SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER BURNOUT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF

THE CHALLENGES THAT INFLUENCE MOTIVATION

by

Sarah Margaret Vaughan

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the challenges that lead to special education teacher burnout and how these challenges influence the motivation of special education teachers in North Georgia. In this study, factors that lead to special education burnout were generally defined as potential challenges, such as quality teacher preparation, inadequate professional development, and lack of administrative support, and how these challenges impact motivation and extrinsic influences of special education teachers. The theory that guided this study was Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which allowed for a deeper understanding of motivation and how intrinsic and extrinsic influencers affected a person and their willingness to continue to work in a difficult profession. The foundations of motivation were characterized predominantly through introspective means, therefore, aligning this study to qualitative methodology. The study occurred in two public pre-K through 12th grade schools in North Georgia. Participants of this study were 10 special education teachers with varying ethnicities, genders, ages, backgrounds, and student exceptionalities. The central research questions explored how special education teachers in North Georgia describe the effects that professional challenges have on their motivation to continue in the field. Data collection was completed through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and audio journaling. Data was analyzed using a modified version of Spradley's (1976) thematic content analysis. Participants from this study reported several factors that contributed to the loss of motivation, as well as factors needed to maintain motivation. The leading causes for loss of motivation were lack of support, paperwork, and exhaustion. The elements needed to encourage motivation were recognition and support, money, more time, and witnessing student progress.

Keywords: special education teachers, motivation, self-determination theory, burnout

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First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, who have helped guide me and always pushed me to always prioritize my education. Dad, thank you for laying the foundation for every opportunity that I have had and thank you for your never-ending support when I needed it the most. Mom, thank you for instilling your love of education in me and teaching me to have acceptance of all children and how to advocate for them. You two have always been my biggest cheerleaders, and I could not have done this with your help and love. I would also like to thank Trey for your unwavering support and helping me find the time to make this possible. Thank you for always being a listening ear and celebrating with me along the way. This has been a difficult, long journey, but you were there with me every step of the way. I am here because of the three of you and will eternally be grateful for everything you all have done for me.

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List of Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Extended School Year (ESY)

Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

All teachers face a multitude of challenges during their years in the classroom, but special education teachers seem to have an even more daunting experience. The field of special education can be tough to keep up with due to its constantly changing rules, regulations, and methods coupled with the difficulties that teachers face while trying to teach students (Mastropieri, 2001). Each of these challenges may lead to burnout for many special education teachers. Ninety-eight percent of school districts within the United States of America have reported a shortage of special education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017, 2019). Research has been conducted regarding the challenges and burnout rates that special education teachers face, but limited research has been conducted on how to implement this information to create best practice approaches and external influences that keep special educators from moving to a new profession. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field. The theory that guides this study is Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory that allows for a deeper understanding of motivation and how intrinsic and extrinsic influencers affect a person and their willingness to continue to work in a difficult profession. Chapter One includes a brief overview of the historical, social, and theoretical context related to the challenges of special education teachers, such as teacher preparation, professional development, administrative support, and how these lead to burnout. Following the background of the study is the problem statement, the historical, social and theoretical context of the study, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, research questions, and the definitions of key terms.

Background

Special education has always been a challenging profession. Between the large range of student needs that must be addressed and accurately managed across a multitude of contexts, to the lack of support from administration, special education teachers face many struggles and challenges that are daunting (Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Special education has come a long way in the past few decades (Yell et al., 2018), but several issues must be addressed to retain teachers in the field. Since the revision of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, which legally mandated special education teachers to be highly qualified, the responsibilities for them have grown immensely (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). The shortage of special education teachers affects many areas of education, from school districts to preparation programs, to students with disabilities (Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2007; Tilos, 2019). By describing the challenges that special education teachers face that lead to burnout and determining intrinsic and extrinsic motivational influences that affect these teachers, best practice approaches can be developed to understand what can be done to keep educators in the field. Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory guides this study to allow an understanding of how intrinsic and motivation influencers affect a person and their willingness to continue to work in a difficult profession (Gagné & Deci, 2005). To grasp the extent of the problem, understanding the historical framework, social context, and theoretical foundations of the challenges that special education teachers endure is imperative.

Historical Context

The history of special education has changed over time and has improved the quality of life and education for individuals with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Before the 60s and 70s, public school settings could reject students with disabilities until the student entered the fifth

grade (Yell et al., 2018). School personnel that deemed students as "feeble-minded" (Yell et al., 2018, p. 220) did not believe that a child would benefit from public education and would cause a hindrance to teachers and other students (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 2018). Advocates worked hard to help children with disabilities and to give them the same rights as other students. In the 1960s and 1970s, supporters and parents fought for the rights of their children with physical and intellectual disabilities to be given the opportunity to receive an education in the same manner as those who were neuro-normally functioning (Yell et al., 2018). During the 1960s and 1970s, only 20% of students with disabilities were obtaining public educational services (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 2018). Instruction for these students with disabilities had not been individualized.

In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the IDEA to provide students with disabilities a right to public education (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 2018). IDEA is the law that requires public schools to appropriately educate students with disabilities in the most opportune setting for each individual student (O'Brien et al., 2019). IDEA mandates appropriate and free education for all individuals with disabilities with an individualized plan to address each need of the student. After the IDEA was signed into effect, the obligations for special education teachers increased to meet the needs of each student and to legally follow the regulations of IDEA (Mastropieri & Scruggs 2018; Skiba et al., 2008). Special education is now a federally and state funded service where schools are required to provide academic services to students in compliance with the IDEA (O'Brien et al., 2019).

The field of special education has evolved since the 1960s; however, special education teachers still struggle to meet the demands and requirements asked of them in the field (Billingsley, 2004). Special education is a field that is relatively new in comparison to similar

disciplines, such as general education (Landrum et al., 2014; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Though the field is more recently developed, special education teacher shortages have been an issue for decades, with no end in sight (Nichols et al., 2008). Historically, special education teachers experienced the greatest amount of stress when compared to general education teachers (Billingsley, 2004). The problem is that the number of challenges that special education teachers encounter, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support could be contributing to diminished motivation, leading to high burnout rates in the field (Bettini et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Special education teachers face different types of demands and responsibilities than general education teachers (Bettini et al., 2018). Due to the stress and high demands that teaching students with special needs brings, almost one-third of educators are more likely to leave the field within their first 3 years of teaching (Conley & You, 2016). Each year, schools all over America struggle to find qualified special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020). Teachers and administration are not the only individuals who are affected, but lack of teacher retention so dramatically affects the students' success (Aldosiry, 2020).

Social Context

Many different factors contribute to the high teacher burnout rates that special educators face. Support from administration, teacher preparation, and professional development are all to blame (Aldosiry, 2020). Researchers found that the top reasons that contribute to special education teacher burnout includes lack of support by administration, lack of preparation by professional development, and insufficient teacher preparation by higher education programs (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Cancio et al., 2018; Cornelius et al., 2019; Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020; Papi, 2018;

Sweigart & Collins, 2017). By examining each of these challenges and how they lead to special education teacher burnout, researchers can potentially create and implement strategies that can be used to retain these teachers and reduce the amount of burnout that the field faces.

Nationwide, school districts struggle to find and keep special education teachers (Consalvi, 2020). Ninety-eight percent of school districts within the United States of America have reported a shortage of special education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2017, 2019). The shortage affects all regions of the United States and approximately 300,000 to 400,000 special education teacher positions are waiting to be filled (Peyton et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2007). Studies showed that 7.4% of special education teachers move to general education after their 1st year of teaching special education and 9.3% leave the field entirely (Aldosiry, 2020; Consalvi, 2020; Thornton et al., 2007). Vacancies for special education teacher positions tend to be higher in certain geographic locations, school settings, disability categories, and school characteristics (Peyton et al., 2020).

Research-based practices are the notion that professional practices should be built on scientific evidence that addresses the variety of student needs (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Williamson et al., 2019). Researched-based practices were created to assist teachers in addressing the wide range of disabilities that students may have (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Due to the lack of qualified special education teachers that are willing to stay in the field, little evidence is available to support the benefit and use of these effective practices in the classroom (Cancio et al., 2018; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). As a result, teachers are unable to facilitate high quantities of student success (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Research is limited regarding unqualified special education teachers' effect on students with disabilities. However, state testing proves that students with mild to moderate

disabilities fail to make sufficient academic progress in general education classrooms (Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). A student's ability to succeed in school, combined with the nationwide special education teacher shortage, needs to be addressed, and a strategy needs to be developed for there to be an end in sight.

Theoretical Context

A large number of research studies has been conducted regarding the challenges and burnout rates that special education teachers face (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Cancio et al., 2018; Cornelius et al., 2019; Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020; Papi, 2018; Sweigart & Collins, 2017), but limited research has been conducted on how to implement this information to create best practice approaches and external influences that will keep special educators from moving to a new profession. The self-determination theory and cognitive evaluation theory examined motivation within a person and how it can affect behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). Each theory uses motivational concepts that establish intellectual, affective, and behavioral variables, looking closely at intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation is instinctive, but the development and preservation of it depends on environmental and societal conditions that are around an individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Special education teachers accept many issues and struggles throughout the day that undermine intrinsic motivation, therefore, decreasing the drive that these teachers once had (Gagné & Deci, 2005), leading to burnout at rapid rates. By identifying how the drive and the constructs of motivation influence special education teachers, researchers can potentially calculate and control the rate of burnout within the field. To understand why a large number of special education teachers leave the field, researchers need a better understanding of an

individual's basic psychological desires that keeps one in the field (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The self-determination theory includes three pertinent needs to achieve motivation and self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The self-determination theory indicates the need for autonomy to make personal growth, in the sense that people feel self-determined and as though they control their personal goals and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Having control of one's life and having the ability to self-direct contributes to being motivated enough to be able to take action in one's life . Self-determination theory also indicates the need of competence to make growth, because humans need to have knowledge of skills to be successful. Once people have knowledge of these skills, they are more likely to take necessary steps to achieve the goals that they have in mind for themselves. The self-determination theory addresses how relatedness is needed to make growth because of the human desire to have a sense of connection or correlation toward others. These desires to create and maintain relationships derive from human nature, and motivation is a direct link by allowing others to give a person encouragement and support.

Problem Statement

Special education teachers face a number of challenges, including teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support, could be contributing to the diminish of motivation, leading to high burnout rates in the field (Bettini et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 1985). With a high demand for special education teachers across the United States, the understanding of how motivation affects the drive of special education teachers and their ability to continue to work under difficult circumstances is vital (Brownell et al., 2010; Cancio et al., 2018; Papi, 2018; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). By choosing to study special education teachers with a wide range of experiences, essential information can be gathered on how their motivation for their job

changes and how quickly it can change, depending on the demands that they face, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support (Billingsley, 2004). Conducting new research is vital to review the challenges, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support, to understand how they lead to burnout for special education teachers and how to make appropriate changes (Bettini et al., 2019). In an attempt to understand the perceptions of what leads to burnout, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a substantial role in exploring the challenges that special education teachers face. Limited research has been conducted on how internal and external influences motivate special education teachers and if these motivators can be used to keep special education teachers from leaving the profession.

According to the cognitive evaluation theory, a sub construct of the self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is instinctive, but the development and preservation of it depends on environmental and societal conditions that are around an individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). If external factors do not uplift intrinsic motivation, the motivation will most likely diminish. Special education teachers accept many issues and struggles throughout the day that undermine intrinsic motivation, therefore, decreasing the drive that these teachers once had (Bettini et al., 2019; Garwood et al., 2018; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Lujan, 2020) and leading to burnout at rapid rates. In a previous study, special education teacher burnout was defined by three components, which are personal accomplishment, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion (Robinson et al., 2019). Each of the three components are direct factors that hinder both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The self-determination theory has not been applied to special education teacher burnout, but previous research calls for a better understanding of why attrition of special education teachers is so prevalent (Boujut et al., 2017).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field. In this study, motivation to continue in the field will be generally defined as the challenges that can affect the drive of special education teachers, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support and how these challenges influence the motivation and extrinsic influences of special education teachers. The theory that guides this study is Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory that allows for an understanding of motivation and how intrinsic and extrinsic influencers affect a person and their willingness to continue to work in a difficult field.

The self-determination theory addresses three pertinent needs to achieve motivation and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). They are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Each of these factors are needed to understand motivation and what influences can be used to increase it in the workplace. Looking at teacher's essential psychological needs in the terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness could potentially explain how the challenges, such as teacher preparation, administrative support, and professional development, diminish the motivation of special education teachers that lead to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Klassen et al., 2012). If a special education teacher does not feel any of these three challenges, the self-determination theory can explain how and why motivation plays a key role in the high number of teacher burnout seen in special education (Klassen et al., 2012).

Significance of the Study

This study is guided by Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which presented a distinct approach to the main reasons that the field of special education faces high

rates of teacher burnout. By discussing the reasons for special education teacher burnout and pairing it with the self-determination theory, this study will offer theoretical, empirical, and practical significance to enhance motivation within the field of special education. Practically, through this study, the goal is to address the need for researching the challenges that special education teachers face, and how the challenges affect motivation, which could be beneficial to key stakeholders, administrators, educators, and to those who work in higher education to prepare teachers. Empirically, this study is an attempt to investigate the gap in the literature regarding how motivation affects special educator's decision to remain in the field. Theoretically, this study addresses the challenges that can potentially affect special education teachers and their motivation by using Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory to frame this research. This study is vital, considering the areas of significance, and is reflective of a pertinent investigation that is receptive to the current special education teacher shortage and determining methods to lessen special education teacher attrition.

Theoretical Significance

Previous studies applied the self-determination theory in education, but the theory has been mostly used when researching the relationship between teachers and students and when researching the motivation of new teachers (Kaplan, 2021; Ulstad et al., 2018). Researchers found that the competences of psychological need fulfillment led to autonomous motivation and ideal function (Kaplan, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2018). The self-determination theory has not been used to describe special education teacher's burnout experiences and their motivations to stay in the field. Special education teachers face stressful, more difficult jobs than general education teachers (Hopman et al., 2018). If autonomy, competence, and relatedness fuel motivation and are needed for basic psychological needs, this study will provide data that describes special

education teachers' burnout experiences and their motivations to stay or not stay in the field. The self-determination theory emphasizes the importance of how motivation and the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors affect a person's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2018). Based on the amount of stress and emotional exhaustion that special education teachers struggle with (Hopman et al., 2018), this study can assist researchers and educators in providing benchmark best practice approaches to addressing special educators' burnout experiences and their motivation to continue in the field.

Empirical Significance

Empirically, special education teacher burnout is a subject area that has been largely researched (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Cancio et al., 2018; Cornelius et al., 2019; Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020; Papi, 2018; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). A prior researcher suggested finding the challenges that special education teachers face and how these challenges led to burnout (Wong et al., 2017). Rather than focus solely on the challenges that special education teachers experience, the objective of this study is to determine the effects of motivation, including intrinsic and extrinsic influences on a special education teacher, and how motivation disrupts their drive in the workplace, which can lead to burnout. Special education teachers deal with many challenges that cause stress, emotional exhaustion, lack of support, feelings of seclusion and loneliness, lack of personal accomplishment, and poor job satisfaction (Cancio et al., 2018; Duli, 2016; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020). Each of these challenges hinder a person's drive and ability to maintain motivation, which could be the underlying cause of the high rates of special education teacher burnout (Hopman et al., 2018).

Practical Significance

Special education teacher shortages affect school districts nationwide (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Each year, school districts struggle financially and personally to replace special education teachers that previously resigned (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). By gaining an understanding of how special education teachers describe the challenges that diminish their motivation from staying in the field, best practices approaches can be developed and implemented to increase special education attrition, which would help school districts and teachers nationwide (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Prior studies indicated that more research discussing the reasons behind special education teacher shortages are necessary (Boe & Cook, 2006; Garwood et al., 2018; Sweigart & Collins, 2017).

Research Questions

The research questions below guide this phenomenological study to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field.

Central Research Question

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their motivation to continue in the field?

Specific research focused on situational, demographic, and environmental factors (Brittle, 2020), while other researchers addressed how special education teachers face a lack of clearness in their roles, growing or large caseloads, feelings of seclusion and loneliness, lack of administrative support, marginal collaboration with peers, and unnecessary paperwork (Cancio et al., 2018). Investigating these challenges and how they lead to burnout can provide the chance to create best practice approaches that can be implemented to decrease the number of special education teachers leaving the profession.

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of self-contained teachers who chose to continue in the field? Special education teachers have an extremely demanding job, and qualified special education teachers remaining in the field is a rarity (Billingsley, 2004; Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020). Previous studies determined that finding and questioning special education teachers who stay in the profession, and regularly describing the reasons that teachers decide to leave could all assist in the retention of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Lesh et al., 2017). By examining and describing the experiences of special education teachers who teach in a self-contained classroom, best practice approaches can be identified and provided to potentially reduce special education teacher attrition.

Sub-Question Two

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of autonomy in the field?

The self-determination theory addresses how autonomy, competence, and relatedness affect a person's motivation and can directly correlate to supporting the drive to persist (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theory indicates needing autonomy to make personal growth, in the sense that people need to feel as though they have self-determination and have control over their personal goals and actions. Having control of one's life and self directly relates to having motivation to take action in one's life. Special education teacher contentment is at an all-time low throughout the United States (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). The unhappiness of these teachers is contributing to the shortages, due to the desire to move to a new profession to find contentment. Lack of teacher satisfaction poses a threat to the field, due to the number of special educators that leave and move to a new career (Bettini et al., 2018). Examining motivation, as well as the intrinsic and

extrinsic influences, can provide opportunities to understand how these factors affect educator's decision to leave special education.

Sub-Question Three

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of competence in the field?

The self-determination theory indicates how autonomy, competence, and relatedness affect a person's motivation and can directly correlate to supporting the drive to persist (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theory indicates a need of having competence to make growth, because humans need to have knowledge of skills to be successful. Once a person has knowledge of these skills, they are more likely to take necessary steps to achieve the goals that they have in mind for themselves. Lack of teacher satisfaction poses a threat to the field, due to the sheer number of special educators that leave and move to a new career (Bettini et al., 2018). Examining motivation, as well as the intrinsic and extrinsic influences, can provide opportunities to understand how these affect educators' decision to leave special education.

Sub-Question Four

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of relatedness to others in the field?

The self-determination theory indicates how autonomy, competence, and relatedness affect a person's motivation and can directly correlate to supporting the drive to persist (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theory suggests that relatedness is needed to make personal growth because of the human desire to have a sense of connection or correlation toward others. These desires to create and maintain relationships derive from human nature and link to motivation by allowing others to give a person encouragement and support.

Special education teacher contentment is low all over the United States (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). The unhappiness of these teachers is contributing to the shortages, due to the desire to move to a new profession to find contentment. Lack of teacher satisfaction poses a threat to the field, due to the number of special educators that leave and move to a new career (Bettini et al., 2018). Examining motivation, as well as the intrinsic and extrinsic influences, can provide opportunities to understand how these affect educator's decision to leave special education.

Interventions and approaches have been created to reduce the rate of burnout for special education, but these approaches are not effective enough (Iancu et al., 2018). The high rate of burnout for special education teachers is concerning and needs to be discussed (Iancu et al., 2018). Exploring the challenges that special education teachers face can be used to generate different approaches to be executed with hopes of decreasing the high rate of burnout.

Definitions

1. *Autonomy* - the sense that people need to have self-determination and feel as though they control their personal goals and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

2. *Cognitive Evaluation Theory* - a sub construct within the self-determination theory, which focuses more on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how each of these factors can affect behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985a).

3. *Competence* - the need to have knowledge of certain skills to be successful and grow personally and professionally (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

4. *Extrinsic motivation* - external motivators that are directly related to and affect intrinsic motivation (Bates, 1979).

5. *Individualized Education Plan (IEP) -* a written educational plan for students whose ages range from 3 to 21 (Musyoka & Clark, 2017). The IEP identifies the goals, accommodations, and services the student needs to be prosperous in school (Musyoka & Clark, 2017).

6. *Intrinsic motivation -* internal motivation that can strongly affect a person and the drive that they are willing to put towards something (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

7. *Motivation -* the internal condition of being willing to work or act in a driven manner (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

8. *Professional Development -* a requirement for all educators to complete each school year, but the number depends on state regulations (Berry et al., 2011).

