. This investigation of the lived experiences of veteran special education teachers may produce new insights for policies and practice that could improve the retention of special education teachers and thereby reduce shortages.

According to the findings from this study, special education students are often labeled as "loving to learn" and "superhumans" and experienced growth in the classroom setting, which acted as one of the key motivators for teachers in the special education field. Teachers decided to enter this profession due to prior experience working in institutions with individuals with disabilities since most of these teachers started their journey as paraprofessionals. Secondly, special education teachers often receive a high degree of autonomy over their class design and

lesson plans; the biggest deterrent unanimously is the sheer amount of paperwork expected of special education teachers.

This study found that special education teachers often utilize meditation, exercise, and work–life balance as some of the ways to relieve anxiety caused by the nature of their job. Special education teachers often recommend the hiring of paraprofessionals in the field of special education to support the department’s endeavors and frequently complain about the lack of specialized training. There remains a notable shortage of skilled staff including administrators, leaders, and paraprofessionals in special education schools. As a result, special education teachers look to strong social support aids to help them navigate the difficulties and challenges they face.

According to the present study, most special education teachers who work in this field are motivated to work with students with special needs because they view them as loving human beings and superhumans. The study revealed that very few special education teachers are willing to walk out of the profession and are more motivated than ever before. Even though the field of special education is characterized by challenges like any other profession, teachers in this field are more motivated compared to other fields of teaching because of the nature and kind of learners with whom they work within their day-to-day experience of teaching.

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APPENDICES**Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 23, 2021

Harold Russell
Gail Collins

Re: Modification - IRB-FY19-20-350 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EXPERIENCES OF VETERAN HIGH SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO REMAIN IN THE PROFESSION

Dear Harold Russell, Gail Collins:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY19-20-350 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EXPERIENCES OF VETERAN HIGH SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO REMAIN IN THE PROFESSION.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to utilize the online platform StudyFind to recruit participants has been approved.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Date:

Dear Teacher:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of my doctoral degree. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers in an urban setting to remain in the teaching profession. I am writing to invite you to participate in the study.

To participate, you must be 21 – 65 years old, a current high school special education teacher who has at least 5 years of experience teaching at the high school level, and currently teaching special education instruction to students in both inclusionary classrooms and separate special education classrooms. Participants will be asked to complete an interview, participate in a focus group consisting of 7 participants or a focus group consisting of 8 participants, and provide written answers to 2 questions. I will audio and video-record the interview and the focus group for transcription. You will be asked to review your transcripts for accuracy. This should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups will be emailed together to you 1 week after the conclusion of the interview or focus group. If you make any corrections, you will email the transcript to me within 10 days of receipt. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes and the focus group will take approximately 1 hour. The written responses to the 2 questions will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and will need to be returned via email to me 1 week after you receive them at the interview. I will request your name and other identifying information from you, but the information will remain confidential.

If you would like to participate in the study, please complete a screening survey to determine if you meet the inclusion criteria for the study. The screening survey is available at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/QZXY5XX>. I will email you to let you know if you have been selected to participate in the study.

A consent document will be attached to the notification email if you are selected for the study. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please type your name on the provided line and return the consent document to me by email before your interview. The consent document will be signed at the time of the interview.

If you have any questions, please contact me at hrussell1@liberty.edu or (770)-596-6992.

Sincerely

Harold Russell
Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Appendix C: Screening Questionnaire

Screening Survey for Special Education Teachers

Following is a brief questionnaire to determine if you meet the inclusion criteria for a study investigating the experiences influencing veteran special education teachers to remain in the teaching profession. None of the following information will be included in the research data.

These questions are designed to ensure diversity among participants.

Top of Form

.Please fill in your name

.What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

.What is your race/ethnicity

- White or Caucasian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian or Asian American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Another race

.Have you taught special education for 5 years or longer?

- Yes

No

.Have you taught in the same school district for the past 5 years?

Yes

No

.Have you taught only special education for more than 4 years?

Yes

No

.Have you taught special education only in high school for more than 4 years?

Yes

No

.Are you currently teaching special education in both inclusionary and separate special education classes?

