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WEATHERING THE STORM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF K-12

SPECIAL EDUCATOR RESILIENCE AND RETENTION

by

Kimberly M. Wisinski

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to interpret the lived experiences of K-12 special education teachers ($N = 16$) from large, suburban districts in Illinois who have persisted in their positions beyond four years. Understanding factors that contribute to the longevity of special education teachers is not only vital for enhancing the educational landscape for students with disabilities but also for informing district-level strategies aimed at fostering teacher retention. This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) bioecological systems theory, which provided a framework for exploring the various systems that influence special education teacher retention. To achieve triangulation and enhance credibility in this study, a purposeful sequence of surveys/questionnaires, individual interviews, artifact sharing, and a writing prompt were used. Themes related to external supports with subthemes related to family support, collegial support, administrator support, and mental health support, as well as internal supports with subthemes related to a sense of purpose, coping skills, and resilience were discovered. These interconnected themes highlight the comprehensive nature of special education teachers' lived experiences. The study provides valuable insights for policy and practice in special education, which can help reduce the negative impact of teacher attrition and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Keywords: special education teacher, teacher burnout, attrition, retention, resilience, internal factors, external factors, PPCT bioecological systems theory

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Dedication

To my mom and dad, each of you has been a significant source of inspiration to me my entire life. Your individual struggles and accomplishments have helped me become the person I am today. Thank you for instilling in me the values of education, hard work, responsibility, and empathy. In your resilience, I found my strength.

To my children, Cady, Jake, Ava, and Luke, you have taught me lessons no book or college course ever could, and watching each of you grow and find your path as young adults has brought me more joy than you will ever know. Despite my pursuit of this academic goal, the four of you will always be my greatest achievements.

To Randy, while no title fully captures the role you have played in my life, your selfless presence and steadfast support have left a lasting mark on my heart. Thank you for always quietly being there and encouraging me every step of the way in this process.

Finally, to my husband, Don, thank you for believing in me and providing me with the time and space to write, reflect, and grow throughout this season of our lives. You challenged me to pursue my dream, regardless of the obstacles, and supported me unconditionally. I do not walk this path alone; I am eternally grateful for your love and to be on this journey together.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge the special education teachers who took part in this study. I would also like to acknowledge the school districts and communities where these special educators teach for their commitment to creating learning environments that are among some of the best in the nation. Even with these supports, I recognize the unique challenges you navigate each day. Your contributions have been invaluable to my research, and for that, I am truly grateful.

I also extend a special thank you to Dr. Andrea Bruce, for serving on my dissertation committee and influencing me to pursue my research qualitatively during our Monday night office hour chats. Your insight and guidance helped me to lay the groundwork for this study. Lastly, to Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, my dissertation committee chair, thank you for joining me on this journey and for believing in me, even after I shared my goal and timeline for this project with you. Your wisdom and support helped me to see this was possible. Thank you for truly standing by me and motivating me every step of the way. I truly couldn't have accomplished this without you.

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List of Abbreviations

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Theory

Special Education Teacher (SET)

Students with Disabilities (SWD)

World Health Organization (WHO)

Undergraduate Prospective Teacher (UPT)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One introduces the problem of special education teacher (SET) attrition, the factors known to cause it, and its inherent implications for students with disabilities (SWD). The background section within this chapter presents the historical context of special education for public school children with disabilities in the United States and highlights the persistent staffing shortages and low retention rates experienced in the field. Recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, civil and political unrest, and racial tensions have further compounded the personal and professional challenges faced by special education teachers while also impacting those enrolled in pre-service programs or contemplating a career in the profession. These complex factors underscore the urgent need to address SET attrition as well as the dire consequences imposed upon SWD when retention rates are low. The imminent need for a continued focus on SET retention is explored in this chapter through the lens of the bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001, 2005) that serves as the framework for this study. The final sections of this chapter include the problem statement, purpose of the study, significance of the study, research questions, key definitions, and a chapter summary.

Background

This section provides an overview and historical context of persistent inequalities SWD have faced in the American public school system. From a social context, SET shortages caused by high burnout and attrition rates have been a longstanding challenge in most states and have worsened in recent years. The theoretical context section of this chapter outlines the key theoretical concepts that underpin the study, focusing on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2001, 2005) Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model as the framework to examine the experiences and

resilience of SETs who have persisted in their positions beyond four years. By conducting this analysis, I aimed to contribute to the knowledge base and discipline of special education and offer practical strategies to increase SET retention.

Historical Context

Throughout U.S. history, children with disabilities have been unjustly excluded from public schools, and those students who were allowed to attend often did not receive appropriate access to materials or necessary support (Francisco et al., 2020; Goldman, 1994; Kors, 2022). It was not until after 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* became a catalyst for education reform and special education legislation, that parents and disabilities advocates began calling for equal access to public education for all children, including those with special needs (Francisco et al., 2020). In 1975, the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which aimed to ensure educational opportunities for all public-school children with disabilities (Yell, 1998). Before this law went into effect, only one in five children with disabilities received equal access to education in the U.S. and many states still had policies in place that prevented certain groups from attending public schools, such as those who were visually or hearing impaired, emotionally unstable, or intellectually challenged (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

IDEA (U.S. Congress, 2004) aimed to ensure that the needs of SWD were met within the public-school setting and that these students were adequately prepared for further education, employment, and independent living through special education (Francisco et al., 2020). An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed through the eligibility determination process outlined in IDEA that qualifies a student for special education services (U.S. Department

of Education, 2023). IEPs are central to the implementation of the IDEA as each student's IEP must outline specific present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), measurable annual goals, progress measurement strategies, and the special education and related services to be provided (IDEA, 2004).

Special education is a specialized educational methodology that caters to the unique learning needs of individuals with disabilities (Yell, 1998). This instructional intervention approach was intended to be implemented by certified SETs who have undergone extensive disability training and possess the necessary skills to meet the diverse learning needs of SWD (Goldman, 1994). Following the passage of IDEA legislation, teacher preparation programs underwent a significant shift in focus, prioritizing the development of specialized skills needed for those aspiring to become special educators (Fisher, 2007).

Since the early days of IDEA, the landscape of special education has changed dramatically. Rather than provide services to students in a separate setting, most special educators today provide services within a general education classroom (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2023a). According to data collected annually by the U.S. Department of Education (2023), during the 2020-21 school year, over 66% of children with disabilities spent 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms. For these students to be successfully engaged in the learning process, special educators must collaborate with public educators about curriculum, modifications, and accommodations needed to support SWD in the general education setting in addition to also planning for and implementing instruction within a small group or self-contained environment when appropriate (Mason-Williams et al., 2020).

This shift has created more significant opportunities for collaboration between special and general educators but also resulted in more complex systems and ever-increasing workloads for

SETs, all of which have an impact on the availability of free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for SWD (Francisco et al., 2020; Kors, 2022; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). In March 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court clarified the scope of FAPE requirements contained within the IDEA in the *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* case (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This case asserted that schools must provide an IEP that is reasonably calculated to enable a child to make appropriate progress, given their individual circumstances, and should not settle for marginal improvements but instead genuinely aim to facilitate meaningful advancements (Kors, 2022). The Endrew F. decision is noteworthy because it is a guiding principle for improving learning outcomes for children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2023), as of the 2020-21 school year, more than 7.5 million students, or 14.7% of all public-school students, received special education services in the U.S. This figure represents an increase of nearly 2.5 million more students receiving special education services than the 1990-91 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). More recently, SETs have faced additional pressures driven by shifting demographics and characteristics within the overall K-12 population, including increased cultural and linguistic diversity, changes in family structure, increased poverty, and challenges related to the physical and mental health of SWD (Kors, 2022).

The rate of teachers leaving the profession has increased dramatically in the past two decades, yet no area has been impacted as significantly by burnout and attrition as the field of special education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Numerous studies have linked burnout to increased attrition rates in teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Herman et al., 2023; Shi & Rucktum, 2023; Sokal et al., 2021). *Attrition* is defined

as the act of leaving a profession altogether for a career in another field (Elyashiv, 2019). Maslach (1986) defines burnout as the act of psychologically distancing oneself from a job. Maslach and Leiter (1999) further described teacher burnout as emotional exhaustion that leads to a highly depressed state, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment, or self-competence. Williams and Dikes (2015) asserted that SETs report high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, which are known factors leading to burnout. As these feelings are coupled with low levels of personal accomplishment, SETs experience burnout at higher rates and more quickly than their general education peers, contributing to higher rates of attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Farmer, 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

Special educators play an essential role in the educational landscape of American public schools; however, staffing shortages caused by high rates of attrition have been a longstanding challenge in most states and have only worsened in the last four years since the COVID-19 pandemic (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; NCES, 2023b; Nguyen et al., 2022). According to findings from the 2021 Illinois Educator Survey, the size of the educator workforce in Illinois has not met the demand for public school districts since 2010 (Beilstein & Withee, 2022). Despite persistent shortages in the field, SETs continue to adapt to the ever-changing needs of K-12 students by supporting social-emotional learning, implementing trauma-informed practices, differentiating between language acquisition and learning disabilities, understanding the unique cultural perceptions of disability, and incorporating culturally responsive practices into instruction and intervention for their students (Kors, 2022; Robinson et al., 2023).

Improving special education practices and providing meaningful educational experiences for children with disabilities is crucial. However, the significant rise in workload demands has impacted the willingness of SETs to continue working in the profession (Hester et al., 2020).

According to Bacher-Hicks et al. (2023), SET attrition currently outpaces entry into the profession. In a national survey by the U.S. Department of Education, 69% of U.S. schools reported having fewer qualified teacher candidates for vacant positions, and 78% expressed significant challenges in recruiting and hiring qualified personnel (NCES, 2022).

Between 2012–13 and 2019–20, the total number of university students completing traditional university teacher preparation programs decreased by 28%, from 161,000 to 116,100 (NCES, 2023b). Because preservice teachers are needed to fill vacancies created by attrition, their interest in and perceptions of teaching must also be considered when looking at ways to recruit and retain new teachers in hard-to-fill positions such as special education. Given the ongoing nature of SET shortages, non-traditional pathways to licensure have been developed in some states and are helping to fill staffing gaps in the short term (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Although outcomes for non-traditional or accelerated teacher preparation programs are mixed, there are growing concerns about the increased popularity of nontraditional programs because these teachers demonstrate a much higher attrition rate than their traditional counterparts (Fraser & Lefty, 2018; Redding & Smith, 2016).

As noted by Sorenson and Ladd (2020), high rates of SET attrition have led to an increase in the number of inexperienced teachers or those who are not fully certified in classrooms serving students who represent the neediest and most vulnerable populations. This, in turn, significantly reduces the number of experienced mentors available to support novice SETs, thereby weakening the level of expertise available to meet the critical needs of students with disabilities within a school. Based on these factors, retaining a workforce of special education teachers will likely continue to be challenging for years to come (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Social Context

Though widely studied, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a historical reference, helps to underscore the importance of the sociocultural context and influence of factors that may have contributed to even higher attrition rates for special education teachers in the last four years. According to Powell et al. (2022) and Baker et al. (2021), at the onset of the pandemic, special educators quickly began to experience heightened stress levels and increased work demands as they adapted to remote teaching, new technology, and in many cases, a return to in-person learning well before their general education counterparts.

Throughout the pandemic, challenges for SETs were intensified by school closure and reopening decisions, inconsistent messaging from public health agencies, fears associated with contracting the virus, divisive views portrayed by popular media, and compliance issues related to their students' special education entitlements (Houston & Steinburg, 2022). Research conducted by Robinson et al. (2023) and Lee et al. (2023) focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SETs specifically and determined that long periods of uncertainty, increased workloads, and concerns related to personal health and safety resulted in increased levels of stress and anxiety for SETs. According to Cormier et al. (2022), SETs reported that the pandemic had an extreme impact on their overall mental health as well, noting significant increases in levels of stress (91%), depression (58%), anxiety (76%), and emotional exhaustion (83%).

Despite being deemed essential (Belser & Prescod, 2021), Americans' fluctuating opinions about teachers were also exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic when parents across the country were faced with the immediate challenge of homeschooling their children (Robinson et al., 2023). During the initial weeks of the pandemic, educators received an outpouring of appreciation from parents for the work they do each day. This respect quickly began to wane in

the fall of 2020 when nearly two-thirds of school-aged children were still receiving much of their education online, and as a result, public school enrollment dropped by 2.7% nationwide (Cormier et al., 2022). Despite these trends, schoolteachers surveyed at the time characterized school closures as "too short," quickly casting teachers and teacher unions as the culprits of prolonged school closures (Peetz, 2023).

In the years since the pandemic began, unemployment rates across the U.S. have been at an all-time low (Aughinbaugh et al., 2023). Employment opportunities in remote settings or well-paying jobs outside of the field of education have, for the most part been plentiful, and in a tight labor market, many teachers have been lured away from the field not just by private headhunters and hiring firms but the same universities where they received their teacher preparation coursework and training (Western Governors University, 2023). Due to changes in the labor market and the ever-changing landscape of public education, Heller (2021) predicted a wave of resignations and retirements at the end of the 2019-20 school year. However, the exodus would not come to fruition until the second year of the pandemic (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023).

More recent studies indicate the pandemic has made SET shortages worse, with an increasing number of teachers leaving the profession or retiring early (Pressley, 2021). As noted by Bacher-Hicks et al. (2023), during the pandemic, school closures disrupted experiential learning opportunities and impacted the overall quality of university programs for pre-service teachers (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). Findings from Bill et al. (2022) suggest that the pandemic made it even more challenging to recruit pre-service teachers into the profession, as more than a third of the participants in their study reported becoming less interested in teaching as a profession due to the "stressful" and "exhausting" work that imposed a heavy "emotional toll" on teachers and concerns about the "lack of respect" teachers encountered

during the pandemic.

Over four years after the pandemic started, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an end to the COVID-19 pandemic on May 5, 2023, by stating the virus was no longer a global health emergency (Wise, 2023). By the time this announcement came, countless American lives had been impacted by long periods of social isolation, extended school closures, economic loss, and tremendous loss of life. The pandemic exposed pre-existing workforce inequalities based on gender, socioeconomic status, and race, adding even greater stress and disappointment to those in serving professions (Belser & Prescod, 2021).

Specifically, this experience affected the well-being of many SETs in America who were already facing the unprecedented challenges of their positions and considering whether to stay in the field long before the pandemic began (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Irwin et al., 2023). This study aims to understand the experiences of SETs who have remained in their positions beyond what is typical despite these overlapping hardships over the past four years (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). In doing so, I seek to uncover the strategies, coping mechanisms, and support systems SETs utilize to overcome the challenges and demands of their roles within the K-12 public school setting.

Theoretical Context

Establishing a sound theoretical foundation backed by rigorous research is crucial to effectively address issues related to SET retention (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers have applied numerous theories to better understand factors that undermine SET retention (Bettini et al., 2019; Brunsting et al., 2014; Ghasemi et al., 2023; Pressley & Ha, 2022), yet the issue of SET burnout and attrition continues to persist (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2022). Maslach's theory of burnout identified three main components that contribute to the

phenomenon of burnout: emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, and depersonalization (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The construct of burnout is often cited in the literature as a factor that leads to increased attrition and adverse student learning outcomes (Brunsting et al., 2014; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023; Park & Shin, 2020), yet, when teachers describe burnout, they most often refer to personal feelings related to physical and mental exhaustion (Billingsley et al., 2023). If exhaustion is the main reason for burnout, which in turn leads to attrition, this study cannot gain any new insights by using this framework alone to address the issue at hand.

Garmezy's (1985) resilience theory is a psychological framework that aims to explain why some individuals can overcome adversity and thrive, yet others are unable to do so (Masten, 2021; Smith, 2020). Garmezy's research focused on identifying what he referred to as *protective factors* that enable individuals to bounce back from challenging, stressful, or traumatic experiences, such as those described by SETs in studies conducted by Daniilidou et al. (2020) and Mullen et al. (2021), that cause SETs to depart from their positions well before their general education counterparts. One of the critical insights of resilience theory is that resilience is not a fixed trait but rather a dynamic process that can be developed and strengthened over time (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014). Although resilience theory has traditionally focused on traits that increase the likelihood of well-being in response to extreme adversity (Garmezy, 1985; Ungar, 2008), studies grounded in the resilience framework have more recently also considered how various biological, psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources interact to improve well-being in challenging circumstances (Masten, 2021; Ungar et al., 2012). This shift has led to a more ecological and process-based understanding of resilience (Ferreira et al., 2023; Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020; Sharifian et al., 2017).

This study utilized Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2001, 2005) PPCT model, derived from his earlier ecological systems and bioecological theories, to examine resilience and retention from this perspective. Bronfenbrenner (2005) posits that synergistic interconnections between the developing person and the environment influence an individual's growth and development (i.e., resilience). According to Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, the four elements that define the framework (i.e., process, person, context, time) simultaneously influence the developing person as well as the environment in what he began referring to as an *interdependent* process in the mid-1970s (Tudge et al., 2016). The PPCT model, however, did not emerge all at once; instead, it evolved from Bronfenbrenner's earlier theories as he continued to analyze human development factors throughout his lifetime (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2001, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's (2001, 2005) PPCT model will serve as the theoretical framework for this study. The *person* will consider the demographics, personal characteristics, and role of the SET who has remained in the same position for more than three to five years, and the *process* will include interactions with and barriers between people and resources. The *context* will consist of the SET's ecological systems (i.e., co-workers, family, church, media), and *time* will include the number of years the SET has served in special education as well as current events or trends that occurred during the specified time. Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of understanding the sociohistorical time in which a study is conducted, as norms, values, and traditions can change over time and influence a study's outcome (Tudge et al., 2016). Research methods incorporating the PPCT bioecological framework provide a suitable lens to explore the vast array of systems that affect the capacity of special education teachers and will allow for relevant themes that have led to SET retention to be critically examined in this study.

Problem Statement

The problem is that far too many special education teachers (SETs) in the United States leave the field within the first three to five years of entering the profession (Bettini et al., 2019; Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020). High staff turnover rates have significant consequences for SWD, as the lack of experienced educators and continuity can hinder their academic progress and overall well-being (Bettini et al., 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). Understanding the life experiences of SETs who have remained in the field can help mitigate the negative impact of teacher attrition and improve outcomes for SWD (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of K-12 SETs who have demonstrated professional longevity and persisted in their current positions for four or more years. For this research study, retention was defined as a SET who remains in the same position as the previous year (Billingsley, 1993). This study was set against the backdrop of a complex and evolving landscape of special education in the US, long characterized by persistent shortages and low retention rates (Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Bettini et al., 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020). The urgent need to explore and understand the resilience and retention of special educators is exacerbated by recent cultural and sociopolitical events, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic. These more recent unsettling factors have impacted the well-being and decision-making of current SETs and those considering entering or currently enrolled in preservice programs (Bill et al., 2022; Kraft & Lyon, 2022).

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to contribute to the knowledge base and discipline of special education

by addressing the high attrition rate among SETs within the first three to five years of entering the profession. This issue has been well-documented in the literature (Bettini et al., 2019; Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020) and poses significant consequences for SWD, as the lack of continuity and experienced educators may hinder their academic progress, overall well-being, and trajectory for financial, occupational, and health-related outcomes (Bettini et al., 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). Furthermore, this study points to a gap in the literature related to the lived experiences of SETs who remain in the same positions they did in March 2020 when the WHO officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and aimed to provide potential strategies for mitigating high attrition rates that not only devastate educational systems but also compromise student outcomes.

Theoretical

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT bioecological systems theory serves as the theoretical framework for investigating the factors that influence special education teacher retention. This theory posits that an individual's development is shaped by synergistic experiences and simultaneous interaction between various internal and external systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Hertler et al., 2018; Tudge et al., 2016).

Empirical

Results from this study contribute to the body of research related to the persistent stress and burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014) associated with the complex workloads (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Murangi et al., 2022), inadequate resources, inadequate compensation, challenging student behaviors, and a lack of support systems that impact the retention of SETs (Herman et al., 2023). As Walker et al. (2021) highlighted, the importance of retaining highly qualified SETs already in

the field cannot be overstated, as the consistent presence of experienced special educators directly correlates to improved educational outcomes and better support for SWD.

Practical

This study holds practical implications for mitigating the adverse effects of SET attrition. By identifying internal and external resources that promote resilience and retention among special educators, educational institutions, leaders, and policymakers can develop targeted support systems and professional development initiatives to increase SET job satisfaction and commitment to the profession. Understanding the lived experiences of long-term SETs can inform evidence-based interventions, mentorship programs, and supportive policies that foster a more stable and experienced special education workforce, which is crucial for promoting positive outcomes for SWD (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023).

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Research Questions

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The following research questions were addressed in this study:

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question One

What are the personal experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question Two

What are the professional experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question Three

What are the experiences with public perceptions of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question Four

What are the overall cultural experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Definitions

The following terms are defined to provide greater clarity and understanding of the many technical terms associated with the subject matter within this paper.

1. *Administrator* – Leaders within the field of education with a master's degree or higher and state-approved licensure to provide supervision, monitor instructional programming, evaluate personnel, manage school sites, recruit and hire certified and classified staff, and serve as a Local Education Agency (LEA) representative (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], n.d.).

2. *Alternative Educator Licensure* – a non-traditional option for those who have not completed traditional teacher preparation programs but have an interest in becoming a teacher; in Illinois, alternative licensure programs allow for teachers to conditionally work full-time in a classroom for two years until coursework and abbreviated licensure requirements are met (ISBE, n.d.).

3. *Attrition* - the act of leaving the special education profession by resignation, retirement, family/personal reasons, or a career change (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

4. *Burnout* – the gradual development of exhaustion and reduced commitment in response to chronic work stress characterized by an inability to cope with work-related stress characterized by three primary symptoms: reduced professional efficacy, an impersonal or

cynical attitude, and emotional exhaustion; the process of gradual fatigue and loss of commitment that develops in response to chronic work stress defined by three symptoms: reduced professional efficacy (feelings of reduced competence and achievement in one's work with people), cynicism (an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's service, care, treatment, or instruction), and emotional exhaustion (feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted at one's work).

5. *Certification* – also referred to as licensure; the most basic qualification established for a SET to serve in their assigned position and is obtained through post-secondary coursework at the graduate or undergraduate level, required clinical experiences in the field, and assessments required by the state of licensure (Boe, 2006).

6. *External Factors* – social systems or environmental structures; these can be imposed, selected, or constructed (Bandura, 1999).

7. *Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Congress, 2004) requires that public school districts provide children who are eligible for special education with a "free and appropriate public education" (FAPE) by way of an individualized education program" (IEP). The Supreme Court has held that FAPE is a legal right that guarantees education of a certain caliber to students with identified disabilities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Kors, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

8. *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA)* – a federal law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children in the U.S. and ensures special education and related services (Yell, 1998); IDEA also governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more

than 7.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities in the State

of Illinois (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

9. *Internal Factors* – personal factors such as cognitive skills, genetic makeup, behavioral

patterns, and/or personality traits (Bandura, 1999).