9. *Self-Determination Theory -* the theory that human motivation derives from attempting to make personal growths (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

10. *Relatedness -* the human desire to have a sense of connection or correlation towards and with others (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

Summary

Special education teachers face many challenges in their profession, and each of these challenges lead to faster rates of burnout (Ramasamy, 2019). These challenges can include administrative support, professional development, and teacher preparation programs. Almost one-third of special education teachers leave the field within the first years of teaching special education (Conley & You, 2016). By investigating the reasons for special education teacher burnout with the contributions of the self-determination theory, this study can contribute to the limited research on how to implement strategies to retain special education teachers. The problem is that the number of challenges that special education teachers encounter is

contributing to the high burnout rates that the field faces. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field. This chapter included a brief overview of the historical, social, and theoretical context related to the challenges of special education teachers, such as teacher preparation, professional development, administrative support, and how these can lead to burnout. Followed by the history is the problem, the purpose, the significance of the study, research questions, and the definitions of key terms found in this research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

According to Cancio et al. (2018) and Conley and You (2016), one-third of special education teachers leave the field within the first 3 years of teaching in a special education classroom. Due to this high turnover rate, special education teacher shortages are nationwide (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Billingsley, 2004). The shortage also directly affects the state of Georgia (*TSA*, 2021). Since 2018, Georgia has had a special education teacher shortage across all discipline areas in grades kindergarten through 12th grades (*TSA*, 2021). In 2021, the special education teacher shortage expanded, including pre-kindergarten, which places Georgia in need of special education teachers across all grades and disciplines. A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the problem of how the challenges that special education teachers face hinder their motivation within the workplace and led to special education teacher burnout. This chapter presents a review of the current literature related to the topic of study. In the first section, the self-determination theory is discussed to show the relevance of motivation and the cognitive evaluation theory which details internal and external influences within a person, followed by a synthesis of recent literature regarding common challenges of special education teachers, including teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support. Lastly, literature surrounding intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, and the challenges which led to the burnout of special education teachers is addressed. In the end, a gap existing in determining how the number of challenges that special education teachers encounter, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support, could be contributing to the diminish of motivation, leading to high burnout rates in the field (Bettini et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 1985), is addressed, presenting a viable need for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is pertinent to research because it effects the progression of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This literature review will focus on how motivation can affect special education teachers and how lack of motivation can contribute to burnout, which, in turn, leaves the field in need of quality special educators. By identifying how personal drive and the constructs of motivation influence special education teachers, researchers can review the challenges and intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impact special education teachers. Furthermore, potentially having more control over the burnout rate within the field can benefit all educational investors.

Self-Determination Theory

The self-determination theory is the theory that human motivation derives from tending to attempt to make growth within themselves (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theory includes motivational concepts that establish intellectual, affective, and behavioral variables. Deci and Ryan developed this working theory in 1985 with the belief that motivation is based on psychological needs as opposed to a composition of a non-nervous system needs, as a previous psychologist believed. Victor Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) is a previous theory that did not explain the motivational variable that persuades a person to have determination.

In 1964, Victor Vroom developed the expectancy theory that explains how behaviors can be considered to be conscious selections among alternative options, which is based on individual influences, such as skills, abilities, personality, experience, and knowledge (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) determined that a person's motivation can be directly affected by their expectations of their future (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) indicated that motivation is a construct of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence

(Gagné & Deci, 2005). Expectancy is one's belief that the amount of effort put forth will lead to specific performance objectives. Instrumentality is one's belief that, if the performance objectives were met successfully, then a desired outcome will be rewarded. Valence is the significance that one places on specific outcomes. Valence is unique to each individual, due to differences in personalities and opinions.

Individual human development can be characterized by integrating information, active engagement, finding assimilation within social groups, and behavior principles (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Derived from within the self-determination theory is the idea that active tendencies for internalization, intrinsic motivation, and social integration are complemented by detailed phenomenal fulfillments. The self-determination theory indicates three pertinent needs to achieve motivation and self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). These adjacent fulfillments reflect the principle of thriving and calculate several indicators of vitality and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Autonomy

Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are all needed to accomplish and maintain personal motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The theory addresses needing autonomy to make personal growth, in the sense that people feel self-determined and as though they control their personal goals and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Having control of one's life and self directly relates to being motivated to take action in one's life. Autonomy is different than having independence or self-sufficiency (Núñez & León, 2015). Autonomous behaviors are not based on a person's level of independence; rather, they are based on personal intentions and volitions of engaging and contributing to a behavior because they choose to, not out of coercion (Núñez & León, 2015). Having autonomy can allow people to believe that their behaviors

develop from within, as opposed to being the result of an outside influence (Martela & Riekki, 2018). Individuals with low autonomy have a diminished sense of initiative and personal choice, in which their behaviors are in response to other's stress, internal expectations, or self-induced pressures (Núñez & León, 2015).

Competence

Self-determination theory also addresses the need for competence to make growths because humans need to know skills to be successful (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When people have knowledge of these skills, they are more likely to take necessary steps to achieve the goals that they have in mind for themselves. Social behaviors can also refer to characteristics of competence (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Social competence can occur when people receive positivity from other people, such as praise or reassuring feedback, which encourages people to become more engaged socially. Alternatively, when people receive negativity from other people, such as criticism or adverse feedback, people are more likely to become disengaged or discouraged.

Relatedness

The self-determination theory addresses how relatedness is needed to make personal growth because of the human desire to have a sense of connection or correlation toward others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These desires to create and maintain relationships derives from human nature and directly links to motivation by allowing others to give a person encouragement and support. When people can connect with others, they have more motivation within them to act appropriately. Without the support of autonomy, competency, and relatedness, a person cannot sufficiently sustain motivation and intrinsic drive and may have a sense of neglect and frustration (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Connection

Looking at teachers' essential psychological needs in terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness could potentially explain how the challenges, such as teacher preparation, administrative support, and professional development, diminish the motivation of special education teachers and lead to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Klassen et al., 2012). If a special education teacher does not feel any of these three factors, the self-determination theory can explain how and why motivation plays a key role in the high number of burnouts seen in special education teachers (Klassen et al., 2012).

Previous studies applied the self-determination theory in education but when referring to the relationship between teachers and students and when researching the motivation of new teachers (Kaplan, 2021; Ulstad et al., 2018). Researchers suggest that the competencies of psychological needs fulfillment led to autonomous motivation and ideal function (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kaplan, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ulstad et al., 2018). The self-determination theory has rarely been applied to the rate of special education teacher's burnout and the rate that they leave the field. Special education teachers face stressful, more difficult jobs than general education teachers (Hopman et al., 2018). If autonomy, competence, and relatedness fuel motivation and are needed for basic psychological needs, the self-determination theory should be researched using special education attrition.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory

Within the self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan (1985a) developed a sub construct called the cognitive evaluation theory which focused on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how each of these factors can affect behavior. Cognitive evaluation theory is the idea that external work motivation can affect the internal motivation of a person (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation encompasses a person doing an activity or job because they find it

stimulating, developing a natural satisfaction from the activity itself (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In contrast, extrinsic motivation needs an instrumentality between an activity and a distinguishable outcome like verbal or tangible rewards. Therefore, extrinsic motivation does not produce satisfaction within itself but from the outcome to which completion of the activity provides. The cognitive evaluation theory uses distinction between controlled motivation and autonomous motivation. Intrinsic motivation can be an example of autonomous motivation. Autonomous motivation transpires when people fully approve and engage in an activity or behavior, experiencing feelings of choice and volition (Jones et al., 2019). Alternatively, controlled motivation happens when people feel forced into a task and feel pressure.

Controlled motivation and autonomous motivation are deliberate, but, together, they can be conflicting and result in the lack of motivation and intention of a person (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Researchers indicate that extrinsic motivators directly affect intrinsic motivators and can leave a person feeling unmotivated, having a diminished autonomy based on certain circumstances (Bates, 1979; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Autonomous motivation is vital within the workplace to improve and support workplace well-being and one's internal drive (Jones et al., 2019). When people internalize or assimilate a value into their own personal morals, the task at hand becomes more important to them, which ultimately effects their attitude and mindset towards completion of the task (Jones et al., 2019).

Intrinsic motivation can be the strongest factor affecting people and the drive that they are willing to put towards their jobs (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Researchers suggest that pressures, deadlines, commands, forced evaluations, and obligatory goals reduce intrinsic motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Special education teachers face each of these tasks on a regular basis, therefore, leading to a sense of diminished intrinsic motivation. Choices,

acceptance of outlooks, and chances for individualism were found to improve intrinsic

motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation can affect the feeling of autonomy, which

many workplaces struggle to create for their employees (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

According to the cognitive evaluation theory, competence cannot solely satisfy the need

for essential motivation, but autonomy or self-directed behavior is also needed to support

intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For a person to be motivated, external supports for

both competence and autonomy are required, and motivation is usually the outcome of a

preceding quality foundation created within a workplace (Bates, 1979). According to the

cognitive evaluation theory, intrinsic motivation is instinctive, but the development and

preservation of it depends on environmental and societal conditions that are around an individual

(Ryan & Deci, 2000). If external factors do not strengthen intrinsic motivation, a person's

motivation will most likely diminish. Special education teachers accept many issues and

struggles throughout the day that undermine intrinsic motivation, therefore, decreasing the drive

that these teachers once had (Gagné & Deci, 2005), leading to burnout at rapid rates.

Teachers with diminished motivation are more likely to be less organized than teachers

with more motivation, lacking in productivity, and making poor decisions (Gagné & Deci, 2005;

Ryan & Deci, 2000). Almost one-third of special education teachers leave the profession within

three years of starting their careers (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2018). With the high

number of special education teachers leaving (Bettini et al., 2017; Cancio et al., 2018), the

motivation among educators is a fascinating phenomenon. The self-determination theory and the

cognitive evaluation theory inform and guide this study by crafting research questions based on

the theories that inquire about special education teacher's motivation within their job and how

intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influence them (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Related Literature

The challenges that special education teachers face is a topic that has been thoroughly researched (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Bettini et al., 2018; Billingsley et al., 2004; Billingsley, 2004; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Working conditions directly affect the frequency at which special education teachers feel burnout, which can include location of school district, salary, job controllability, early career supports, the school climate, a heavy caseload, and wide range of characteristics of each student (Billingsley et al., 2004). Each of these challenges can openly impact the attrition of special educators by driving teachers to struggle under pressure, feel overworked and discontented, which may eventually lead to burnout (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Sweigart & Collins, 2017).

Common Challenges of Special Education Teachers

In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide students with disabilities the right to public education (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 2018). IDEA is the law that requires public schools to appropriately educate students with disabilities in the most appropriate setting for each individual student (O'Brien et al., 2019). After the IDEA was signed into effect, the obligations for special education teachers increased to meet the needs of each student and to legally follow the regulations of IDEA (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018; Skiba et al., 2008). Special education is a federally and state-funded service in regulation with IDEA (O'Brien et al., 2019). IDEA mandates proper and free education for all individuals with disabilities with an individualized plan to address each need of the student (O'Brien et al., 2019). Special education teachers provide students with disabilities curriculum that is adapted, modified, and differentiated lessons at different levels that are appropriate for each student (O'Brien et al., 2019).

Special education teachers typically have students in their class with a variety and ranges of disabilities and diagnoses (O'Brien et al., 2019). Special educators can make accommodations in several ways and not just by the way the curriculum is taught. Making accommodations to the curriculum can be very important but, depending on the student and their disability, special education teachers may need to do more for the student to be successful and have full access to what is being taught. Accommodations can be made by the way that the materials are presented or by the way the student responds. Accommodations can also be made by where the instruction is delivered, such as the location, or even just the number of peers the student is with when being instructed. Lastly, timing and scheduling are accommodations and ways to differentiate lessons that may need to be considered, such as extended amounts of time for tests, longer response times, or more frequent breaks throughout the instruction.

Special Education Teacher Shortage

Special education can be a difficult field and the number of qualified special educators that remain in the field is low (Billingsley, 2004). In 1983, the shortage of special education teachers was emphasized in *A Nation at Risk*, which addresses the decline in educational performance from students and teachers, and unfortunately, the shortage remains a nationwide problem (Nichols et al., 2008; *TSA*, 2021). Finding and maintaining special education teachers has not kept up with the continued growing number of students that have been identified with disabilities (Peyton et al., 2020). *About the Shortage* (2019), a website focusing on the national need for special educators and related services, addresses the high demand for special education teachers and support staff in all regions or the country. Teaching students with disabilities should be of the utmost importance, but the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated the acute need for highly qualified special educators. Due to the high shortages, students with disabilities have

greater difficulty reaching their full potential academically, and school districts must strive harder to prepare students to be ready for higher education and jobs. The first few years for special education, teachers can set the tone for their career, due to the vulnerability of the teacher (Billingsley, 2004; Peyton et al., 2020). Beginning special educators are typically more susceptible to workplace problems, receive insufficient support from peers and administration, and have an overload of responsibilities.

Since the introduction of IDEA in 1975 and the progression of special education, shortages of special education teachers continue to rise, which poses an ongoing concern for education agencies on a local, state, and federal level, due to the inability to find and retain special education teachers, including the lack of qualified special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017; Brownell et al., 2018; Vagi et al., 2019). According to IDEA's Assurance 14, schools have the ability to hire any individual as long as they hold a bachelor's degree (Sindelar et al., 2018). IDEA's Assurance 14 is a provision that allows school districts to hire teachers based on the promise that the teachers are working towards meeting IDEA regulations (Myers et al., 2020). If a special education teacher is not fully certified, the school district must provide assurances that the teacher is taking the appropriate steps to becoming fully certified special education teachers. While this may address special education teacher shortages, it does not support the quality of instruction that students with disabilities will receive (Sindelar et al., 2018). Furthermore, the vast need for special education teachers greatly effects the growing number of paraprofessionals who are required to offer adapted lesson materials, behavioral supports, and student instruction (Stewart, 2019).

The three-year turnover rate for special education teachers nationwide is roughly 25%, which is double that of the three-year turnover rate for general education teachers (Mathews et

al., 2017; Wong et al., 2017). Studies found that 22% of special education teachers leave the profession each year (Mathews et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2017). Due to this high rate of special education teacher attrition, determining teacher retention is vital to address the need for special educators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017). Previous studies determined that the supply of encouraging working conditions, finding and inquiring special education teachers who stay in the profession, and regularly describing the reasons that teachers decide to leave, could all assist in the retention of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Lesh et al., 2017).

Job Satisfaction

The self-determination theory suggests that autonomy or satisfaction affects a person's motivation and can directly correlate to maintaining the drive to persist in difficult situations (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Special education teacher satisfaction is low throughout the United States (Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Hughes (2019) reported that job satisfaction directly affects a special education teacher's commitment to remain in the profession. In a qualitative study, which included 296 special education teachers in Ohio, surveys were used to assess their satisfaction within their jobs (Hughes, 2019). Results included that most teachers reported to be satisfied in their current role, but if given the chance to move to another career, 79.4% stated they would leave the field. Results from this study also determined that special education teachers who received support from school administration and significant professional development were more likely to have greater feelings of job satisfaction than teachers who do not feel supported by administration and had insignificant professional development. The dissatisfaction of these teachers contributes to the shortages, which are extremely high, especially in the rural areas (Berry & Gravelle, 2018).

Qualified special education teacher shortage is up to 35% in the rural parts of the United States **(**Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Berry and Gravelle (2018) reported that special education teachers who felt a lack of satisfaction in their jobs was due to the large amount of responsibility that special education teachers have. In a quantitative study which included 203 specials education teachers, surveys were used to identify what special education teachers found challenging about their jobs **(**Berry & Gravelle, 2018). Data were analyzed using an across-case analysis method. Results demonstrated that special education teachers were dissatisfied with lack of resources, role confusion, lack of support from administration, and non-instructional role responsibilities.

Lack of teacher satisfaction poses a threat to the field, due to the number of special educators that leave and move to a new career (Bettini et al., 2018). The attrition of special education teachers stems from dissatisfaction of many different aspects of the job (Bettini et al., 2018). Many special education teachers feel discontent with the number of role obligations, paperwork, testing, problems with parents of students, and lack of time **(**Berry & Gravelle, 2018**).** Some teachers also described issues on the responsibilities regulated by the government, such as paperwork, state assessments, and meeting required benchmarks **(**Berry & Gravelle, 2018). According to Samuels (2022), a 2012 study indicated that 24% of special education teachers left due to the lack of support, burnout, and stress; 13% left their position to take a different position at another school or with another age group; and 27% left the field due to a wish to cut down on their responsibilities or to retire. Robinson et al. (2019) reported that the special education teacher shortage, combined with the high attrition rate, triggered an examination into special education teacher burnout. In this quantitative study, which included 363 public special education teachers from 34 states, participants completed a survey on burnout.

Data were analyzed by Canonical correlation to determine the statistical significance on how job satisfaction contributes to special education teacher burnout. Results included a significant correlation between the relationship of job satisfaction and special education teacher burnout.

Workload

Sheldrake (2013) reported that results of a survey, given to 200 special education teachers, showed excessive paperwork and large caseloads to be two leading issues that affect the attrition of special education teachers. Paperwork is a major challenge for special education teachers, contributing to feeling overwhelmed and deciding to leave the classroom profession (Billingsley, 2004). Teachers who are provided with enough time to finish their paperwork are more likely to stay in the field of special education (Billingsley, 2004). Samuels (2022) stated that, as teachers work with larger groups of students with disabilities, completing the extensive amounts of paperwork required by state, federal, and local governments under IDEA becomes increasingly more challenging. Every time a teacher receives a new student in their class, their workload increases immensely (Billingsley, 2004; Consalvi, 2020). Berry and Gravelle (2018) and DeMik (2008) examined the special education teacher shortage. In this case study, which included five participants, a narrative style inquiry was used to determine what led special education teachers to burnout. Data were collected using an ongoing process that included interviews, field notes, open coding, and axial coding. Results indicated that working conditions, excessive paperwork, lack of time for planning, and difficulty in meeting each student's individual needs contributed to special education teacher burnout.

In fact, special education teachers spend more time on paperwork than on planning instructional activities, averaging five hours per week focused solely on completing paperwork (Billingsley, 2004; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Billingsley (2004) found that special education

teacher attrition could potentially be established by the type of disability categories that a special education teacher has on their caseload, such as teachers of students with physical disabilities are less likely to experience burnout. In contrast, teachers of students with emotional disabilities were more likely to experience burnout (Billingsley, 2004; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). DeMik (2008) also reported that, special education teachers have more difficulty and find it more challenging to serve students with a wide range of needs, which had a poor impact on their commitment to the field.

In a previous study, Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2009) observed and documented the activities of 36 special education teachers. The study found that special education teachers spent an average of 12% of their day on paperwork, 15% of their time was consumed on instructional support, and 16% of their day was expended on academic instruction (Samuels, 2020; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2009). The study also noted that for certain teachers, paperwork was extreme, and they spent nearly 50% of their day completing it (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2009). Most special education teachers were discouraged by the amount of time spent on paperwork (Samuels, 2020; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2009). Their motivation for becoming a special education teacher was to make a difference in the lives of students with disabilities, which can be hard to do when the paperwork is so demanding (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2009).

Work Conditions

Working conditions also directly affect the rate at which special education teachers feel burnout, including salary, location of school district, job controllability, caseload physiognomies, early career supports, and the school climate (Billingsley et al., 2004; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Another notable challenge that special education teachers face is the large range of student needs, such as physical, medical, behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or teaching different

disability categories in one setting, with each area needing to be addressed and accurately

managed across a multitude of contexts (Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Currently, special education

teachers can be required to teach a diverse range of students with disabilities all in one

classroom, which can include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, specific learning

disabilities, deaf and hard of hearing, autism spectrum disorder, communication disorders,

blindness and low vision, emotional and behavior disorders, multiple and severe disabilities,

intellectual and developmental disabilities, special gifts and talents, and traumatic brain injury

(Council for Exceptional Children, 2019; Pullen & Hallahan, 2017). Most special education

teachers work with a multitude of different special education categories in one classroom setting,

so special education teachers must be prepared and knowledgeable on each category and have

the proper support to work with the numerous student populations (Brownell, 2018; Woolf,

2019).

The variety of special education teacher caseloads can be a leading cause of burnout and

stress within the profession (Matthews et al., 2017). Because of the large caseloads, reviewing

the number of students and disability categories that are placed in each classroom must be

reexamined to promote special education teacher attrition and deter teachers from feelings of

burnout (Matthews et al., 2017). At least 14% of public-school students, or six million students

with disabilities, receive special education services (*About the Shortage*, 2019). Arthur-Ofei

(2018) addressed the shortage of resources and materials that are needed to keep teachers and

students safe, discovering the negative effect that the lack of resources can have on the decisions

of special education teachers to continue teaching. By increasing safety for both teachers and

students and providing more resources and materials, special education teachers are more likely

to stay in the profession (Arthur-Ofei, 2018). Each of these conditions can create a myriad of

difficulties for special education teachers that can all lead to burnout. Previous researchers also indicated that one of the leading causes of attrition is unsupportive administration (Hester et al., 2020).