Yes

No

.Please provide your preferred means of communication

Email Address

Phone Number

.Day of the week and time that works best for you for an interview

.Day of the week and time that works best for you for a focus group

Bottom of Form

Appendix D: Emails Following Completion of the Screening Survey

Email to Individuals Selected for Participation in the Study

Dear (Special Education Teacher Name)

RE: Participation in a research study investigating experiences influencing veteran special education high school teachers to remain in the teaching profession

Thank you for completing the screening form for this study. You have been selected for participating in the study. Attached you will find a consent form to be completed as a requirement for participation in the study. The consent form contains additional information about your role in the research. Please complete the form and return it to me by email with your name typed in the form. Before the interview, I will ask you to sign the informed consent form. After completing the form, I will be in contact with you to schedule an interview and a focus group session.

Harold Russell
PhD candidate
Liberty University

Email to Individuals Not Selected for Participation in the Study

Dear (Special Education Teacher Name)

RE: Participation in a research study investigating experiences influencing veteran special education high school teachers to remain in the teaching profession

Thank you for completing the screening form for this study. Regretfully, you have not been selected for participation in this study. I appreciate your interest in participating in the study.

Harold Russell
PhD candidate
Liberty University

Appendix E: Consent Form for Participants

A Phenomenological Study of Experiences of Veteran High School Special Education Teachers Who Remain In the Profession

Harold Russell
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study seeking to understand the experiences of special education teachers who have remained in the teaching profession for 4 years or more. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 21 – 65 years old, a current high school special education teacher who has at least 5 years of experience teaching at the high school level and currently teaching special education instruction to students in both inclusionary classrooms and separate special education classrooms. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Harold Russell, a doctoral candidate at the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences influencing veteran high school special education teachers in an urban setting to remain in the teaching profession. Improving the understanding of the way experiences of special education teachers can contribute to the decision to remain in the teaching profession can help develop strategies to improve special education teacher retention.

Procedures: If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you for the following things:

1. Participate in an audio and video-recorded interview taking place on the internet through Zoom lasting approximately 45 minutes.
2. Participate in either one-hour audio and a video-recorded focus group with 7 other veteran special education teachers or one-hour audio and a video-recorded focus group with 8 other veteran special education teachers taking place on the internet through Zoom.
3. Provide written responses to two questions concerning your experiences as special education teachers. This should take about 30 minutes. You will need to return the answers via email to me 1 week after you receive the questions at the interview.
4. Once the interview and focus group are completed, the recorded data will be transcribed. I will email you a copy of the transcription of the interviews and the focus group at the same time for you to review for accuracy one week after the conclusion of the interview or focus group. You will have the opportunity to make corrections to the transcript and return the corrected transcript by email. Please return the transcripts 10 days after you receive them to ensure any corrections you make will be included in the data of the study. You will have the opportunity to give final approval of the transcript with any changes you made. This procedure should take about 30 minutes.

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

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

The findings of the study may also benefit society by developing policies that can improve the retention of special education teachers.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in the study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked cabinet and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic and physical records will be destroyed.
- 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.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationships 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.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address 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.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Harold Russell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at www.liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Gail Collins, at www.liberty.edu

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.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: 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-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix F: Interview Questions

The standardized open-ended interview questions were as follows:

1. What experiences led you to the field of special education?
2. What are some of the experiences that led you to remain in the field of special education?
3. What are some of your most memorable experiences with students?
4. What are some of your most memorable experiences with colleagues?
5. How have your experiences as a special education teacher measured up to your expectations of the profession?
6. How do your experiences influence your career decisions?
7. How do your experiences influence your attitude towards special education?
8. What is your experience of the way others view your profession as a special education teacher?
9. What is your experience of control over your teaching methods?
10. What are some of your experiences as a special education teacher that you find most satisfying?
11. How would you describe your experiences with the support you receive from administrators and colleagues?
12. Please describe your experiences with family and friends concerning your career in special education.
13. What are some of your experiences as a special education teacher that you find least satisfying?
14. What experiences have you had as a special education teacher that can shed insight on strategies schools can use to retain special education teachers?
15. What experiences were the most influential on your decision to remain as a special education teacher?
16. Please describe your experiences with coping with the stress associated with teaching in special education.
17. What experiences with professional development have been influential in your decision to remain a special education teacher?

Appendix G: Focus Group Questions

The guiding questions for the focus group were as follows:

1. What made you select special education as a teaching specialty?
2. What are the most important positive experiences you have had as a special education teacher?
3. What experiences have led you to remain in the field of special education?
4. What is your attitude towards teaching special education?
5. What do others think about your profession as a special education teacher?
6. How much control do you have over the way you teach special education?
7. What experiences have increased your satisfaction with special education?
8. What experiences have decreased your satisfaction with special education?
9. What were the positive aspects of your work environment in the school?
10. What were the negative aspects of your work environment in the school?