10. *Learning Behavior Specialist* – individuals who teach students with disabilities between

the ages of 5-21 must take coursework from an accredited university and pass an exam

that entitles them to hold the LBS1 (Learning Behavior Specialist 1) endorsement and be

employed as special education teacher in the State of Illinois (ISBE, n.d.).

11. *Local Education Agency (LEA)* – Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA)

identifies an LEA representative as someone qualified to provide or supervise the

provision of specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with

disabilities; is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and is

knowledgeable about the availability of resources within the public school setting.

12. *Office of Special Education Services (OSEP)* – provides efforts to improve outcomes for

children with disabilities, birth through 21, and their families, ensuring access to fair,

equitable, and high-quality education and services in the U.S. through the administration

of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which authorizes formula

grants to states and discretionary grants to states and local districts (U.S. Department of

Education, 2023).

13. *Resilience* – the process and outcome of successfully adapting to complex or challenging

life experiences, primarily through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and

adjustment to external and internal demands in culturally meaningful ways (American

Psychological Association, 2023b; Unger et al., 2012).

14. *Resource Support Services* – the least restrictive level of exceptional education support on the continuum of educational placement options that exist outside of general education as defined by a student receiving support for the majority of the day within the general education setting with limited support resulting in removal from that environment (ISBE, n.d.).

15. *Retention* – when a special educator remains in the same position as the previous year (Billingsley, 1993).

16. *School Culture* – underlying social norms, values, and assumptions about schools, students, and how teachers should act (Jones et al., 2013).

17. *Self-contained Services- a* more restrictive level of special education support on the continuum of educational placement options defined by a student receiving support for the majority of the day outside of the general education environment (ISBE, n.d.).

18. *Special Education* – specially designed instruction intended to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

19. *Special Education Teacher* – in the State of Illinois, these individuals have received at least a bachelor's degree in education and hold an LBS1endorsement and work in special education; professional responsibilities include but are not limited to understanding the impact of specific disability areas within the school setting, expertise in cognitive, physical, academic, emotional, social, communication, and sensory development in students ages 5–21, implementation of accommodations and modifications to the general education curriculum, formative and summative assessments, regular parent communication, and IEP compliance (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour et al., 2023; Hester et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020).

20. *Teacher Shortage* – teaching positions that are unfilled after the start of the school year or are filled by non-certified, provisional, or emergency certification (U.S. Department of Education & Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022).

21. *Stress* – a normal response to upsetting or threatening events that can become pathological; chronic stress can impede day-to-day functioning and emotional balance and is a known risk factor for developing other psychiatric illnesses, such as anxiety and depression; prolonged teacher stress negatively correlates with job satisfaction and positively correlates with withdrawal behavior, including physically or psychologically leaving the work setting and intending to leave the teaching profession (Apyapong et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021).

22. *Teacher Burnout* – emotional exhaustion associated with numerous adverse outcomes, including less favorable interactions with students, mood and mental well-being changes, increased absenteeism, lower job commitment, and increased turnover intentions (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Maslach et al., 2001).

23. *Teacher Shortage occurs when not enough qualified individuals are* willing to offer their services for the wages and conditions offered. In other words, teacher shortages emerge in different fields and locations when there is an imbalance between the number of teachers demanded and the number of qualified teachers willing to offer their services to fill these required positions (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019).

24. *Undergraduate Prospective Teachers* (UPTs) – Undergraduate students who are considering or have considered a career in teaching or are actively enrolled in a teacher preparatory program with the intent of directly entering the field upon graduation (U.S. Department of Education & Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022).

Summary

The problem is that a significant number of SETs leave the field within the first three to five years of starting their career, and often, in less time than it took to earn their degree and obtain their teaching license. This phenomenon has been highlighted in numerous studies conducted by Bettini et al. (2019), Bettini and Billingsley (2023), Gilmour and Wehby (2020), and Hester et al. (2020). High attrition rates among SETs negatively impact the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of SWD (Bettini et al., 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of K-12 special education teachers in large, suburban districts in Illinois who have remained in their positions for more than four years to gain a more comprehensive understanding of SET retention.

By exploring these research questions through in-depth interviews, the collection of personal artifacts, and letters of advice to novice teachers written by SETs who have been in the classroom for the last four years and still remain in those positions today, I hoped to uncover common themes related to the internal and external factors that have contributed to their resilience and decision to stay in the field of special education to help mitigate the negative impact of teacher attrition and improve outcomes for SWD. By adopting a comprehensive theoretical framework and employing a rigorous research methodology, I aimed to offer practical insight that can be leveraged to enhance SET resilience, reduce attrition rates, and ultimately improve educational experiences and outcomes for SWD.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter examined literature pertaining to the ongoing shortage of special education teachers (SET) in the United States, explored the underlying factors that have contributed to persistently high rates of SET attrition, and closes with a section on SET retention. Chapter Two provides an analysis of the research topic, with an overview, theoretical framework, related literature, and chapter summary. This review explored the various internal and external systems that have impacted special education teachers and examined the relevant themes that contributed to their retention. Understanding factors contributing to or worsening special education attrition rates is crucial to improving outcomes for SWD (Scott et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner's pioneering work in human development significantly enriched our understanding of the bioecological systems that shape human development (Tudge et al., 2016). Grounded in an ecological perspective, Bronfenbrenner's theory developed over time from 1973 to 2006 through four distinct phases before evolving into the PPCT bioecological systems model. In his seminal publication, The Ecology of Human Development (1979), Bronfenbrenner introduced a psychological framework that theorized humans, through the interactive influence of *nested, interconnected systems* (p. 54), each representing a developing organism or social system of greater complexity, can influence and be influenced by the other. Bronfenbrenner's (2001) third phase marked a pivotal transformation, renaming his theory the bioecological theory of human development. This phase emphasized the interplay between personal characteristics and person-environment interactions. In his final phase, Bronfenbrenner built upon his original theory and developed what he called the PPCT framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner proposed that within the PPCT framework, individuals are simultaneously influenced by four factors: proximal process, person characteristics, context, and time. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris posited, these factors collectively impact individuals in a complex and interrelated manner.

Bronfenbrenner's *process* describes the continuous back-and-forth exchanges between individuals and elements of their surroundings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These interactions can be between individuals, such as an administrator and a teacher, or between objects, such as a teacher and classroom resources. The *person's* characteristics include disposition, personal strengths, and areas of weakness. According to Navarro et al. (2022), one's characteristics play a dual role in the PPCT model as they influence both proximal processes as an input and become an outcome resulting from the dynamic interplay between the person, context, and proximal processes over time. One's *context* considers the places, groups, or systems and groups with which an individual interacts. The construct of *time* integrates personal life-shaping and historical events that influence an individual's development throughout their lifetime (Belser & Prescod, 2021).

Tudge et al. (2016) reviewed numerous studies that used Bronfenbrenner's PPCT framework as the primary theoretical framework in empirical research, and Ainsworth and Oldfield (2019) used the theory to investigate factors that contribute to an individual's capacity to adapt to challenging situations. This theoretical framework bears significant relevance to special education teacher retention, as it provides further evidence of how factors at multiple levels can positively or negatively impact teacher burnout, job satisfaction, and resilience (Hertler et al., 2018). The lived experiences of special education teachers can be fully contextualized using Bronfenbrenner's (2006) PPCT model.

Theoretical Connections

Connecting Bronfenbrenner's (2006) PPCT bioecological framework to this study informs the research questions and influences data collection, analysis, synthesis, and reporting. This alignment enhances the study's potential to contribute to the theory itself. Applying this theory to the retention of SETs could also contribute to the theory's development and enable customization and/or expansion of the theory in other professional settings. The application of Bronfenbrenner's theory to the decision-making process of special education teachers is essential to understanding factors that could prevent or exacerbate attrition rates in the field of special education (Scott et al., 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's PPCT bioecological systems theory offers a more global understanding of factors that lead to special education teacher attrition because SET burnout typically manifests in various settings over time (Brunsting et al., 2014). This framework's personal and contextual elements allow for the exploration of themes related to how a sample of special education teachers overcome challenges associated with their positions and maintain their commitment to their students and their profession (Kavgaci, 2022). To align with Bronfenbrenner's theory, data collection will involve gathering information on personal, professional, and cultural aspects of the experiences of K-12 SETs who have remained in their roles for more than four years. This comprehensive approach will capture the multifaceted and interrelated nature of SET experiences, as the theory suggests (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic and now post-pandemic times illustrate the connectedness of one's mental well-being, family life, career, and culture. Blustein and Duffy's (2020) research highlighted the interconnectedness of work and context, particularly during times of significant crisis. Across the country, the pandemic revealed existing inequities in the

workforce along gender, socioeconomic, and racial lines as well, triggering and compounding layers of stress, frustration, fear, and uncertainty (Bollyky et al., 2023; Petroulakis, 2023; Whitsel et al., 2023). The degree of privilege or marginalization that an individual experiences can have far-reaching effects on workers, both on an individual and systemic level (Blustein & Duffy, 2020). It is essential to recognize and address the amplified nature of these events to ensure that SETs are supported and able to thrive, regardless of their background or circumstances.

From Fimian's (1986) perspective, educational institutions are complex social systems made up of numerous interconnected components. Within the historical context of this period, the application of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT bioecological framework will provide meaningful insight into how various personal and social systems play out in an individual's work environment and may have impacted a SET's decision to remain in the field. In the context of SET retention, the application of the PPCT bioecological systems theory offers valuable insights into the factors that contribute to high turnover rates and systemic challenges that impact outcomes for SWD (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019; Braun et al., 2020; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Nguyen, et al., 2019). Through the demonstration of alignment between the data and the theory, the proposed study will not only shed light on the experiences of these teachers but also potentially enrich the theoretical framework itself. By addressing these factors and providing adequate support and resources, policymakers and educators can strive towards increasing the retention rates of special education teachers and fostering a more stable and supportive environment within the field while also enhancing the quality of special education services for SWD.

Related Literature

This literature review aimed to present internal and external systems that exert influence

on the social and emotional well-being, burnout, and attrition rates of SETs while also investigating themes related to workload, compensation, and administrative support (Economic Policy Institute, 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Murangi et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2023). This literature review also included pertinent information related to the sociocultural context of special education teacher shortages, declining teacher preparation program enrollment, and the impact of alternate licensure on the problem of special education teacher shortages in the U.S. (Tran et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Additionally, this research highlighted the gap in literature related to the experiences of special education teachers who have remained in their positions since before the pandemic began (Fox & Walter, 2022; Scott et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023).

Sociocultural Context

Public education in the US has undergone numerous reforms that have often portrayed teachers as both the problem and solution to perceived shortcomings (Kraft & Lyon, 2022). According to research conducted by Tran et al. in 2022, there is a pervasive belief among both aspiring and current teachers that the root cause of the acute teacher shortage is the longstanding lack of respect for educators, which manifests as excessive public scrutiny and inadequate compensation and subpar work environments. The field of special education often presents a challenge for its teachers, due to the gender imbalance in the profession and the historical gender-based pay disparities in the US (Allegretto & Mishel, 2016). As a result, SETs often encounter lower salaries than their counterparts in other fields. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, described the teacher shortage in her report from the American Federation of Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force as a "ruse for a constellation of societal issues that have been poured on teachers, which have not been sufficiently addressed by the public"

(American Federation of Teachers, 2022) adding, in her view, the teacher shortage boils down to an overall shortage of respect for educators.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the initial weeks of the pandemic, educators received an outpouring of appreciation from parents about the challenging work they do each day. This respect quickly began to wane in the fall of 2020 when nearly two-thirds of school-aged children were still receiving much of their education online, causing public school enrollment to drop across the country by 2.7% (NCES, 2023b). Despite these experiences, the majority of schoolteachers who participated in an EdWeek Survey characterized school closures as "too short," resulting in teachers and teacher unions being cast throughout popular media as the culprits of prolonged school closures in the media (Peetz, 2023).

For many SETs who were already dealing with pervasive feelings of stress, anxiety, and burnout that existed before the pandemic, the complex series of events that unfolded across the country starting in March 2020 became the tipping point that exacerbated already high levels of burnout for many in education (Ghasemi et al., 2023). A series of notable killings of Black individuals by law enforcement, an increased number of school shootings, instances of violence targeting Asian Americans, and the domestic terrorist attack at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, prompted a wave of large-scale rallies and demonstrations, despite the health risks associated with public gatherings due to the pandemic at that time (Bailey et al., 2021; Lu & Hua, 2022).

The ramifications of these issues reached the realm of classrooms where school districts were faced with having to issue statements, develop curriculum in response to these events, and implement diversity training programs to reduce the impact of these events within the public-school setting (Belser & Prescod, 2021). Diliberti et al. (2021) and Herman et al. (2023) reported

that teachers were apprehensive about their own health and safety at the time but also felt a great

deal of concern for their students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral health at the time.

According to Irwin et al. (2023), while the COVID-19 pandemic has been studied

extensively, it serves as a reminder of the sociocultural context and various emotional factors

affecting special educators at the time. Research conducted by Robinson et al. (2023) and Lee et

al. (2023) found, not surprisingly, that long periods of uncertainty, increased workload, and

concerns related to personal health and safety during that time resulted in increased levels of

stress and anxiety for special educators. According to Cormier et al. (2022), SETs reported the

pandemic had an extreme impact on their levels of stress (91%), depression (58%), anxiety

(76%), and emotional exhaustion (83%). A study published by *Education Researcher* in 2022

examined teacher's mental health during the pandemic and found their stress and anxiety levels

were higher than that reported even by healthcare workers at the time (Kush et al., 2022). While

also underscoring their importance in society, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the many

challenges SETs have historically faced. Taking these historic events into account is crucial, as

they can cause shifts across various systems and provide valuable context for understanding why

two individuals in similar environments may respond differently (Belser & Prescod, 2021).

Teacher Shortages

Prior to the COVID pandemic, eight percent of teachers left the profession, and another

eight percent shifted schools each year (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). In a 2022

study conducted at Boston University, researchers compared the rate of teacher turnover in

Massachusetts between 2015–16 and 2021–22 and found these rates increased by 17% going into

the fall 2021 school year (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023). Various reports have indicated that teacher

shortages are even more critical in less resourced communities and hard to staff subject areas

(Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; García & Weiss, 2020; ISBE, 2022). Nguyen et al. (2020) highlighted that the impact of shortages is also not the same for all districts, as differences in school environment, subject matter, and location can make a shortage manageable for more resourced schools but far more devastating for districts with more significant needs. Despite widespread teacher shortages across the country, no area has been impacted as significantly as the field of special education (Bill et al., 2022; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022).

Special Education Teacher Shortages

According to Mason-Williams et al. (2020), the shortage of SETs is a "complex, multi-faceted problem" (p. 47). The term *teacher shortage,* as defined by Sutcher et al. (2019), is commonly used to refer to an insufficient number of new teachers given student enrollment in undergraduate teacher preparation programs and the number of teachers retiring from the field each year. Critical SET shortages have been widely attributed to both high SET attrition rates (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020) and an insufficient supply of new teachers entering the workforce from university teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hamond & Podolsky, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022; Sutcher et el., 2019). Boe (2006) highlighted the importance of distinguishing between the number of educators needed to fill vacancies caused by attrition and the need for highly qualified teachers who possess the necessary credentials, such as a degree in the field of special education, appropriate licensure, and prior clinical or professional teaching experience because each bear strengths and limitations to analyzing actual SET shortages.

Because the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) must report annually to Congress, decades of information on SET shortages exist (Billingsley, 2005; Boe, 2006; Peyton et

al., 2021). Researchers have long expressed concern over special educator shortages in the United States, yet numerous studies indicate schools have not had enough SETs to serve all SWD since the IDEA went into effect in 1975 (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Carriker & Weintraub, 1989; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Schnorr, 1995; Zabel & Zabel, 1983). Peyton et al. (2021) extensively studied SET shortages using data from OSEP spanning almost a decade and found that states with low shortages invested more, paid better, had greater preparation capacity, and produced more special education graduates, which suggests that teaching special education is more appealing in states with low shortages.

In the state of Illinois, public school districts report unfilled positions by specific vacancy type (i.e., secondary science, K-12 special education) each year to the ISBE, and every three years this data is released and reported to the public, per the requirements of Illinois School Code (ISBE, 2020). According to Nguyen et al. (2022), the U.S. Department of Education also collects data on teacher shortages by subject and state. A critical flaw in this system, as noted by Nguyen et al. (2019), is that the U.S. Department of Education does not clearly define *shortage*, nor does it define the extent of shortages in each state, resulting in data that is not entirely reliable when examining the scope of SET shortages from state to state or across the country.

According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019), even before the COVID-19 pandemic, academic experts projected a potential SET shortage of up to 316,000 educators nationwide by 2025. In Illinois, most unfilled teaching positions captured in the most recent Educator Supply and Demand Report were in special education (ISBE, 2020). While most of the unfilled SET positions were proportionally distributed across the state, Chicago Public School District (CPS), the state's largest and highest-need district, accounted for only16% of Illinois' public-school teachers but 40% of the state's unfilled vacancies (ISBE, 2020).

Special educators serve a critical role in the American public school system; however, persistent staffing shortages due to high attrition rates have posed a long-standing challenge in many states and have been exacerbated in recent years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; NCES, 2022; Nguyen, 2022). For instance, findings from the 2021 Illinois Educator Survey reveal that the educator workforce in Illinois has failed to meet the demand in public school districts since 2010 (Beilstein & Withee, 2022). Despite these ongoing shortages, SETs have adapted to the evolving needs of K-12 students by embracing various roles, such as assuming additional professional duties, supporting social-emotional learning, implementing trauma-informed practices, and promoting culturally responsive practices in their instruction and interventions (Kors, 2022; Robinson et al., 2023; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Special Education Teachers of Color Shortages

The lack of SETs of color is also a pressing issue for schools, according to studies by Billingsley and Bettini (2019) and Mason-Williams et al. (2020), who emphasize the need for equitable opportunities for SWD. Mason-Williams et al. (2020) highlight the importance of addressing the shortage of SETs who are people of color to create a diverse and inclusive teacher workforce. Similarly, Kozleski and Proffitt (2020) stress the importance of striving for equity and diversity in the teacher workforce by recruiting and retaining teachers from diverse backgrounds to better serve SWD.

According to Billingsley et al. (2019), 82% of SETs were White, while only 53% of SWD were White. According to Grissom et al. (2015), diversity is not adequately represented in public schools when the majority of the teaching staff is White. Studies suggest teachers of color positively influence the academic achievements of students of color, but most of these studies focus on general educators, not SETs (Grissom et al., 2015; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). According

to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019), despite recent efforts to recruit teachers of color, unfortunately, many districts struggle to retain them.

Special Education Teacher Preparation Program Enrollment

According to the U.S. Department of Education's 2022 report on teacher preparation programs, a supply of high-quality teachers is essential to the success of the nation's education system (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). This report highlights significant decreases in students enrolled in and completing teacher preparation programs from 690,000 in 2012–13 to 560,000 in 2018–19. Sutcher et al. (2019) also examined historical enrollment in undergraduate SET programs and found that from 2009 to 2014 there was a 35% decrease in SET preparation program enrollment.

Kraft and Lyon (2022) confirmed the issue of decreased enrollment at undergraduate SET programs more recently, reporting that 35% of undergraduate prospective teachers' (UPTs) interest in the teaching profession had decreased because of the pandemic. Bill et al. (2022) further described data from their study that found more than a third of the participants attributed their decreased interest in the field directly to policymakers' response to the pandemic that "put teachers at risk and illustrated school districts' and the broader public's disrespect of the teaching profession" (p. 38). Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public perception of teacher prestige declined from 20% to 47%, marking the lowest score in 50 years. Furthermore, seniors in high school and first-year students in college displayed a marked reduction in their interest in pursuing a career in teaching, reaching an unprecedented low of 50 years, as reported by Kraft and Lyon (2022).

Gilmour et al. (2023) emphasized that preservice coursework and clinical experiences in the field of special education are foundational to undergraduate SET programs and provide

teachers with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to demonstrate competency through licensure, but more importantly, effectively fulfill their roles as experts within the field of special education. King (2022) further described the challenges of recruiting recent UPT graduates into the field of education, citing a Fall 2021 American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Member Survey that found 54% of the undergraduate teaching programs across the country reported a decrease in the number of new students entering their programs among high school seniors and college freshman has recently fallen to the lowest level in 50 years and only 150,000 students completed teacher preparation programs in 2018–19, compared to 190,000 in 2012–13.

Bill et al. (2022), Han et al. (2018), and Kraft and Lyon (2022) all agreed the larger problem of the SET profession being widely viewed as undesirable by aspiring youth will continue to result in decreases in enrollment at undergraduate SET programs and will continue to contribute to the ongoing and pervasive shortage of qualified special education teachers. On a positive note, in focus-group discussions conducted by Bill et al. (2022), UPTs shared that their respect for SETs was initially renewed during the pandemic because they were reminded of the role teachers play in the lives of their students and the essential part SETs play in advancing social justice. Yet, as Bill et al. (2022) and Kraft and Lyon (2022) pointed out, the public's continued lack of respect for teachers and low salaries did little to change UPTs' minds about not pursuing a career in teaching. Continued decreases in enrollment at undergraduate SET programs that lead to highly qualified special educator licensure will only exacerbate the persistent shortages that undermine the promise of IDEA for SWD across the country (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Special Education Teacher Attrition

Special education teachers (SETs) play a critical role in supporting SWD, but they often

face high levels of stress and burnout, which can lead to attrition from the profession (Bettini et al., 2019; Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Billingsley (2004) defined SET attrition as the act of leaving the special education profession by resignation, retirement, family/personal reasons, or a career change (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Nguyen et al. reported in 2022 that by conservative estimates, there were 36,000 vacant teaching positions across the US, with at least 163,000 positions being held by underqualified teachers at that time. Several studies have explored the relationship between SET burnout and higher teacher attrition rates. Hester et al. (2020), for example, found that special education teachers reported feeling overworked and underappreciated, causing higher levels of stress and burnout. Similarly, Gilmour and Wehby (2020) found that teachers who reported higher stress levels and lower job satisfaction were more likely to leave their positions.

Job-related Stress

Over five decades of research confirms that not only is teaching a highly stressful profession, but the impacts of occupational stress for teachers are linked to poor health (Boe et al., 2008), reduced job satisfaction (Farmer, 2020), poor work performance, (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1979), early retirement (Farmer, 2020), emotional exhaustion, and compassion fatigue (Fimian, 1986). Prolonged teacher stress, or chronic stress, negatively correlates with job satisfaction and positively correlates with withdrawal behavior that presents as physically or psychologically leaving the work setting as well as thoughts of leaving the teaching profession (Apyapong et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021).