Other research proved that special education teachers feel as though they have too much responsibility and the pressure is too much to handle (Bettini et al., 2018). Billingsley (2007) discovered that 18% of special education teachers teaching in an urban district left their current position due to extreme discipline problems with their students, and an additional 11% left due to student behavioral issues, such as a lack of student engagement, absenteeism, and a diminished sense of motivation. Lack of progress, student behaviors, meeting the wide range of needs for each student, and poor relationships, have all been associated to increase stress, attrition, and burnout in special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Wong et al., 2017). Some of the pressures that special education teachers struggle with involve the students' behavioral skills and delivering academic instruction in a way that allowed students to have success in a general education setting (Bettini et al., 2018).

A definitive link has been found between special education teacher attrition and handling the challenges of students who exhibit difficult behaviors (Simbajon, 2018). Emotional exhaustion in special education teachers who work with students with behavior issues is reportedly higher than teachers who do not, which can lead to a lack of student success and student engagement (Simbajon, 2018). Each of these challenges directly affects the attrition of special educators by forcing teachers to struggle under pressure, feel overworked, and unsatisfied, which eventually leads to diminished motivation and potentially special education teacher burnout (Berry & Gravelle, 2018; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Sweigart & Collins, 2017).

Special Education Teacher Preparation

Special education teachers, like all teachers, must obtain a degree, complete a student teaching practicum, pass specific tests that are relevant to their state requirements, and receive licensure to teach before they are eligible to become teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Dewey et al., 2017). Due to the shortage, college programs for special education are not as difficult to join, and individuals enrolled in the program tend to have an easier time while in school, making it easier to graduate with less preparation (Dewey et al., 2017). After the students graduate and enter the special education field, they struggle with applying the instructional methods taught in the preparation program (Billingsley, 2004; Lujan, 2020). Although the shortage of qualified special educators is apparent, it is worsened by the need to expand the profession (Dewey et al., 2017; Nichols et al., 2008). New special education teachers have difficulty juggling responsibilities, working with new administration and general education teachers, and dealing with parents who might not understand how special education works nor support how the teacher is teaching (Billingsley, 2004; Dewey et al., 2017; Freeman et al., 2014). Billingsley (2004) discovered some preparation programs offer no help with any of these tasks while the teachers are in school and leave special education teachers starting off feeling unequipped and overwhelmed.

Research indicates that new special education teachers make and establish practices and routines that shape their careers that they may use for many years (Dewey et al., 2017). A study from the 1990s proved that, due to the many positions to be filled within special education, almost 10% of special education teachers were less than fully licensed in the area of their primary teaching position (Nichols et al., 2008). Therefore, some students in special education have never been taught by a fully licensed special education teacher (Hester et al., 2020; Nichols

et al., 2008). Certain higher education programs are not contributing to the success of these practices (Dewey et al., 2017).

Higher Education

All teachers are under pressure to ensure the success of their students by providing superior instruction, regularly observing the progress of each student, delivering differentiation in each lesson, and managing all student behaviors (Freeman et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020). Unfortunately, prior to the start of teachers' careers, they are not given sufficient classroom management training and often do not feel prepared to meet the demands of each student, effectively handling behaviors in the classroom (Freeman et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020). Teacher preparation programs often lack real experiences of what special education classrooms look like and what the responsibilities entail (Brownell et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2014). Special education teachers often feel overwhelmed, and studies showed that lack of preparation from special education programs is a crucial factor influencing the teacher's decision to leave the field altogether (Brownell et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020).

Mentors

Teacher induction programs that incorporate mentors for new teachers have proven to develop teacher practices and lessen attrition for the special education teaching profession (Cornelius et al., 2019). Studies also indicate that mentors should be provided for the new teachers who focus on their specific areas of certification (Cornelius et al., 2019; Lujan, 2020; Wasburn-Moses, 2006). Special education teachers who are ill-prepared have a higher chance of implementing less applicable teaching practices than their more experienced peers (Cornelius et al., 2019). Mentoring programs and teacher induction should incorporate more than simply appointing a teacher to help new teachers become acquainted to a new school (Goldrick, 2016).

Goldrick suggested that teacher induction programs should offer help to new teachers for a minimum of two years and should also incorporate professional development specific to the needs of each teacher, team collaboration, and evaluation of growth of the teaching standards.

Special education teacher induction programs that tend to be the most successful offer a rigorous mentor choice process, continuing support from selected mentors, and thorough professional development (Cornelius et al., 2019). Another study suggested induction programs solely for special education teachers that offer professional development on writing and implementing the individual education plan (IEP) and how to handle various problems that new teachers may encounter (Cornelius et al., 2019; Wasburn-Moses, 2006). If teacher induction programs offered special education teachers a chance to grow and thrive professionally, certain stressors that hinder new special educators will be significantly lowered (Vittek, 2015). Many first-year teachers experience feelings of isolation, along with lack of advice and support from fellow teachers, but, with the help of an effective mentoring program and induction program, some of those feelings can potentially be alleviated.

The first several years for special education teachers are the most critical when determining if the teacher will remain in the field or if they will change professions (Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020; Whitaker, 2000). Without the proper training and support, new special education teachers become overwhelmed and stressed with their jobs (Cornelius et al., 2019; Lujan, 2020; Mastropieri, 2001). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) found that 80% of 1st year special education teachers who were assigned qualified mentors continued in the classroom beyond five years. Raue and Gray (2015) discovered that 64% of 1st year special education teachers that were not assigned a qualified mentor left the field (Raue & Gray, 2015). Goldrick (2016) endorsed that a mentor be provided to new teachers at the beginning of the

school year, and the assigned mentors needed to teach the same disability area in a similar grade level to be the most effective. Due to the wide range of responsibilities and differences for each special education teacher, first year teachers should have a general education teacher and a special education teacher mentors (Goldrick, 2016; Wasburn-Moses, 2006). First year special education teachers and their mentors should also be allotted time during the school week to observe, collaborate, coordinate, and interact with one another (Goldrick, 2016). The mentor program will not be successful for the first-year special education teacher if time is not allotted, due to the fact that the teacher would not receive the support that is needed to maintain success (Goldrick, 2016).

Belknap and Taymans (2015) uncovered a theme that reoccurred for beginning special education teachers, which was feelings of isolation. This study consisted of nine 1st year special education teachers and conducted interviews with each participant, determining the feelings of seclusion from working in special education. Special education teachers that teach in self-contained classrooms have an even smaller amount of time and interactions with other teachers throughout the day (Mrstik et al., 2019). Mentors can provide the support and leadership for new special education teachers to help them feel more in control, capable, and produce more profound relationships with peers, which may lessen attrition and reduce special education teacher burnout (Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020; Whitaker, 2000). According to the self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are needed to produce and maintain motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Therefore, by offering special education teachers a mentor during their first years, schools set teachers up for success and determination within their profession.

Professional Development

Professional development is a requirement for all educators to complete each school year, but the number depends on state regulations (Berry et al., 2011; Sciuchetti et al., 2018). Often, educators do not feel that professional development is beneficial and is ultimately a waste of time (Sciuchetti et al., 2018). To eliminate this feeling, professional development should be created with specific activities related to the teacher's license (Billingsley, 2004; Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020). By creating relevant activities, educators are not forced to participate in professional development that does not affect them (Billingsley, 2004). Professional development is created around the idea that special education teachers are prepared but undoubtedly face challenges where they need assistance and support; therefore, responsive induction programs for these teachers are crucial to their success (Cornelius et al., 2019).

Belknap and Taymans (2015) recommended requiring professional development for all first-year special education teachers to discuss and implement various expectations connected to working in the field of special education and being a special educator. The prominence of creating professional development for first-year special education teachers with their mentor teachers shows ways to be an efficient case manager, what all case management entails, and how being a successful case manager leads to feelings of determination, which have a positive effect on special education teacher retention and attrition (Belknap & Taymans, 2015).

The creation of professional development as a means to persevere in the special education classroom could potentially be a way for administrators to inspire persistence among new and experienced special education teachers (Hughes, 2019). In an earlier study, researchers reported that special education teachers who are offered consequential professional development felt more job satisfaction within their current position. Professional development that teaches the

prominence of having positive mindsets, the ability to persist, and a variety of ways to preserve this mindset could potentially support special education teacher attrition.

Special education teachers need a variety of professional development to tackle the everyday challenges they face (Papi, 2018). The professional development that schools should focus on for special education is working with students with behavior disorders, working with parents and paraprofessionals, classroom management, low-incidence disabilities, adapting curriculum, and developing proficiency in collaboration (Berry et al., 2011; Sciuchetti et al., 2018). By creating and implementing positive, effective professional development, special education teacher attrition and burnout could decrease, allowing schools to cultivate more qualified teachers (Sciuchetti et al., 2018).

Support from Administration

Having support from administration is crucial for special education teachers, and if the reinforcement is not present, the lack of support can increase the educator's chances for attrition and burnout (Hester et al., 2020). One of the most substantial factors of job contentment for special education teachers is support from administration (Hester et al., 2020). Unfortunately, administrators rarely received proper training on how to efficiently handle and help special education teachers. For special education teachers to be successful, ongoing support from administration is vital (Lujan, 2020). Teachers are not the only individuals affected if they do not feel supported by their administration; it also affects the students (Aldosiry, 2020). Cancio et al. (2018) reviewed the perception of stress of special education teachers and what factors created the most stress. In this study, 211 special education teachers completed a survey reporting the top stressors found in their jobs (Cancio et al., 2018). Data were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. Results found that most special education teachers

experience stress that interferes with the quality of their work. These stressors include large caseloads, pressure of student achievement, and behaviors of students, all which were increased by lack of support from administration.

The shortage of quality education that students receive due to the lack of administrative support contributes to the poor education that students with disabilities receive (Aldosiry, 2020). Ninety-eight percent of school districts within the United States of America have reported a shortage of special education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2019). The shortage affects all regions of the United States, and there are approximately 300,000 to 400,000 special education teacher positions waiting to be filled (Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2007). A previous study found that 7.4% of special education teachers move to general education after their initial year of teaching special education, and 9.3% leave the field entirely (Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2007). Vacancies for special education teacher positions tend to be higher in certain geographic locations, school settings, disability categories, and school characteristics (Peyton et al., 2020). Special education teacher stress and burnout are significantly reduced by increasing administrative support, all while job satisfaction, instructional excellence, commitment, and student outcomes are increased (Aldosiry, 2020).

Special education teachers often express their dissatisfaction with the profession stems from a lack of support from administration (Conley & You, 2016). For many special education teachers, administration does not provide adequate resources and materials for teaching, and administration does not provide support when dealing with behaviors from students or struggling with difficult parents (Conley & You, 2016). Conley and You (2016) reported that lack of administrative support is a leading cause in special education attrition. This study included 2,060 special education teachers and determined that several types of support exist for special

education classrooms, but the absence of school-level and district-level administrative support has the most substantial impact on special education teachers (Conley & You, 2016).

Studies indicated that there is a direct link between administration and special education teacher's intent to stay in the profession (Conley & You, 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2019; Peyton et al., 2020). Lack of administrative support can affect career obligation, job satisfaction, and work commitment for special education teachers (Aldosiry, 2020; Conley & You, 2016). Due to the demanding workload that special education teachers face, teachers need administration to concentrate on encouraging positive behaviors, communicating clear responsibilities for the teachers, standing up for teachers when needed, and recognition when necessary (Conley & You, 2016).

Effective leadership within special education is crucial for the success of students and educators. Effective leadership can foster essential relationships between teachers and students by accurately meeting emotional, academic, and social needs (DeMatthews et al., 2019). University programs typically lack the necessary curriculum to properly educate leadership within special education. These higher education programs need to incorporate mentoring, cohort alignment, experiences in realistic environments, and meaningful partnerships with other schools into their current curriculum. Many times, when a special education educator does not feel prepared or feels overwhelmed, they turn to a superior for guidance. The superior must be knowledgeable, knowing enough about special education to assist the special education teacher accurately. Experience can help in these situations, but many instances can arise where new principals and superiors do not know how to support due to a lack of quality education (DeMatthews et al., 2019).

Special education has changed immensely over the last 50 years. Starting in 1975, officials encouraged the use of inclusive schools and creating inclusive environments for students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Even though schools practiced inclusive settings throughout the United States, an emphasis on educational leadership within inclusive classrooms is lacking. DeMatthews et al.'s research provided advice for principals within inclusive schools on how to best support educators and students with disabilities. Some of the advice was having a vision for the school and special education programs and by aiding in quality educational experiences for all students. By focusing on collaboration between educators and families of students with disabilities, principals can reflect positive practices for both the staff and the student. Several studies indicated that educators can create better achievement for students with disabilities, but very few studies show how principals can affect those results. Researchers offer simple, attainable ways for principals to support students with disabilities and how to promote success for each of them (Aldosiry, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hester et al., 2020).

Special education teachers who feel supported by administration have administrators who make their teachers feel valued and respected, implement consequences on students with inappropriate actions, and promote positive relationships between special education and general education teachers (Hester et al., 2020). Hester et al. reported that special education teachers who do not feel supported by their administration have deeper feelings of burnout than those who do feel supported. In a mixed methods study, which included 366 special education teachers, open-ended questions were asked to identify the work-related stressors, expressing their reasoning behind leaving the profession (Hester et al., 2020). Data were analyzed using a mixed-method

analysis. Results included those teachers who did not feel supported by their administrators deeply contributed to feelings of burnout (Hester et al., 2020).

Administration should work towards finding the resources to alleviate and decrease stressors that special education teachers face (Cancio et al., 2018). Also, administrators should provide time throughout the day for planning, have multiple opportunities to participate in professional development, offer plenty of resources to handle the needs and diversity of each child, and provide qualified, knowledgeable paraprofessionals (Lujan, 2020). Hawks (2016) reported that special education teachers who receive supportive administrative encouragement have elevated levels of job fulfillment. Alternatively, special education teachers who received a lack of administrative support had insufficient feelings of job satisfaction (Hawks, 2016). To expand special education teacher attrition and retention, knowledge of special education and administrative support must improve and become more prevalent (Hawks, 2016). By creating a supportive working environment, special education teacher burnout can be lessened, while also providing a better quality of instruction for students (Aldosiry, 2020).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation for Special Education Teachers

The self-determination theory found intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as being vital for success in a person's workplace (Ryan & Deci, 2018). To have intrinsic motivation and encouragement, a teacher must be stimulated by internal feelings of self-actualization, accomplishment, success, and achievement (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kaplan, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2018; Ulstad et al., 2018; Yasmeen et al., 2019). To have extrinsic motivation, outside motivators can be used to derive external circumstances, such as money, recognition, and praise (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Yasmeen et al., 2019). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are critical for

special education teachers to contribute to their general desire to remain in the field (Yasmeen et al., 2019).

Joy, achievement, job satisfaction, and appreciation contribute to intrinsic motivation (Kaplan, 2021; Yasmeen et al., 2019). Each of those elements are achievable for administration and teachers to help retain special education teachers. Salary, promotion, allowance, recognition, and having administration listen to teachers contribute to extrinsic motivation (Yasmeen et al., 2019).

Stewart (2017) reported that planning and collaboration, relationships with coworkers, encouragement, and training are the top influences that improve self-worth and help maintain special education teachers. In this study, Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory was used to determine the top influences; however, the components are similar to the self-determination theory and the use of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2018; Stewart, 2017). Extrinsic motivation is difficult to offer teachers due to lack of resources and funds (Lindqvist et al., 2020; Yasmeen et al., 2019). Extrinsic motivation relates to intrinsic motivation and, due to the apparent lack of extrinsic motivation, high intrinsic motivation is more difficult to maintain for special education teachers (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Mahler et al., 2018).

Special education teachers' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can have a negative impact by a lack of support, overbearing rules and demands, and administrative control (Haerens, 2020). Lack of motivation in teachers can make it difficult for them to, in turn, motivate students in their classroom, which could make teachers feel discouraged, overwhelmed, and potentially experience feelings of burnout (Haerens, 2020). Teachers who report elevated levels of intrinsic motivation are more likely to stay in special education and maintain a longer retention rate (Daniel & Cooc, 2018). Recognizing the extensive research previously done on

special education teacher burnout, researchers must take a closer look at how the challenges that these educators face and how motivation and intrinsic and extrinsic influences in special education led to burnout and what changes can be made to improve the retention rates (Scott & Alexander, 2018; Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Special Education Teacher Burnout

Special education teachers are required to accomplish several diverse responsibilities as part of their job (Emmer et al., 2013; Haerens, 2020). Each of these responsibilities demand great amounts of mental and physical energy (Robinson et al., 2019). Almost one-third of new special education teachers feel unsatisfied in their jobs and leave the field after only three years (Cancio et al., 2018; Conley & You, 2016; Peyton et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2007). Leaving the profession after only three years is an alarming figure, and even though copious amounts of research have been completed on special education teacher burnout, the problem for the profession is still prevalent within the United States (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Cancio et al., 2018; Cornelius et al., 2019; Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018; Jovanović et al., 2019; Lujan, 2020; Papi, 2018; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Special education teachers who experience job dissatisfaction struggle with elevated levels of burnout, therefore, deciding to leave the profession (Robinson et al., 2019). The number of responsibilities placed on a special education teacher can have a negative effect on their well-being, health, and motivation (Ansley et al., 2016).

Special education is one of the most demanding professions, and because of the stress, the field of special education experiences high levels of burnout (Doyle, 2014; Haerens, 2020). Special education teachers can experience burnout on multiple levels, such as: intellectual, spiritual, social, physical, and emotional burnout (Emmer et al., 2013). Intellectual burnout

symptoms can include lack of focus, difficulty processing information, trouble with controlling behaviors, and poor decision making (Consalvi, 2020; Emmer et al., 2013). Social burnout symptoms can include poor attitudes, such as being cynical, acting frustrated, and becoming withdrawn from responsibilities and others (Emmer et al., 2013). Physical burnout symptoms can include chronic fatigue, incorporating both the failure to sleep or sleeping excessively (Emmer et al., 2013). Emotional burnout symptoms can include feelings of mistrust, absence, and insufficiency (Emmer et al., 2013; Peyton et al., 2020).

Special education teachers are typically under greater amounts of stress than general education teachers (Bettini et al., 2017, Cancio et al., 2018; Garwood et al., 2018). In 2013, MetLife conducted a survey on teachers in America, which found that more than 59% of teachers reported feelings of stress (Jennings et al., 2017). This figure is an increase from the 35% of teachers who reported feelings of stress in 1985 (Jennings et al., 2017). Studies also indicated that special education teachers are more than likely to describe their states of well-being as being overly tired and under high amounts of stress (Cancio et al., 2018; Conley & You, 2016; Garwood et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019), which can make them more likely to leave the field of special education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Brownell et al., 2018; Conley & You, 2016; Robinson et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2017).

A Gallup study conducted in 2014 found that 46% of teachers reported high daily stress during the school year, which rivaled the two most stressful occupations, including physicians (45%) and nurses (46%) (Jennings et al., 2017). Special education teachers who experience feelings of stress are more than likely to have a diminished sense of achievement and may have trouble finding significance within their job (Cancio et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). The outcome of stress can have negative consequences for special education teachers, such as a

reduction of student engagement, lack of appropriate instruction, and reduced number of student IEP goals achieved (Elreda et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2017).

Specific research focuses on situational, demographic, and environmental factors (Brittle, 2020), while other studies address how special education teachers face a lack of clarity in their roles, growing or large caseloads, feelings of seclusion and loneliness, lack of administrative support, marginal collaboration with peers, and unnecessary paperwork (Cancio et al., 2018; Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018). According to a study completed by Gersten et al. (2001), regarding special education teacher burnout, "We train teachers poorly and then treat them badly-and, so they leave in droves" (p. 1). Certain ways to improve special education teacher retention are by increasing support from principals and general education teachers, developing better teacher preparation programs, creating effective professional development, and providing new special education teachers with an experienced, qualified mentor (Aldosiry, 2020; Gersten et al., 2001). Robinson et al. (2019) discussed that, to help special education teachers stay in the classroom, job satisfaction must be improved through support from administration and more effective professional development opportunities. Billingsley (2004) and Robinson et al. (2019) found that demanding work conditions, qualifications of special education teachers, and personal influences all contribute to the attrition of special education teachers.