Appendix H: Written Prompt

The prompts for participant journals are shown below.

Please take approximately 15 minutes for each of the following prompts to describe yourself as a special education teacher and return the responses to me by email within one week.

1. Please write about the experience you believe was most important for your decision to remain as a special education teacher.
2. Please write about an experience you believe reflects the greatest challenge to special education teacher retention.

Appendix I: Researcher's Reflective Journal

Date	Journal Entry
June 2019	I met with my Chair (Dr. Collins) through Webex. Dr. Collins informed me of the SOE expectations and decided to become my chairperson. I received a note (Dr. Cox) accepted to Cochair (July 2019)
February 2020	I received permission to begin research from the participating school system.
September 2020	I received approval from the IRB Board. A change to the protocol was done to get approval to go from face-to-face to virtual for data collection. The approval was given from the IRB board to approve the change in October 2020.
November 2020	I began recruiting for data collection and using the Survey Monkey platform to recruit participants for my study. There was a delay in collecting data due to my school system halting the research process. I had to use alternate means with other schools to complete.
February 2021	I completed the first teacher interview with Aliana. The first interview was lengthy, I had to direct the teacher to stay on the topic. What strikes me about Aliana is her calm and composed demeanor.
March 2021	Completed the second teacher interview with Charlton. Charlton appears nervous but provided great responses to the questions. He appeared to have developed communication skills, given his experiences as a paraprofessional.
March 2021	I completed the third teacher interview with Danila. The interview took less than an hour which I was pleased with since it was the time I had projected. The teacher provide a wealth of information on the research questions.
April 2021	I completed the fourth teacher interview with Hayley. She appeared calm and composed towards the research questions. The teacher was very knowledgeable regarding behavioral interventions that help students learn daily life skills.
May 2021	I completed the fifth teacher interview with John. The teacher appeared to take a detailed approach in responding the research question. He consistently appeared to pride himself on his organizational skills.

June 2021	I completed the sixth teacher interview with Jules. She seemed to be assertive and vocal about her response to the research questions. She appeared to be pleasant after having a taught a full day of school.
June 2021	I completed the seventh teacher interview with Karen. Karen is very passionate about special education. She kept on reminding me about her vision in bringing out the best in students and to contribute to their general well-being.
July 2021	I completed the eighth teacher interview with Linda. Linda has a very empathetic and diligent personality. Her interest in special education emerged from her early personal experiences with non-verbal individuals who were unable to articulate their needs. She had an incident in which a non-verbal individual tore his room apart just because he was unable to make others understand that he had a headache. Because of these experiences, she became very passionate about bringing out the artistic side in her students that can help them to communicate.
August 2021	I completed the ninth teacher interview with Miata. Miata strongly believes in self-sufficiency, and she strives to help her students with the same. It was for this reason that she pursued a PhD, to learn more about behavioral and other interventions to assist her students to become independent. She adheres to the notion that their independence will allow them to become fundamental parts of society.
August 2021	I completed the 10th teacher interview with Abelia. This interview was rescheduled several times. The teacher was apologetic. I am happy we finally agreed on a time since she provided much insight to the research question.

Appendix J: Audit Trail

Date	Events that occurred throughout this study
June 2019	I met with my Chair (Dr. Collins) through WebEx. Dr. Collins informed me of the SOE expectations and decided to become my chairperson. I received a note (Dr. Cox) accepted to Cochair (July 2019)
February 2020	I received permission to begin research from the participating school system.
September 2020	I received approval from the IRB Board. A change to the protocol was done to get approval to go from face-to-face to virtual for data collection. The approval was given from the IRB board to approve the change in October 2020.
November 2020	I began recruiting for data collection and using the Survey Monkey platform to recruit participants for my study. There was a delay in collecting data due to my school system halting the research process. I had to use alternate means with other schools to complete.
July 2021	A new dissertation template was introduced by the Liberty University School of Education Department. I began using it for Chapters 4 and 5
August 2021	Data collection is complete; I began transcribing data and coding themes.
February 2022	I submitted a completed proposal with Chapters 1 through 5 for review. There were numerous revisions done in March and April
April 2022	I received a dissertation agreement contract from Dr. Collins and the SOE department.
May 1 2022	I submitted my dissertation for review.