According to Maslach (1986), individuals experience stress when they perceive a demand from external sources to exceed their capacity to manage it. Although stress is a typical reaction to unpleasant or threatening situations, prolonged stress can hinder normal daily activities and

emotional stability. Additionally, chronic stress is a recognized risk factor for developing physical and psychiatric illnesses, including muscle pain, headaches, insomnia, anxiety, and depression (Aznar et al., 2006; Seo et al., 2017). Stressors commonly cited by teachers include a lack of administrator support (Cancio et al., 2013; Hester et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020), limited agency over classroom decisions and curricula (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2022; Rolf et al., 2023), workload responsibilities (Bettini et al., 2019; Farmer, 2020; Ghasemi et al., 2023; Hester et al., 2020), and disruptive student behavior (Albrecht et al., 2009; Ghasemi et al., 2023; Rolf et al., 2023).

In a 1982 study Hammen et al. found that 76% of teachers reported moderate stress levels, while reports from Fimian (1986) also found that 87% of teachers experienced significant levels of stress. Hammen and DeMayo (1982) also found that more than 45% of the teachers participating in their study experienced *much stress* or stress they quantified as *almost unbearable*. Similarly, Proctor and Alexander (1992) reported in findings from their research that 67% of teachers experienced extreme stress, 32% reported feeling slightly stressed, and only one percent indicated they experienced no stress. A study by Ratanasiripong et al. (2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic reported a six percent prevalence of *severe to highly-severe* stress among teachers. This is consistent with a pre-pandemic study that found teachers rated a seven percent prevalence of *severe to extremely-severe* levels of stress (Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019). More recent studies have further established that teacher stress continues to be an ongoing issue nationwide, with SETs at even greater risk than their general education counterparts (Farmer, 2020).

Gilmour and Wehby (2020) and Murangi et al. (2022) found that SETs encounter substantial workload demands and stress related to collaborating with parents and other teaching

staff, complying with administrative policies and regulations concerning caseload management, and serving students in a variety of settings. According to Gilmour et al. (2023), these demands can negatively affect job satisfaction, well-being, and retention in the profession. Chronic stress from challenging working conditions has emerged as a primary contributor to SET attrition (Walker et al., 2021).

Factors such as student behavior (Brunsting et al., 2014; Farmer, 2020) and emotional exhaustion (Park & Shin, 2020) also contribute to increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and higher attrition rates (Sutcher et al., 2019). Ghasemi et al. (2023), Powell et al. (2022), and Rolf et al. (2023) noted that during the pandemic, SETs endured significantly higher levels of job-related stress than their general education counterparts. Herman et al. (2023) pointed out, however, that while many teachers experienced significant stress levels during the pandemic, others displayed healthy coping skills and high levels of emotional regulation. Ghasemi et al. (2023) also found that veteran teachers indicated lower stress dimension scores on the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) when compared to novice teachers.

Hester et al. (2020) also found that the resignation of an experienced SET can cause a significant increase in workload and job-related stress for staff who remain. This is primarily because vacated positions often remain unfilled or are filled by less experienced teachers who require extensive training and support. As a result, the burden of work falls heavily on the remaining staff, which can have a negative impact on their performance and well-being. These factors, while complex and often interrelated, impede the ability of SETs to maintain the emotional well-being necessary to allow them to remain in their positions, which underscores the urgent need to address this problem (Park & Shin, 2020; Rolf et al., 2023; Sokal et al., 2021).

Maslach and Leiter (2016) indicated that when SETs encounter acute stress more

frequently, they become far more vulnerable to burnout. Herman et al. (2023) noted consistent findings adding stress is a warning sign of future teacher burnout as well as attrition. Further discussion from Herman et al. (2023) indicated that self-reported stress levels and coping among teachers can serve as warning indicators for future burnout, attrition, and depression while suggesting that monitoring teacher well-being will be a crucial factor in maintaining a healthy, sustainable SET workforce. According to a recent study by Fox and Walter (2022), however, teachers with a more optimistic outlook tended to focus on the positive aspects of their work and find the good in difficult situations rather than dwelling on the challenges, which improved their overall mood and job satisfaction. Bonanno (2004) posited that educators who possess a more favorable outlook in times of extreme stress or trauma are able to demonstrate enhanced resilience, increased self-esteem, and wellness.

Special Education Teacher Burnout

Maslach's (1986) burnout theory, a widely cited model for understanding burnout, particularly among teachers, defined burnout as a process that progresses through three stages: exhaustion, cynicism, and loss of accomplishment. Sokal et al. (2021) posited that in the initial stages of burnout, individuals devote a lot of energy and time to their job roles but struggle to meet the demands and experience a great deal of physical, emotional, and mental fatigue. Research indicates that exhaustion and cynicism can, at times, overlap, as teachers may experience a decline in their sense of achievement as they progress from exhaustion to cynicism (Park & Shin, 2020). Regardless of the order in which burnout occurs, burnt-out teachers become less efficient in their positions and may demonstrate reduced dedication to their schools and students, leading to problems such as chronic absenteeism, leaves of absence, and attrition (Sokal et al., 2021).

Maslach et al. (2001) defined teacher burnout as a prolonged response to chronic job-related stress. One of the most extensive studies related to SET burnout was conducted by Brunsting et al. (2014) and provided a comprehensive review of research conducted over 34 years on the topic of special education teacher burnout. This groundbreaking study highlighted factors that have historically contributed to burnout, including high workload, lack of resources, challenging student behavior, and inadequate support systems. The study's findings highlight the importance of implementing specific interventions, support systems, and strategies to combat burnout and improve the retention rate of special education teachers. Similarly, Zabel and Zabel (1983) examined the relationship between burnout and factors such as experience, training, and age among SETs, suggesting that these factors play a role in burnout levels, with less experienced and younger teachers being more susceptible to burnout. This early study emphasized the importance of providing specialized assistance and professional development that caters to the distinct requirements of SETs at various stages of the profession.

A study conducted by Ryan et al. (2017) showed a strong negative correlation between teacher attrition rates and the amount of stress that educators experience as a result of their administrator, which sheds light on the impact that leadership styles can have on the well-being of teachers and highlights the importance of creating supportive and nurturing work environments. According to Sokal et al. (2021), administrators contributed significantly to teacher stress and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic, as teachers planning to leave the field shared issues that led them to feel undervalued and disregarded, ultimately leading to burnout. On the other hand, Bettini et al. (2020) found that administrators who actively supported SETs created a more positive working environment by sharing a vision for meeting the needs of all students. Administrators who involved teachers in decision-making showed concern for SETs and their

students, which built trust and led to a school culture of collective responsibility for SWD.

More specifically, Camp et al. (2022) studied changes in teachers' mobility and attrition during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic in Arkansas by focusing on the unique challenges SETs faced during that time. Findings from this study illustrate that SETs experienced higher rates of attrition during the pandemic due to the added pressure and workload associated with remote and hybrid learning models and also emphasize the importance of providing specific resources and administrative support to retain special education teachers during times of crisis (Camp et al., 2022).

Baker et al. (2021) and Robinson et al. (2023) also found that some SETs experienced even higher levels of stress after students returned fully to in-person instruction, which led to increased mental health diagnoses, difficulties maintaining a healthy work-life balance, and higher rates of attrition. According to Fox and Walter (2022), however, the well-being of certain SET groups they studied was affected not only by internal factors but also external factors such as interactions with colleagues, support from administrators, and opportunities for professional development.

Herman et al. (2023) and Ghasemi et al. (2023) found that feelings of professional isolation, elevated stress levels, and low support levels increase burnout. Contextual factors such as effective school leadership, a positive school climate, workload, perceptions of safety, support from colleagues, and the availability of resources were also common themes noted in multiple studies that examined the importance of environments that decrease stress and burnout levels for special educators (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019; Ghasemi et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Rolf et al., 2023). There is also increasing evidence that burnout represents a risk factor not only for depression but also for cardiovascular and other somatic diseases (Nil et al., 2010).

Research on SET burnout underscores the pervasive issue and emphasizes the need for targeted interventions, supportive work environments, and professional development opportunities to address burnout and retain SETs. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring SETs' well-being and providing quality education for SWD.

Systemic Issues

According to Herman et al. (2023), school system policies and practices directly and indirectly affect teacher stress, burnout, and attrition. System policies refer to job duties, salary, and district procedures. Several studies have investigated systemic issues that influence SET shortages, such as low pay (Bleiberg & Kraft, 2023; Peyton et al., 2021), insufficient resources (Brunsting et al., 2014; Hester et al., 2020), inadequate administrator support (Hester at al., 2020), and higher student to teacher ratios (Peyton et al., 2021). Collectively, these issues underscore the unique challenges faced by the SET workforce.

In a meta-analysis conducted by Li and Yao (2022), findings indicate that a high workload is a significant factor associated with the SET's intention to leave. Gilmour and Wehby (2020) agreed, citing the increased workload associated with teaching SWD is identified as a contributing factor to higher turnover rates among SETs. Murangi et al. (2022) also examined the effects of SETs' job demands and resources on work engagement and their intention to leave. According to their research, a heavy workload coupled with limited resources is linked to reduced work engagement and a greater likelihood of attrition. Each of these studies emphasize the importance of providing adequate resources, support systems, and a manageable workload to reduce job-related stress and promote retention among special education teachers (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Li &Yao, 2022; Murangi et al., 2022).

Research also highlights the importance of administrative support in SET retention.

Albrecht et al. (2009) emphasized that administrative support is a defining factor in whether special educators choose to continue in their current positions. According to Farmer (2020), having a supportive principal can help alleviate the stress experienced by special education teachers. As defined by Cancio et al. (2013), administrative support encompasses trust, appreciation, respect, and open communication. Albrecht et al. (2009) posit that administrative support can be observed through tangible indicators such as providing necessary curricula and materials, granting adequate preparation time, ensuring the availability of support personnel, and offering opportunities for effective professional development. Moreover, the quality of school leadership has been found to be the most influential factor in predicting teacher attrition, which further emphasizes the importance of fostering supportive administrative environments to retain and support SETs in their roles (Boyd et al., 2011).

Special Education Teacher Workload

Special education teachers (SETs) play a vital role in serving the diverse needs of SWD in the public-school setting (Billingsley et al., 2020). Day-to-day work requirements with limited time to complete tasks lead to SETs feeling overworked, stressed, and anxious. Bottiani et al. (2019) also found that heavy SET workloads led to exhaustion, lower self-efficacy, and lower self-esteem.

Work demands placed on SETs encompass a continuum of services for SWD and are influenced by the service delivery models within each school. These delivery models include general education with the support of a SET within the class or co-teaching, resource services, self-contained settings, and separate schools for students with intensive needs (Gilmour et al., 2023). The differences in these service delivery models result in varying demands for SETs, significantly impacting their professional workload (Bottiani et al., 2019).

Several factors have contributed to changes in SETs' roles and responsibilities, including policy changes like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), No Child Left Behind (2001), and the IDEA (U.S. Congress, 2004) that prioritize access to general education curricula within the least restrictive environment (LRE). Nance and Calabrese (2009) and Billingsley et al. (2020) noted that increased legal requirements and accountability measures to track the educational environment, service delivery, and evidence of student progress drastically increase instructional and case management responsibilities for SETs.

Demands of a workload can either facilitate or obstruct SET engagement, burnout, and intention to leave (Murangi et al., 2022). The size, composition, and extent to which caseloads require collaboration across grades and subject areas can vary even between schools within the same district and significantly impact a SET's workload. The workload of a SET in a self-contained classroom is entirely different than that of a co-teacher in the general education setting, for example. As noted by Billingsley et al. (2020), SETs are expected to utilize evidence-based practices to improve outcomes for SWD, yet even those who are well-prepared may not be providing adequate services to SWD, as complex working conditions and heavy workloads limit opportunities to teach effectively and negatively impact longevity in the profession. According to Billingsley and Bettini (2019), a demanding caseload can hinder a SET's ability to address the added tasks that make up the workload, such as meeting individual student needs, delivering effective instruction, managing student behavior, completing IEP paperwork, supervising paraprofessionals, collaborating with general education teachers, maintaining data related to student progress, and conducting assessments.

Agyapong et al. (2022) noted the lack of consistency between SET roles can also negatively impact the professional experiences of future teachers. Billingsley et al. (2020) agreed,

adding that responsibilities and tasks assigned to SETs that make up their workload can also differ significantly between schools within the same district. When UPTs experience a very narrow view of their professional role during their clinical experience, it can make it harder for them to adapt when the roles and responsibilities associated with their first job may differ, even within the same school district. This lack of familiarity can increase stress and, consequently, hinder a SET's ability to perform at a level that is personally fulfilling, which, in turn, eventually leads to burnout (Agyapong et al., 2022).

Compensation

Public educators often experience inadequate compensation due to the insufficient funding of public education. When teachers and other school staff request higher pay, some members of the public may view them negatively, presuming that they are acting selfishly or taking away resources from students; however, this narrative fails to accurately depict the financial challenges many teachers face (American Federation of Teachers, 2022). According to the Economic Policy Institute (2022), *teacher penalty pay* refers to the disparity between teacher pay and the pay of college-educated nonteaching peers, has been tracked for many years and has historically fallen behind comparable jobs in non-education related fields. EPI's 2020 analysis found that teachers earn about 20% less than non-teacher college-educated peers, and after adjusting for inflation, the average teacher salary was 4.3% lower in 2017–2018 than in 2009–2010.

Low teacher pay has real-life implications for those in the field of special education who are forced to work second or third jobs to make ends meet (Bowers, 2019). A national study conducted by IPSOS in 2018 found that these added responsibilities only increase the level of exhaustion with 59% of teachers surveyed reported working a second job to secure a living wage.

To make matters worse, a 2018 U.S. Department of Education study found in a nationally representative survey that 94% of public-school teachers spent their own non-reimbursable funds on basic materials for their classrooms. According to Bartolomeo (2022), there is not a teacher shortage, but instead, a shortage of desirable working conditions and equitable pay for what is arguably the most important job in the world.

School Resources

Special educators rely on resources, such as the knowledge and skills obtained through university coursework and clinical experiences, as well as social and material supports found within a school to meet their professional obligations and perform their essential duties (Billingsley et al., 2020). Murangi et al. (2022) investigated various job demands versus resources teacher profiles and found that a stressful job, when paired with scarce resources, negatively impacted teachers' work engagement, and increased their intention to leave. Added responsibilities in the classroom for SETs have also not equated to additional resources such as mentoring programs and professional development opportunities to address these critical challenges (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). The American Federation of Teachers (2022) underscore the importance of attracting and retaining educators and school staff, highlighting the need for robust support systems to mitigate teacher attrition.

School Culture and Administrative Support

Billingsley et al. (2020) and Gilmour et al. (2023) present consistent data that shows special education teachers who report a positive experience with their school culture are more likely to remain in their positions than those who did not rate their school culture as positive. Jones defines school culture et al. (2013) as the underlying social norms, values, and assumptions related to how students and teachers should act, the school climate, and collegial and

administrative support.

SETs depend on collaboration with various other professionals to serve their students, making them particularly reliant on their school and district-level administrators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). As indicated by Billingsley et al. (2019), administrators are uniquely positioned to positively impact the working conditions of SETs by setting high expectations for SWD, implementing evidence-based practices, utilizing valid assessment systems to monitor learning, and promoting collaboration among all teachers. Yet, Hagaman et al. (2017) maintained that many building administrators lack the necessary knowledge in special education to support SETs, highlighting the need for additional training for administrators. When SETs feel their administrators are uninformed or out of touch with their professional duties related to special education, they are more likely to consider leaving the profession (Ansley et al., 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Walker et al., 2021).

According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019), principal support is crucial in reducing early career teacher turnover. House (1981) categorized administrative support as emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support. According to Aldosiry (2022), emotional support includes open communication and attentiveness to teachers' work, while instrumental support involves providing resources, materials, and assistance with various classroom challenges. Informational support consists of providing training, professional development, and helpful information to improve teaching practices, and appraisal support includes trust, confidence, and positive feedback from administrators.

Prior research has yielded substantial evidence supporting the notion that fostering a supportive and collaborative administrative and collegial environment, coupled with a culture of shared responsibility, can effectively mitigate burnout, and bolster the retention rates of special

education teachers (Billingsley et al., 2020; Ghasemi et al., 2023, Herman et al., 2023). When administrators prioritize an inclusive culture and foster collaboration between special and general educators, they create a positive environment that reduces SET attrition rates (Billingsley et al., 2017).

Student Populations

Gilmour and Wehby (2020) analyzed a vast state administrative dataset from North Carolina to examine the connection between teacher turnover and teaching students with SWDs and determined there was a positive correlation between a higher percentage of SWDs in a teacher's classes and an increase in teacher attrition rates. Gilmour and Wehby posited that teachers face heightened demands in their work with students with academic or behavioral needs, which can contribute to attrition rates among teachers. Carver Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) also found that special education attrition rates were 46% higher than those of their general education counterparts. In Texas, Sullivan et al. (2017) found that SETs left the profession at about twice the rate of all other teachers. This suggests that the demands of working with SWD, particularly in self-contained settings, contribute to even higher turnover rates in these settings.

Berry et al. (2011) reported difficulties in retaining special educators, especially in areas like autism spectrum disorder (ASD), emotional disabilities, and severe/multiple disabilities. Students with significant needs require competent teachers who can plan effective instruction, differentiate the teaching process, provide personalized accommodations, implement evidence-based practices to sustain inclusive education settings, employ positive behavioral interventions and supports, support progress monitoring, and collaborate with colleagues, administrators, families, and community agencies (Bettini et al., 2020; Rock et al., 2016). According to Bettini et

al. (2020), educators who work with more diverse groups of students also tend to supervise more paraprofessionals and are more likely to experience a lack of time for planning, unmanageable workloads, emotional exhaustion, and a desire to leave their jobs.

Impact of Attrition on Students with Disabilities

The consistent lack of qualified SETs is a pressing issue that hinders the fulfillment of the rights of SWD, as stipulated in IDEA (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). In response to staffing difficulties, many school districts have been forced to cancel courses, fill positions with substitute teachers who lack special education licensure, and, when faced with vacancies and no applicants, have even leave positions open throughout the school year (Castro et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). With many positions either left vacant or filled with less qualified or uncertified candidates, teacher shortages are detrimental to students' progress and to schools. Schools with consistent teacher shortages are more likely to have lower levels of student achievement and less positive student outcomes overall (Castro et al., 2010; García & Weiss, 2019).

Numerous studies indicate that excessive workloads and decreased teacher engagement can also negatively impact student outcomes (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). In addition, teacher stress and negative emotional factors can interfere with attempts to provide effective instruction and manage student behaviors because when a teacher is stressed or experiencing burnout, they are more likely to be reactive, unpredictable, and use harsh, ineffective forms of behavior management (Herman et al., 2023). According to the U.S. Office of Disability Employment Policy (2023), in the broader context, these factors lead to decreased student outcomes and impact the trajectory of opportunities into adulthood. The latest report from the

U.S. Department of Labor (2023) reveals a significant disparity in labor force participation between people with disabilities and those without. While the rate for individuals without disabilities is 68.6%, it is only 20.1% for those with disabilities. This low rate of labor force participation contributes to socioeconomic disadvantages, limited access to healthcare, and fewer education opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty for entire families (American Psychological Association, 2023a).

Most teachers enter the profession with a desire to make a difference in the lives of SWD (Herman et al., 2023), and research confirms that effective teachers positively impact the trajectory of students' lives (Nagro et al., 2023). According to Billingsley et al. (2020), the quality of education received by SWD is related to the consistency and retention of their SETs. The importance of retaining highly qualified SETs who are already in the field cannot be overstated, as the consistent presence of experienced special educators directly correlates to better support for SWD and improved outcomes for both students and adults (American Psychological Association, 2023a; Nagro et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Labor, 2023; Walker et al., 2021).

Special Education Teacher Retention

Retaining highly qualified SETs continues to challenge school and district-level administrators (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Walker et al., 2021). To address this issue, it is essential to understand the multifaceted factors that influence SET retention and develop comprehensive strategies to support their continued presence and value in the educational workforce. Several well-documented factors, including administrative support (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019), professional relationships (Billingsley et al., 2021), professional development and preparation (Reitman & Karge, 2019; Schanck, 2023), certification (Beesley et al., 2010; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019), and mentorship programs have been found to increase

rates of SET retention.

     Administrative support has emerged as one of the most critical factors in retaining SETs. Studies indicate that greater administrative support reduces the likelihood of SETs leaving their positions within the first few years of teaching (Cancio et al., 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Walker et al., 2021). Inadequate support from central administration is also a significant source of dissatisfaction, sometimes even more than the perceived lack of support provided by principals, as noted by Billingsley (2004). Billingsley et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of creating a supportive work environment, asserting that such conditions are conducive to SETs thriving and growing professionally. Special educators who rated their administrators positively were more likely to report higher work commitment and career satisfaction, indicating that the perceived quality of administrative support also positively influences retention rates (Cancio et al., 2013). These studies highlight the role of school and district-level administrators in fostering an atmosphere that retains qualified special educators.

     The social context within which SETs work also significantly influences their decision to remain in the field, underscoring the significance of professional relationships, collegiality, and collaboration among educators (Billingsley et al., 2021). Studies also indicate that strong administrative practices that foster relationships between special education and general education teachers and administrators can alleviate stress and improve job satisfaction (Stewart-Banks et al., 2015). Building upon this social context, professional learning community and mentorship programs are crucial in supporting SETs (Schanck, 2023). According to Billingsley et al. (2019), mentorship provides valuable guidance and support that enhances teacher retention. Investing in a comprehensive support plan for SETs is vital for improving retention rates, and improving the preparation process for SETs increases their likelihood of remaining in the profession (Reitman &

Karge, 2019; Schanck, 2023).

Certification also plays a pivotal role in SET retention (Bettini et al., 2023, p. 46). SETs who are well-trained, fully certified, and adequately prepared for their roles are far more likely to remain in the field (Beesley et al., 2010; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Mentorship programs are a cornerstone of retaining SETs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). These programs, characterized by structured mentorship and professional development opportunities, provide the necessary support for novice special educators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Effective mentorship fosters collaboration, builds confidence, and improves job satisfaction among new special educators (Huling et al., 2012). In a study that surveyed 776 special educators, Albrecht et al. (2009) found that those who had been in the same position for five or more years valued professional development more than those who were intending to leave their jobs at the end of that year.