Other complex demands related to working in special education are the insurmountable workloads, teaching students with diverse needs across different settings and grades, paperwork, and limited time for planning and teaching (Aldosiry, 2020). Other research indicated that emotional exhaustion is the leading cause of burnout (Duli, 2016). Special education teachers report having deficient levels of job satisfaction, reduced levels of energy, and severe fatigue, all leading to emotional exhaustion (Duli, 2016). Robinson et al. (2019) reported that special

education teacher burnout has proven to have a negative effect on the achievement of students. In this study, survey questions based on connections between job satisfaction and special education teacher burnout were answered by 125 special education teachers (Robinson et al., 2019). Results included a substantial connection between job satisfaction and special education teacher burnout (Robinson et al., 2019). Lack of personal accomplishment, role ambiguity and conflict, absence of administrative support, and inadequate teacher experience and training are all significant contributors to special education teacher burnout (Cancio et al., 2018; Garwood et al., 2018). The number one cited reason special educators change professions is due to the lack of administrative support (Lujan, 2020). Emmer et al. (2013) defined teachers who have experienced feelings of burnout as being less sympathetic to the needs of each student and being indifferent to their jobs. Even with this information, little has been done to rectify each of the problems; therefore, special education teacher retention rates and shortages continue to rise (Garwood et al., 2018).

Job-related stressors, such as excessive caseloads, the lack of administrative support, limited teacher training, burdens of the IEP paperwork, lack of gratefulness by administrators and co-workers, a wide range of diversity of student needs, and isolation, all combine and make a special education teacher's life troubled, leading to faster rates of burnout (Langher et al., 2017; Lujan, 2020). Lambert (2020) named the top three reasons special educators leave the field: challenging parents, working with students with a broad range of needs with minute support, and overpowering workloads. Researchers, administrators, and program coordinators need to address each of the challenges that lead to special education teacher burnout and make necessary changes to promote motivation, providing special educators with the resources needed

for success. Making the necessary changes and addressing each of the many challenges is vital to maintaining qualified special education teachers, keeping them from leaving the profession.

Summary

Special education can be a difficult field to be in due to its changing rules, regulations, and methods, including the complications that teachers face while trying to teach students who can be a challenge to manage. Because of the high rate of special educator's burnout, researchers have explored the challenges and experiences of special education teachers and how these can impact them and their teaching methods (Garwood et al., 2018). Additionally, research has been conducted on motivation within the self-determination theory and the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic influences within the cognitive evaluation theory, including how each of these relate to job performance (Gagné & Deci, 2005). The self-determination theory is the concept that human motivation derives from attempts to make growths within themselves and uses motivational concepts that establish intellectual, affective, and behavioral variables.

A significant amount of research has been studied regarding the challenges and burnout rates that special education teachers face, but limited research has been conducted on how motivation and intrinsic and extrinsic influences directly affect special education teachers, as well as what can be altered to help keep special educators from moving to a new profession. A gap exists in understanding how motivation affects special education teachers and how the lack of motivation can lead to burnout. Special education teachers face different types of demands and responsibilities that general education teachers do not. By examining the challenges that special educators face, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support, research can indicate how diminished motivation in special education teachers can lead to burnout.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field. In this study, motivation to continue in the field was generally defined as the challenges that can affect the drive of special education teachers, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support, and how these challenges effect the motivation and extrinsic influences of special education teachers. Chapter Three includes the rationalization of using a transcendental phenomenology design and how it aligns with the central research question and sub-research questions. The setting and participants used for the study and data collection are provided in this chapter. The research design, including research questions, sub questions, setting, and participant guidelines are also present in Chapter Three. Also included is a review of data procedures, the researcher's positionality and role, and data collection strategies. Chapter Three concludes with the elements of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Research Design

The foundations of motivation can be characterized predominantly through introspective means, therefore, aligning this study to qualitative methodology (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). A better understanding was needed to address how motivation affects special education teachers and how it directly correlates to burnout. Consequently, motivation as a concept can be related to a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is the method of studying individuals in their own natural environment, with the attempt to interpret or make sense of a certain phenomenon the way that people intend (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Keegan (2009) stated that, qualitative research emerged in the United States after WWII, motivated by the rise of new mass

communication means, commercial interests, and the revival of Freudian psychology. Qualitative

methods address individuals and the experiences of a phenomenon that they have experienced

(Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative research begins with theoretical frameworks to enlighten the study of

complications affecting groups with human or social issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this

study, the self-determination theory espoused by Deci and Ryan (1985b) form the basis of the

study's theoretical framework to explain how special education teachers describe their

motivation to continue in the field. The self-determination theory is the theory that human

motivation derives from having a tendency to attempt in making growths within themselves.

Collecting a vivid description of special educators' experiences and motivation to continue in the

field will provide awareness and contextual information from each participants' perspectives.

From a phenomenological viewpoint, research is conducted to reason with the way

individuals experience the world and to have the desire to understand the world in which humans

exist (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research is the inquiry of what defines humans, and

accuracy is vital when describing those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). By

interviewing special education teachers and allowing them to describe their motivation to

continue in the field, including their experiences in the classroom, this study will provide data

and useful information to guide best practice approaches to reduce special education teacher

attrition (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology is a term dated from 1765 when Hegel first used it, and then again by

Husserl, to describe knowledge as individuals saw it in their consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).

Husserl then discussed phenomenology deeply, discussing the realities of subjective and

objective thoughts and feelings. In 1931, Husserl described concepts of noema, noeses, and

noesis. A transcendental phenomenological study permits the "Integrating of noematic and noetic correlates of intentionality into meanings and essences of experience" (p. 32). Each of these concepts form intentionality, which later developed epoché. Epoché is the concept of viewing a phenomenon with new perspectives, forgoing any prior assumptions or judgements. Transcendental phenomenology uses epoché when conducting research, to ensure that the data gathered and analyzed is reliable and valid. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, special education teachers, without previous biases or perceptions and experiences, was selected as part of this study.

Transcendental phenomenology also uses bracketing to require researchers to identify any previous vested interests, personal experiences, or assumptions that could alter how they view and analyze the data (van Manen, 1990). To ensure that the researcher did not let any previous biases, assumptions, or preconceptions hinder the study, bracketing was applied by the researcher to verify that the participant's descriptions of their experiences were accurately portrayed without researcher bias.

A transcendental phenomenology approach was selected for this study to grasp and describe the experiences of special education teachers and their motivation, without the preconceived perceptions of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The focus of this study is to describe how special education teachers describe their motivation to continue in the field. The actuality of the motivation that special education teachers have, and how it ties into burnout, can be captured through their experiences and a transcendental phenomenology approach. In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and used audio journaling to capture the lived experiences, describing how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field.

Research has been conducted regarding the challenges and high burnout rates that special education teachers face, but limited research has been conducted on how to implement this information to create best practice approaches and external influences that will keep special educators from moving to a new profession (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Cancio et al., 2018; Cornelius et al., 2019; Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020; Papi, 2018; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Four research questions guided this phenomenological study to recognize the lived experiences and describe how special education teachers discuss their motivation to continue in the field.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this phenomenological study to understand the perspectives of special education teachers on how challenges and motivation contribute to burnout and what can be done to keep these teachers in this field.

Central Question

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their motivation to continue in the field?

Sub-Question One

What are the lived experiences of self-contained teachers in North Georgia who chose to continue in the field?

Sub-Question Two

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of autonomy in the field?

Sub-Question Three

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of competence in the field?

Sub-Question Four

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of relatedness to others in the field?

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Setting and Participants

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For this study, the setting took place in two separate school districts in North Georgia to grasp the differences on how location and resources can affect special education teachers. One location was in a highly populated, wealthy county of North Georgia. The other location was in a rural area, with fewer resources and a lower economic status. Ten participants with varying ethnicities, genders, ages, backgrounds, and exceptionalities of students that they serve were chosen for this study. All participants teach or have taught in a self-contained classroom for at least one year.

Setting

The setting for this study comprised of two public pre-K-12th grade schools in North Georgia. A statewide shortage of special education teachers is currently affecting all discipline areas within special education (*TSA*, 2021). All settings and participants were given a pseudonym to ensure the security of each participant's identity. Participants were selected from the Davis County Public Schools (pseudonym) in North Georgia. Other participants were chosen from Barlow City Schools (pseudonym) in another section of North Georgia. Two separate areas are selected for the setting due to the difference in economic status and resources available of each county. Davis County Public Schools (pseudonym) is one of the biggest and wealthiest school systems in North Georgia. The school system is guided by a superintendent and five

board members. Each board member represents one district in the county. Under the five board members are district superintendents, followed by coordinators, principals, and a fluctuating number of assistant principals.

Barlow City Schools (pseudonym) is a smaller county in a more rural area of North Georgia. The county has one superintendent and six board members, each representing a different discipline within the county. Following the board members are the principals and vice principals in each school. All special education teachers within both counties are supervised under principals and assistant principals.

In 2020, Davis County Public Schools (pseudonym) offered educational services to over 188,589 students at over 120 different school buildings. The school district employs 11,429 teachers. Among the students, 24,033 have individual education plans (IEP) and receive special education services. The school district has a diverse student population, 33% are Hispanic/Latino, 32% are African American, 20% are Caucasian, 11% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% are Multiracial. In 2020, Barlow City Schools (pseudonym) served 4,528 students with educational services at five different school buildings. The school district employs 263 teachers. The school district has a diverse population of students, 51% of students are Caucasian, 22% of students are African American, 20% of students are Hispanic/Latino, 5% of students are Multiracial, and 2% of students are Asian/Pacific Islander. Both school districts are different in size and location, therefore, offering diverse results from special education teachers.

Participants

To understand the true experiences of special education teachers and how their motivation leads to burnout, transcendental phenomenology was applied in this study. Ten special education teachers, with varying ages, ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds were sought

to provide their experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended selecting between three to four participants to 10 to 15 participants to ensure that each participant has experienced the phenomenon. All participants must hold a valid special education teaching license and have also worked in a special education self-contained classroom within the last 3 years or are actively teaching special education in a self-contained classroom. All special education teachers must have taught or are teaching in a self-contained special education classroom.

The broad range of experience in the field of special education was due to the research, showing that special education teacher burnout begins as early as the first year in the classroom (Billingsley, 2004; Peyton et al., 2020). Ten special education teachers were selected to grasp the understanding of the challenges and motivation that each special education teacher encounters. Criterion sampling was used to select the participants for this sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For transcendental phenomenology, all participants must experience the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Criterion sampling works well with phenomenology by selecting participants who meet predetermined criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling verifies that all special education teachers have taught or teach in a self-contained classroom within the last three years, have at least one year of experience, and hold a valid special education teaching license. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that data saturation occurs when new information is no longer being generated during the data collection process. Sampling for this study was continued until data saturation is achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Positionality

The field of special education is challenging and changing. Researchers indicated that special education is facing high shortages and attrition of special education teachers (Mason-

Williams et al., 2019). While special education teacher burnout is a topic that has been extensively researched, little research regarding how motivation contributes and leads to burnout has been conducted (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). As a special education teacher, I personally see the struggles and challenges that educators face. I teach in a severe and profound self-contained classroom, and my hope is to help alleviate some of these struggles and potentially decrease the high burnout rate of special educators by identifying how motivation plays a role in it.

Additionally, research related to motivation and challenges of special education teachers is of interest to me because of my firsthand struggles with it. In preparation for qualitative research, I will identify the interpretive framework that bases my views of this research process. I will also identify the philosophical assumptions that I bring to the research process and how they shape my research. For this study, to create data from numerous realities, individual semi-structured interviews were used to gather subjective data from each participant. I also will use bracketing to avoid any bias and predetermined personal views to keep from altering the perceptions and experiences of each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

Interpretive Framework

Interpretive frameworks are used to interpret the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive framework is a fundamental set of principles that help guide actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Social constructivism is also known as interpretivism, which means to attempt to understand the world in which individuals live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Social constructivism indicates a relativist view that there are several realities of an understanding in the natural world.

The researcher looks for broad views, instead of forcing constricted connotations into few ideas or categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism suggests the research should

focus on the participants' experiences and views of their situations. The researcher develops broad, open-ended questions to allow the participants to create their own meaning of each situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007). For this study, I sought to discover the multiple experiences of special education teachers through their detailed accounts of the challenges they face in the classroom and how it affects their motivation.

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions in qualitative research set the direction for the goals and outcomes of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These assumptions assist with forming the research questions and problems that shape this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three philosophical assumptions helped shape this study: ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, and axiological assumptions. Researchers have assumptions prior to the research process, but qualitative researchers typically use these assumptions in their studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption implicates the principles on the nature of reality and leads to the understanding of reality through several different views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To understand the motivation of special education teachers and how the challenges that they face hinder motivation, I sought to produce data based on the details of the multiple realities shown by the special education teachers. Each participant brought a variety of experiences and opinions. I valued each participants' experiences as a special education teacher and points of view on being a special education teacher, with the challenges that it entails. I also valued what each participant said during interviews and their thoughts on being a special education teacher. By noting that all realities differed between participants, the multiple realties were individually

created. This study addressed various methods of data collection to create the themes from each reality.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption in qualitative research addresses how knowledge is gained through life experiences, how its claims are acceptable, and the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of qualitative research is subjective and derived from experiences from a variety of people. Knowledge was gained through interviews and audio journaling, by listening to the words spoken by each participant of their lived experiences. Knowledge was also obtained by identifying the recurring themes that became apparent in the data as it is collected and analyzed. For this study, to create data from numerous realities, individual semi-structured interviews were used to gather subjective data from each participant. I also used bracketing to avoid any bias and predetermined personal views to keep from altering the perceptions and experiences of each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption defines how researcher ideals are known and conveyed in a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All researchers offer principles when conducting research, but qualitative researchers must identify these principles and not let them affect their research. Axiological assumption creates the acknowledgement of biases and principles that are distinctively present within the job, as the researcher. As the researcher and current special education teacher, I acknowledge that every experience of a special educator is different and diverse. Axiological assumptions are vital to the research, and bracketing is essential to grasp the motivation in special education of each participant.

Researcher's Role

As the researcher, I acted as the human instrument, collecting data myself through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and audio journaling to understand the perceptions of motivation in special education teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this research, my personal experiences were bracketed, to fully understand the reality of special education teachers' experiences without my own personal opinions creating a bias (Moustakas, 1994). The two school districts selected for the setting and data collection purposes were both places that I have worked or where I currently work. At this point in the research, I currently work in the Davis County Public School district (pseudonym), and I previously worked in the Barlow City School district (pseudonym). Due to these experiences, some personal relationships have been formed within the communities. Therefore, if I have an affiliation with any of the selected participants, the extent of the rapport was described thoroughly and moved aside.

Although my positions were in both counties, I was never a person of authority over any of the participants. While analyzing the data, all participants were assumed to answer the questions with accuracy during the interviews, focus group discussion, and audio journaling. As the researcher, I did not approach the data with any preconceptions related to my previous or current position or with any interactions I had with the participants. This study was clearly articulated to the participants prior to signing the informed consent.

Procedures

I submitted a proposal to the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to obtain approval to conduct the study. After the IRB returned the initial review, modifications were needed to secure official approval. Upon receiving the official approval of my research proposal from the IRB, I contacted the principals at both schools via email. After gaining consent

from the school's principals, each participant was contacted directly via email. All the necessary

information and details of the study was provided to each participant. Each participant was

required to respond via email within two weeks. If a participant did not respond, a follow-up

email was sent containing similar information as the first email. If participants did not respond to

the second email, they were no longer be contacted to participate in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the first step of the data collection process to

understand the extent of burnout among this study's participants. Questions for the interviews,

focus group discussion, and audio journaling were crafted with the help of experts in the field.

Informed consent was given to all participants before the interviews are scheduled. Informed

consent can be found in Appendix B. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that each participant

must be provided with pertinent information on the study to ensure proper procedure and ethical

considerations, such as the right to withdraw at any time, the purpose of the study, explanation of

confidentiality for each participant, potential benefits of the study, and the signature of each

participant.

When a participant indicated willingness to participate in the study, all methods of data

collection were scheduled, depending on the researcher and participant's schedules. The data

collection methods included a face-to-face interview, focus group discussion, and audio

journaling (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). At the completion, member checking was applied to

ensure credibility and confirmability of all information gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Schwandt, 2007).

Permissions

Following the approval from the IRB, the participants were given informed consent. The

IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix A. Approval from each setting was directly

received from each administrator from each school. After interested parties were gathered, a recruitment letter was sent to each participant via email, along with the informed consent. Then, the informed consent was obtained from each participant selected and stored in a password protected file folder (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participant recruitment letter can be viewed in Appendix B and participant consent for the study can be found in Appendix C.

Recruitment Plan

The participants for this study were ten special education teachers. The sample pool for this study was 2,347 special education teachers. All participants held a valid special education teaching license and have also worked in a special education classroom within the last three years or are actively teaching special education with at least one year of experience in a self-contained classroom. The range of experience in the field of special education was due to the research indicating that special education teacher burnout starts as early as the 1st year in the classroom (Billingsley, 2004; Consalvi, 2020; Peyton et al., 2020).

Criterion sampling was used to select the participants for this sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For transcendental phenomenology, all participants must have experienced the phenomenon firsthand. Criterion sampling works well with phenomenology by selecting participants who meet predetermined criteria. Criterion sampling verified that all special education teachers have taught or teach in self-contained classrooms within the last three years, have at least one year of experience, and hold a valid special education teaching license.

After participants have been gathered, the informed consent was obtained from each interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The informed consent can be available to view in Appendix C. All identifying information for each individual and their locations were withheld, and pseudonyms used in place of their real identity. Only special education teachers who teach in

North Georgia were included in this research.

Data Collection Plan

Multiple methods of data collection were used to accurately understand and describe the role of motivation and how it leads to special education teacher burnout. Collecting data through various methods to grasp each experience is critical (Moustakas, 1994). Data collection occurred in the following order. Participants were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews, following with a focus group discussion, and then audio journaling. The semi-structured interview questions were open-ended questions to allow the participants to consider their own personal experiences without any biases from the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The focus group discussion was created to allow for a group interview covering three open-ended questions generated by the responses of the semi-structured interviews to allow for additional richness to be added to the data. The audio journaling questions were created to follow the interviews and focus group discussion to allow the participants to reflect on the participants' attitudes towards the challenges that they faced that day.

Individual Interviews

Completion of individual interviews was the first step in the data collection process. Semi-structured interview questions were open-ended questions to allow the participants to consider their own personal experiences without any biases from the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews took place face-to-face at a public location that the participant desires or via Zoom. Since the participant was willing to participate in the study, it was my goal, as the researcher, to make this process as easy as possible for the participant. In the interview, only the researcher and the participant were present. By having only, the participant and the researcher present, the participant was comfortable, distractions were limited, and the participant felt at ease

while conducting the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

 A quality interview is an art that can be established with practice (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The purpose of a qualitative interview was to try to fully grasp the world from the participants' viewpoint. Brinkmann and Kvale offered seven stages to assist with interviews. The seven steps were to thematize the inquiry, design the study, interview, transcribe the interview, analyze the data, verify the validity, verify reliability, generalize the findings, and report the study. The interviews started with a grand tour question to invite the participant to open up and feel comfortable during this process (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Once the interviews were over, I transcribed each response using Otter transcription software and then create themes based on participant responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The themes were identified after interviews were finished and all responses were transcribed. The creation of the themes derived off participant responses and which topics and words were used the most. Validity, reliability, and generalization were verified by using epoché (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Moustakas, 1994).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career through your current position. CQ

2. What challenges do or did you struggle with the most while teaching special education? SQ1

3. Thinking back to your first few years of teaching, how has your motivation changed throughout the course of your career? SQ1

4. How can the challenges that special education teachers face be addressed to improve the retention rates of special education teachers? SQ1

5. What mentorship opportunities were provided to you as a beginning teacher? SQ2

6. What challenges do or did you face with administration? SQ2

7. How did your higher education program prepare you for teaching in a special education classroom? SQ2

8. How have professional development courses benefitted you? SQ2

9. What challenges do or did you face while understanding your roles as a special education teacher? SQ3

10. In what ways have the challenges you have faced as a special education teacher promoted growth? SQ3

11. How prepared did you feel during your first few years of teaching? SQ3

12. What recommendations do you have to improve professional development that would better benefit you? SQ3

13. What do you think your higher education program could have done differently to prepare you? SQ3

14. How do or did you feel about your relationships and connections with your coworkers? SQ4

15. In your opinion, what could administration do or have done to better support you and your needs in your classroom? SQ4

16. What changes would you like to see in higher education programs that educate special education teachers? SQ4

17. What else would you like to contribute to this study on the retention and motivation of special education teachers? SQ1

Question 1 was created as the grand tour question to allow the participant to feel comfortable and feel as though they could be open and honest with me, as a researcher (Marshall

& Rossman, 2015). Questions 2-4 and 17 were created to answer sub-question question one, which was inquiring about how the challenges that special education teachers face in North Georgia, such as administrative support, teacher preparation, and professional development, contribute to lack of autonomy, including intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which can lead to burnout. Each of these questions directly related to the challenges that special education teachers can face, and tend to be the leading causes of burnout and loss of motivation (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Conley & You, 2016; Cornelius et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Dewey et al., 2017; Hester et al., 2020; Langher et al., 2017; Lujan, 2020; Sciuchetti et al., 2018). Each of these challenges can disrupt the motivation that you have and affect your drive in the workplace (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Questions 5-8 were developed to address sub-question two, which was seeking to determine how special education teachers in North Georgia perceive the challenges that they face and how it affects their sense of autonomy that can lead to burnout. The self-determination theory indicates needing autonomy to make personal growth, in the sense that people need to feel self-determined and as though they control their personal goals and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). Personal and professional growth can be hindered if a person does not feel as though they control the outcomes of their daily lives. If a special education teacher feels that they are losing control by being overwhelmed or overworked, the chances of burnout are increased exponentially.

Questions 9-13 were developed to address sub-question three, which asked about how special education teachers in North Georgia perceive the challenges that they face and how it affects their sense of competence that can lead to burnout. Intrinsic and extrinsic influences directly drive motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). The self-determination theory indicates needing

competence to make growth, because humans need to have knowledge of skills to be successful .

There are several roles and responsibilities that special education teachers oversee, and, by not

understanding or being able to maintain each of the requirements, motivation and competence

can fade quickly.

Questions 14-16 were created to respond to sub-question four, which investigated how the

challenges that special education teachers in North Georgia face effect their sense of relatedness,

and how it can result in the drop of retention rates within the field. The self-determination theory

examined how relatedness is needed to make growth because of the human desire to have a sense

of connection or correlation toward others (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). Special education is one of the

most stressful professions in the education field, and these educators need more support and

resources to accurately do their jobs without diminishing their motivation towards their careers

(Klassen et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2017).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to analyze the data collected in

this study. This approach was selected to accurately describe the experiences of special education

teachers and to detail their viewpoints on the challenges that they face, determining how these

challenges affect their motivation and essentially lead to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 1985b).

Moustakas (1994) presented a method of transcendental phenomenological data analysis derived

from the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method indicated that

researchers must find the "meaning of units of experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122), organize

each unit into a theme, and blend each unit and theme into a description of the participant's

experiences. All interviews were transcribed using Otter transcription software. The Otter

transcription software transcribed the audio recordings and highlight a summary from each

recording. The interviews were transcribed to follow the common practices of qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994). Each response was transcribed verbatim, including silences, pauses, slang, utterances, and any other vocalizations to ensure accuracy (Lincoln, 2009).

Moustakas' (1994) method indicated that data was analyzed over a series of phenomenological reductions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first phase included bracketing, which is the process of removing all biases and preconceived opinions (Moustakas, 1994). The next phase was the individual deliberation of each interview. Horizontalization was used to identify substantial statements from each interview, which is the process of retrieval and extraction of each expression related to the phenomenon. Each of these substantial statements were grouped into a thematic unit to offer a foundation for further interpretation. After themes were identified, the individual interviews were reviewed to uncover any reoccurring statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This process was the creation of textual description, which is composed from the themes (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, a composite description of the special education teacher's experiences were created to fulfill the last phase of phenomenological reduction.

Transcendental phenomenology uses epoché when conducting research, to ensure that the data gathered and analyzed is reliable and valid (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché is the concept of viewing a phenomenon with new perspectives, forgoing any prior assumptions or judgements. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, special education teachers were chosen without any previous biases or perceptions, and all experiences from the researchers were bracketed.

Focus Group

All participants were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. A focus group can

bring together a group of people for discussion on a certain topic (Schwandt, 2007). The focus group occurred after all individual interviews had been completed and transcribed and must include at least four of the participants to participate. To allow for the largest number of participation, the focus group was scheduled based on the availabilities of the most participants and were held face-to-face or via private and password-protected Zoom for any participants unable to attend in person. Focus groups can enhance the quality of the data, due to members having the opportunity to offer checks and balances to each participant and are considered to be cost-effective (Patton, 2002). The focus group discussion was transcribed using Otter transcription software. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to gain a better perspective on how each of the participants view their jobs, their students, and how satisfied they feel within their field of work.

Focus Group Questions

1. How could the challenges that special education teachers face be addressed by professional development, higher education programs, or administration? CQ

2. What additional supports would assist you in maintaining motivation to continue in the profession? CQ

3. What can be done to increase the motivation and retention of special education teachers? SQ1

Questions 1 and 2 were used to address the central question. Each of these questions relate to special education teacher's motivation and how to determine strategies to increase and maintain their motivation in their careers. Question 3 was used to address sub-question 1. Question 3 related to special education teacher retention and how the lived experiences of special education teachers can lead to faster burnout rates. Each of these questions are affected by the challenges

that special education teachers can face and how they can lead to burnout and loss of motivation (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Conley & You, 2016; Cornelius et al., 2019; Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Dewey et al., 2017; Hester et al., 2020; Langher et al., 2017; Lujan, 2020; Sciuchetti et al., 2018).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

This research study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to analyze the data collected. This approach was selected to accurately describe the experiences of special education teachers and to detail their viewpoints on the challenges that they face and how these challenges affect their motivation and essentially lead to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). Moustakas (1994) presented a method of transcendental phenomenological data analysis derived from the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method indicated that researchers must find the "meaning of units of experiences" (p. 122), organize each unit into a theme, and blend each unit and theme into a description of the participant's experiences.

Moustakas (1994) method focuses on analyzing data over a series of phenomenological reductions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first phase included bracketing, which is the process of removing all biases and preconceived opinions (Moustakas, 1994). The next phase was the individual deliberation of each interview. Horizontalization was used to identify substantial statements from each interview, which is the process of retrieval and extraction of each expression related to the phenomenon. Each of these substantial statements were grouped into a thematic unit to offer a foundation for further interpretation. Once themes were identified, the individual interviews were reviewed to uncover any reoccurring statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Uncovering reoccurring statements assisted with the creation of textual description, which was composed from the themes (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, a composite

description of the special education teacher's experiences were created to fulfill the last phase of phenomenological reduction.

Transcendental phenomenology uses epoché when conducting research, to ensure that the data gathered and analyzed is reliable and valid (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché is the concept of viewing a phenomenon with new perspectives, forgoing any prior assumptions or judgements. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, special education teachers were chosen without any previous biases or perceptions, and all experiences from the researcher were bracketed.

Audio Journaling

Audio journaling was the final phase of data collection and was sent via email following the focus group discussion. Audio journaling was selected for this transcendental phenomenological research to allow the participants a chance to reflect upon their experiences and thoughts of the day using technology (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017). During a 3-week period, participants were asked to record themselves, answering three questions using their phone at least 2 times a week. They then texted or emailed the recording directly to me to guarantee confidentiality. With this method, they had more time to reflect on their day and the goals that they had previously set for themselves, prompting them to make a conscious effort to understand how the challenges affected their motivation throughout the day (Deci & Ryan, 1965b). Only three questions were asked to keep the participants from having to spend too much time on responding to the prompts and recording.

Directions on how to complete audio journaling were given to each participant following the focus group discussion. Directions for audio journaling can be found in Appendix E. Each audio recording sent to me was transcribed using Otter.

1. What challenges did you face today?

2. How did you address and handle the challenges?

3. Did anyone assist you in handling the challenges?

Question 1 reflects sub-question one, which inquired how challenges affect their sense of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1965b). Question 2 was created regarding sub-question two, which inquired how challenges affect their sense of competence. Question 3 was established in regard to sub-question three, which addressed how challenges affect their sense of relatedness.

Audio Journaling Data Analysis Plan

A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to analyze the data collected. This approach was selected to accurately describe the experiences of special education teachers and to detail their viewpoints on the challenges that they face and how these challenges affect their motivation and essentially lead to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). Moustakas (1994) presented a method of transcendental phenomenological data analysis derived from the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method indicates that researchers must find the "meaning of units of experiences" (p. 122), organize each unit into a theme, and blend each unit and theme into a description of the participant's experiences. Moustakas' method analyzed data over a series of phenomenological reductions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first phase includes bracketing, which is the process of removing all biases and preconceived opinions (Moustakas, 1994). The next phase was the individual deliberation of each interview. Horizontalization was used to identify substantial statements from each interview, which is the process of retrieval and extraction of each expression related to the phenomenon. Each of these substantial statements were grouped into a thematic unit to offer a foundation for further interpretation. Once themes were identified, the individual interviews were reviewed to uncover

any reoccurring statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Uncovering reoccurring statements assisted with the creation of textual description, which was composed from the themes (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, a composite description of the special education teacher's experiences was created to fulfill the last phase of phenomenological reduction.

Data Analysis

This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to analyze the data collected. This approach was selected to accurately describe the experiences of special education teachers and to detail their viewpoints on the challenges that they face and how these challenges affect their motivation and essentially lead to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). Moustakas (1994) presented a method of transcendental phenomenological data analysis derived from the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Moustakas' method analyzed data over a series of phenomenological reductions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each method of data collection was purposefully selected to start with gaining a better understanding of each participant as an individual, to fully grasp their experiences as a special education teacher. Coding was used to analyze the data collected, which allowed for categories of the most common topics to be generated, and then collapsing the categories into themes to help synthesize the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

<div align="center">

Trustworthiness

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Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed the foundational concepts and terms that establish the trustworthiness of a study, which institutes the rigor in a qualitative study. In striving to achieve trustworthiness of the data and the analysis, I took several precautions to address the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Previous research helps develop the use of former practices to improve the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research.

Credibility

Credibility is the certainty of the findings in qualitative research and the degree that the findings precisely define authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The strategies used to achieve credibility were bracketing, triangulation, and member checking. Bracketing is essential in transcendental phenomenology to ensure that both professional and personal opinions not taint the outcome of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Triangulation was used to collect data from a variety of sources and maintain consistency from each of these sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation helped provide corroborating evidence for themes and explanations once all interviews have been transcribed. Triangulation of the data being collected, with continued and sustained commitment in the field of special education also provided credibility to this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007).

Member checking was applied to ensure credibility and confirmability of all information gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt, 2007). This process allowed the participant to offer feedback to the researcher's view of their experiences. Participants were given an opportunity to review and confirm the research to verify that their perceptions and experiences were accurately portrayed (Moustakas, 1994). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314).

Transferability

Transferability is displaying the outcomes that may have the ability to be applicable in other frameworks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is vital in qualitative research since it can increase the ability of researchers to conclude if the outcomes can be applied within their selected setting (Hays & Singh, 2011; Schwandt, 2007). The transferability in this study was aided by keeping the participants and their locations anonymous but also including detailed

descriptions of them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pseudonyms were used for all participants and

locations, but all pertinent information was kept the same, such as ages, number of years in

special education, population of special education that they taught, reasons for the selection of

the site and setting, and reasons for the selection of participants.

Dependability

Dependability is proving that the outcomes are consistent and can be repeated, which is

pertinent for future research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Schwandt (2007) discussed that the

investigation process should be rational, observable, and documented to fully address the

dependability of the study. For this study, all details involving the sampling processes, selection

of the site and setting, collection of informed consent, selection of participants, and data

collection methods were provided throughout the study. Member checking was applied to ensure

dependability of all information gathered from the participants in the study (Creswell & Poth,

2018; Schwandt, 2007). This process allowed the participant to offer feedback to the researcher's

view of their experiences.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the amount of objectivity that the researcher can report for the opinions

of the participants without incorporating their own views and bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To

address confirmability within this study, triangulation was used to collect data from a variety of

sources and maintain consistency from each of these sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To better

enhance confirmability, conclusions were recounted as precisely as achievable, by distancing

myself from any personal opinions or previous biases. Member checking was also applied to

ensure credibility and confirmability of all information gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018;

Schwandt, 2007). This process allowed the participant to offer feedback to the researcher's view of their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Multiple ethical considerations were maintained during the entire process of this study. Primarily, IRB approval was received before any data collection begins. Seeking IRB approval ensures that proper guidelines for conducting ethical research will be met (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, permission to contact participants and conduct research were pursued from the principals at each school district. After permissions were granted, participants were contacted via email. Informed consent was pursued through email.

Informed consent must be obtained to ensure that the study is conducted ethically by providing each participant with pertinent information on the study, such as the right to withdraw at any time, the purpose of the study, explanation of confidentiality for each participant, potential benefits of the study, and the signature of each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were given notice that their participation was not mandatory and completely voluntary. They were also informed that they had the right to renounce their contribution at any time.

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained the importance of receiving written consent from each participant. The participants were given a full explanation that their confidentiality was maintained and ensured throughout the entire process. Following the confirmation of their participation, a pseudonym was chosen for each participant to use during the process. All locations of places, schools, and the participants' names were completely omitted. Both schools involved in the study were given a pseudonym and only basic geographical explanations were offered. Furthermore, no other identifying data of students or colleagues was used. During the focus group, individuals had the opportunity to maintain the confidentiality of their identity by

not turning on cameras and using pseudonyms for the interview. I also highly encouraged and reminded subjects that the information discussed during the focus group needed to remain confidential. The data collected from this study was stored on an encrypted hard drive on a password protected computer.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field. A transcendental phenomenological study permits the "integrating of noematic and noetic correlates of intentionality into meanings and essences of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32). Chapter Three included the rationalization of using a transcendental phenomenology design and how it aligned with the three central research questions. The setting and participants used for the study and data collection were thoroughly described. The researcher positionality detailed an interpretive framework and three philosophical assumptions, which were ontological, epistemological, and axiological and how these aligned with qualitative methods, followed by the researcher's role. Next, the procedures used to conduct the research were outlined by detailing the permissions and recruitment plan of each participant. Details supporting various data collection methods and data analysis methods were then provided according to phenomenological practices. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study is detailed and identified by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Chapter Three concludes with an emphasis on the importance of ethics and the attempts made to ensure this remains an ethical study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field. To fully understand how motivation affects special education teachers within their jobs, data was collected from 10 special education teachers using individual interviews, a focus group, and audio journaling. Pseudonyms were used for this study to ensure confidentiality for each participant. Common themes and codes were identified from each data collection method and are described to offer insight into each of the participant's lived experiences as special education teachers. Chapter Four provides descriptions of each participant in detail, structural and textural descriptions of the themes, and responses to the central research questions and the sub-questions.

Participants

To fully understand how the motivation of special education teachers can change due to the challenges that they face, such as quality teacher preparation, inadequate professional development, and lack of administrative support, 10 participants were selected to participate in this study. Initially, permissions were obtained from two separate school districts located in North Georgia. Davis County Public Schools required permission to be obtained through a research department by having the researcher and the school administrator sign a local school research request before contacting teachers and seeking participation. Barlow City Schools required permission to be obtained from the school administrator.

Criterion sampling was used to select the participants for this study. Criterion sampling was chosen to verify that all special education teachers have taught or teach in self-contained classrooms within the last three years, have at least one year of experience, and hold a valid

special education teaching license. Following the participant selection process, eight special

education teachers employed by Davis County Public Schools participated in this study, and two

special education teachers employed by Barlow City Schools participated. Participants from

Davis County Public Schools teach students in grade levels ranging from prekindergarten to 5th

grade, and participants from Barlow City Schools teach students between the grades of

prekindergarten to 5th grade.

All communication with participants occurred via text message, email, password-

protected Zoom meetings, and face-to-face interactions. Individual interviews were arranged

with each participant based on their availability and convenience. Eight of the participants opted

for face-to-face interviews. All face-to-face interviews were conducted in a secluded classroom

with no distractions, and no other individuals were permitted to enter while interviewing. Two of

the participants chose to interview via a password-protected Zoom meeting. Only the interviewer

and participant were given access to the Zoom meeting. One focus group was held face-to-face

and contained six of the 10 participants. Personal conflicts arose for two participants, and two

other participants opted not to participate in the focus group due to inconvenience. Nine of the 10

participants individually recorded audio journals and submitted the journals by text message or

email. The participant who did not submit audio journals is now a general education teacher and

currently faces different challenges than were sought to be determined by responding to the

audio journals.

All participants taught in a self-contained classroom, but their instructional experiences

were very diverse, and they each taught a variety of student disability categories. One participant

previously taught in a self-contained classroom but recently made the transition to teaching

general education. The participants' experiences with teaching in the classroom ranged from one

year to 30 years, and each participant was female. All identifying information for each individual and their locations was withheld, and pseudonyms were used in place of their real identity. Table 1 provides a brief description of each participant.

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Student Categories	Grade Level
Alexis	7	Master's	Severe and Profound Intellectual Disabilities	2nd-3rd
Caroline	16	Master's	Severe and Profound Intellectual Disabilities	K-2nd
Claire	3	Bachelor's	Emotional Behavior Disorders	3rd-5th
Grace	20	Education Specialist	Severe and Profound Intellectual Disabilities	Pre-K
Liline	8	Master's	Emotional Behavior Disorders	K-2nd
Melanie	28	Master's	Autism Spectrum Disorder	4th-5th
Sadie	14	Master's	Cross-Category	Pre-K
Sue	1	Bachelor's	Cross-Category	Pre-K
Susie	2	Bachelor's	Severe and Profound Intellectual Disabilities	K-1st
Tracy	30	Doctor of Education	Cross-Category	Pre-K

Alexis

Alexis teaches students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities in a self-contained setting at Davis County Public Schools. She began her career as a substitute teacher in a general education setting to have the same hours and holidays as her children. Alexis then began subbing in special education classrooms, where she fell in love with the setting. She became a long-term substitute teacher and then a paraprofessional for a cross-category self-contained classroom for two years. Alexis then accepted a teaching position in an autism spectrum disorder self-contained classroom, where she taught for six years. In August of 2022, she began teaching students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. When asked at the end of the individual interviews if there was anything that she would like to contribute to help retention rates and motivation of special education teachers, she explained that:

> The best thing to keep teachers is good administrators that support teachers and that encourages them. I feel very supported here [in my current position]. They have only said positive things to me. I am my own worst critic, so that validation, that encouragement goes a long way with me. And it's cheap! It doesn't cost money to say, "you're doing a great job!". That will help with the retention of teachers, just simple recognition from administrators.

Caroline

Caroline teaches in a self-contained classroom for students with severe and profound intellectual disorders at Barlow City Schools. Caroline has been teaching for a total of 16 years and began her career as a general education teacher. She taught 2nd grade for eight years and then stopped teaching for 15 years while her children were young. She then began teaching as a long-term substitute in a self-contained classroom for students with severe and profound

intellectual disorders and accepted the full-time teaching position shortly after. She has been teaching in this setting for the past eight years. When asked what challenges Caroline struggled with the most while teaching in a special education classroom, she stated that:

> I find that meeting the daily living needs for my kids, such as toileting and feeding, are very challenging, and then the lack of instructional materials and no curriculum to follow is also a big challenge. You know, I have the general education standards as a guide to go by but no materials to go with them, and we don't have a curriculum map that kind of spells out the order to teach things in. So, I'm just having to pull from different resources.

Claire

Claire teaches students with emotional behavior disorders in a self-contained classroom at Davis County Public Schools. Claire is a 24-year-old with three years of teaching experience, all in the emotional behavior disorder self-contained setting. She grew up in another state and graduated from a well-known university but moved to Georgia once she began her teaching career. When asked how Claire's motivation has changed since she first started as a special education teacher, she explained that:

> It goes back and forth sometimes. Overall, I feel more motivated at this time because I've learned so much. The organization was hard for me at first, and I've gotten a lot more organized over the years. So, that was a big motivator for me. Because when I'm not organized, it's a huge challenge and struggle. But the more I learn, it helps motivate me to do better and try new things. Sometimes it is hard, though. I mean, I could move to a general education setting for the same pay but a fraction of the paperwork and behaviors that I deal with now.

Grace

Grace teaches in a self-contained classroom for students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities at Davis County Public Schools. Grace has been teaching for 20 years and has taught in a variety of settings. She began her career as a general education teacher and moved to special education after three years. She taught students with autism for several years before teaching students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. Grace has worked with many different grade levels but is currently teaching pre-kindergarten. During the focus group, Grace noted that she thinks that the challenges that she struggles with the most are:

> I would say paperwork management, I would say behavior management, dealing with the multiple levels of each individual student, and I would say the multiple [adult] personalities in the room are some of the toughest challenges. And then when you're dealing with multiple levels, some who are higher functioning than the others, you find yourself most of the time creating, like, a classroom within a classroom within a classroom because you have to in order to be able to meet all their specific needs.