Why SETs choose to stay in their positions is a complex issue (Scott et al., 2022). The bulk of educator supply today is made up of experienced teachers, so ensuring the retention of those educators is crucial (Billingsley et al., 2019). Most SETs enter the field intending to stay until retirement, but the interplay between personal and environmental factors create barriers that prevent them from remaining in the field (Scott et al., 2022). Some evidence suggests that an individual's skills and personality traits such as psychological resilience, self-efficacy, and values can play a role in teacher retention and promote resilience (Kavgaci, 2022; Zavelevsky & Lishchinsky, 2020). Recognizing that teacher resilience is vital to improving teacher retention is essential (Fox & Walter, 2022; Scott et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

Special Education Teacher Resilience

Teachers worldwide will likely always remember the 2019–20 school year as one of the most challenging of their careers. Despite feelings of fear and uncertainty, SETs demonstrated

considerable pride, commitment, and determination (Aiello et al., 2023). Shortly after the pandemic began, researchers started to note a host of protective factors such as empathy, compassion, self-care, social connections, self-efficacy, personal boundaries, and psychological resilience were leveraged to offset increased levels of stress, anxiety, and job dissatisfaction and remain in their current positions (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Fox & Walter, 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Rolf et al., 2023).

Sokal et al. (2021) revealed that many of the factors that led to SET burnout and attrition pre-pandemic were still functioning in quite the same ways well into the pandemic. However, personality traits such as the ability to effectively self-regulate and cope under stress, adapt to change, maintain boundaries, and sustain prosocial relationships resulted in teachers reporting less stress, anxiety, and burnout, lead to increased rates of retention (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023). While Ainsworth and Oldfield (2019) and Aiello et al. (2023) submitted that positive relationships with colleagues are more predictive of an individual's capacity to adapt to stress than internal characteristics, others have maintained that both internal and external factors play a role in a special education teacher's ability to manage high levels of stress, exhaustion, and burnout (Aiello et al., 2023; Fox & Walter, 2022; Ghasemi et al, 2023; Herman et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2023; Sokal et al., 2021; Wanat, 2021; Yang et al. 2023).

Resilience is the ability to maintain competent functioning in the face of significant adversity (Kaplan et al., 1996, p. 158). The Resilience Research Center defines *resilience* as the capacity to individually and collectively navigate to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain well-being and negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways (Unger et al., 2012). Resilience, from a social-ecological perspective,

refers to the ability of a person to cope with and bounce back from adversity and is based on the premise that a person's resilience is influenced by their personal factors, such as their biological and psychological makeup, as well as their interactions with the social contexts in which they function (Mansfield, 2021).

Garmezy's (1985) resilience theory is a psychological framework that aims to explain why some individuals can overcome adversity and thrive while others are seemingly unable to do so (Masten, 2021; Smith, 2020). Garmezy's research was particularly influential in the field of developmental psychology because it focused on identifying the protective factors that enable individuals to bounce back from challenging life experiences (Masten, 2021). One of the key insights of Garmezy's resilience theory is that resilience is not a fixed trait but rather a dynamic process that can be developed and strengthened over time (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014). In theory, this means individuals who experience adversity can still develop resilience throughout their lifetime if provided adequate support and opportunity (Masten, 2021). According to Kavgaci (2022), SETs who reported higher levels of psychological resilience also reported higher levels of self-efficacy and more positive attitudes toward teaching.

Drew and Sosnowski (2019) highlight the importance of internal factors such as self-reflection, social support, and a sense of purpose in promoting SET resilience. Lu and Hua (2022) and Aiello et al. (2023) found that many SETs drew on their personal resources and support networks to overcome challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet Ungar et al. (2012) posited the importance of the social and physical environment for personal growth by suggesting that "individual and ecological positions are neither mutually exclusive nor antagonistic. They simply emphasize different aspects of the processes associated with resilience" (p. 15). Similarly, Masten (2015) concluded that the "processes that lead to resilience clearly involve many systems

within the individual as well as many systems outside the individual" (p. 170). As these multiple systems and contexts continually interact with one another, resilience is displayed through individual characteristics, strategies, or processes used to navigate personal well-being, professional growth, and commitment to the profession (Mansfield, 2021).

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of resilience as a desired skill or personal characteristic for SETs cannot be overstated. According to Mansfield et al. (2016), the development of resilience should be an emphasis in SET preparation programs to prepare pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and support systems to cope with challenges and thrive in the profession. This emphasis on resilience building involves accentuating SETs' strengths (Kavgaci, 2022) while also addressing risk factors (Drew & Sosnowski, 2019) and nurturing a more supportive social and professional environment (Lu & Hua, 2022). Comprehensive approaches such as these have increased SET retention, well-being, and long-term retention (Scott et al., 2019). As Aiello et al. (2023) and Masten et al. (2021) noted, while disasters can often overwhelm a system, they can also mobilize more positive responses and lead to collective growth within a community. While the pandemic complicated and disrupted how schools did business for more than three years, it also provided SETs with an opportunity for individual and collective growth as resilience emerged as a desirable and indispensable asset (Masten et al., 2020).

Summary

This chapter provides a synthesis of literature related to the ongoing shortage of SETs caused by high attrition rates in the field. Despite the extensive literature on SET attrition, there is a notable gap in the literature related to the experiences of SETs who have persevered through the unique challenges of the past four years in public education. High rates of SET attrition have

historically been linked to persistent stress, burnout, complex workloads, a lack of resources, challenging student behaviors, and inadequate support systems (Billingsley, 1993; Brunsting et al., 2023; Hester et al., 2020; Peyton, et al., 2021; Sutcher et al., 2019). Since March 2020, prolonged periods of uncertainty, increased workloads, and concerns related to personal health and safety have resulted in increased levels of stress and anxiety for special educators (Lee et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2023). According to Cormier et al. (2022), SETs reported the pandemic had an extreme impact on stress levels that resulted in increased rates of depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion.

While SETs consistently report being overwhelmed by administrative tasks and IEP meetings (Hester et al., 2020), the increased workload associated with teaching SWD has been identified throughout the literature as a contributing factor to higher turnover rates among SETs (Billingsley et al., 2020; Bottiani et al., 2019). Those who work with specific student populations such as those with Autism and emotional disabilities must possess a highly refined skillset to meet the diverse and complex needs of their students (Bettini et al., 2020). The demands of working with SWD, particularly in self-contained settings, can cause significant stress and lead to high turnover rates (Berry et al., 2011). Murangi et al. (2022) also examined the effects of SETs' job demands and resources on work engagement and their intention to leave. According to their research, a heavy workload coupled with limited resources is linked to reduced work engagement and a greater likelihood of attrition.

Understanding the body of research that exists related to SET shortages is also critical to understanding the scope of SET attrition, as the literature emphasizes the historical context of persistent SET shortages dating back to the implementation of the IDEA in 1975. As noted in this chapter, the field of special education has yet to fulfill the promise of providing a FAPE for all

SWD due to the lack of a fully qualified workforce (Mason-Williams, 2020). Schools that face regular teacher shortages tend to have lower student achievement levels and less favorable student outcomes overall, as stated in studies by Castro et al. (2010) and García and Weiss (2019). Moreover, Billingsley et al. (2020) suggested that the quality of education for SWD is linked to the consistency and experience of special education staff.

The study examines and interpret the personal, professional, historical, and cultural aspects of SET experiences to offer a holistic view of the lived experiences of K-12 SETs who have remained in their positions for more than four years, including the tumultuous period since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The application of Bronfenbrenner's (2006) PPCT bioecological systems theory offers valuable insights into factors that contribute to high SET attrition rates (Braun et al., 2020; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Nguyen, 2019) while also providing meaningful insight into how various personal and social systems play out in an individual's work environment and may have impacted a SET's decision to remain in the field (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019).

The complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic, and now post-pandemic times, have undeniably highlighted the connectedness of various aspects of life, including one's mental and physical well-being, family dynamics, career, and community. Research conducted by Blustein and Duffy (2020) highlights the interconnectedness of work and context, particularly during times of significant crisis. The proposed study intends to shed light on SETs' personal, professional, historical, and cultural experiences during an unprecedented time in public education (Bollyky et al., 2023; Petroulakis, 2023; Whitsel et al., 2023). By applying Bronfenbrenner's PPCT bioecological systems theory, I aim to narrow a gap in research by interpreting the experiences of K-12 SETs who have remained in their current positions in the four years since the pandemic

began, inform strategies to enhance SET retention, and improve outcomes for SWD.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of SETs who persisted in their positions beyond four years through the lens of the interpretive social constructivist framework (Bettini et al., 2019; Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020). A qualitative phenomenological research design was chosen for this study as the researcher aimed to better understand the shared experiences and context that mutually and simultaneously contributed to SET retention, particularly following a time period in the US characterized by stress and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, political and social turmoil, and an ongoing mental health crisis (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Doonan & Kenneally, 2022). The first section of Chapter Three outlines the research design and rationale, followed by the research questions that guided this study. The subsequent section provides a detailed description of the setting and participants, interpretive framework, and philosophical assumptions that underpinned this study. The recruitment procedures, data collection methods, and approach to data analysis are also described. In the closing section of Chapter Three, a comprehensive plan for measures that were implemented to ensure that the research methods employed align with the theoretical frameworks and establish trustworthiness were provided, as established by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Research Design

This section outlines the research paradigm, design, and approach that were used for this study. A qualitative method and phenomenological research design were selected to gain a deeper understanding of SET retention as described by participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Gadamer, 1976; van Manen, 1990, 2016). The phenomenological research design

aimed to provide meaning, context, and insight into the participants' experiences through data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). van Manen (1990, 2016) describes phenomenology as a practice tied to being and knowing yet free from the "calculative rationality" associated with quantitative work.

Edmund Husserl, known as the father of phenomenology, was critical of psychology scholars for trying to use natural science methods to understand human experiences (Laverty, 2003). Husserl (1970) introduced the concept of the *lifeworld* as a sort of consciousness individuals experience that is free from external or cultural context. Heidegger (1962), a former student of Husserl's, later proposed in his work *Being in Time* that personal experiences and consciousness cannot be isolated from the world around us, and by solely focusing on individual experiences and neglecting the related context, researchers overlook significant factors that could potentially distort one's interpreted meaning and understanding. From a phenomenological lens, meaning and understanding are created through the process of continued questioning and engagement with various systems within the environment (van Manen, 1990, 2016). Consequently, the act of researching, questioning, and theorizing becomes an intentional process of connecting oneself to the world and becoming more fully integrated within it.

Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher, and student of Heidegger proposed that the hermeneutic approach is one of continuous interpretation that fosters a deeper understanding of participants' experiences from various perspectives, which leads to the development of new meaning (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1990, 2016). According to Gadamer (1976), hermeneutic phenomenology provides a meaningful framework for illuminating deeper understanding and meaning through progressively layered reflection and interpretation. Gadamer (1990) maintained that hermeneutics is not just a research method but a way to find links between individuals and

their experiences, adding,

> hermeneutics must begin with the assumption that a person who seeks to understand
>
> something has a relationship with the subject matter that is expressed through traditional
>
> texts and possesses or develops a connection with the tradition from which it originates.
>
> (p. 295)

Newberry (2012) added hermeneutic methods allow researchers to better understand everyday human experiences through relational, reflexive, and artistic approaches, while Moules et al. (2015) posit that hermeneutics permits researchers to explore more complex, dynamic relationships and experiences while also acknowledging more sophisticated contextual or historical factors.

The hermeneutic approach was deemed most appropriate for this study as it allowed for engagement in a subjective, in-depth interpretation of shared texts, culture, and experiences within the field of special education (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). Hermeneutic phenomenological research methods were used to examine the experiences of special education teachers during an unprecedented time in our country's history, taking into account the complex factors that contributed to SET experiences (Moules et al., 2015). This approach allowed for a meaningful interpretation of SETs' self-reported strengths, challenges, and overall experiences while also addressing the gap in current research related to factors that cause special education teachers to remain in their positions when so many choose to leave the profession after four or more years (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1990, 2016). Multiple perspectives were brought together by exercising self-reflection and a merging of *horizons*, which Gadamer et al. (2004) defined as knowledge that helps one understand what is familiar.

This study employed the six-step approach to hermeneutic phenomenology outlined by

van Manen (1997) to explore the phenomenon of special education teacher retention with the aim of contributing to existing research and improving outcomes for SWD. This framework allowed for flexibility to prioritize or minimize certain steps as patterns emerged within the data as it was being collected. Step one in van Manen's outline requires the formulation of a research question by "turning to the nature of the lived experience" (p. 35). While implementing the second step in this approach, virtual individual interviews were used to investigate the phenomenon and gather SET participants' thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about their experiences to better characterize the phenomenon. Next, van Manen suggests the researcher maintain a strong orientation and focus on the phenomenon. This step was applied by prioritizing the analysis process, staying focused on the research questions, and intentionally pausing to reflect on common themes from participant interviews to capture the true essence of the lived experiences.

Precision was maintained in the fourth step of the hermeneutic framework by creating thorough and precise descriptions of topics and concepts shared by participants within the text (van Manen, 1997). Researchers should never assume a position of scientific disinterest, but instead, they should always remain oriented to the phenomenon of study, according to van Manen (p. 33). Focusing on interpreting data at various stages can improve accuracy, allowing patterns to emerge and interpretations to form (Laverty, 2003, p. 23). Throughout the study, efforts were made to maintain a strong link between the research question and the phenomenon being investigated through an immersion in the text as data was continually read and reexamined for significance (van Manen, 1997).

The sixth and final step in van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological research framework relies on immersion in the text to illuminate the participants' experiences while ensuring balance between the overall research design and the significance of individual

experiences that shape the study. To accurately capture the essence of the research problem at hand, triangulation techniques were used to integrate multiple data sources and provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of special education teachers who persisted in their positions beyond four years. Understanding the experiences of SETs who have remained in the field for a length of time beyond what is typical can help to mitigate the negative impact of teacher attrition and improve outcomes for SWD (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019).

Research Questions

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of SETs who have persisted in their positions beyond four years. Retention is defined as a special education teacher who remains in the same position as the previous year (Billingsley, 1993). The following central research question and subsequent sub-questions will be addressed in this study.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question One

What are the personal experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question Two

What are the professional experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question Three

What are the experiences with public perceptions of K-12 special education teachers who

have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Sub-question Four

What are the overall cultural experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years?

Setting and Participants

This section outlines the setting and participant details of this qualitative study. Participants selected for the study consisted of full-time special education teachers (SETs) from large suburban school districts in Illinois who offered their firsthand experiences of the phenomenon being investigated. The setting and participants were purposefully chosen to meet the required specifications and thoroughly explore the research question and purpose of this study while offering new insights into the existing literature on SET retention.

Setting

When conducting a qualitative study, the setting refers to the physical, social, or cultural environment where the research will be conducted (Given, 2008, p. 788). This study consisted of participants from various school districts who were employed in large, suburban school districts situated in what is commonly referred to as the "collar counties" outside of Cook County in Illinois. These counties, namely DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, Will, and Kendall encircle Cook County, where the city of Chicago is located. Geographically, these counties surround Chicago much like a shirt collar, which is how the region got its namesake.

The ISBE refers to large districts as those with 12,000 or more students (ISBE Department of Data Strategies and Analytics, 2023). Of the 852 school districts in the State of Illinois, 70% of the largest school districts in the state exist within this geographic region referred to as the collar counties (ISBE, 2022). In terms of population, the collar counties rank as the most populous

counties in Illinois, outside of Cook County, and make up nearly 65% of the state's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

In the state of Illinois, school districts are primarily funded by local sources such as property and sales taxes. Historically, this has created an inequitable school funding system where wealthier areas contributed far more to their school districts, simply by nature of the state funding formula, thus creating a system of "haves" and "have-nots" across the state (Benoit, 2021). In an effort to improve this flawed system, the ISBE implemented a new Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) formula in 2018 that was intended to provide greater equity in school funding across the state by assigning each district with an "adequacy target" (ISBE, 2023). This funding target was aimed at providing each student in the state with a quality education by considering the district's size, number of low-income families, and English language learners, regardless of the school they attended. The intent of EBF was to give school districts in need a greater portion of available state funds, however, it did not affect the overall funding wealthier s continued to receive from local property and sales taxes.

The specific region where this study took place has one of the world's largest and most diversified economies, with the lowest unemployment rates in the state of Illinois (World Business Chicago, 2023). The financial stability of a school district is significant in this study because districts with greater financial stability can offer better salaries, resources, and working conditions to their teachers compared to neighboring districts with lower tax bases. This trend has historically positively impacted the recruitment and retention of teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). According to Niche (2024), a marketing research company that gathers data from various sources, including the Department of Education, the NCES, the U.S. Census, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to rank schools across the US, six of the 14 largest suburban school districts that

were included within this study have consistently ranked among the top 25 school districts in

Illinois. Given the relatively densely populated nature of this region, students from these sample

districts represent a wide range of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. However,

demographically, teachers still tend to be disproportionately white (81.3%) and female (76.7%)

overall (ISBE, 2022).

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research can encompass the

examination of one or more research sites to provide a variety of perspectives related to a specific

phenomenon. Once participants were confirmed for the study, specific school district

demographic information was collected and analyzed. This information included each school

district's average spending per student, percentage of students with an IEP, average teacher salary,

and teacher retention rates (see Figures 1-4). This data was used to contextualize the conditions

SETs face across the various counties, districts, and school communities that were represented in

this study.

Figure 1

Average Spending per Student by District Compared to IL State Average
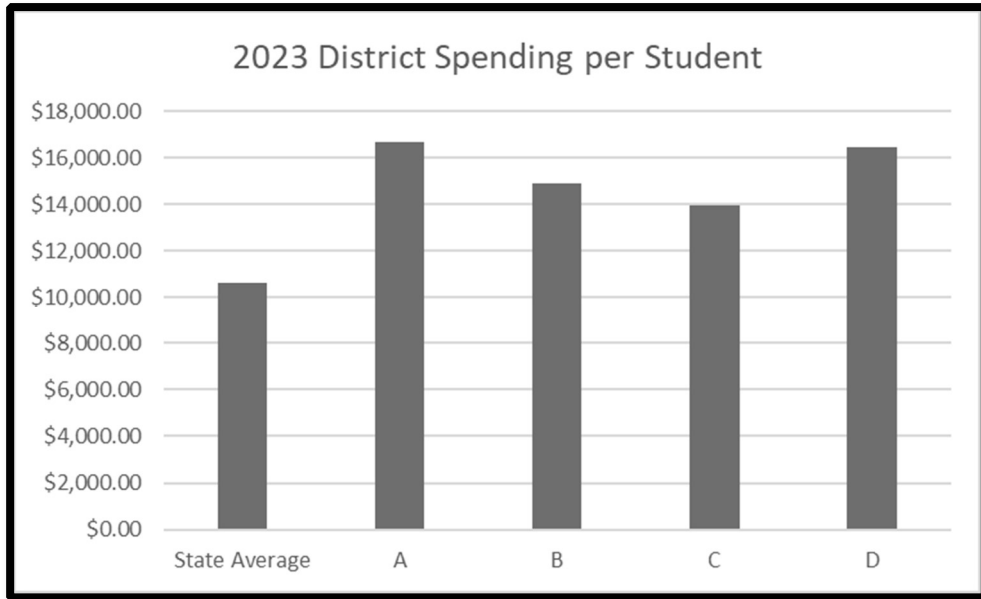
Figure 2

Percentage of Students with Disabilities by District Compared to IL State Average
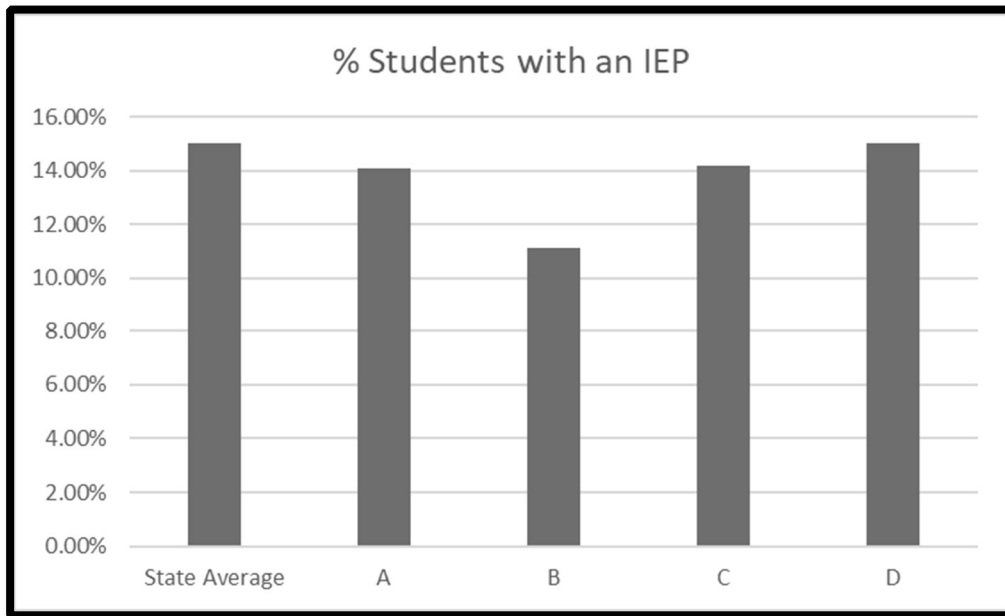
Figure 3

Average Teacher Salary by District Compared to IL State Average
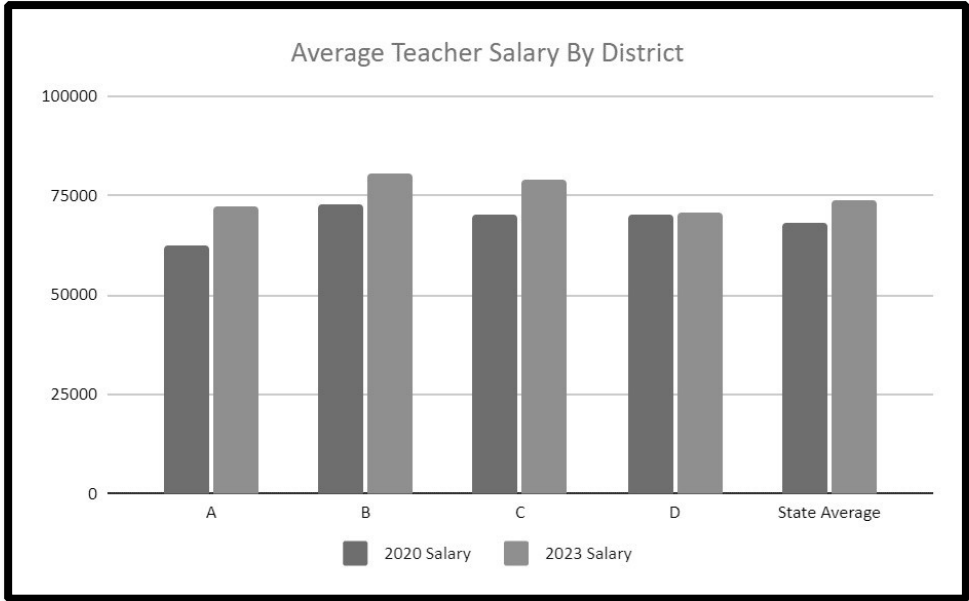
Figure 4

Teacher Retention Rates by District Compared to IL State Average
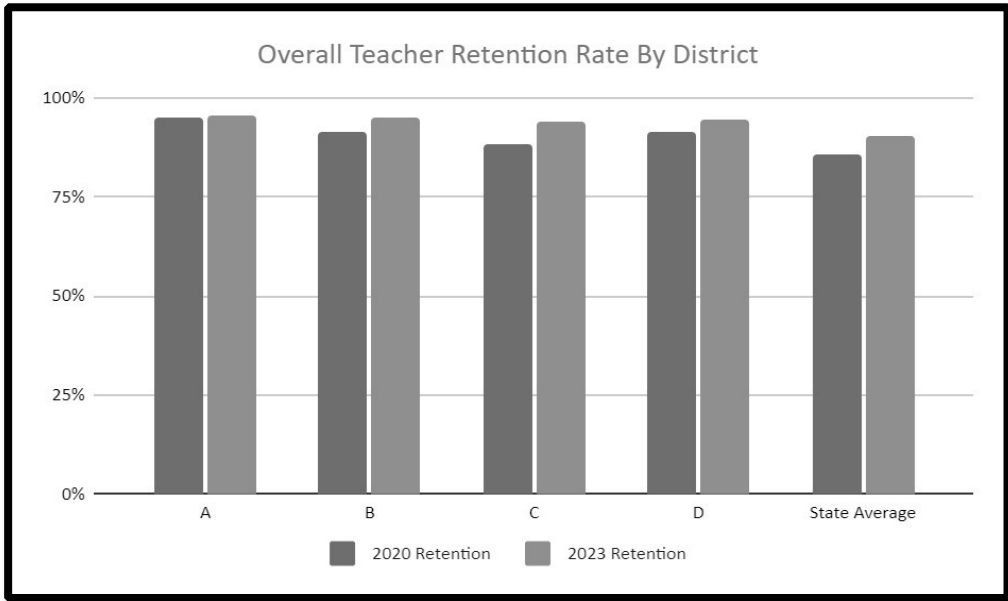
Participants

One of the most important tasks in the of this research was in the identification of potential participants who were adequately informed and willing to contribute to this study (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). When choosing participants for this study, consideration was given to the research questions, theoretical perspectives, and the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To participate in this study, special educators needed to be working full-time in special education, possess a valid Learning Behavior Specialist (LBS1) license, and in their current position since the 2019–20 academic year. Selected participants represented staff who provided various levels of support to SWD, including resource, instructional or self-contained special education services. Given these parameters, selected participants had firsthand experience with the phenomenon under investigation and were able to demonstrate the ability to share their experiences.