Liline

Liline teaches students with emotional behavior disorders in a self-contained classroom setting at Davis County Public Schools. She has been teaching for eight years but began her career as a paraprofessional. Liline was a paraprofessional for 13 years before transitioning to a special education teacher. As a paraprofessional, she worked in multiple self-contained classrooms, teaching students with significant developmental delays, learning disorders, and emotional behavior disorders. When asked about how her motivation has changed throughout her career, Liline stated that:

> I guess at the at the beginning I was a little bit more [motivated] because I was excited. Even over the school year, my motivation changes from time to time, it fluctuates. Because

at the beginning of the year I'm very excited, sometimes at the middle of the year I'm like "ugh, oh my gosh!", and then at the end of the year when I am finishing up and doing IEPs [individual education plan] I'm like "oh my gosh, you have to keep going through this!" So, it just kind of, it fluctuates. But the part that gets me going is the fact that I see the changes in the kids both academically and in terms of behavior, and when I can start pushing them out from the self-contained setting, that makes me feel good.

Melanie

Melanie teaches students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in a self-contained classroom at Barlow City Schools. Melanie has been teaching for 28 years and has taught a variety of disability categories during her career. She began working as a paraprofessional in an inclusion setting in a general education classroom for one year and then moved to an emotional behavior disorder self-contained classroom for three more years. Melanie then began teaching students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. She worked with this population of students for 16 years before she started teaching students with ASD. She has worked in this setting for the past 12 years. In response to an audio journal question that posed the question of what challenges the participants faced that day, Melanie stated:

> Today, I had a training course on GAA [Georgia Alternate Assessment], which is a standardized test. And, you know, I am all for teaching my students standards and introducing and exposing them to every topic that general education students learn, but I do not think that it is fair to them [my students] that I feel that the majority of my time needs to go towards teaching them standards that will never truly benefit them, when I should be more focused on teaching them things that are relevant to their lives. For example, I think that it is more important for them to be able to feed themselves or dress

themselves than it is to, oh, I don't know, maybe know the difference between a vertebrate and an invertebrate.

Sadie

Sadie teaches in a general education classroom for kindergarten students but previously taught in a cross-category self-contained classroom at Davis County Public Schools. Sadie has been teaching for the past 14 years and began her career in a cross-category inclusion classroom with a general education co-teacher. She then taught as an interrelated teacher for one year before teaching in a self-contained cross category-classroom. Prior to teaching, she was a substitute teacher for students who participated in an extended school year (ESY) program during the summers. She transitioned to a general education kindergarten classroom two years ago with hopes of one day being considered for an administration position. When asked how the administration could better support special education teachers, Sadie's response was:

> I think just by listening to teachers and getting out and seeing their classrooms. To me, it is probably the biggest one, and I know that they want to do that, you know, you hear them saying, oh, we need to get out, oh, we need to come see you or oh, I'm gonna try and come hang out with you tomorrow. And then other things just come up, and other things get in the way that, so I think that it goes more than just being able to rely on their support. You need that follow through as well.

Sue

Sue teaches in a cross-category self-contained classroom at Davis County Public Schools. Sue has one year of teaching experience in a self-contained classroom. Prior to teaching, she was a paraprofessional for seven years in a cross-category self-contained setting. She began her career in a childcare setting and then became a substitute teacher. At the end of the interview,

when asked what she thought could help the motivation and retention of special education teachers, she stated:

> For me, pay is a big one. I mean, yeah, it was a jump in pay from being a paraprofessional to a teacher, but with the workload and the paperwork and now I'm seeing my money go right back into the classroom. So, it's not even enough to make that much of a difference financially for me.

Susie

Susie teaches in a self-contained classroom for students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities at Davis County Public Schools. Susie is a 24-year-old with only two years of experience in education, all in the severe and profound intellectual disabilities self-contained classroom setting. Susie recently graduated from a well-known university that is known for its education program. When asked what she thought higher education programs could have done differently to better prepare her, she discussed that:

> I feel like instead of just going your last year in college into a classroom you could do it throughout your whole program. I feel like even just maybe once a week, you go sit in a classroom during your first semester in the program just to kind of get an idea. Like as you're learning these tactics and strategies in school, you also see how they're actually applied. Like I said, I had a very good mentor teacher for my like final student teaching, but that was only a semester. So, I feel like it would be really beneficial for them to incorporate it throughout the whole time, just so you are getting more exposure, I guess.

Tracy

Tracy teaches in a cross-category self-contained classroom at Davis County Public Schools. Tracy has been an educator for 30 years and has worked in a multitude of roles. She

began her career working at a middle school in a program at the time that was referred to as a psychoeducational program. She then moved to the high school level and then on to a leadership position at a county level. After her leadership position, Tracy took a position in the local school administration level due to being a mother and needing to have the ability to be more flexible for her children, as her youngest began to exhibit medical needs. She then made a choice to go back into the classroom as a self-contained EBD teacher due to needing even more flexibility with her schedule. As her children got older, she realized that she wanted to work with younger students and eventually moved to the self-contained prekindergarten grade level. When asked what challenges she struggles with the most as a special education teacher, Tracy stated that it was:

> The bureaucracy, the number of administrators, and superintendents trying to make all of these changes is way too high. And I think where we as teachers need help on an ongoing basis in the school is needing instructional coaches or behaviors coaches, or any type of coach to be here, at the school level, daily. People like that that can stick with teachers every day, 180 days a year. Not come in for the first 10 days of school and then never see them again. I think the thing that made me successful was in the beginning when I was part of the psychoeducational program for my first seven or eight years every single day, we had a team meeting, and we sat around the table and someday you may say nothing because it was a good day and it was fine. But the director was on campus all the time, and she would go around the table and call your name, and you could say pass, nothing happened, or you could say, "hey, I had this issue today. I really need some help." We've just got too many superintendents and not enough support. I think we're all in need of more support within the classroom, not just someone telling us what to change policy wise.

Results

Three methods were used to collect data, which were individual interviews, a focus group, and audio journals. The methods were used to gather the essence of special education teachers lived experiences of maintaining their motivation to stay in the profession. The individual interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via password-protected Zoom. All interviews were recorded using a password-protected audio recorder. After the participant completed the individual interviews, instructions were sent to them on how to complete and submit the audio journals. The participants were given the freedom to answer the questions openly about the challenges that they faced that day and how and who helped them with the challenges. The audio journals were then emailed or texted to me for submission. After, all individual interviews were completed, participants were asked to partake in a focus group, which was also recorded using a password-protected audio recorder. The focus group was conducted in person. After all data was collected and a thorough analysis was completed, data triangulation became evident.

This study used Moustakas' (1994) method of transcendental phenomenological data analysis derived from the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method to analyze the data from this study. Each method of data collection was purposefully selected to attempt to gain a better understanding of each participant as an individual and to fully grasp their experiences as a special education teacher. Bracketing was used throughout the entire data collection process to remove as much research bias as possible. Phenomenological reduction was used for individual deliberation of each individual interview, focus group response, and audio journal response.

Horizontalization and coding were used to identify categories of significant phrases and words from all data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Next, themes were

established. Through the coding process, three themes and nine sub-themes were found. Table 2

provides a brief description of each theme and sub-theme. Finally, a composite description of the

special education teacher's experiences was created to fulfill the last phase of phenomenological

reduction (Moustakas, 1994).

Table 2

Theme Development

Theme	Sub-Theme	Key Words/Phrases
Educating the Special Educator	Tailored Professional Development	More focused on what I teach, more applicable, apply to us, choices, pick topics, directed towards us, self-contained topics, individualized based on the student disability, options, wasted my time, attend what will actually help, as needed, tailored to what I teach
	Experiencing Self-Contained Classrooms	Exposure, beneficial, correlate, see firsthand, infield, see how tactics and strategies are applied, throughout your whole program, more than one semester, good foundation, shadow, mock IEP, mock IEP, mock data collection process, meeting, practice, opportunities to engage, real life experiences, observe
Factors Contributing to Loss of Motivation	Paperwork	Exhausted, unattainable, IEPs, paperwork, data, documentation, legality, overwhelming, parent communication, physically exhausted, mentally exhausted, burnout, affected, tired, administration, lack of
	Exhaustion	communication, included in decision making, paperwork management, never ending, deadlines, lack of planning, stress, take it home, scheduling, teacher-student ratio, hands off,
	Lack of Support	goes back and forth, varies, exhaustion, pressure, beginning, supported, implement, strategies, goes up and down, started low, started high, rocky, coming back, pulling myself back up,
Factors Needed to Maintain Motivation	Recognition and Support	Support from administration, support from coaches, support from fellow teachers, provide help,
	Money	provide solutions, more resources, praise, recognized, understanding, encouragement, time outside of the room, planning time, lunch, mental health, step away, hours in the day,
	Student Progress	planning periods, student success, academic success, behavior progress, open communication,
	More Time	support within the building, rapport, asking questions, pay raise, stipend, salary, more money

Educating the Special Educator

The application of professional development and lack of in person classroom exposure quickly emerged as an apparent theme when discussing the challenges of special education teachers. Nine out of the 10 participants believed that most professional development had little to no benefit to them and the needs of their classroom. Susie stated, during her individual interview, that she wished professional development were "more applicable to us because if we're going to spend the time learning it and participating in it, I want to be able to apply it." The lack of beneficial professional development was discussed in depth during the focus group, with participants all noting that every teacher should have the choice to participate in professional development and that there should be choices for teachers to pick. Liline voiced that she wanted "to have the option to pick instead of being told what I have to participate in."

All participants noted that higher education programs need to have more options for aspiring special education teachers to spend more time in the classroom, gaining first-hand experience. Most of the participants felt that their college programs offered a solid foundation for teaching special education but that they sorely lacked enough time actually spent working inside self-contained classrooms. Susie made comment:

> I feel like instead of just going into the classroom your last year of college you should do it throughout your whole program. To be able to really see what all goes on in self-contained classrooms and to be able to apply what we are learning in school.

Participants all agreed that higher education programs could not prepare you for 100% of the challenges that special education teachers face, but with more time spent inside the classroom, aspiring special education teachers have a chance to witness more and see how difficult milestones are handled.

Tailored Professional Development

Participants cohesively stated that professional development needed to be directly tailored to them and their students. The participants felt that the professional development that was required for every teacher to complete did not benefit them and their students at all. When asked how professional development had helped her, Alexis made a comment:

You mean the general education professional development? Like practically zero. Ha! When I was team leader at my previous school, one of the things that I asked for was to have our own professional development where we could pick topics and get them approved and have them taught by people at the county that were directed towards us, we asked county mentors to come and teach us on very certain things. We had the behavior specialists come out one month. And you know, the next month, it was the ASD [autism spectrum disorder] coaches talking about interventions for behavior. But we as a team, we came up with a list of ideas. We got them approved, and that was our professional development, and it was fantastic when we could actually apply the professional development that we participated in.

By having the ability to select what professional development teachers participate in or being able to request the types of professional development that they need, special education teachers have the opportunity to actively apply what is taught in their classrooms.

Sadie made a comment, "You're only going to get what you put into it, so if you don't care and are annoyed that you were told to do it, then that's what you're going to get out of it [professional development]." Melanie and Caroline also went on to discuss that special education teachers need a variety of professional development to tackle the everyday challenges they face. During the focus group, participants felt that professional development for special

education teachers should focus on working with students with behavior disorders, working with parents and paraprofessionals, classroom management, low-incidence disabilities, adapting curriculum, and developing proficiency in collaboration. Grace's experience with professional development left her feeling that:

> Teachers need to be given a choice just to pick the ones that are really relevant to us because you find a lot of them; they don't even apply to you or your students. So, it's like you are forced to do this and it's just a waste of time.

Experiencing Self-Contained Classrooms

While most of the participants believed that their higher education program gave them a good start, each participant individually said that special education programs in colleges need to give aspiring teachers more time in the classroom to fully understand what happens day to day in a self-contained classroom. Liline said:

> I think the best way is to be in the classroom. I think that's the best way is giving teachers more opportunities to engage with the kids. And to be able to maybe go through the IEPs with the teachers. So, those things would be very helpful, not just when you're writing one in school. But just shadowing someone longer than just come into the classroom and watch what they're doing, and then after that you're on your own kind of thing.

The participants described their desire to have had more time to gain infield experience and knowledge of how to apply what they were reading about in their course. Claire openly discussed that she had never witnessed an actual IEP meeting before starting her current position and how she struggled, "It was very stressful, and I was not prepared for it and I had no idea what I was doing."

The participants described how the exposure could better prepare special education teachers on what to expect and how to handle the behind-the-scene tasks. Alexis said, "Nobody taught me how to write my own schedule. On my first day, administration asked us to send them our schedules and I was like, uh, I'm sorry, don't you do that? Ha!" Grace described that her higher education program did not teach her how to prepare her classroom and manage the adult personalities, "I wish someone could have taught me how to set up my classroom. Or how to manage your paraprofessionals and collaborate with them." Other participants felt that their higher education programs should have prepared them more for the paperwork side of special education. Claire discussed needing "more help getting into the whole IEP process and seeing it from start to finish. I mean starting even as early as the data collection part and going all the way to the IEP meeting."

Factors Contributing to the Loss of Motivation

Several factors that affected motivation were quickly identified by the participants. However, three specific elements were identified to be the leading reasons for the loss of motivation from this set of contributors. The participants reported that the overwhelming amount of paperwork, feelings of both mental and physical exhaustion, and lack of support from administration, coworkers, and instructional coaches all played vital roles in the decline of motivation. Each of the factors were discussed in detail by the participants, and it was noted by several of them that their motivation to continue to work in special education varies due to paperwork, exhaustion, and lack of support. Grace said, "It kind of goes up and down. Sometimes I feel like I don't know how much longer I can do this, and then something changes and I'm doing better. So, it's kind of a rocky path for me." Several participants discussed that, at

times, their states of well-being tended to lean more towards being overly tired and highly

stressed. Claire discussed that her motivation:

> Goes back and forth. Overall, I feel more motivated because I've learned so much. So, the
>
> organization was hard for me at first, but I've gotten a lot more organized over the years,
>
> and that was a big motivator for me. Because when I'm not organized it's a huge challenge
>
> and struggle, and that makes this job even harder.

Lack of support from administration was a leading factor for each participant. Alexis

commented, "My motivation has varied according to how supported I felt by my administrators."

Every participant discussed in detail that if they felt a lack of support from their administrators,

then their desire to stay in special education would be completely diminished.

Paperwork

During an audio journal response, Melanie laughed while saying, "Ugh, the paperwork

will be the end of me!!" The most used word to describe the amount of paperwork that special

education teachers are in charge of was "overwhelming". The word "overwhelmed" was said a

total of 24 times while discussing paperwork, specifically during the individual interviews. Liline

discussed that:

> I'm constantly bringing work home. My day is never over. I'm never finished. Sometimes
>
> I have to go home and keep working, and then I'll still be doing it at 11 o'clock or 12
>
> o'clock. I'm just sitting on the floor in my bedroom and I'm working. I don't do certain
>
> things that I would like to do because of the fact that this job is so time consuming.

During the focus group, participants described having a hard time finding a good work-life

balance and juggling all the different way documentation was required. Alexis said, "It's very

difficult to get all my paperwork done. It's hard to find enough hours in the day to do everything

that is required of us. And most of it has to be done while you still remember what happened!"
Sue discussed how the "behind the scenes paperwork" is the most challenging aspect of her job
and how her time management skills have improved, but that the "IEP writing, the data
collection, the work samples" make it hard for her to stay on top of it all. During an audio journal
response, Caroline made the comment that the paperwork:

> Is overwhelming, and I spend a lot of extra time at the school just trying to stay caught up
> because during the day, you're trying to stay focused on the students. So, then after that,
> it's the paperwork, the parent communication, the documentation it's all overwhelming.

Exhaustion

Several of the participants noted exhaustion as a contributing factor to the loss of
motivation. Claire said, "I know, for me at least, that dealing with behaviors all day, every day
can be hard. It can wear you down not only physically, but also sometimes mentally." Special
education teachers who participated in this study describe feeling exhausted as early as the
second week of school and the feelings are not solely from dealing with student behaviors.
Several participants reported that the amount of paperwork and certain other requirements add to
the exhaustion. Melanie discussed one requirement that leaves her feeling fatigued in detail:

> The GAA [Georgia Alternate Assessment] always exhausts me. You know, most of my
> students have IEP [individual education plan] goals and objectives for learning their
> numbers one through ten or maybe even fifteen, but the GAA has questions on its math
> portion that are asking my students to add and subtract in the hundreds. I just don't
> understand the logic behind this test, it's truly exhausting.

Participants commented that the mental and physical exhaustion sometimes make it difficult to
persevere, and these feelings can cause motivation to vary.

Caroline commented, "I do feel like it's aged me a lot, I'm a little slower and more tired when I start the day." Feelings of exhaustion can occur in special education teachers early on in their careers. Susie reported:

I go home exhausted every day. I still love it, but it has definitely affected my motivation to do things and get things done because it's so physically taxing with the aggression and the exhaustion of having to chase them around and stuff like that. I'm only on year two and I feel physically, and mentally exhausted when I go home, so you can only do that for so long.

Several special education teachers in this study discussed having reduced levels of energy during the school year, making them less likely to participate in recreational or social activities outside of school. Sadie stated, "I don't know that everybody necessarily understands the level of stress and of just sheer exhaustion. Your brain is going from the moment you wake up until the moment you go to bed, and people just don't understand that."

Lack of Support

Lack of support was emphasized as an expediting factor to the loss of motivation by the participating special education teachers. Not only was the lack of support from administration mentioned cohesively, but also the lack of support from coworkers and lack of support from higher up positions within the county. Melanie said, "You know, sometimes, I get less support from my coworkers and peers than I ever thought I would. It can be a very isolating feeling to think you cannot even rely on your neighbor [class next door]". Special education teachers in this study felt reinforced by administration for the most part, but each participant wished administration would offer more hands-on support and involvement in their classrooms. Caroline discussed an instance where she needed more open communication from administration:

Well, for instance, recently we had an additional paraprofessional added to my room, but instead of consulting with me about what time it would benefit me, she was just assigned at random times. So, I had to completely rearrange my whole schedule to work with the time that I would have the extra set of hands in my room.

Participants also voiced the desire for administration to have a deeper understanding of how special education self-contained classrooms are run and things look very different than general education classrooms. Grace stated, "And sometimes you get administrators who aren't familiar with how self-contained classrooms operate, and when they come for observations, you feel like you're at their mercy because you don't know what they're looking for because they don't have the experience."

During the focus group, the participants discussed a new empathy professional development training that was required of teachers, and Tracy made a comment, "I think one of the things that has bothered me the most about the empathy and equity training that we've been taking is that teachers are expected to treat kids with respect, but I don't see administrators treating teachers that way." Melanie then contributed to Tracy's statement saying, "Very true. You don't see administrators coming in and high five us and going out of their way to say good morning and asking us how we are doing on a daily basis." All participants felt that lack of support, from administration, from coworkers, and from higher county officials was a main contributor to the loss of motivation in special education teachers.

Factors Needed to Maintain Motivation

When discussing improvements needed to help reduce the attrition and increase the motivation of special education teachers, four main factors were emphasized. Each participant consistently agreed that to maintain special education teachers, they needed more recognition

and support, more time during the day, a higher salary, and to be able to witness student

progress. Eight out of the 10 participants separately discussed the desire to watch their kids

succeed in something. Caroline said, "The motivation to make a difference in the lives of the

children and watch them excel and then the love that I have for them has not changed. I still feel

just as motivated in that sense." Time and money were also topics that were discussed at great

length. Grace commented that she thought, "Better compensation or maybe a big stipend…"

would help with special education teacher motivation. Liline said:

> Giving us more time. I mean, general education teachers get go to planning together, eat
>
> together, spend time together during certain periods of the day, and we [special education
>
> teachers] don't even have time to eat lunch, much less eat with our colleagues!

Susie agreed with this statement and then commented, "There is definitely not enough time

during the day to do everything that is expected of us."

The factor discussed in the most detail that special education teachers needed to help

improve the retention rates was recognition and support. Alexis said:

> For me, the problem that would make me want to leave would never be the students, the
>
> teaching, or even the parents, and as much as I don't like the paperwork, it's not the
>
> paperwork, it would be the lack of support from administration. And lack of recognition
>
> from administration.

While support from administration was a leading factor, special education teachers in this study

also emphasized a need for more support from instructional coaches and specialists to help them

navigate different challenges that special education teachers face. Susie said, "We just need more

support. Give us coaches who can give us instructional strategies and people who can come in

your classroom and provide you with help on specific things that you are struggling with at that time."

Recognition and Support

Participants in this study emphasized a need for praise and recognition from administrators. Liline said, "Being praised and feeling like you're worthy or being recognized for your hard work or something that you did makes a huge difference." Recognition and praise can help positively influence extrinsic motivation, which in turn reduces attrition. Grace said, "I also think that we, as teachers, need to be shown more appreciation. By administration, by coworkers, by county level coaches. Respect, recognition, and appreciation all go a long way."

Each special education teacher in this study discussed the importance of having support to assist them with the challenges of their jobs and to help make them more successful. Caroline commented:

> Administration at my school is kind of hands-off with the special education teachers. Which kind of leaves you with the feeling of isolation, and they don't spend a lot of time with our students are in the classroom, so I don't feel like they are in touch with what's really going on with them and what I need as a teacher to better support them. And I think that for administration to truly be able to better support us, they need to have a better understanding of what all is needed to support our students, because I am not a successful teacher if my students are not successful.

Participants felt that administration does not provide adequate resources and materials for teaching special education teachers. Special education teachers in this study also highlighted the need for administration to provide more support when dealing with behaviors from students or

when struggling with difficult parents. Sadie stated, "I think just by listening to teachers and getting out and seeing their classrooms. To me, it is probably the biggest one."

Effective leadership within special education is crucial for the success of students and educators. Tracy said, "I think where we as teachers need help on an ongoing basis in the school is needing instructional coaches or behavior coaches, or any type of coach to be here, at the school 180 days a year." Support from instructional coaches and specialists could greatly impact the success of a classroom by allowing one on one support for teachers who need specialized help that administration may not be able to provide. Having the support and praise from administration and extra support from instructional specialists could truly make a difference for special education teachers. Melanie said, "I would just like to see administration actually spend time in my classroom and getting to know my kids."

More Time

Each participant consecutively discussed needing more time in the day to address the challenges that they face. Participants described what a normal day for them looked like including their frustration with limited breaks to use the restroom. Alexis said:

> Administrators need to give us more time so that we can pull back and not just for planning but also for mental health so that we're not always on. I think there's some burnout with special education teachers because it can be stressful for a lot of people who feel like they always have to be on and always vigilant. We need to be able to step away at times just to get away for a minute. Like duty free lunches, mentally detach for a minute or two. We just need time away from the room.

There are a multitude of roles and responsibilities in special education that expand way beyond teaching. Participants discussed that, like general education teachers, special education teachers

are expected to play many parts in their students' lives, but students with disabilities have a much broader range of needs, and special educators are required to meet them all. When discussing the scope of responsibilities outside of teaching, Grace stated:

> I have found myself dealing with so many other areas outside of just the academics, and so it's like you feel like you have to master everything, starting from academics to self-care skills, to behaviors, to medical needs. And sometimes I feel like I'm a nurse, sometimes I feel like I'm a physical therapist, other times I feel like I'm an occupational therapist. So, it's like you have to wear so many different hats in one room and then you're like wait a minute when I am supposed to find time to teach?

Unfortunately, time is not an easy thing for administration to give, but during the focus group, participants deliberated that time could be added into special education teacher's days just by receiving more support. Melanie said, "In our school, general education teachers have duty-free lunches. I don't get duty-free anything! I am with my kids all day long with no breaks and no planning."

Money

When asked to discuss in the focus group what could be done to help special education teacher retention rates, several participants brought up higher paying salaries. Liline called out, "Uh, money!" Most participants agreed that better compensation could be a potential draw for special education teachers. Melanie discussed her work to pay ratio in detail:

> I definitely think that more special education teachers would stay in this profession if we were compensated for how much we actually work. If I added up all the hours that I work outside of my salaried hours, I would essentially be working another full-time job. People think teachers have it easy because of the summers and the breaks that we get, but I do not

know about you all, but I actually take things home over the breaks and during the summer. So yeah, compensation would definitely be a motivator.

Participants all agreed that they worked many more hours than they were compensated for. They also felt that they put way more money into paying for things for their classrooms and students than other professions pay into their jobs. Alternatively, Sadie felt that special education teachers needed more than just a pay raise, "Like I don't necessarily know that throwing more money at us is going to be the right thing. I feel like there's got to be something else, there's got to be more than a couple of thousand dollars."

Student Progress

Eight participants separately discussed in their individual interviews that they find motivation in their students making progress and succeeding. Seeing the success of the students helped remind them of what they loved about their jobs and why they continued to go to work every day. Liline made a comment when asked about how her motivation had changed throughout the course of her career that:

> The part that gets me going is the fact that I see the changes in the kids both academically and in terms of behavior, and when I can start pushing them out from the self-contained setting, that makes me feel good. I try to teach the children that they have the power and the control over themselves and their actions, and once you build that trust and they know you believe in them, they can succeed.

By finding motivation in their students and the progress that they make, teachers are reminded of why they chose to become teachers. Melanie said, "I just keep coming back, pulling myself back up, and thinking through why I do this and why I want to do this. And knowing that my main focus helps me because I love these kids." The special education teachers in this study discussed

student progress during the focus group and how seeing their students, who already have so many obstacles to overcome, become successful, is one of the best feelings a teacher could have. Several participants emphasized that witnessing that student progress can make up for some of the more challenging aspects of teaching special education. Claire said, "I will say you have to really love the kids and the impact that you will have on them, or you will not make it. It's too hard to not love the kids and want to see them succeed." Grace also discussed how her motivation increased as she sees her students' progress:

> Sometimes you'll find that some of these kids, who are so challenged, maybe physically, mentally, and also health wise, that when you show them something little, which is supposed to be basic, very, very basic to you, but to them, it's such a hard task and then when you see them learn and be able to become more independent, that is what motivates me to do more and to want to work harder, you know?

Research Question Responses

This study was guided by one central question and four sub-questions. Each theme and sub-theme developed from the central question and is receptive to at least one sub-question. Findings from this study, supported by narratives from the lived experiences of special education teachers, were provided for each research question in this section.

Central Research Question

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their motivation to continue in the field?

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), the self-determination theory indicated three pertinent needs to achieve motivation and self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These adjacent fulfillments reflect the principle of thriving and calculate several

indicators of vitality and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are all addressed within each sub-question. The central question is a broad inquiry seeking to determine the motivation of special education teachers as whole before looking at the individual needs that are pertinent to achieving self-determination.

The participants in this study each discussed their motivation and how it has changed over the course of their careers. The majority of the participants described their motivation as varying and not always constant. Several reasons caused their motivation to fluctuate, including lack of support from administration, paperwork, feelings of exhaustion and isolation, student behaviors, and lack of time during the day. Lack of support was the most thoroughly discussed topic across all data collection sources. Participants in this study voiced the desire for administration to have a deeper understanding of how special education self-contained classrooms are run and how things look very different than general education classrooms. During her individual interview, Alexis said, "My motivation has varied according to how supported I felt by my administrators." The special education teachers in this study each discussed that lack of support and recognition from administration played a crucial role in their desire to continue in the profession.

Lack of time during the day and paperwork were other factors indicated by the results. Sue said, "It's very overwhelming and it all comes down to time. Like can I get this done and that done and meet the kids needs and meet that goal and still like make it look like we're being productive." Participants cohesively used the word "overwhelming" to describe the amount of paperwork a special education teacher is taxed with. They each discussed not having enough time in the day to manage the multitude of roles that they have. Alexis said:

The planning, the prep, getting everything ready, all the paperwork. We have a lot we have to write up, and it has to be done while you still remember everything. You know, if somebody has a seizure, if there's a behavioral incident, you know, all those things have to be written up, and they can't wait.

The sheer amount of paperwork that is required of special education teachers and the lack of time to complete the paperwork was a major hindrance for the participants of this study. Several participants discussed that, at times, their states of well-being tended to lean more towards being overly tired and highly stressed. Exhaustion also played a large role in how the participant's motivation varied. Claire said, "I know, for me at least, that dealing with behaviors all day everyday can be hard, it can wear you down not only physically but also sometimes mentally." Special education teachers who took part in this study describe feeling exhausted as early as the second week of school.

Results from this study also found four factors that participants felt were needed to maintain motivation to continue in special education. The four factors were recognition and support, more time, money, and student progress. Recognition and support were the biggest factor that participants felt they needed to maintain their motivation. Grace said, "I also think that we, as teachers, need to be shown more appreciation. By administration, by coworkers, by county level coaches. Respect, recognition, and appreciation all go a long way." Each special education teacher in this study discussed the importance of having support to assist them with the challenges of their jobs and to help make them more successful. Results from this study found that having more time during the day would contribute to the motivation of special education teachers. There is a multitude of roles and responsibilities in special education that expand way beyond teaching. Participants discussed that, like general education teachers, special education

teachers are expected to play many parts in their student's lives, but students with disabilities

have a much broader range of needs, and special educators are required to meet them all.

A pay raise was discussed among participants in the focus group and determined to be a

leading factor in maintaining motivation. Melanie discussed how she felt that higher

compensation should be given due to the amount of time that she works outside of school hours:

> Money would be a big motivator for me. This past summer, I spent time adapting materials
>
> and lessons that I do not have time to do during the school year when working with the
>
> students, the paperwork, the behaviors and so on. Not to mention we all had professional
>
> development course that we had to attend over the summer that we did not get paid for!

The last key factor this study found was student progress. Participants each agreed that

witnessing their students make progress was a big motivator for them. Seeing the success of the

students helped remind them of what they loved about their jobs and why they continued to go to

work every day.

Sub-Question One

What are the lived experiences of self-contained teachers in North Georgia who chose to

continue in the field?

The findings from this study suggested that motivation is an important factor for those

who continue to work in special education. However, results indicated that two important

considerations are needed to support the motivation of special education teachers. The

application of professional development and lack of in person classroom exposure quickly

emerged as two leading issues that can affect the drive of special educators. Participants

cohesively stated that professional development needed to be directly tailored to them and their

students. The special education teachers in this study felt that the professional development that

was required for every teacher to complete did not benefit them and their students at all. By having the ability to select what professional development teachers participate in or being able to request the types of professional development that they need, special education teachers have the opportunity to actively apply what is taught in their classrooms.

While most of the participants believed that their higher education program gave them a good start, each participant individually said that special education programs in colleges need to give aspiring teachers more time in the classroom to fully understand what happens day to day in a self-contained room. The participants described their desire to have had more time to gain infield experience and knowledge of how to actually apply what they were reading about in their course. The special education teachers in this study described how the exposure could better prepare special education teachers on what to expect and how to handle the behind the scene tasks.

Sub-Question Two

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of autonomy in the field?

The self-determination theory addresses needing autonomy to make personal growth, in the sense that people feel self-determined and as though they control their personal goals and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Having control of one's life and self directly relates to being motivated to take action in one's life. Individuals with low autonomy have a diminished sense of initiative. Participants in this study felt that special education was a difficult career and that to be a special education teacher, individuals' need to like the challenge and have the ability to adapt at a moment's notice. Alexis said, "I like challenge and I like to make sure that I'm personally challenged. I set goals for myself to get certain things done, and I like to be busy. If I'm busy,

I'm happier. I think challenge makes me better." Claire described how she felt she had made personal growths from working in special education, "This job has definitely helped me with patience, both for my students and for myself. I've always struggled with giving myself grace and understanding, but this job has helped that."

Grace also felt that being a special education teacher benefitted her by making her a more patient person. She said, "I had to learn how to have patience with not only the students, but also colleagues, administrators, parents, you know, everybody. It has really opened a way for me to look at things differently and think out of the box." Participants felt that when they were faced with a challenge, they were more likely to conduct research on the topic that needed to be addressed, which in turn contributed to their knowledge and confidence.

Sub-Question Three

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of competence in the field?

The self-determination theory addresses the need for competence to make growths because humans need to know skills to be successful (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When people have knowledge of these skills, they are more likely to take the necessary steps to achieve the goals that they have in mind for themselves. All 10 participants reported that they felt they made professional growth by constantly trying to learn new things and strategies to utilize. Liline made a remark:

 I am constantly trying to find new ways to teach if they're not learning or if they have a behavior I need help with. I'll go read about it. And I'll see how other people handle it. Then I'll try to come in and try to implement that just to see if that works. So, just trying to find better ways to serve them and to expand my ways of looking at things.

Several participants also discussed conducting extensive research on the types of disabilities that their students may have. Caroline said, "I'm constantly learning, especially about the different disabilities I see in my children. I research it to death. I feel like I've learned a lot, not just about the students, but also about the parents and the challenges they face."

Alternatively, participants felt that the professional development that was provided by their counties did not contribute to their sense of competence. Results found that the special education teachers in this study believed that most of their professional development did not directly benefit them or the needs in their classrooms. Participants felt more confident in conducting their own research than they did by attending professional development training. Melanie said, "Nine times out of 10, if I need to learn how to do something another way or learn a different strategy, I will research it myself. I don't depend on professional development to teach me those things anymore."

Sub-Question Four

How do special education teachers in North Georgia describe their sense of relatedness to others in the field?

The self-determination theory addresses how relatedness is needed to make personal growth because of the human desire to have a sense of connection or correlation toward others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The desire to create and maintain relationships derives from human nature and directly links to motivation by allowing others to give a person encouragement and support. When people can connect with others, they have more motivation within them to act appropriately. Overall, every participant in this study believed that their relationships with other special education teachers at their school was very good and close knit. However, eight out of the 10 participants felt that their relationship with general education teachers was severely lacking.

Seven of the 10 participants used the word *isolating* when discussing how it felt to be a special education teacher in schools predominantly full of general education teachers. Alexis said, "I feel like in special education, we're separate from the rest of the school. I'm always gonna be closest with my team, and it's extremely important to have that, but the rest of the school doesn't always feel welcoming."

Other participants discussed the difficulty that they have with the inclusion of their students in a general education setting. Alexis, Caroline, Melanie, and Liline commented that they struggle with finding advocates in general education teachers that will allow their students to participate and accept that their students are different but still students. Caroline said:

> I still can't believe I have to say this, but it's a struggle for inclusion and to make sure kids are included. That our kids get the same opportunities as other kids, and that's been surprisingly difficult with administration and other teachers. I'm shocked that I've had to explain to teachers why our kids need to be able to push in.

Other participants discussed that the lack of support from coworkers can be a difficult challenge to overcome. Melanie said, "Sometimes I get less support from my coworkers than I ever thought I would. It can be a very isolating feeling to think you cannot even rely on your neighbor." The results of this study suggest that special education teachers tend to find relatedness with other special education teachers but not as common with general education teachers.

Summary

This chapter offered a brief review of the study's purpose to describe how the motivation of special education teachers can change due to the challenges that they face, such as quality teacher preparation, inadequate professional development, and lack of administrative support.

Data collection methods for this study were discussed, along with the process of the phenomenological reduction used to analyze the data. From this, themes and sub-themes were described through textural and structural descriptions. Research questions were then answered through the correlation of each data method. Three themes and nine sub-themes emerged from the data. The first theme was Educating the Special Educator with sub-themes Tailored Professional Development and Experiencing Self-Contained Classroom. The second theme was Factors Contributing to the Loss of Motivation with sub-themes Lack of Support, Paperwork, and Exhaustion. The final theme was Factors Needed to Maintain Motivation with sub-themes Recognition and Support, More Time, Money, and Student Progress.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discuss their motivation to continue in the field. The self-determination theory addresses three pertinent needs to achieve motivation and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). They are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Each of the factors were needed to understand motivation and what influences can be used to increase it in the workplace. Examining the lived experiences of teacher's essential psychological needs in terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness could potentially explain how the challenges, such as teacher preparation, administrative support, and professional development, diminish the motivation of special education teachers that leads to burnout (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Klassen et al., 2012). This chapter begins by detailing the interpretation of findings from this study and the implications for policy and practice. Following this, theoretical and empirical implications are described. Lastly, this chapter identifies limitations and delimitations and provides recommendations for future studies to be conducted.

Discussion

This section describes the interpretation of findings from this study, as well as the implications of the theoretical and empirical literature that were derived in Chapter Two. The outcomes from this study corroborate that there are challenges that affect the motivation of special education teachers in North Georgia and contribute to the rate that special education teachers feel burned out. Ideas were also contributed to the needs of special education teachers to help maintain their motivation to remain in the profession. This section also presents the

implications for policy and practice, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. Three methods of data collection were used, including individual interviews, a focus group, and audio journals. Moustakas' (1994) method of transcendental phenomenological data analysis derived from the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze the collected data. The analyzed data presented three themes and nine sub-themes, which align with the central research question and four sub-questions. From the themes and sub-themes, interpretations of the findings were generated, which are support is a necessity, special education teachers are only successful when their students are, and excessive workloads.

Summary of Thematic Findings

From the data collection methods, three themes and nine sub-themes emerged. The first theme was Educating the Special Educator, with sub-themes Tailored Professional Development and Experiencing Self-Contained Classroom. The second theme was Factors Contributing to the Loss of Motivation, with sub-themes Lack of Support, Paperwork, and Exhaustion. The final theme was Factors Needed to Maintain Motivation, with sub-themes Recognition and Support, More Time, Money, and Student Progress. Each of the themes and sub-themes applies a fresh outlook on the challenges that affect motivation and contribute to special education teacher burnout.

Support is a Necessity. Participants in this study emphasized a need for praise and recognition from administrators. Recognition and praise can help positively influence extrinsic motivation, which, in turn, reduces attrition. The self-determination theory addressed how

relatedness is needed for personal growth because of the human desire to have a sense of

connection or correlation toward others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These desires to create and

maintain relationships derive from human nature and directly link to motivation by allowing

others to give a person encouragement and support. Competence is another psychological need

addressed by the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Social behaviors can also refer

to characteristics of competence (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Social competence can occur when

people receive positivity from other people, such as praise or reassuring feedback, which

encourages people to become engaged socially. Alternatively, when people receive negativity

from other people, such as criticism or adverse feedback, people are more likely to become

disengaged or discouraged. Each special education teacher in this study discussed the importance

of having support to assist them with the challenges of their jobs and to help make them

successful. Studies indicated that there is a direct link between administration and special

education teachers' intent to stay in the profession (Conley & You, 2016; DeMatthews et al.,

2019; Peyton et al., 2020). Lack of administrative support can affect career obligation, job

satisfaction, and work commitment for special education teachers (Aldosiry, 2020; Conley &

You, 2016).

Special education teachers in this study also highlighted the need for administration to

provide increased support when dealing with behaviors from students or when struggling with

difficult parents. Effective leadership within special education is crucial for the success of

students and educators. Support from instructional coaches and specialists could significantly

impact the success of a classroom by allowing one on one support for teachers who need

specialized help that administration may not be able to provide. Due to the demanding workload

that special education teachers face, teachers need administration to concentrate on encouraging

positive behaviors, communicating clear responsibilities for the teachers, standing up for teachers when needed, and recognizing teachers when necessary (Conley & You, 2016).

Special education teachers who feel supported by administration have administrators who make their teachers feel valued and respected, implement consequences for students with inappropriate actions, and promote positive relationships between special education and general education teachers (Hester et al., 2020). Hester et al. (2020) reported that special education teachers who do not feel supported by their administration have deeper feelings of burnout than those who do feel supported. Having the support and praise from administration and extra support from instructional specialists could truly make a difference for special education teachers. When people can connect with others, they have more motivation within them to act appropriately. Without the support of relatedness, a person cannot sufficiently sustain motivation and intrinsic drive, which leads to having a sense of neglect and frustration (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Special Education Teachers Are Only Successful When Their Students Are. Eight participants in this study separately discussed in their individual interviews that they find motivation in their students making progress and succeeding. Seeing the success of the students helped remind them of what they loved about their jobs and why they continued to go to work every day. By finding motivation in their students and the progress that they make, teachers are reminded of why they chose to become teachers. The special education teachers in this study discussed student progress during the focus group and how seeing their kids, who already have so many obstacles to overcome, become successful is one of the best feelings a teacher could have. While several studies indicated that lack of student progress due to several factors, such as lack of support, underprepared teachers, and hefty workloads (Bettini et al., 2018; Billingsley,

2004; Wong et al., 2017), these studies did not report that when students did make progress, it is a vital motivator for special education teachers. Several participants emphasized that witnessing that student progress can make up for some of the challenging aspects of teaching special education. Claire said, "I will say you have to really love the kids and the impact that you will have on them, or you will not make it. It's too hard to not love the kids and want to see them succeed."