The final participant sample consisted of 16 SETs who met the defined criteria for this study. Of note, these participants represented five large, suburban school districts from four different counties within the Chicagoland area, a region that employs some of the highest-paid teachers in the state of Illinois (ISBE Department of Data Strategies and Analytics, 2023). In 2018–19, the 14 large suburban school districts in the collar counties ranked at the top of the starting teacher salary list reported by the ISBE, with only Chicago Public Schools (CPS) ranking higher. This is significant because prior studies have concluded that financial compensation is often cited as a reason special educators leave their jobs for positions in higher-paying districts (Billingsley et al., 2019).

A list of possible participants was created by contacting district-level administrators from school districts within the geographic region identified for this study. Participants' professional

contact information was then obtained from each respective school district's online staff directory. Recruitment letters were sent via email to 103 potential participants. Out of the 103 potential participants, one completed the potential participant survey screener, questionnaire, and consent form and 16 of those participants met the criteria to participate in the study. Consent information was provided as the first page participants saw after clicking on the survey link provided in the recruitment email (see Appendix C).

Upon receipt and review of the consent form (see Appendix D), participants were asked to type their name and date on the consent form before completing the confidential online survey. Participants also provided a pseudonym of their choosing to maintain anonymity for this study. The pseudonyms in Table 1 do not correspond with the participants' interview order. Participant demographic information collected for this study included gender, race, age, grades served, population served, number of students on caseload, education level, and years of experience in special education teaching (see Table 1).

A brief three-question survey was also provided at the end of each demographic questionnaire. The purpose of these three questions was to assess the psychosocial work environment and its impact on teacher retention and satisfaction as well as to understand the extent to which SETs perceive their work environment as supportive and affirming. These questions focused on feelings of safety, recognition, and appreciation. These factors are critical in determining a SET's likelihood to remain in the profession, as they influence one's well-being and effectiveness in meeting the needs of SWD (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Table 1

SET Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Grades Served	Population	Education Level	Years of Teaching
Dane	Female	White	33	6-8	Self-contained	Master's	10
Missy	Female	White	44	5-8	Self-contained	Master's	7
Lucky	Female	White	38	K-2	Self-contained	Master's	14
Tasha	Female	Asian	34	K-5	Resource	Master's	7
Sal	Male	White	41	11	Resource	Master's	7
Marcy	Female	White	48	3-5	Self-contained	Master's	20
Jessica	Female	White	31	2, 4-5	Instructional	Master's	6
Jen	Female	White	43	K-5	Instructional	Master's	18
Gina	Female	White	51	6-8	Resource	Master's	20+
Pearl	Female	White	51	10-12	Resource	Master's	20+
Ruby	Female	White	39	6, 8	Resource	Bachelor's	15+
Gnome	Female	White	42	K, 3, 5	Resource	Master's	17
Shay	Female	White	36	8	Resource	Master's	6
Eden	Female	Black	48	8	Resource	Master's	16
Thea	Female	White	30	K	Self-contained	Master's	7
Taylor	Female	White	37	9-12	Self-contained	Master's	15

Researcher Positionality

As a doctoral researcher studying SET retention, my positionality aligns with the philosophical assumptions of the social constructivist paradigm. Social constructivism holds that personal experiences with others, systems, and our environment shape our understanding of

meaning and truth, which can vary between individuals who have engaged in the same experience (Keaton & Bodie, 2011; Lincoln et al., 2011). The social constructivist framework informed the procedures and methodology of this study as evidenced by participant interviews and reflexive memos (Gadamer et al., 2004; van Manen, 1990, 2016). While approaching this research study, I remained focused on understanding the complexities and nuances of special education teacher retention and attrition by continually examining the participants' subjective realities (Laverty, 2003).

The social constructivism framework allowed for a more holistic and nuanced analysis of the research and led to more meaningful insights into the experiences of SET participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers should prioritize studying the specific regions where their participants work to gain a comprehensive understanding of their cultural and historical background and link the causes, extent, and implications of SET stress and burnout that lead to high rates of attrition to provide a deeper, more nuanced, understanding of SET experiences (Larson & Adu, 2022). The significance of context was also emphasized to highlight various socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, and personal factors that could also contribute to special education teacher retention. By adopting a social constructivist lens, I aimed to illuminate the interplay between individual agency and broader social structures in order to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issues surrounding special education teacher retention.

Interpretive Framework

Qualitative research methods focus on capturing participants' narratives to better understand and interpret their experiences as they relate to the research questions at hand (Larsen & Adu, 2022). By prioritizing process over outcomes, the qualitative paradigm provides a

valuable alternative to more quantitative methods that may overlook essential nuances and

complexities of a given phenomenon (King & Horrocks, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This

study sought to gain a deeper understanding of underlying themes or patterns related to the

phenomenon of SET retention by engaging in dialogue with research participants about their lived

experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research was grounded in the social constructivist

interpretive framework, which guided the defined purpose of this study, research problem,

research questions, data collection techniques, and data analysis strategies enlisted (Larson &

Adu, 2022).

Qualitative research operates under the assumption that the researcher serves as the

primary instrument for data collection and analysis (King & Horrocks, 2010; Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Within the qualitative paradigm, data analysis is iterative and inductive, with recurring

themes arising until there is enough data to ensure the research questions can be answered

(Bowen, 2008). The social constructivist interpretive framework is a comprehensive theoretical

perspective that views reality as a social construct that relies upon reciprocal and ongoing

communication between a researcher and their participants (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). In a social

constructivist interpretive framework, one's reality or "meaning" is shaped by cultural and

historical experiences and social interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In social

constructivism, interactions, and context are essential for gaining an understanding, as knowledge

cannot be acquired alone (Kivunja & Kuyani, 2017).

Gadamer's (1990) hermeneutics framework expands on the inseparable connection

between meaning and human existence within social constructivism, asserting that language

serves as the fundamental means by which individuals understand the world (Kivunja & Kuyani,

2017). As Gadamer et al. (2004) established, language is so integral to our understanding of

reality that nothing can be fully comprehended without it. Individuals develop questions and interact with others in their environment to make sense of the world and construct their own meaning. As a result, one's experiences, both past and present, foster the development of knowledge and personal beliefs. Within the social constructivist framework, multiple realities are constructed as we seek to understand others and make sense of the world (Cuthbertson et al., 2020).

Through the lens of social constructivism, people create meaning in different ways, even as it relates to the same phenomena. Once data was collected, the next step was to interpret and utilize individual experiences and context to gain a deeper understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The selected framework for this study impacted how data was analyzed and aided in understanding and interpreting the experiences of special educator participant. By applying this theoretical approach to my participants' lived experiences, I aimed to better understand how to increase special educators' longevity in the field.

Philosophical Assumptions

Three key philosophical assumptions or constructs inform hermeneutics as a strategy for knowledge creation. According to Koch (1999), hermeneutics refers to the mutual understanding that we share, which is facilitated through language. The second assumption is that meaning is formed through an ongoing dialogue between the text and the inquirer (Koch, 1999). This is something that is unique to hermeneutics as the researcher continuously returns to the participant, each time with a more complete interpretive account. The researcher becomes part of this circle, moving repeatedly between interpretations of parts of the text and interpretations of the whole text, representing an emerging understanding of the phenomenon in what Heidegger and Gadamer called the *hermeneutic circle* (Moustakas, 1994).

In the following sections, I discuss my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. These assumptions provided the foundation to support my research design. According to Moustakas (1994), personal beliefs, past experiences, and prior knowledge can significantly influence one's research approach and underlying assumptions. In the closing section, I discussed my role as a researcher as I considered and acknowledged personal biases and beliefs as they related to the phenomena of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

A researcher's ontological assumptions are vital in hermeneutic phenomenological research as they define one's nature of reality (van Manen, 1990, 2016). According to Koch (1999) and Laverty (2003), it is crucial that individuals understand their personal history and context in the world, as these experiences continually influence the nature of one's reality. My Christian worldview is founded upon the belief that we are called to connect with others to fully appreciate and seek to understand the experiences of all living things, particularly those most vulnerable. Based on the social constructivist viewpoint, reality is continually created and refined by interactions with different people, environments, objects, and experiences throughout one's lifetime (Adu, 2019; Patton, 2015). Through the application of the social constructivist theory and my own worldview, I am reminded that everyone we meet contributes to our development of knowledge and understanding just as we contribute to theirs.

For this study, I approached the analysis of historical and contextual data from each SET's personal experience and provided a nuanced understanding of the identified problem from multiple viewpoints (Lauterbach, 2018; van Manen, 1990, 2016). When considering the thoughts and perspectives that make up each SET's reality through an ontological lens, I looked for patterns or themes before I began developing assumptions (Saldaña, 2011). Through this process,

I sought to contextualize the experiences of research subjects to uncover hidden meanings embedded within the data (van Manen, 1990, 2016).

To gain a deeper understanding of the concept of multiple realities as it related to the proposed research problem, I relied upon special educator participants from various school districts at varying stages within their careers (Vandermause et al., 2020). By analyzing the perspectives of each participant as their unique reality, I intended to develop overarching themes and a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the problem based on these findings (Vandermause et al., 2020; van Manen, 1990, 2016).

Epistemological Assumption

In qualitative research, epistemological assumptions seek to answer questions about how knowledge is defined and justified (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Hughes (2012), epistemological assumptions also assist researchers in making sense of "social reality" based on research conducted in the context of people living their lives (p. 7). In this study, I gathered subjective evidence from participants about a specific problem to discover or assign new knowledge on the subject. I relied on my 24 years of experience in the field of special education to collaborate and build relationships with study participants. This allowed me to pay close attention to the nuances of each participant's verbal and non-verbal communication style, as well as the context of each participant's personal and professional experiences.

Axiological Assumption

Axiological assumptions in qualitative research are determined by the researcher's values (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 20–21). Our values shape how we see the world and how the world sees us through our actions. Axiological assumptions play a vital role in assisting the researcher to acknowledge any personal biases related to a study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), we

must be self-reflective and acknowledge our biases and values rather than set them aside during the research process (p. 242).

My scholarly pursuits have consistently been motivated by a need to understand the intentions and actions of others. From a humanistic lens, this extends to understanding human behavior and reflecting on how individuals are interconnected within broader social and ecological systems. The humanistic paradigm insists on a subject-centered, empathetic approach to understanding, which allows for a richer exploration of the complexities of human experience (DeCarvalho, 1991). The axiological assumptions that I brought to this study are those of a lifelong special educator. I have first-hand knowledge of the responsibilities, challenges, and stress associated with working in the field of special education. As an administrator, however, I also must acknowledge my bias toward SETs who do not prioritize values such as loyalty, dedication to SWD, and commitment to the profession.

Researcher's Role

According to Patton (2015), in qualitative studies, the researcher assumes the role of human instrument for data collection through the process of reviewing, sharing, and reflecting on participants' experiences. According to Gadamer (1990),

> Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditionary text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which it speaks. (p. 295)

To achieve this goal in the proposed study, I engaged in dynamic and dialectical interactions with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through ongoing cycles of review and reflection, I also aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the data (van Manen, 1990, 2016).

In hermeneutic phenomenological studies, the researcher can also generate, analyze, and

interpret data, which fosters a mutual understanding of reality between the researcher and participants in a study (Gadamer et al., 2004). Per Gadamer's (1990) recommendation, I recognized and addressed any biases or prejudices during the data analysis phase of this study by using a *fusion of horizons* to describe the process of interpreting research findings. Gadamer (1976) believed researchers must first examine their own assumptions and then apply new data to gain a more complete understanding. This process involves bridging the past and present, as well as closing the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar. Prior to and during participant interviews I used my own lived experiences to connect with participants through dialogue related to the historical context of this study as well as through participants sharing personal artifacts related to their own personal journeys over the past four years in special education (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). This interpretive process aligned with the aims of my doctoral study and provided a framework for exploring a deeper understanding of the phenomena of SET retention.

For this study, I also adopted a more reflexive approach by utilizing the practice of bridling to maintain continuous openness throughout the research process. Traditional phenomenology methodologists have recommended the use of bracketing to set aside researcher bias to acknowledge preconceptions, experiences, and assumptions during the hermeneutic process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Vagle (2010), however, the practice of bridling does not remove or set aside the researcher's bias but instead illuminates the researcher's intentional and interconnected relationship between the phenomenon, self, and the world by revealing how the self and world are interconnected. Bridling discloses the researcher's full involvement with the phenomenon and enhances their understanding of it (Stutey et al., 2020). I reviewed my own ideological, social, and cultural assumptions and remained open to reflecting, wondering, and asking myself questions throughout the data collection process (Vagle et al.,

2009). Bridling allowed me to acknowledge my own past experiences, while also remaining open to the new understandings I gained from participants in this study (Stutey et al., 2020).

As a lifelong special educator, my interest in factors contributing to retention in the field goes beyond professional. I have worked as a Director of Student Services for the last six years. Additionally, as the mother of a SET, I have witnessed the frustration, stress, and disappointment that stems from ongoing staffing shortages and heavy workloads, particularly over the last four years. Despite these difficulties, I have also witnessed the professionalism, passion, optimism, and fortitude that many special educators possess, which has helped them to persevere through these trying times. These factors have led me to pursue scholarly research in special education and engage in experiences that lead to personal growth, greater authenticity, and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of SET retention (Stutey et al., 2020).

Procedures

Before starting the proposed study, an application for approval to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was submitted. Before submitting the IRB application, a comprehensive plan for recruiting participants was developed. Once recruited, SET participants were given information about the study and allowed to opt out at any time. This section describes the three data collection methods that were used for this study: individual interviews, personal artifacts, and letter writing. Data was collected and analyzed to uncover themes and patterns that provide a deeper understanding of why the special educator participants in this study chose to stay in their positions despite unprecedented challenges.

A detailed data synthesis plan is provided to demonstrate how the triangulation of data and rigor of the research was achieved by comparing themes, identifying commonalities and differences, and creating an integrated understanding of the cohesive body of data related to the

research topic. Finally, this study aimed to address the gap in current research related to factors that cause special education teachers to remain in their positions when so many have chosen to leave the profession for good.

Permissions

Upon receiving the necessary approval from IRB, potential SET participants were sent an email that included information about the purpose of the study and informed that there was no undue risk to those participating in the proposed research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A Google form with a link to the informed consent page and demographic questions was embedded within the email. A consent document was provided as the first page of the survey and contained additional information about the research study. After each participant read the introductory information presented, they were asked to provide informed consent electronically via the Google form by signing and dating the form. Participants were then asked to complete a brief 15-question survey on the next page that included pertinent screening and demographic information such as professional experience, current role, and special education population served. The survey also included three questions related to job satisfaction. According to Garrett (2023), for employees to experience job satisfaction they must feel safe, respected, and valued (p. 22).

Upon completion of the survey, participants were offered the opportunity for a follow-up video conference via Microsoft Teams to address any questions or concerns before participating in the study. SETs who met the selection criteria for the study were contacted via their preferred method of communication to schedule a time to complete a virtual 1:1 interview.

Recruitment Plan

In the context of hermeneutic phenomenological research, an important consideration in selecting participants is to identify individuals from diverse backgrounds who possess first-hand

experience with the subject matter and are willing to engage in open dialogue about their experiences (van Manen, 1997). Convenience sampling was used to recruit SET participants with experience at the K-12 level for a minimum of four consecutive school years to ensure a comprehensive and reliable study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This selection process allowed for a collection of insights and data that were both meaningful and representative of the broader SET population who have experienced the phenomenon of retention.

Using a professional network of district-level leadership from other surrounding school districts within the geographic region proposed for this study, participants who were believed to qualify for this study were identified and shared. Once identified, potential participants were contacted directly by email and provided a link to a Google form to ensure they understood the purpose of the study and met the SET participant criteria prior to providing consent. Once consent was provided within the Google form, potential participants completed the demographic survey and questionnaire (see Appendix C).

Once the recruitment documents were collected and a data file was created, the researcher read and reviewed each recruitment response to identify participants who responded "yes" to question 2 that asks if the SET is currently teaching in the same position he/she was during the 2019–2020 school year (Fowler, 2009). Of those participants, an identifier code was also assigned to establish a reliable system for creating categories of respondents and triangulating data with other sources of data in this study. The remaining demographic questions from the recruitment survey were then reviewed and stored in an individual folder by participant. This information included information such as the participants' pseudonym, current role, professional experience, educational background, special education population served, case load size, and workplace satisfaction. This information was later used for subsequent analysis once the participant was

selected to participate in an individual interview.

Upon review of completed demographic surveys and questionnaires, participants were selected and contacted via the preferred method of contact listed in their survey. Participants were asked to participate in an online interview, share a personal artifact during the interview, and write a letter of advice to a first-year SET immediately after the interview. Additionally, a request was made that participants be open to answering follow-up questions via phone, email, or Microsoft Teams as part of their commitment to this study.

According to Laverty (2003), the number of participants necessary for studies of this type varies depending on the nature of the study and the data collected. The current study used 16 participants to ensure a saturation point was reached and SETs had sufficient time to share their unique personal and professional experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Snowball sampling was used to recruit the final three participants to generate a more diverse grade level representation within the participant sample. The snowball sampling technique is a method used to expand the number of participants and generate a more diverse sample by leveraging existing relationships and networks to gain access to individuals who may not have been identified through other means (Babbie, 2020).

Data Collection Plan

This study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore and interpret the experiences of SETs who have remained in their current positions since the 2019–20 school year. After discovering a phenomenon of interest, a comprehensive literature review was conducted (van Manen, 1990, 2016). According to Fleming et al. (2003), Gadamer disapproved of expressions such as collecting data or gaining information and advocated instead for the use of gaining understanding to describe the process of data collection. In accordance with Vagle's

(2010) recommendations, I created an initial statement in a reflexive journal before data collection that included my preconceptions and predictions about the study. Throughout the data collection process, I consistently reflected on and evaluated my initial assumptions. This helped me maintain focus on the studied phenomena while also remaining open to gaining a deeper understanding through participant dialogue (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

According to Gadamer (1990), questioning is a crucial part of the hermeneutic phenomenological interpretive process that allows researchers to create new horizons and gain a better understanding of the subject matter. In this hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, I aimed to interact directly with participants, while considering their experiences, viewpoints, and discussions to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, as highlighted by Patton (2015), while also thoughtfully and purposefully reflecting on my own initial assumptions. Unique viewpoints of SET participants were also considered and situated within the broader cultural and educational contexts (Billingsley et al., 2023).

To achieve triangulation and enhance credibility in this study, a purposeful sequence of data collection was employed as prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Through these encounters, I aimed to generate a comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field related to SET retention (Heidegger, 2005). To answer the research questions posed for this study SETs participated in a virtual 1:1 interview, shared an artifact, and wrote a letter of advice to a first-year SET. Data was collected sequentially using each of these methods and used not only to inform the next phase of data collection but also to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of SETs who have persisted in their current role for more than four years.

This phenomenological qualitative study utilized van Manen's (1990, 2016) hermeneutic

phenomenological research methods as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants who have remained in their positions through the period of civil unrest that paralleled the COVID-19 pandemic while also providing insights into their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies used throughout their experience. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design also allowed for the creation of a trusting, supportive, and non-judgmental environment throughout the interview process, where participants were encouraged to openly share their narratives (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This type of interview method leads to a better understanding of structures or themes that have been essential to the retention of SETs during times of increased stress and uncertainty (van Manen, 1990, 2016).

For this study, data from 1:1 virtual interviews conducted online using Microsoft Teams was collected through audio and video recordings. A detailed transcription of each participant's narrative was also collected. The researcher also maintained field notes and interview summaries to allow for deeper interpretation and reflection (Koch, 1999) (see Appendix H). This data allowed for subsequent detailed analyses of participants' expressions, body language, and nuances of language that might not have otherwise been represented in the electronically generated transcripts. Finally, all interview recordings, transcripts, and related materials gathered were stored in digital folders that were created for each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure proper labeling and sorting of data, a system of date and time stamping was implemented, and backup files were produced to guarantee the availability and accessibility of content throughout the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Vanover et al., 2021).

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were utilized as the primary method of data collection in this study. Questions were thoughtfully crafted to encourage participants to share their experiences and

perspectives in what Benner (1984) refers to as the 'critical incident' approach, wherein participants recount a memorable experience that holds significance in relation to the phenomenon under examination (p. 116). Vandermause and Fleming (2011) commonly employ this approach by posing personal questions in a way that elicits an honest response from participants while they recall and reflect on their experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2014) refer to these types of questions as "grand tour" questions that are designed to engage the participant in a conversation and make him or her comfortable (van Manen, 1990, 2016).