Participants cohesively stated that professional development needed to be directly tailored to them and their students. The effectiveness of professional development when providing special education teachers with the tools to make them successful is lacking for the special education teachers in this study. The participants felt that the professional development that was required for every teacher to complete did not benefit them or their students. Self-determination theory addressed the need for competence for growth because humans need to know skills to be successful (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When people have knowledge of these skills, they are more likely to take the necessary steps to achieve the goals that they have in mind for themselves. According to the cognitive evaluation theory, competence cannot solely satisfy the need for essential motivation, but autonomy or self-directed behavior is also needed to support intrinsic motivation. The self-directed behavior of selecting professional development that is truly applicable to the teacher and their students could be very beneficial to retaining special education teachers. By having the ability to select what professional development teachers participate in or being able to request the types of professional development that they need, special education teachers have the opportunity to actively apply what is taught in their classrooms. Participants discussed that special education teachers need a variety of professional development to tackle the everyday challenges they face. During the focus group, participants

felt that professional development for special education teachers should focus on working with students with behavior disorders, working with parents and paraprofessionals, classroom management, low-incidence disabilities, adapting curriculum, and developing proficiency in collaboration.

While most of the participants believed that their higher education program gave them a good start, each participant individually said that special education programs in colleges need to give aspiring teachers more time in the classroom to fully understand what happens day to day in a self-contained classroom. The participants described their desire to have had more time to gain in-field experience and knowledge of how to actually apply what they were reading about in their course. According to the cognitive evaluation theory, intrinsic motivation is instinctive, but the development and preservation of it depends on environmental and societal conditions that are around an individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teacher preparation programs often lack real experiences of what special education classrooms look like and what the responsibilities entail (Brownell et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2014). Special education teachers often feel overwhelmed, and studies showed that lack of preparation from special education programs is a crucial factor influencing the teacher's decision to leave the field altogether (Brownell et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020). The participants each described how the exposure could better prepare special education teachers on what to expect and how to handle the behind-the-scene tasks, which in turn, helps make both the teacher and the students successful.

Excessive Workloads. Exhaustion was a significant topic of discussion across all data collection methods when discussing the roles of special education teachers. Several of the participants noted exhaustion as a contributing factor to the loss of motivation. Claire said, "I know, for me at least, that dealing with behaviors all day, every day can be hard. It can wear you

down not only physically, but also sometimes mentally." Special education teachers deal with many challenges that cause stress, emotional exhaustion, lack of support, feelings of seclusion and loneliness, lack of personal accomplishment, and poor job satisfaction (Cancio et al., 2018; Duli, 2016; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020).

Special education teachers who participated in this study described feeling exhausted as early as the second week of school, and the feelings are not solely from dealing with student behaviors. Several participants reported that the amount of paperwork and certain other requirements add to the exhaustion. The self-determination theory addressed needing autonomy to make personal growth, in the sense that people feel self-determined and as though they control their personal goals and actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomous behaviors are not based on a person's level of independence; rather, they are based on personal intentions and volitions to engaging and contributing to a behavior because they choose to, not out of coercion (Núñez & León, 2015). Participants commented that the mental and physical exhaustion sometimes make it difficult to persevere, and these feelings can cause motivation to vary.

Duli (2016) reported that special education teachers have deficient levels of job satisfaction, reduced levels of energy, and severe fatigue, all leading to emotional exhaustion. Several special education teachers in this study discussed having reduced levels of energy during the school year, making them less likely to participate in recreational or social activities outside of school. Having autonomy can allow people to believe that their behaviors develop from within, as opposed to being the result of an outside influence (Martela & Riekki, 2018). Individuals with low autonomy have a diminished sense of initiative and personal choice, in which their behaviors are in response to others' stress, internal expectations, or self-induced pressures (Núñez & León, 2015).

Participants in this study described having a hard time finding a good work-life balance and juggling all the different ways documentation was required. They each felt that the amount of paperwork required of special education teachers was "overwhelming" and was very difficult to keep up with. During her individual interview, Sue discussed how the "behind the scenes paperwork" is the most challenging aspect of her job and how her time management skills have improved, but that the "IEP writing, the data collection, the work samples" make it hard for her to stay on top of it all. Billingsley (2004) indicated that paperwork was a major challenge for special education teachers, contributing to feeling overwhelmed and deciding to leave the classroom profession. Teachers who were provided with enough time to finish their paperwork were more likely to stay in the field of special education. Samuels (2022) stated that, as teachers work with larger groups of students with disabilities, completing the extensive amounts of paperwork required by state, federal, and local governments under IDEA becomes increasingly more challenging.

Each participant consecutively discussed needing more time in the day to address the challenges that they face. Participants described what a normal day for them looks like and how few breaks they have just to go use the restroom, much less deal with the paperwork and other issues that can arise. There are a multitude of roles and responsibilities in special education that expand way beyond teaching. Participants discussed that, like general education teachers, special education teachers are expected to play many parts in their student's lives, but students with disabilities have a much broader range of needs, and special educators are required to meet them all. Unfortunately, time is not an easy thing for administration to give, but during the focus group, participants deliberated that time could be added into special education teachers' days just by receiving more support.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This phenomenological study revealed implications for both policy and for practice related to special education teachers' workplace motivation. Special education teachers, administration, and other officials within Barlow City Schools and Davis County Public Schools can benefit from the policy and practical implications of this study. The motivation of special education teachers can be improved by incorporating and applying the data found in this study. The awareness of the reasons that special education teachers lose motivation and what can be done to help special educators maintain motivation can inform new policies and practices to influence the retention of special education teachers. Additionally, the implications derived from this study offer a basis for future research and development within the profession. Therefore, the data found from this study can offer a firm foundation for the implications discussed within this section.

Implications for Policy

Davis County Public Schools is one of the biggest and wealthiest school systems in North Georgia. The school system is guided by a superintendent and five board members. Each board member represents one district in the county. Under the five board members are district superintendents, followed by coordinators, principals, and a fluctuating number of assistant principals. Barlow City Schools is a smaller county in a more rural area of North Georgia. The county has one superintendent and six board members, each representing a different discipline within the county. Following the board members are the principals and vice principals in each school. All special education teachers within both counties are supervised by principals and assistant principals.

In 2020, Davis County Public Schools offered educational services to over 188,589 students at over 120 different school buildings. The school district employs 11,429 teachers. Among the students, 24,033 have individual education plans (IEP) and receive special education services. The school district has a diverse student population, 33% are Hispanic/Latino, 32% are African American, 20% are Caucasian, 11% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% are Multiracial. In 2020, Barlow City Schools served 4,528 students with educational services at five different school buildings. The school district employs 263 teachers. The school district has a diverse population of students, 51% of students are Caucasian, 22% of students are African American, 20% of students are Hispanic/Latino, 5% of students are Multiracial, and 2% of students are Asian/Pacific Islander. Both school districts were different in size and location, therefore, offering diverse results from special education teachers.

Support from instructional coaches and specialists, having more hands-on experience in classrooms during higher education programs, increasing salaries, and the ability to pick applicable professional development are all potential ways to increase the retention rates of special education teachers. At both Barlow City Schools and Davis County Public Schools, participants suggested that support and praise from administration and extra support from instructional coaches and specialists could truly make a difference for special education teachers and their motivation to continue to work in the profession. At Davis County Schools, special education teachers expressed the desire to have increased support from instructional coaches and specialists to come into their classrooms and teach them strategies to implement when needed. Instructional coaches and specialists could provide insight and knowledge that is beneficial to special education teachers that administration cannot offer, supporting both novice special education teachers and veteran special education teachers.

Participants in this study described the need for more experience and exposure to self-contained classrooms while in school to become special education teachers. Having the ability to be exposed to self-contained classrooms throughout the entire program could allow future teachers to see first-hand how the strategies that they are learning are implemented and how other special education teachers navigate their various other roles. Additionally, providing special education teachers with the option to choose which professional development would best benefit them and their students could positively impact special education teachers and their strategies, making them feel more prepared, which in turn can increase motivation. At Barlow City Schools and Davis County Public Schools, a pay increase was another motivator that could potentially help increase the retention rates of special education teachers. The participants felt that they worked harder than what they were compensated for, and if more money were an option, it could theoretically improve their workplace drive.

Implications for Practice

This study generated implications for practice that special education teachers, administrators, and other special education team members might consider assisting in the retention of special education teachers. The motivation of special education teachers can be improved by providing more support from administration, offering more time for special education teachers to complete paperwork throughout the day, and recognizing the efforts of the teachers. Administrators may consider providing more support and recognition to special education teachers, as well as spending more time in their classrooms. Having support from administration may foster a better understanding of how special education classrooms operate and may potentially offer more time in the day for special education teachers to catch up on the copious amounts of paperwork. Through discussions and observations, special education

teachers may have more motivation to continue in the profession if more time was provided during the school day for various other role obligations that typically are not handled until after school hours.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discussed their motivation to continue in the field. Previous studies applied the self-determination theory in education, but the theory has been mostly used when researching the relationship between teachers and students and when researching the motivation of new teachers (Kaplan, 2021; Ulstad et al., 2018). Researchers found that the competencies of psychological need satisfaction led to autonomous motivation and ideal function (Kaplan, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2018). The self-determination theory has not been applied to describe special education teachers' burnout experiences and their motivations to stay in the field. This transcendental phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of 10 special education teachers who were actively teaching in self-contained special education classrooms. Results from this study amplified previous literature discussed in Chapter Two, and the findings related to theoretical and empirical research were thoroughly considered.

Theoretical Implications

Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory is the theory that human motivation derives from tending to attempt to make growth within themselves. The self-determination theory emphasizes the importance of how motivation and the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors affect a person's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2018). The theory indicates three pertinent needs to achieve motivation and self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). These adjacent fulfillments reflect the principle of

thriving and calculate several indicators of vitality and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The self-determination theory has rarely been applied to the rate of special education teachers' burnout and the rate at which they leave the field. Teachers with diminished motivation are more likely to be less organized than teachers with more motivation, lacking in productivity, and making poor decisions (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

This study continued to support the basic psychological needs that fuel motivation, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Participants in this study cohesively described challenges that they face that affect each psychological need that the self-determination theory deems as pertinent. Exhaustion, lack of time, and excessive workloads can affect a special education teacher's autonomy by making it difficult to maintain energy for a personal life outside of work. Ineffective professional development can affect a special education teacher's competence by not providing the teachers with the right tools to have a successful classroom. Lack of support and recognition can affect a special education teacher's relatedness by not giving teachers the connection and encouragement that they may need. Given that special education teachers in this study reported the variation of motivation depending on underlying circumstances, such as exhaustion, lack of support and recognition, excessive workloads, lack of time, and ineffective professional development, the self-determination theory has been further proven.

Empirical Implications

Empirically, special education teacher burnout is a subject area that has been largely researched (Aldosiry, 2020; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Cancio et al., 2018; Cornelius et al., 2019; Dewey et al., 2017; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020; Papi, 2018; Sweigart & Collins, 2017). Additional researchers have gained insight into the

challenges that special education teachers face (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017; Brownell et al., 2018; Vagi et al., 2019). A prior researcher suggested finding the challenges that special education teachers face and how these challenges lead to burnout (Wong et al., 2017). Rather than focus solely on the challenges that special education teachers experience, the objective of this study was to explore the determination of motivation, including intrinsic and extrinsic influences on a special education teacher, and how motivation disrupts their drive in the workplace, which can lead to burnout. This study addressed closing the existing gap by understanding how motivation affects special education teachers and how the lack of motivation can lead to burnout.

Narratives from special education teachers were collected concerning their lived experiences with the challenges that they encountered daily to further investigate their perceptions of their motivation to continue to work in the field at Barlow City Schools and Davis County Public Schools. Previous studies addressed how special education teachers deal with many challenges that cause stress, emotional exhaustion, lack of support, feelings of seclusion and loneliness, lack of personal accomplishment, and poor job satisfaction (Cancio et al., 2018; Duli, 2016; Garwood et al., 2018; Lujan, 2020). Each of these challenges hinder a person's drive and ability to maintain motivation (Hopman et al., 2018). Determining the perceptions of special education teachers concerning the challenges that they encounter is beneficial because it reveals specific reasons that special education teachers lose their drive and move on to general education or a completely new profession.

By studying the special education teacher's lived experiences, the outcome of this study added to the previous research based on special education teacher burnout and the challenges that special educators face. Four facilitating factors that participants felt were needed to maintain

motivation to continue in special education were recognition and support, more time, more money, and student progress. While several studies indicated that lack of student progress due to several factors, such as lack of support, underprepared teachers, and hefty workloads (Bettini et al., 2018; Billingsley, 2004; Wong et al., 2017), these studies did not report that when students did make progress, it is a vital motivator for special education teachers.

Based on the four facilitating factors needed to support motivation, Barlow City Schools and Davis County Public Schools can benefit from the suggestions found in this study. The findings from this study expand on the research previously conducted on special education teacher burnout and the challenges that special educators encounter, provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of special education teachers, and offer significant perceptions into the motivation of special educators at Barlow City Schools and Davis County Public Schools.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study possessed both limitations and delimitations. Limitations of this study included the setting of two separate school districts. In Davis County Public Schools, eight of the 10 participants contributed to this study, while at Barlow City Schools, only two participants signed up to contribute. Davis County Public Schools is a large county and one of the wealthiest in North Georgia, offering many resources to their special education teachers. Given the number of resources, Davis County Public School teachers have more support than surrounding counties with fewer contributions, giving Davis County teachers an unfair advantage. Barlow City Schools is located in a more rural part of North Georgia, but the extremely small sample size made it difficult to fully grasp how the lack of funding and resources affected the special education department and its teachers. The setting restricts the capability to generalize the

findings of this study. The sample size of this study was a limitation of this study. A larger sample size could have produced additional insight and perceptions that could have offered more experience to results and themes that were exposed from the data.

Additionally, participants were difficult to obtain due to scheduling and their hesitation to add additional work to their already busy work lives. This study also only included female participants, therefore lacking various male perceptions, which could have yielded different experiences. Finally, data from this study was self-reported, meaning that the special education teachers were able to filter their responses in the individual interviews, a focus group, and audio journals, which could have altered the results by only including information that they felt complacent with sharing.

Delimitations from this study include the choice to use a transcendental phenomenological design was a vital decision to accurately obtain the lived experiences of special education teachers. Other research designs would not have allowed for an accurate insight into the true experiences of this study's participants. Participants who were fully licensed special education teachers with at least one year of experience teaching in a self-contained classroom were sought to participate in this study. Participants who no longer taught in a self-contained classroom could have only been out of the self-contained setting for less than three years to offer this study the most accurate and current results. The broad range of experience in the field of special education was due to research indicating that special education teacher burnout begins as early as the first year in the classroom (Billingsley, 2004; Peyton et al., 2020). Using participants who no longer teach special education was due to determining the reasons that they left special education and what field they entered into after making the transition out of special education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on the motivation of special education teachers and their drive to continue working in the profession should be studied in both suburban and urban school districts. Future research should also be conducted across all grade levels to determine if certain age levels affect special education teacher's motivation differently. Additionally, this study only included teachers who taught in the self-contained classroom setting, therefore, excluding special education teachers who taught in resource or inclusion settings who work with both special education students and general education students. Further research should be conducted to include special education teachers who teach in a resource or inclusive setting to allow for perspectives on all special education teachers, not just those in self-contained classroom settings.

Future research on the motivation of special education teachers should also include more diversity than this study was able to provide. Both male and female participants could allow for deeper, more generalized results that truly capture the motivation of special education teachers. Additionally, multiple school sites would better benefit future research by providing broader results that could be applied to larger areas, as opposed to just one or two. Finally, a transcendental phenomenological methodology was used for this study, which allowed for the focus to remain on the lived experiences of special education teachers. Future researchers could conduct a study using a transcendental phenomenological methodology with participants who have retired but worked in a special education self-contained classroom for the entirety of their careers. This research could offer insight into potential strategies that retired special education teachers used to maintain their motivation to work for an extended period of time in special education, which is considered to be uncommon.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia discussed their motivation to continue in the field. The theory that guided this study was Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, which allowed for a deeper understanding of motivation and how intrinsic and extrinsic influencers affect a person and their willingness to continue to work in a difficult profession. This study found a transcendental phenomenology design that offered a better comprehension of the phenomenon explained by those who experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One central question and four sub-questions were presented to fully grasp how the challenges that special education teachers face hinder their motivation to remain in the profession. Data collection methods included individual interviews, a focus group, and audio journals. After all data was collected and analyzed, three themes and nine sub-themes emerged.

Participants from this study reported several factors that contributed to the loss of motivation, as well as factors needed to maintain motivation. The leading causes for loss of motivation were lack of support, paperwork, and exhaustion. The elements needed to encourage motivation were recognition and support, money, more time, and witnessing student progress. Support from instructional coaches and specialists, more hands-on experience in classrooms during higher education programs, increasing salaries, and the ability to pick applicable professional development to be implemented is recommended to help support the retention of special education teachers. This study enlightens the challenges and struggles that special education teachers in self-contained classrooms face as it relates to their motivation to continue working in the profession.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 5, 2022

Sarah Vaughan

Janet Deck

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-398 Special Education Teacher Burnout: A

Phenomenological Study of the Challenges That Influence Motivation

Dear Sarah Vaughan, Janet Deck,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in

accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug

Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review.

This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your

approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in

which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

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

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Dear Recipient:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia describe their motivation to continue in the field, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be (1) have a valid special education teaching license, (2) worked in a special education self-contained classroom within the last 3 years or are actively teaching in a special education self-contained classroom, and (3) have at least 1 year of experience in teaching in a self-contained classroom. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in recorded interviews (30 minutes), recorded focus group discussion (45 minutes), record an audio journal twice a week for a 3-week period (30 minutes), and once interviews have been transcribed, transcriptions will be returned to participants to check for accuracy and make corrections if necessary. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ for more information.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional

information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent

document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Sarah Vaughan

Special Education Teacher

Appendix C

Participant Consent

Title of the Project: Special Education Teacher Burnout: A Phenomenological Study of the

Challenges That Influence Motivation

Principal Investigator: Sarah Margaret Vaughan, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must (1) have a valid

special education teaching license, (2) worked in a special education self-contained classroom

within the last 3 years or are actively teaching in a special education self-contained classroom,

and (3) have at least 1 year of experience in teaching in a self-contained classroom. Taking part

in this research project is voluntary.

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

this research.

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

The purpose of the study is to describe how special education teachers in North Georgia describe

their motivation to continue in the field. The motivation to continue in special education can be

affected by challenges that can disrupt the drive of special education teachers, such as teacher

preparation, professional development, and administrative support.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in a recorded interview session consisting of 17 questions related to your experiences as a special education teacher and your motivation. This should take about 30 minutes to complete.

2. Participate in a recorded focus group discussion on the motivation and experiences of special education teachers. This should take about 45 minutes to complete.

3. Participate in recording an audio journal twice a week over the course of a 3-week period. You will receive three open-ended questions and will complete six separate recordings, with no minimum or maximum time constraints. You will then send your audio records to the researcher via email or via text message. This should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

4. Once your interview is complete, it will be transcribed and returned to you to check for accuracy. You will have the opportunity to make any corrections to your responses at this time.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include the different types of demands and responsibilities that special education teachers face are very different than general education teachers. By examining the challenges that special educators face, such as teacher preparation, professional development, and administrative support, research can indicate how diminished motivation in special education teachers can lead to burnout. Potentially having more control over the burnout rate within the field can benefit all educational investors.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and 2 committee members will be the only people with access to the data. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Data will be stored on a password protected computer in a separate password protected folder and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Interviews, focus group discussion, and audio journals will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer in a separate password protected folder for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and 2 committee members will be the only people with access to the recordings.

- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, your school division, or school. If you

decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Sarah Margaret Vaughan. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ████████████ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Janet Deck at ████████████

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

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

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

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

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

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

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix D

Audio Journaling Directions

To capture the elements of the challenges that you experience weekly and how your motivation changes as the challenges arise, please maintain an audio journal using the following guidelines: Answer three short questions 2 times weekly for a 3-week period, for a total of 6 entries. There are no time restrictions for your audio entries. The recordings may be as long or as short as you decide. You will answer the same questions each time you record yourself.

Audio Journaling Questions:

1. What challenges did you face today?

2. How did you address and handle the challenges?

3. Did anyone assist you in handling the challenges?

As you record your audio journals, please email them to: ███████████████████ or text them to: ██████████ .