Before each interview began, SET participants were welcomed and made to feel comfortable. They were then asked to share their personal artifacts, which provided an opportunity to share something of significance about themselves as well as elicit positive feelings associated with that item. When conducting interviews using hermeneutic phenomenology techniques, the purpose is twofold according to van Manen (1990, 2016). The first purpose is to gain an understanding of the phenomenon being studied, while the second purpose is to discuss the significance of personal experiences related to the phenomenon. Personal interviews provided an opportunity for relationship-building and trust to be established through the sharing of personal stories in a conversational way and active listening techniques designed to gather rich, in-depth data (van Manen, 1990).

By creating a trusting, supportive, and non-judgmental environment throughout the interview process, participants were encouraged to openly share their experiences (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). According to van Manen (1990, 2016), this type of interview method leads to increased intimacy and a much deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences. An intentional series of 16 open-ended questions were used throughout the individual interview process to elicit responses from participants regarding their experiences as special education

teachers who have remained in the profession for the past four years or more. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences while also being given the opportunity to elaborate on each response to the fullest through guided follow-up questions (van Manen, 2016, p. 15).

As noted by Kvale and Brinkman (2009), "The research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation" (p. 3). The intended aim throughout this process was to acquire a deeper understanding of the experiences of each participant while setting aside what is known about the experiences being described (Roberts, 2020). Individual interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams which allowed for the creation of audio and video recording as well as detailed transcription. Participant recordings and transcripts allowed for active listening and more thoughtful follow up questions to be asked during the interviews and repeated review and reflection after the interviews occurred.

During each of the interviews, personal observations were recorded by taking note of behaviors and frequently repeated key words or phrases as well as potential follow up questions, as recommended by Gadamer (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Richness and detail were evoked by encouraging the interviewee to elaborate on his or her responses. Interview experiences with each of the SETs were noted in the researcher's reflexive bridling journal to allow space to note, question, or reflect upon each individual participant (Vagle et al., 2009). Each interview was scheduled for 45 minutes to allow ample time for participants to freely share their experiences and for follow-up questions to be asked as needed. Asking follow-up or clarifying questions is essential in obtaining more detailed and nuanced answers, especially when the initial response is too broad or rigid (Lauterbach, A., 2018). In doing so, unanticipated responses were uncovered and a deeper understanding of the topic at hand was achieved (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about why you decided to become a special education teacher. CRQ

2. Tell me about your experiences over the last four years as a special education teacher. CRQ

3. What challenges, if any, have you experienced over the last four years personally? SQ1

4. How have you supported yourself through these challenges? SQ1

5. What has your experience been with accessing external support or resources to help you personally manage your emotions or feelings of stress? SQ1

6. What has your experience been with accessing external supports or resources to help you professionally in your role as a special education teacher? SQ2

7. What has your experience been with how others outside of the field of education view your role as a special education teacher? SQ3

8. Tell me about how experiences related to racial conflict or civil unrest in the past four years have affected you professionally. SQ4

9. Tell me about how experiences related to racial conflict or civil unrest in the past four years have affected you personally. SQ4

10. Tell me about how you feel others outside of education perceive special education teachers and why do you think that? SQ1, 3

11. What personal experiences do you feel have contributed to your longevity in the field? SQ1, 2, 3, 4

12. What about this current time in your life has contributed to your longevity in the field? SQ1, 2, 3, 4

13. What social systems or resources do you feel contributed to your longevity in the

field? SQ1, 2, 3

14. What are some of the most important things you have learned from your experience as a special education teacher in the last four years? SQ1

15. What advice do you have for recruiting more candidates into the field of special education? CR

16. Where do you see yourself in five to ten years? CR

Semi-structured open-ended interview questions 1 and 2 were designed to establish rapport, engage the participant in a conversation, and make him or her comfortable (van Manen, 1990, 2016). Questions 2 and 3 also solicited recollections of the past by grounding these questions in a specific timeframe (Navarro et al., 2022). Questions 3–5 were designed to engage the participants by turning their focus to the nature of their lived experience from the personal and emotional perspective while also soliciting both internal and external resources that may have been accessed for support (van Manen, 1989). Questions 6–7 oriented the participants to the professional challenges and resources they may have potentially accessed over the past four years that may have contributed to their retention (van Manen, 2016). Questions 7–10 focused on public perception and cultural factors that may have presented challenges but also provided opportunities for SETs to manage these stressors internally or by accessing other external resources. Questions 11–14 asked SETs to share their experiences with overcoming challenges in their role and align with Bronfenbrenner's PPCT bioecological systems theory. Questions 14–16 were closing reflective questions intended to minimize tension or anxiety the participant may have experiences during the interview the process and could potentially add valuable information or additional issues for future consideration (Sowicz et al., 2019). Each of these questions provided details related specifically to personal, professional, cultural, and time-related

experiences of K-12 SET who have remained in their roles for more than three years. This comprehensive approach captured the multifaceted and interrelated nature of SET experiences, as suggested by van Manen (1989) while aligning with Bronfenbrenner's PPCT theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Field notes and reflexive journaling were used to supply additional context and capture key details that will provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2011). During the research process, participants were carefully observed, and notes were taken and referenced to seek opportunities to ask follow-up questions or gain additional insight from the participant through natural conversation. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Each Teams meeting ended by completing a member check with the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure the accuracy of participant impressions as presented (Vanover et al., 2021). Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that this process allows for the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings and open new lines of inquiry.

An important aspect of data collection process within the hermeneutic approach is researcher reflection (Moules et al., 2015). While conducting 1:1 interviews, I continuously engaged in recording personal observations, noting questions, and reflecting on the proposed purpose of this study through a reflexive bridling journal (Vagle, 2010), in accordance with Saldaña's (2011) data collection methods. A comprehensive record of field notes was maintained to complement the data collection process (Saldaña, 2011) and ensure that data collected was accurate and comprehensive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Individual Interviews Data Analysis Plan

A hermeneutic phenomenological research design allows for a deeper exploration and

interpretation of the data collected through in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews with SET participants. Individual interviews are a research method designed to create detailed accounts of personal experiences related to a specific phenomenon that connect groups of people or a society as a whole (Smith, 1996). According to Saldaña (2009) taking field notes during the initial interviews can also offer valuable insights to researchers that may not be evident solely from audio or video recordings (see Appendix H). A field note template served as a reflexive bridling journal and was used to sort participant demographic data prior to interviews as well as record first impressions, analytic memos, and other relevant thoughts or feelings noted during the interview (Saldaña, 2011) (see Appendix H).

Upon completion of each 1:1 interview, the entire transcript was read, reviewed, and a brief summary was written in the reflexive bridling journal, as recommended by Vagle et al. (2009). The first cycle coding method used for this study consisted of a second line-by-line reading of each participant's interview transcript while highlighting preliminary in vivo codes. This practice allowed for the researcher to remain open and cultivate deeper understanding of each participant's experience (Stutey et al., 2020). Deep engagement with the text was achieved by continuing to read, review, and reflect upon the data collected while searching for structures that formed essential or recurring themes (Vanover et al., 2021). Similar statements or comments taken from the text were then grouped to establish themes or patterns within the data. As Vandermause and Fleming (2011) recommend, tracking potential patterns or themes that begin to emerge can aid in determining if these concepts fully develop. A cyclical analytic process was then used to begin dividing codes into categories or themes (see Appendix H).

Open-mindedness and reflexive thinking were practiced as data was analyzed, as suggested by Stutey et al. (2020). Personal knowledge and understanding of the subject matter

were relied upon to engage in a hermeneutic conversation with the text, as van Manen (1990) proposed. This approach provided new insights and a deeper understanding of the data collected. Further reviews of recorded interviews, transcripts, and field notes were completed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings from the participants' responses by closely and repeatedly examining important aspects of the data which van Manen (1990, 2016) refers to as *structures of experience*. Then, in the last step of the first phase of data analysis, data was tagged with attribute codes to begin sorting and organizing by themes (Bingham, 2023). These topic codes, sometimes referred to as descriptive codes by Saldaña (2011) reflect broader categories of interest that represent the study's purpose and the aligned research questions.

Physical Artifacts

Physical artifacts are not commonly employed as evidence in qualitative studies; however, hermeneutical scholars propose that certain objects such as diaries, photographs, and artwork can be subject to interpretation to uncover the meanings that were projected onto them during their creation (Yanow, 2013). According to Yanow, phenomenologists also draw on the notion that understanding that is derived from personal experiences also includes the significance that comes from interactions with tangible objects or artifacts and should be used to complement in vivo evidence from participants.

Prior to the 1:1 structured interview, participants were asked to bring an artifact to share that resonated with them during challenging times in their career when they might have considered leaving the profession. A brief list of sample items was shared for reference (i.e., picture, book, personal gift, song). At the start of each virtual meeting, participants were welcomed and informed that recording and transcription of the session would begin. In addition to video recording and transcription, a physical artifact log was created and used to provide space

for reflexive notes according to Vagle (2010) (see Appendix G). The artifact log also provided space to document an initial description of the artifact, analysis of meaning, social structures, and timeframe noted, as well as to log similarities and differences noted between data collected from other participants for future analysis.

Upon confirmation that recording and transcription had started, participants were asked if they remembered to bring their artifact to the virtual meeting. After verbally prompting participants to share why they selected their item and what that item represented to them, they were given the opportunity to show and describe their item. Each participant's physical artifact log was used to note details about the item, as well as behaviors or nuances observed while the participant was sharing. These additional notes related to the context of each artifact provided a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences (Saldaña, 2021).

Physical Artifacts Data Analysis Plan

According to Edwards and I'Anson (2020), the use of artifacts in qualitative research has been effective in revealing deeper meaning and providing insights that participants may not have shared otherwise. Froschauer and Lueger (2016) presented a hermeneutic interpretation method specific to physical artifacts to safeguard the validity of researcher insights. These artifact analysis stages include descriptive analysis of the artifact, analysis of meaning, reconstruction of underlying use, and supplementary comparative analysis. The first stage serves as a basis for formally constructing the artifact's purpose, makeup, and reason for existence. The second stage examines the artifact's social and contextual relevance to begin constructing perspective and meaning. The next stage of analysis views the artifact through the lens of the social structures, timeframe, practical conditions behind the creation of the item, as well as how it is used and by

whom. The final stage of artifact analysis, according to Froschauer and Lueger (2016) is a detailed comparative analysis whereby the artifact is compared to other data collected by the individual such as interview responses and similarities or differences are identified.

Each participant's artifact sharing was recorded via Microsoft Teams and a transcript was created. Reflexive notes were kept on each participant's artifact log, to record initial thoughts and perceptions and were used for analysis and reflection (Brauner et al., 2018; Vagle, 2010). Nonverbal cues can encompass various interconnected signals, including body movements, vocal tone, physical proximity, and the use of objects. Individuals often rely on nonverbal cues to communicate their identities, emotions, control conversations, and exert influence over each other; however, directly observing and decoding these implicit messages can pose a challenge (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2018).These challenges were mediated through the use of audio and video recordings as well as reflexive notes to provide a deeper understanding of each participant's lived experience and the use of the most recognized nonverbal communication codes.

This data allowed for themes to functionally emerge from the data (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2018; van Manen, 1990, 2016). Using van Manen's (2016) method of phenomenology, themes were organized based on perceptions and experiences of their experience. These were carefully analyzed to capture data related to the participant's experiences and themes and were then narrowed to those central to answering the research question (Moustakas, 1994). Opportunities for member checks to ensure transcripts reflect the essence of each participant's experience were provided (Saldaña, 2011; van Manen, 1990, 2016). Data collection and analysis continued until no new insights or dimensions were identified and data saturation was achieved (Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 1990, 2016; Urquhart, 2022). Feedback from peer reviewers was also solicited to verify the analysis and interpretation of data (Gadamer et al., 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, the depths and connections between identified themes were explored while also considering the cultural, historical, and contextual elements that may have contributed to their emergence until no new information is attained and data saturation was reached (Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 1990, 2016). Glaser and Strauss (1967) define data saturation as a point in the research process where an adequate amount of information has been gathered to replicate the study, and the capacity to obtain additional information from this data source has been exhausted.

Letter of Advice to New Special Education Teacher Data Collection Plan

The final data collection method used for this study consisted of each SET writing a letter of advice to a hypothetical first-year special education teacher. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), a well carried out research interview can be an enriching experience for participants who may obtain new insights into themselves or their experience from the process, so the aim of this letter-writing response was for SETs to further reflect and elaborate on their experiences outside of the fixed questions asked during the 1:1 interview (Burtt, 2020).

The timing of this data collection method afforded the opportunity to capture SETs memories that may have been primed by reflection that occurred during the interview and artifact sharing discussion to capture even deeper thoughts about their experiences in a different way (Friedman, 1993). Qualitative researchers have long overlooked the potential value of written documents, such as letters, as a form of data collection (Burtt, 2020). According to Samaras and Sell (2013), engaging in letter writing enhances critical thinking skills and promotes authentic peer-to-peer dialogue. The tool used to collect this data provided unlimited space for participants to provide a response and given that special educators are known for their helpful nature, the purpose of this activity was to encourage them to share their thoughts and experiences in a different format, for a different audience, with a specific intended purpose (Steindle et al., 2023).

At the conclusion of each 1:1 interview, participants were thanked for sharing their time and personal experiences and given the opportunity to ask any follow up questions. Participants were then asked to complete one last exercise for the purpose of this study with the option of completing it at that time or as a follow-up activity should they need more time to complete the task. A Google Form link was then shared in the messaging box of Teams meeting and participants were instructed to open the link. Written instructions were provided within the Google Form and brief instructions were also provided verbally for the final task of writing a letter of advice to a first-year special education teacher. Participants were prompted to share their thoughts and advice based on their own experiences (Friedman, 1993). Responses were collected along with email addresses to ensure they were correctly linked with the appropriate participant pseudonym.

Letter of Advice to New Special Education Teacher Data Analysis Plan

Saldaña (2021) posited that data analysis must also consider the writing, sharing, and questioning of participants as they reflect on their overall experience. Data analysis typically begins with a transcription of the data, however, in this case, text was created by SET participants in Google Forms and stored for future review and analysis. Upon notification of receipt of completed letters from SET participants, an analysis was first generated from the text (Samaras & Sell, 2013). Next, a thorough line-by-line review was conducted to identify recurring words or meaning units into what van Manen (1990, 2016) refers to as *codes*. Saldaña (2021) also defines a code in qualitative data analysis as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p.96). Codes were then sorted based on common ideas or relationships to form categories that were used to identify main ideas or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Critical

reflection was used to assess attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of SET participants, demographic classification, as well as the group (Samaras & Sell, 2013). According to Bowen (2009) documents such as letters can serve multiple functions and offer valuable insights to researchers as they gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Data Synthesis

Phenomenology is a philosophy that emphasizes the significance of one's lived experience (van Manen, 2016). According to Friesen et al. (2012), "experiences," in this context, are not skills that are learned, but rather, something that happens to individuals. According to van Manen (2016), phenomenology involves reflecting on the experiences of human existence. The act of reflection serves to explore the essence of a phenomenon. However, its purpose is not to provide an explanation but rather to offer a detailed account of how the phenomenon manifests itself in one's consciousness (van Manen, 1997). Cohen et al. (2017) argues that throughout the process of data synthesis, researcher reflections are just as important as the essence of the phenomenon itself.

Saldaña (2021) posited that data analysis is accelerated by taking cognitive ownership of data. According to Saldaña, one approach to understanding the intricacies of the human experience is to recognize and interpret recurring patterns within it. When conducting qualitative research, the practice of using various sources of data to enhance confidence in the validity of findings is known as triangulation (Miles et al., 2014). Triangulation involves verifying evidence from multiple sources such as different individuals, types of data, or methods of data to develop descriptions and themes in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 259).

Hermeneutic phenomenological research methods, by definition, recognize the subjective nature of human experiences and become the foundation upon which all subsequent steps of

analysis are based (Friesen et al., 2012). As a researcher, I understand that data gathering and analysis are often iterative processes. Therefore, I conducted individual interviews to collect primary data, which was recorded and transcribed. Additionally, I collected individual artifacts and maintained thoughtful field notes and a reflexive journal to aid in data analysis. To organize data, I used Google Sheets to sort and categorize relevant information. Through structured interviews, the collection of artifacts, and reflexive journaling, I aimed to gain new insights through past learning and research. These insights, referred to by Gadamer et al. (2004) as *horizons*, played a crucial role in the interpretive process.

Data collected for this study underwent a thorough analysis and synthesis process, which involved the application of at least three different coding techniques (Saldaña, 2021). This consisted of in vivo coding, or "verbatim coding" (p. 137) of exactly what the participant stated or wrote, as well as process coding, which denotes an action being taken (e.g., running, reading, meditating) as well as values coding, which is derived from the principles or moral codes an individual ascribes to (Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle of data analysis consisted of applying codes to data that was collected. During the second cycle of data analysis, I examined codes for similarities and patterns and combined groups of codes into clusters and set aside outlier codes.

From these clusters of codes, I was able to then generate themes from data collected. During the final stage of the data analysis, multiple examinations were completed to ensure that conclusions were reliable and accurate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I engaged in an interpretive process, drawing on hermeneutic principles involving a deeper exploration of the identified themes and their interrelationships (van Manen, 2016). I also reflected on and challenged the cultural, historical, and contextual factors that may have influenced the emergence of these themes, providing a rich understanding of the participants' experiences of resilience within the

broader social and educational context (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This research design is aligned with the research questions presented and data analysis steps were facilitated to produce a thorough exploration of the lived experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in the profession since the 2019–20 school year.

Trustworthiness

According to Patton (2015) and Shenton (2004), the positivist community has traditionally valued the objectivity and statistical nature of quantitative research. Despite criticism from positivists, valid and reliable qualitative frameworks aligned with a naturalistic paradigm have been developed by researchers (Fleming et al., 2003; Gadamer, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). One such framework, first outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), applies the positivist concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative study (Shenton, 2004). This section provides a comprehensive overview of the steps that were implemented to ensure the research methods align with the theoretical frameworks established by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility refers to the degree of assurance, trust, or truth in data or its findings. I engaged in reflexive notetaking to establish credibility during individual interviews to ensure participants' verbal and nonverbal responses were accurately and clearly represented. Lincoln and Guba also recommend *prolonged engagement* with participants to establish trust with participants and ensure credibility in the interpretation of the data. To accomplish this, I cultivated a sense of familiarity with participants through personal emails or text messages to schedule a time to meet, semi-structured 1:1 interviews, and the sharing of personal artifacts.

To further ensure credibility, member checks were completed through participant, peer, and expert reviews at every stage of data collection and analysis to ensure the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each participant was given a chance to review, edit, and approve their transcript for accuracy prior to it being used in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Alsaigh and Coyne (2021) and Vanover et al. (2021), these checks clarify and validate research conclusions.

According to Patton (1999), triangulation in qualitative research refers to using various techniques or data sources to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The triangulation of data sources and collection methods utilized in this study were intended to enhance the accuracy and credibility of its findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure greater diversity in the study, involved participants from various school districts and special education positions. This provided a wider range of lived experiences, thereby increasing the credibility of the research (Shenton, 2004). This process of considering multiple perspectives in a variety of formats to achieve a more credible and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon is something scholar Brenda Dervin referred to as *circling reality* (Shields & Dervin, 1993).

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability is akin to external generalizability in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish transferability, researchers must present findings that can be applied to other populations, situations, contexts, and timeframes to ensure that conclusions are not limited to the specific sample population or context under examination. A comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon was provided through rich descriptions supplied by participants as well as sufficient details about their demographics (i.e., age, gender, years in the

profession, and disability areas served) (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Shenton, 2004).

The study involved recruiting special education teachers from various locations who were currently serving students in kindergarten through 12th grade in a variety of disability areas. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that the existence of differing viewpoints leads to a variety of interconnected data that will be used to analyze and interpret data from this study. The inclusion of diverse participants contributed to achieving my objective of establishing reliable and transferable results, a principle advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

A robust description of the historical context of this study was provided to offer further insight into the factors affecting special education teachers across the country during this time (Shenton, 2004). Although each participant's experience may differ in certain aspects, I exhibited the applicability of this study by furnishing a comprehensive portrayal of their experiences to allow for inferences, comparisons, and generalizations to be made (Lincoln & Guba; Shenton, 2004). According to Gadamer (1990), understanding can only be attained through the establishment of a cohesive connection between the entirety of a subject and its distinct parts. Gadamer also claimed it is imperative that researchers' perspectives are authentic and dependent on historical context (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). As a result, both the larger picture and the finer details related to the unique experiences of SET participants were examined prior to the final interpretation of research findings.

Dependability

Dependability, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), pertains to the reliability and consistency of data over time and in different circumstances, ensuring that findings can be reliably replicated. Lincoln and Guba have established that credibility and dependability are closely interrelated, with one being contingent upon the other. To establish both qualities, Shenton

(2004) recommends the use of overlapping methods to strengthen the dependability of a study.

Overlapping methods (i.e., individual interview, artifacts, letters) were used to strengthen the dependability and establish consistency in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Steps taken throughout the data collection process were clearly outlined and consistently followed. To ensure research dependability, the dissertation committee also conducted an inquiry audit to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of the inquiry process (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability

Miles et al. (2014) state that to ensure confirmability, it is essential for researchers to acknowledge biases and preconceptions. Confirmability refers to the degree of impartiality in a study, indicating the extent to which the participants influence the results rather than the researcher's predispositions, motivations, or interests (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). To ensure that the final interpretation of the research findings reflects the participants' experiences, data triangulation techniques were used to reduce the effect of bias (Guba, 1981; Lauterbach, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

To confirm reliability, an audit trail was provided that details the methodology used in a clear and comprehensive manner to ensure accurate replication of the study is possible (Shenton, 2004). This study was also conducted with reflexivity by practicing self-awareness and critical reflection to ensure that research findings were accurate and unbiased. Researchers practice reflexivity by acknowledging their own biases, values, and assumptions and intentionally incorporating them into their research (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 626). According to Alsaigh and Coyne (2021), reflexivity amplifies the integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness of a qualitative study.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting a phenomenological hermeneutic study, there are several ethical issues outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) that must be addressed. First, prior to starting the proposed study, an application for approval to Liberty University's IRB was submitted. Data collection did not begin until the necessary approval from IRB was obtained (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Upon approval, participants received information about the expectations and intended purpose of the study. Participants were notified that their participation in the study was voluntary, and every effort was made to protect their identity through pseudonyms. Any identifying information related to school assignments or positions was also omitted to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Participants were informed they were free to withdraw from the study at any time (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Once research began, access to all physical and electronic data, such as consent forms and interview transcripts, was limited solely to the primary researcher (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). When working with qualitative data, researchers typically remove information that could directly or indirectly reveal the identities of participants, organizations, or locations (Heaton, 2022). Allen and Wiles (2016) argued that assigning pseudonyms to participants without choice, however, can have negative psychological effects. Participants in this study were asked how they wish to be named and assigned a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview process that linked data from the interview, personal artifact, and letter to the respective individual.

Data was securely stored in a password-protected laptop or a locked file cabinet (Van Leeuween et al., 2017) and after five years, all transcripts and consent forms will be destroyed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To address any potential problems that may arise from interviewing teachers from the same school district, participation was not requested from staff who were under my direct supervision. Additionally, research was conducted in four other nearby districts to

ensure a more diverse group of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Summary

The rationale for choosing hermeneutic phenomenology to research the experiences of special educators who have persisted in their roles was rooted in the potential to uncover themes that lead to a deeper understanding of special education teacher retention. This study focuses on the lived experiences of full-time SETs who have been in their current position since the 2019–20 academic year. Participants were employed in large suburban school districts in Illinois known for some of the state's highest teacher salaries (ISBE Department of Data Strategies and Analytics, 2023). The setting of this study is significant, given that financial compensation has been a key factor influencing teacher retention in prior research (Billingsley et al., 2019). Data collection for the study consisted of individual interviews, artifact sharing, and letter writing to ensure rigor and credibility, as prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This sequential approach was designed to inform subsequent phases and to provide a multi-dimensional perspective of why SETs with over four years of tenure have persisted in their roles.

In this study, I aimed to understand the views and encounters of the participants while considering my own background as a special educator and researcher, whose educational and professional background was considered while studying the participants' perceptions within this context. This study employed the six-step approach to hermeneutic phenomenology outlined by van Manen (1997) as a framework to explore the phenomenon of special education teacher retention as it allows for flexibility to prioritize or minimize steps in the data collection process based on emerging data. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design necessitates a complete immersion in the text, resulting in subjective interpretation and a thorough comprehension of the research phenomenon (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Sheehan, 2022).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years. The problem is that far too many SETs in the United States leave the field within the first three to five years of entering the profession (Bettini et al., 2019; Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020). High staff turnover rates impact the academic achievement and overall trajectory of SWD, by depriving them of experienced instructors and disrupting the continuity of their educational experiences (Bettini et al., 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). Exploring the experiences of SETs who surpass the typical length of time spent in their field provides critical insights into strategies that can lessen the adverse effects of teacher turnover and enhance overall outcomes for SWD. (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). This collection of data focused specifically on SET experiences over the past four years since the onset of the pandemic which allowed for a deep exploration into supports that have shaped their resilience and retention during a time characterized by abrupt change, conflict, and uncertainty. This chapter includes a description of each participant, themes and sub-themes, research question responses, and a summary of research findings.

Participants

After successful recruiting, the 16 participants in this study represented SETs from four of the 20 largest school districts in the state of Illinois. Together, these 16 SETs represented 211 cumulative years of teaching experience, averaging slightly over 13 years of experience per participant. The youngest participant in this study was 30 years old and the two oldest were both

51 years old. Ninety-three percent of the participants in this study were female and seven percent were male, and in terms of ethnicity, 87.5% of the participants were White, 6.25% were Black, and 6.25% were Asian. SET participants in this study serve students from kindergarten through 12th grade and most serve students at multiple grade levels (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Grade Levels Taught by Special Education Teacher Participants
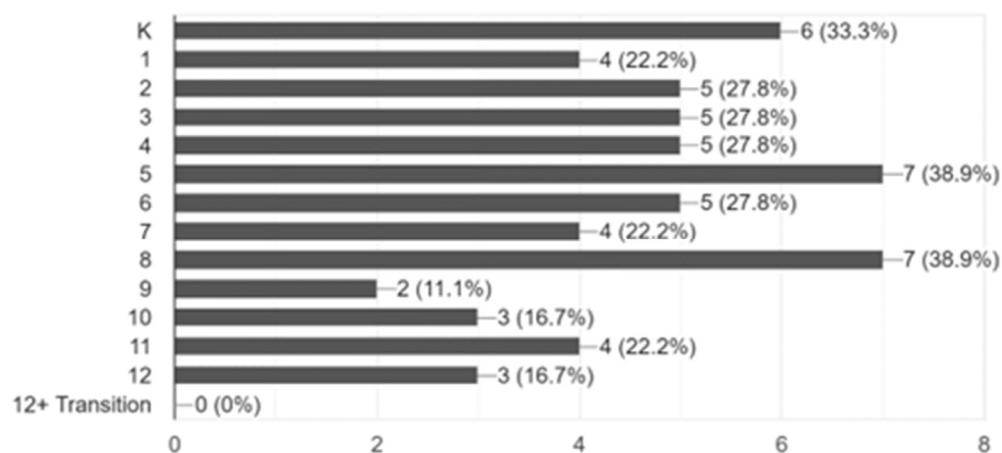
A brief biography has been provided in the following section using the pseudonym selected by each SET participant. These biographical descriptions help acquaint the reader with the SETs more intimately and gain a better understanding of each of their experiences. According to van Manen (1990) narrative participant descriptions are a key aspect to phenomenological research and allow the reader to encounter the individual more fully and better understand his or her experience.

Dane

As a 33-year-old White female, Dane has already spent a decade in the field of special education. During her interview, she recalled being inspired to become a special education teacher during a high school experience where she was able to support a peer with disabilities in PE class.

Dane also shared that her father, uncle, and "a lot of extended family" are also educators, but "they're all PE teachers and I was never really interested in that." Over the last four years, she has faced professional and personal challenges that included adapting to online teaching, managing hybrid classrooms for SWD, and dealing with the physical and emotional isolation of the pandemic. Despite sharing that she was relieved to return to school in person, at least part-time initially, she also resented that only SETs were forced to do so: "That was pretty tough because it wasn't very fair," she shared.

Dane shared that even now, she often feels isolated within her own building: "I joke with the other teacher in my program that we're kind of on an island within our building. We have things that we do that no one else in the building does." Dane maintained support through professional development, online forums, and weekly personal therapy sessions, yet shared she was diagnosed with depression in 2021. Admittedly, depression was not something she had struggled with in the past, but she found herself getting "easily frustrated" and felt she needed to "figure out what's going on" so she began to access this outside support. "There's gonna be bad days, and there's gonna be good days," she reflected, "but being able to adapt to that change has been a big thing" for her in the past four years.

Missy

Missy is a 44-year-old White female special education teacher with seven years of experience who embarked on her career path because of her own experiences as a student diagnosed with learning disabilities in high school where she faced bullying and emotional challenges as a result. Missy now holds a master's degree and case manages ten students in fifth through eighth grade in self-contained setting. Missy highlighted challenges she has faced in the past four years specifically due to administrative directives, student behavioral issues, and the

diverse language needs of her students. In her position, Missy teaches all core subjects for students at four different grade levels, which she shared is not only time-consuming and stressful but also requires a great deal of planning and modification of the instructional materials. To cope with the stress and demands of her role, Missy engages in physical activities like going to the gym and has adopted a "fresh start" approach to each day. "I've taken to a punching bag at the gym and then I know I have to let it go because it's a new day tomorrow." Missy's commitment to personal well-being and her positive outlook are reflected in her personal philosophy, "I never hold anything over for my kids."

Lucky

Lucky, a dedicated 38-year-old SET with 14 years of experience, has devoted her career to working with young children in kindergarten through second grade in a self-contained classroom. Inspired by her own struggles with dyslexia and influenced by the support she received; Lucky chose to pursue a career in special education to "make a difference" in her students' lives. Throughout the last four years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lucky navigated the challenges of adapting to new teaching methods, and dealing with the increased complexities of students' needs due to missed early interventions. Despite the challenges she faced, Lucky finds solace and rejuvenation in self-care practices, such as enjoying a good cup of tea, taking walks, and finding quiet moments between work and her responsibilities as a mother. Her resilience and dedication are further supported by the strong community and relationships she has built with her colleagues, whom she considers her "work family." Lucky knows her students' parents are grateful for her, but she also added, "When you've only got seven in your class and maybe only two who are English speaking, you don't get lots of feedback." In contrast, she feels her colleagues outside of special education not only have fewer responsibilities

but also receive far more praise. She further explained, she doesn't require praise or expect gifts from her parents but admits that she maintains low expectations for receiving any kind of positive praise at all because "when you're in a regular ed. classroom, and you have 26 parents, maybe 15 of them are saying you're doing a great job, and I just don't get that."

Tasha

Tasha is a 34-year-old Asian female special education teacher who has also earned her master's degree. Now seven years into her career, Tasha manages a case load of 13 students in kindergarten through fifth grade who receive a resource level of support throughout their school day. Tasha's journey into special education, like many others who participated in this study, resulted from her career path not going as initially planned. She shared she "always knew" she would pursue a career in education but she "didn't actually plan on being a special education teacher." She had originally intended to be a high school math teacher, but when her college program "didn't go in the direction" she wanted, she graduated with "just a degree in math." She then accepted a job as a teacher's assistant at the urging of a friend. "So that's the path that I took, and I haven't looked back," Tasha shared.

The supportive environment she now works in is what she attributes to her own retention. She stated, "I don't think that I would have stayed here if I didn't have my teacher besties!" and attributed her ability to maintain her personal well-being and work-life balance to her administrator, who happens to be a former special educator. Tasha shared that her principal was very intentional during the pandemic and continued to foster a positive school culture even when they were not together physically. "The efforts they have made to maintain a sense of community and support among staff during challenging times" has meant a great deal to her. Such leadership has provided Tasha with clear expectations, opportunities for professional development, and the

chance to forge meaningful professional relationships. These aspects have been essential to her job satisfaction and continued commitment to special education, and as a result, she does not ever see herself leaving her current role.

Jacob

Jacob, a 41-year-old male SET with a master's degree and seven years of experience, manages a caseload of thirteen 11th grade SWD in a resource setting. Jacob's journey reflects the unpredictability of career paths and the importance of maintaining an open mind and being adaptable when considering a career in special education. Jacob reports initially pursuing a career in the field due to uncertainty with finding a job after earning his English degree. Jacob shared, "I became a (special education) teacher because I didn't know what else to do with my English degree, which is what a lot of English majors wind up doing." Jacob admits that his journey into special education was somewhat accidental but eventually became his "calling." He was initially hired as a teaching assistant which he said, "basically opened my eyes to a world that I had been in but never really understood fully," highlighting the need to appreciate and recognize the level of expertise and hard work demanded of special educators. Jacob shared that in his current role, he is assigned as a co-teacher within the English department at his high school. This has allowed him to leverage his English degree in a meaningful way while also providing support to students with special needs within the general education environment. Outside of work, Jacob shared that he enjoys playing challenging video games to relieve his work-related stress. Admittedly, he is not a "sports guy," so video games help him to unwind after work. He shared, "I don't have a lot of time, but when I do, it really does help me decompress." Jacob stated he finds his work as a SET "personally fulfilling" and credits his retention to ongoing mentorship, professional development opportunities, and being a part of a supportive school community.

Marcy

Marcy's decision to enter the field of special education was sparked by a meaningful interaction with a child with Down syndrome, leading her to switch her focus from general education to special education while in college. She now teaches in a self-contained classroom for third through fifth grade students with emotional disabilities and manages a case load of five students. Marcy, a 48-year-old white special education teacher with a master's degree and two decades of classroom experience, attributes her commitment to fitness as a key factor in managing stress and sustaining a positive outlook despite challenging professional circumstances. Marcy credited her rigorous marathon and Ironman training regimens with providing her the mental and physical strength necessary to tackle the daily challenges of teaching self-contained students with emotional disabilities. In her interview, when asked what exercise does for her, Marcy shared that through her own morning check-ins with her students she learned, "I needed (exercise) to get through my day, and now it's become such a part of me…I just needed that release from the week." Marcy is also passionate about the importance of self-care and advocated for continuous professional development and mentorship, both for new teachers and seasoned professionals, to enhance teaching practices and student outcomes.

Marcy shared she views herself as a "positive person" who looks for the good in people and has learned that "you have to communicate" when issues arise. Despite attesting to always "look for the good" in others, Marcy shared that special educators are sometimes not given that same respect or courtesy. "We have a lot on our plate, but (the public) also sees that we have those days off, you know, the Christmas break, the spring break, then summer. So, the joke has become, 'teacher life,' you know?" Despite feeling that these negative attitudes or perceptions exist, Marcy also emphasized the variability and potential for growth. "Every year is different and

I wanna keep developing these relationships." These sentiments, Marcy revealed, are what make it difficult for her to even consider leaving the profession one day.

Jessica

Jessica's narrative reflects a journey of adaptation, resilience, and growth within the six years she has spent so far in the field of special education. As a 31-year-old, White female who manages a caseload of eight students in second through fifth grade, Jessica highlights the importance of work-life balance and having a personal and professional support network. "My mom was a special education teacher," Jessica shared. "So, when we were younger, my sister and I used to go to bring your child to work day. I don't even know if it's a thing anymore, but it was when I was a kid. We used to go in, and I loved it!" Now with her own classroom, Jessica shared she feels "there's an extra layer of difficulty" imposed upon special educators that even those in education do not fully recognize. She noted challenges such as frequently having to move her classroom and not having all the curricular materials she needs to work with her students who are at many different grade levels, but also shared that her willingness to be "flexible and adaptable" have helped her to cope with these challenges. In addition, Jessica shared she attempts to maintain clear boundaries between her work and personal life by deliberately choosing not to put her work email on her personal cell phone, which she believes helps her manage stress and maintain a sense of personal well-being. She added, "I've just found that if you don't have a good work-life balance then you just drive yourself crazy." Jessica noted observing a shift in attitudes towards teachers since first starting in the profession six years ago, which she believes was influenced by the pandemic and other more broad societal issues "over the past four years," noting "increased appreciation during and immediately after the pandemic, but a more recent regression back to previous stereotypes and misconceptions about the teaching profession." In her experience, there

has been an increased lack of respect from parents and students more recently. Jessica shared she also recently faced a complex legal situation that was unique to her role as a special educator, but she felt the experience was an "opportunity" that contributed to her overall professional development and resilience, despite causing a tremendous increase in her workload and overall stress levels. Jessica reflected that while her first six years of teaching thus far have been somewhat tumultuous with the pandemic and her varying roles and responsibilities, they have also "helped to make her a better teacher by increasing her resilience, adaptability, and love for the profession."

Jen

Jen is a 43-year-old White female who has spent 18 years in special education. Like most of the participants in this study, Jen has her master's degree, and manages a case load of special education students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Jen's path to becoming a special education teacher was influenced by her interest in psychology and social work, as she transitioned from an office manager for a psychologist to a teaching assistant role. "I took a part time job, as an office manager for a psychologist, and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, how boring!'" After becoming a teaching assistant, at the urging of her stepmother, who is also a teacher, Jen felt much happier about her choice. Once certified to teach special education, she navigated through various roles within the district, ranging from self-contained programs to serving as a support teacher, where she has remained the past four years. These opportunities highlight the possibilities that exist for special educators to find their niche in larger districts without having to leave and find a job elsewhere if a position does not meet their initial expectations.

Jen attributes her sustained career in special education to "to-do lists," diverse teaching experiences, the opportunity to pursue new challenges, and having supportive leadership and

mentorship. She also added, "You just learn to prioritize, and you just learn what not to stress about." Like other participants, Jen also emphasizes the importance of exercise, healthy eating, and quality family time as essential components of her well-being. Therapy and meditation have played a crucial role in her ability to cope during stressful times in her life as well. She had accessed outside therapy right before the pandemic started, but shared this is a support she has accessed "on and off" for most of her life. Jen shared that she experienced a heightened awareness of racial dynamics within the educational setting in the last four years, particularly during periods of civil unrest. These experiences have influenced her approach with student interactions as well as behavior management. When discussing her students who are African American, she reflected, "You're like, oh, my gosh, they are surrounded by all these White people right now, you know? So, it gave you some more perspective and what that student might be feeling based on the climate…so it was something that that we thought about and we discussed often when managing behavior." Jen's support networks, self-awareness, and ability to adapt in stressful times have helped her to support student engagement while also maintaining her own personal well-being.

Gina

Gina is a seasoned special education teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience. She is 51 years old, has her master's degree, and maintains a caseload of 14 middle school students in Grades 6–8. As a child, her mother was the school librarian at her elementary school, which provided her with regular opportunities to stay after school and help other teachers in their classrooms. Gina shared that the positive reinforcement she received from those teachers "was a big influence" on her decision to become a teacher. When initially deciding on a college major, Gina's father told her that he thought special education teachers made a little bit more than general education teachers, "which obviously we don't," she chuckled, but that was enough to

persuade her at the time. Throughout her career, Gina has relied on her faith, journaling, and her family and friends to cope with stress and maintain her sense of purpose. During the pandemic, Gina joked that, like many people at the time, she experienced an increase in alcohol consumption to cope with "being stuck" at home all the time. In her experience over the past four years specifically, she feels parents are more appreciative and give teachers more grace.

Gina also feels that because of the pandemic, she was able to "reprioritize what I value and what keeps me sane." Gina also attributes her longevity in the field to her administrators being supportive, flexible, and understanding. "I can go to my boss with anything, and I know she'll hear me out and be very supportive," she added. Gina also relies on her special education colleagues as well for support in her role. "No one understands what we do in our position except us, right?" she shared. "No one knows all the little intricacies that we deal with all day, except for us. So, when something happens, we are there to support each other and we're really…really close," she added.

Pearl

Pearl is a White, female SET with 31 years of high school special education teaching experience. She is 51 years old, and like most of the participants in this study, also has her master's degree. She openly shares concern about teacher and administrator retention and the impact on SWD adding,

> This stinks because we've lost some *really* good teachers because they're, like, "This is not what I signed up for." And it *isn't* what we signed up for, but we need to have people that encourage us to keep going and to make us feel like we belong!

Despite these concerns, Pearl was reflective and expressed a profound sense of fulfillment in her work in her interview. She began her career in education somewhat inadvertently, transitioning

from a pre-med major to special education through a scholarship opportunity. Soon into the program, she had an opportunity to work with a student with cerebral palsy who was wheelchair bound and she thought, "I think I can do this!" Pearl has taught with the same co-teacher for over 17 years and admits she thinks of her colleagues as her "work family" adding, "At least we have each other…our staff is kind of a family here, small enough, but we all care about each other. You know, we lean on each other when we can."

To reduce her stress outside of work, Pearl enjoys taking walks, and feels her 40-mile drive to and from work every day helps her to decompress. Her family values were evident as she spoke about her two adult children and the increased opportunity, she will have to see them more once she retires. However, she added, "My work's not done. I know it's not done here. I know I need to finish, but this (her children) keeps me going." Pearl's husband is also a former educator who retired two years ago. Throughout the pandemic she found solace in their shared experiences. She reported consulting him as a sounding board for her concerns. "Like, is it *this* bad?" she would ask him. She appreciated his support at the time, underscoring the importance of their partnership, and added "I'm grateful we had each other." Pearl's journey reflects layers of personal and professional support, a deep commitment to her school community, and a recognition of her ability to make a significant impact through her work with students.

Ruby

Ruby also entered the field of special education after initially aspiring to be a high school English teacher. Ruby is 39 years old, White, and currently working on her master's degree. Now a middle school special education teacher, Ruby has 12 students on her caseload who receive services at the resource level of support. Ruby shared her caseload sizes have remained consistent over the years, but because of her noted strengths in communication and dealing with difficult

parents, she admitted she is often assigned a more challenging caseload than her colleagues. Ruby shared, "I appreciate that I am seen as someone who is skilled at communicating and giving information in a way, and kind of bridging a gap between school and home, but it can be tiresome." Ruby admitted that even if she has a lot on her plate, she finds a way to get everything done, and acknowledged being a "people pleaser." Ruby's husband is also a special educator and serves as a director of student services in a neighboring district. His insights and shared professional experiences are helpful and often provide her with additional support and perspective when needed. In times of stress, Ruby shared that reading books allows her to momentarily step away or "disassociate" from her professional and personal responsibilities. She reported benefiting from working in a supportive work environment and having strong relationships with her colleagues and administrators.

Ruby shared, "I love being in the classroom. I love being with kids. I love interacting and having fun all day with them, and I want others to be kind of inspired by that." In terms of how others outside of education perceive special educators, Ruby shared that she believes opinions are mixed. "There are people that are like, I don't know how you do what you do. We value you so much … and then there's people that are like, you're just a babysitter. You're not doing enough. You're lazy, you know?" Upon reflection, Ruby admitted that being an English teacher one day is still her true passion as she shared her time in special education may not be as "long lasting" as some might hope. She added, "What's kept me here is the building that I'm at overall…There have been, you know, rough years here and there…but my colleagues, my administration…I really do like where I am."

Gnome

Gnome, a White female special education teacher with 17 years of experience, is 42 years

old and a mother of two young children. She is currently employed at an elementary school, where she oversees a caseload of 11 SWD ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade. Gnome also has her master's degree. Initially aiming for a career in occupational therapy, Gnome shifted to special education after learning that her program was being dropped at the university she was attending. Then while working as a teaching assistant in college, she decided to pursue a license to become a SET adding,

> I still think about those OT things, you know? So, I incorporate some of that teaching and training that I did for myself in my current instruction…I still have a passion for (occupational therapy), but I feel like I know I'm useful in this role.

Over the past four years, Gnome balanced the demands of her job with the personal responsibilities of being a mother. "I was mom and teacher at the same time. That's when I started drinking coffee!" Having to return to work in-person before other work groups and frequently move her classroom with very little notice since returning, has caused a great deal of stress and even resulted in significant weight gain that affected her physically and emotionally and left her feeling like she wasn't "fully present" in any area of her life. Gnome started exercising, reading for pleasure, and taking dance classes as a form of self-care. After making these changes, her stress was reduced. Gnome reflected, "I try to exercise four or five days a week before work. Just something low impact just to get me up and moving. It puts me in a good headspace." She also made a point on January 1st of this past year to "start doing writing in my gratitude journal…I feel like I'm finding little things that kind of just make life a little more positive." To make self-care more convenient, she always keeps her journal with her "and I think that's the thing" she said that increases her use of this resource for support.

Shay

Shay is a 36-year-old White female with a master's degree who has been a special educator for six years. She currently instructs eighth-grade students who spend most of their day in general education classrooms and has 11 students on her caseload. Her journey into special education began as a "late bloomer," as she referred to herself, initially earning a bachelor's degree in history. Over the past four years, Shay has faced hurdles that drastically affected her teaching as well as her students' engagement. She reported personal struggles, health issues, and navigating wedding planning amidst pandemic restrictions that caused her a great deal of stress. Like many educators, Shay was also diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder during this time. Despite the challenges she faced, Shay embarked on a journey to improve her overall health and mental well-being, which eventually resulted in her losing 80 pounds. This personal achievement improved her health and helped to boost her self-esteem and mood.

Like many of her counterparts in this study, Shay reported valuing a strong relationship with her administrators. She added that she appreciates those who "take control of situations but also listen to their staff." Shay reported she believes it is important for administrators to have a background in special education so they "understand the process" and can help teachers plan and problem solve as well as advocate for their students. When reflecting on the past four years as a special education teacher Shay shared, "I'm so thankful that we're kind of back to normal in a sense, you know? I don't know, it was just very, very scary." Despite her positive outlook, Shawna also expressed frustration with recent political developments in education, including book banning and a lack of inclusivity in the classroom, as well as a shift toward more parental control in decision-making within education.

Eden

Eden is a 48-year-old Black female special education teacher who currently has 14

eighth-grade resource-level students on her caseload. She is an immigrant to the US who earned her master's degree in special education after getting a job as a teacher's assistant and having a meaningful experience while working with a student in that role. The student she was assigned to work with had significant disabilities and other staff had reported to her that he had made little to no growth in his communication skills. While in her role as an assistant, Eden saw this as a challenge and that year she was able to teach him a skill that he had previously been unable to learn. While her initial aspiration was to become a school psychologist, after that experience, she reported that things had changed for her. "For whatever reason, that student just inspired me, and I'm like, you know what? Even though it's just one skill, and we might look at it as one simple thing, but it was so impactful."

Eden also reflected on the past four years, considering COVID-19 and other large-scale racial and social injustice issues, which highlighted the multi-layered challenges faced by special educators, particularly those of color. Eden spoke to the burden of navigating remote teaching and addressing the needs of SWD in a social climate fraught with misinformation and hate, further complicated by her own personal journey of racial identity and understanding. During this time, Eden shared that she relied on her husband for comfort and described him as a "solid guy" who provides her with support. "He's kind of my rock where, you know, if there's anything going on, I can always rely on him." Eden shared that she and her husband often have "deep conversations" about racial and systemic issues. "If there's anything going on, I can always rely on him," she shared. Eden disclosed that she has become significantly more guarded, and her overall outlook has become more negative in the last four years than it ever was in the past. She expressed,

> I typically don't give people the benefit of the doubt. Umm, which was not my stance
>
> before the last four years, but that's kind of how I feel and I'm not gonna hide my feelings

about that. And it's something that I need to work on and but I'm not quite there yet. Eden shared that she is not yet in a place where she has been able to cope with these feelings effectively:

> but you know, I'm a Black woman working in a setting where on top of dealing with these economic things that are going on, and the social things that are going on, and you take a look at yourself and try be introspective and then question, "Am I really valued?"

Thea

Thea is a 30-year-old White woman who teaches kindergarten students with emotional disabilities. She has taught in a self-contained classroom for the past four years but has seven years of teaching experience overall. Thea started her career in a public day school for SWD that are so significant their needs cannot be met even in a self-contained classroom within a public school. After three years in that position, she transitioned to her current role in a self-contained special education program where she has seven students on her caseload and supervises two paraprofessionals. Despite increasing the support available for students in Thea's classroom, supervising paraprofessionals drastically increases her workload. Thea shared that she creates their schedules, meets with them daily, provides them with training and supervision, and evaluates their performance. While Thea is extremely grateful for their support, she stated that using the assistants in a meaningful way requires a great deal of planning each day.

Thea also reported that even now, as a tenured teacher, she has consistently worked a second, and sometimes a third, part-time job to help make ends meet since graduating from college due to student loans and the cost of continuing her own education. When asked about her path into special education, Thea shared that her mother was a special educator and several members of her extended family also work in the education field. Thea shared she feels new

teachers are sometimes made to feel like they are "expected to have everything figured out" adding this advice to new teachers: "Don't be afraid to start over and try something again…It's ok to make changes to your teaching and to be open to doing things differently than you had initially planned." Thea also shared that she is expecting her first child this year and recently finished her master's degree at Northern Illinois University. To help her cope with job-related stress, Thea attends yoga classes several times a week and enjoys spending quiet time at home with her husband and two cats.

Taylor

Taylor, a 37-year-old White female special educator with a master's degree, has dedicated 16 years to the field of special education. Her initial interest in this career path was sparked during her high school years when she encountered SWD during an exploratory class that allowed her to serve as a peer helper. This early exposure significantly influenced her career choice which underscores the impact these types of experiences can have on shaping young adults' vocational aspirations. Taylor now works in a high school and case manages nine ninth- through 12th-grade students. Taylor shared that she has faced persistent challenges in her role in the past four years. She noted that while the pandemic complicated her duties as a SET at the onset, it has also altered the nature of the challenges she continues to face four years later.

Taylor has noticed an increase in severe student behaviors and an overall decrease in respect students show teachers and administrators. Another trend she has observed to be more prevalent since the pandemic is advancing students to the next grade without adequate support. "We're starting to see a lot more lower functioning students that seem to have just been, like, passed down the pipeline," she explained. This trend not only increases the workload and stress levels of special educators but also complicates their roles. Taylor stated she feels staff in her

building "are a different breed" in that they are extremely collaborative and supportive of one another. She shared that the camaraderie among staff and the positive culture in her building play a critical role in helping her to manage the day-to-day challenges of her position. Because of these supports, Taylor shared she can "embrace flexibility, humor, and a positive outlook" when navigating the complexities of being a special educator at the high school level.

Results

While examining the experiences of SET participants who exhibit higher than expected retention rates, two major themes were identified (see Table 2). These themes included external supports with subthemes of (a) family support, (b) collegial support, (c) administrator support, (d) mental health support, and internal supports with subthemes of (a) purpose, (b) personal belief system, (c) coping skills, and (d) resilience. These themes were identified through a systematic analysis of data collected from individual interviews, a structured writing prompt, and artifact collection. Each theme and subtheme were shared with participants who were given the opportunity to provide feedback on these fully developed themes via member checking. The following themes and subthemes are related to the central research question and sub-questions related to the experiences of the K-12 SETs who participated in this study.

Theme Development

Table 2

Themes, Subthemes, and in Vivo Evidence

Theme	Subthemes	In Vivo Evidence
External Supports	Family Support	Family support, experience, family of teachers, support from my husband
	Collegial Support	Collaboration with colleagues, school community, friends, group conversations,

Theme	Subthemes	In Vivo Evidence
		socializing, fun, joy, work family
	Administrator Support	Admin support, positive relationship, mentorship, supportive leadership, more involved, special education experience
	Mental Health Support	Started seeing a therapist, Lexipro, depression diagnosis, exercise, meditation, yoga, prayer
Internal Supports	Purpose	My calling, passion, always knew I wanted to be a teacher, make a difference, positive impact, meaningful to me, love being a teacher
	Values and Beliefs	Always learning, asking questions, resource sharing, learning new technology, valuing personal growth, finding your niche, modeling being a good student
	Coping Skills	Adaptability, boundaries, make time for yourself, give yourself grace, not taking this personally, self-care, to-do lists, release from the week
	Resilience	Resilience, I won't ever quit, brand new start, embrace challenges, keep laughing, everyday is a new day, reset and refocus, challenges as opportunities, see things through no matter what, not done yet

External Supports

All of the SET participants shared they rely on external supports to help manage their stress. Megan manages stress and maintains emotional balance through social interactions with friends and family. "I decompress by running around...I spend time with family and friends. I need this to get through the day," she shared. The staff Shay works with "make her want to come to work every day." She asserted that having positive relationships with colleagues is fundamental

to job satisfaction:

> Building relationships, especially when you're working with someone every day, is really
> important. If you don't like hanging out as friends, you don't have to be friends. But if
> you're not, like, enjoying the presence of your coworkers, then it's not gonna help you
> enjoy what you're doing.

When asked about their professional experiences in the last four years, shared that the external support, encouragement, and assistance they received were not only helpful but essential to their well-being. Although each participant had their own unique experience, all stressed the importance of external supports in managing stress related to the complexity of their instructional responsibilities. As Gina emphasized, "Because no one understands what we do in our positions except us, right?" This statement highlights the need for multi-layered support systems for special educators to persist in their roles. Throughout each of the participant interviews, positive relationships with families and friends, supportive administrators and colleagues, access to mental health services and treatment, and professional development opportunities were reoccurring subthemes.

Family Support

Among the 16 SET participants interviewed, seven shared details about support they received from their spouses, parents, or other close family members over the last four years. Jessica, Dane, and Gina provided insights into how their parents, who were educators themselves, helped them to understand the demands of the job before entering the profession, and continue to support them in their roles today. Eden and Ruby also both have spouses who are educators and help them cope with the demands of their jobs. Eden discussed the benefit of having her husband to lean on for support. She described him as her "rock" and shared that during the pandemic and

other times of heightened racial and social conflict, they would often have deep conversations about history and race:

> My husband and I talked about it all the time because I'm not from here and he's from Chicago. And so, we kind of talk about the differences…the way we grew up and what makes his struggle kind of different from my struggle, even though we're both Black…Because when you look at me, you see a black woman. You don't see someone who's an immigrant who just didn't really get it, but now have to go and educate yourself because you know, I'm benefiting from some of the struggles that people in the past have gone through, you know, so someone who looks like me can be sitting here talking to you right now.

Ruby's husband is a special education administrator who provides her with a unique form of support due to his role and level of expertise in the field. Ruby shared, "I think I have a really unique situation in who my husband is and what he does... he's there to (provide support). So, I'm very fortunate in that."

Marcy, Megan, and Jen shared positive reflections on how their families not only support their careers but also contribute to their job satisfaction and personal well-being. Gnome stated she involves her children in helping her set up her classroom each year. This type of support instills a sense of ownership and participation in the career her mother has chosen while also easing her burden. Marcy highlighted her family's happiness contributes to her well-being at work "because when they're happy, I'm happy." In relaying her story, Taylor shared that she experiences mixed opinions from her family. "You get both ends of this spectrum... some people think, you know, you're a saint and you walk on water and then other people are like, why do you complain? You're fine. You get your summers off." These sentiments speak to the broad range of

perceptions held by individuals outside of the field of education, even among families that include educators.

When sharing her personal artifact of something that helps her to get through challenging days as a special educator, Melody probably said it best when sharing a picture of her family. Her husband, now a retired teacher, was in the photo, along with her two adult children. While sharing, Melody described her photo this way:

I married a little older man. That's OK, a couple years older than me, but he's done. So that's hard. Like, I get in the car to go to work, and like, he gets to stay and play golf and I get to go do this again, you know? Like, I keep doing this again and again, and I…I'm not…My work's not done. I know it's not done here. I know I need to finish but this keeps me going. That's the number one thing, my family, that keeps me going through the changes. Like special ed., I've been doing this forever.

Collegial Support

Teacher's relationships with their colleagues are another key factor that has been shown to increase SET retention rates (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). According to participants in this study, when asked about their professional experience in the last four years and their reasons for staying in their current positions, nine out of the 16 SETs highlighted the importance of collegial support. Several participants even referenced feeling like they found their "people" and "at home in sped." In her letter to a first-year teacher Gina advised

Everyone needs a support system. In the field of special education, it is a must. Our job is unique, and it is important to seek out other people who share it. I have found the most incredible, useful support from my special education colleagues.

Shay identified strong relationships with colleagues as a key factor to her job satisfaction and

even went on to share "I love the staff I work with." In her letter to a first-year teacher, Ruby's advice illuminated the significance of finding and nurturing collegial support when she shared

> Make friends! You are going to need people in your corner who understand exactly what happens in your classroom. Maybe it is the teacher right next to you, or maybe that teacher is across the building, but make connections with other adults…Get involved. Join committees. If you want change, it will not happen by complaining at your desk. Being involved sets you apart as a leader. Your voice will have more power and your influence will help your colleagues and students.

Strong relationships with staff and a supportive work environment were noted by Taylor in her interview as well. When sharing how she feels about support from colleagues she stated, "I do feel like the staff at (my school) is a different breed…we're very supportive of each other." Marcy added she values "collaboration with my colleagues and the team" and enjoys "problem-solving different situations" with them. Gnome reported that she and other members of her special education team meet as a small group, on their own time, to collaborate, problem solve, and share resources each week. She reflected that during those meetings:

> I feel like those conversations are more like the problem solving of how we're doing our jobs…I feel like I'm able to help others understand why we teach certain things, or how to enrich, or if the kids not are not getting it by the 2nd reinforcement lesson, come talk to me and we'll figure out how we can. So, I feel like, for me, it's sharing more of my knowledge and my understanding and my teaching with my other colleagues and that's been really beneficial.

SET participants also shared that spending time outside of work with colleagues has helped to build long-term relationships that keep them more connected and committed to their

school community. Eden shared in her interview that she has "formed a really good relationship with a group of support teachers…we developed this bond…We go out, and we meet, and we socialize." These experiences highlight the significance of collegial support in navigating the complex challenges SETs face each day.

Administrator Support

Throughout this study, SETs expressed strong opinions about administrator support for special educators. Lucky shared her need to work under leadership who "respects and listens to teacher opinions," while Marcy emphasized the importance of always coming prepared with solutions when approaching administration about special education related concerns. Shawna also shared:

> Building leadership is very important. You know, you need to have a strong person to not only take care of situations, but also listen to their staff and the many concerns that arise…I also think, if there's not an open forum to discuss changes, you know, you gotta have that relationship with them, so that's pretty important to me.

> Jen and Gina reflected on the closeness of their relationships with administrators in their building. Jen shared "being comfortable with your admin as a new teacher" is crucial, while Gina admitted "I really like my principal and vice principal…I feel like they give us a lot of grace and are very understanding." This flexibility is something SETs appreciate, given the demands of their jobs.

When asked about how they feel in their current work environment, all the participants in this study indicated they feel a sense of safety and security. A key predictor of adaptive coping patterns and resilience is a sense of personal safety at work (Herman et al., 2023). Slightly fewer (94.4%) reported feeling valued and appreciated and 88.9% reported feeling recognized and

respected (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Special Education Teachers' Responses to Psychosocial Environmental Questions
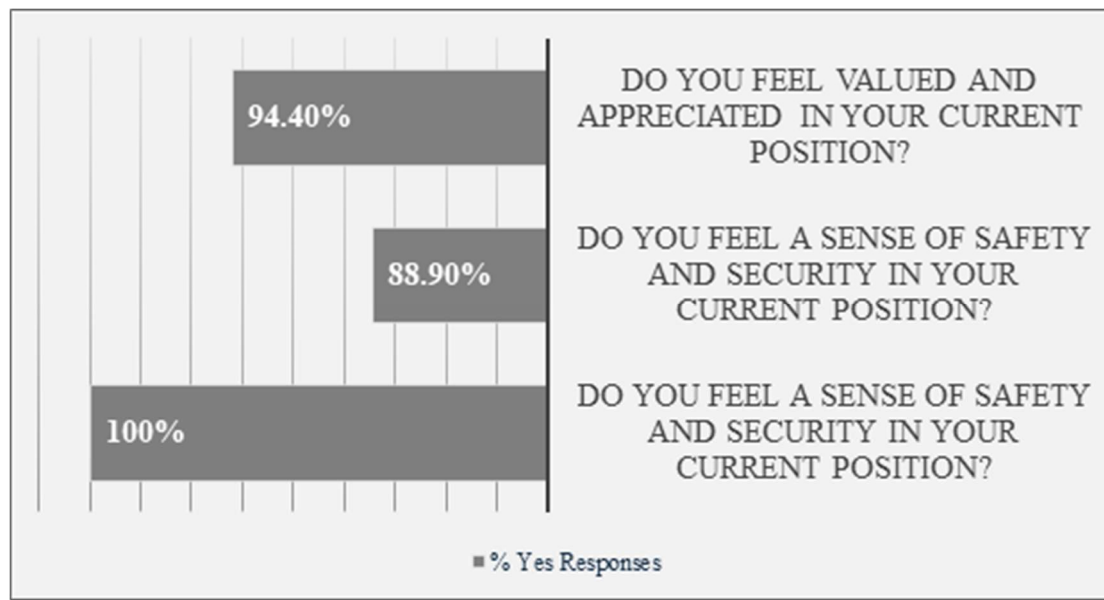
Prior studies have shown that unfair practices and expectations are major sources of stress for SETs (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023). According to Garwood (2023), SETs who perceived practices as unfair or inequitable in their building were also more likely to fall into a maladaptive pattern of stress and coping. Yet Bettini et al. (2020) found that administrators who actively supported SETs created a more positive working environment by sharing a vision for meeting the needs of all students. Administrators who involved teachers in decision-making showed concern for SETs and their students, which built trust and led to a school culture of collective responsibility for SWD.

Pearl conveyed in her letter to a first-year teacher the importance of establishing an open dialogue with administration. "Share how you're feeling so they know where you stand…If you don't say something, they may not know. It's helpful to have and ask for assistance. This does not show weakness." Shawna also noted the importance of having an administrator with a

background in special education to better support SETs and advocate for students' needs:

> I think it's important that the people who are in special education have a person that they can go to that knows what they're talking about and they're like, advocating for this kid for a reason. And that administrator with that background understands why they're doing it and there can be some type of plan put in place if there's something going on. Someone who understands the process, more or less. I think what we do is so specialized that you don't recognize or appreciate it until the person doesn't have it. And then you're, like, oh yeah, they don't really get it now, which is a bad thing. It's not anyone's fault. It just certainly helps.

Having strong administrative support contributes to teacher well-being, is a strong predictor of retention, and leads to improved outcomes for SWD (Herman et al., 2023). In this study, only one SET, Jessica, mentioned "dealing with a difficult situation" involving her building's administration. Remarkably, Jessica did not refer to the administration again throughout her interview, even when probed about her experiences as a SET over the past four years and professional support available in her building. This singular mention and absence of any further mention of her school leadership suggests an unwillingness to fully share her responses on this topic for reasons unknown and may be indicative of a more nuanced perspective.

Mental Health Support

Throughout the pandemic, SETs faced markedly greater amounts of work-related stress, when compared to those in general education (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2022; Rolf et al., 2023). Prolonged chronic stress, like that experienced by those in special education, positively correlates with psychologically leaving the work setting and physically leaving the teaching

profession altogether (Agyapong et al., 2022; Pressley et al., 2021). The similarities across these SET participants' stories lie in their awareness of the emotional toll a career in special education takes on an individual and the varied strategies used to cope with these challenges, resulting in mental health support emerging as an important subtheme of external supports within this study. One participant started taking Lexipro, a medication used to treat depression and anxiety. Others noted the start of "panic attacks," a new "mental health diagnosis," and the need to start "seeing a therapist." Their motivation for seeking outside support to help them cope with their feelings was as on participant shared, to "keep that sanity" or because they "never want my children to be exposed to that." Other strategies were noted such as re-engaging in journeys toward personal health, therapy, yoga, journaling, and meditation, which reflect a broader perspective of the various activities that can also benefit SETs' mental health.

Shay's mention of establishing care with a primary doctor suggests the importance of basic healthcare access as part of mental health support. "I was 300 pounds. I'm like, part of that group that's gonna die if I get (COVID)…so I finally got a primary doctor…because I do know that I stress eat, so I needed something to help curb my brain." In addition, Jen shared "I've accessed therapy on and off…and also done meditation" to increase her overall emotional wellbeing. For her personal artifact, Gina shared her journal that she received as a Christmas gift in 2019, three months before the pandemic. Her first entry was in 2020 where she wrote "shelter in place." Sifting through the pages, she then shared she wrote "fears and anxieties" then laughed when she got to her entry about the 2020 election and said,

> I have the election in here too, like when Biden won and then, like, between Trump and
> Biden, or whatever…It's interesting. When I die, someone's gonna have quite the
> historical artifact." Gina also shared in her interview that she supported her mental health

during the pandemic through not just journaling but also "going to church and praying a lot!

Accounts from Tasha, Gnome, and Marcy emphasized the interconnectedness of their emotional and physical health. Tasha shared that on her hardest days as a special educator, she looks forward to playing volleyball after school and plays softball in the summer, adding "physical activity for sure" helps "get her through." Gnome acknowledged the importance of a mind-body connection when she stated, "my emotional health wasn't good, which meant my physical health wasn't great…So now I exercise four or five days a week before work." In her interview, Marcy shared that physical activity is linked to her emotional well-being as well. As a self-contained ED elementary teacher, Marcy exemplified the Zones of Regulation framework when she shared how regular physical activity positively affects her mood each day (Kuypers, 2011): "The mornings that I don't work out, I'm always a yellow...I need this to get through my day."

These accounts collectively call attention to the critical role of mental health support in the reduction of stress and improved emotional well-being for SETs and their experiences truly showcased a range of external mental health supports. From medication to direct engagement with a therapist, to time outdoors engaging in physical activity, the impact of access to a wide range of layered mental health supports prove to be essential for SET retention and overall wellbeing based on these narratives.

Internal Supports

Drew and Sosnowski (2019) highlight the importance of internal support such as self-reflection and a sense of purpose in promoting SET retention. When asked what they thought others outside of the field of special education thought about them after spending the last four

years in education, SETs shared they felt "appreciated," "like a positive person," and that they were committed to something with "purpose" that was "meaningful." Admittedly, such praise was also met with acknowledgement of personality traits such as being "a positive person," "having tough skin," and "not giving up." Based on participant narratives, these qualities, sometimes referred to as internal supports, enabled SETs to overcome the ongoing and multilayered challenges have faced over the past four years and persevere in their roles despite extremely challenging circumstances.

Central to understanding this dynamic is the recognition that SETs access their internal supports when navigating the complex challenges of their roles. In vivo evidence from participants in this study, for example, included phrases like "Don't take life for granted," and "It's my calling," which reflect the deep-seated motivations and personal philosophies that have guided their commitment to teaching SWD. One participant reflected that despite the many changes and challenges experienced, these things helped to "rejuvenate those feelings again of why I went into the field."

Internal support plays a crucial role in how SETs manage stress and adversity (Fox & Walter, 2022). Several key factors emerged at the heart of this research study when it came to understanding the internal supports these SET participants accessed to help them cope with the daily demands of their roles over the past four years. When asked about their personal experiences, participants shared that having a strong sense of professional purpose, a deep commitment to the work, the ability to handle stress, and the strength to bounce back when faced with adversity have been essential to remaining in their jobs, and in some cases, remaining in the profession at all. For this study, these key factors have been developed into the following subthemes: purpose, personal belief system, coping skills, and resilience.

Professional Purpose

Having a sense of purpose emerged as a subtheme of internal support within this study through participant narratives, letters to first-year teachers, as well as personal artifacts. Discovering one's purpose in life is an important internal support that can contribute to adaptive coping strategies and overall well-being (Platsidou & Daniilidou, 2021). This is particularly crucial for teachers who frequently face stressors that, if not properly supported, could negatively impact their quality of life and job performance.

Dane's letter of advice to a first-year teacher not only exemplified this point but also conveyed the importance of remaining true to one's purpose. She advised that new SETs not be influenced by what others say and encouraged them to find meaning and a purpose if they are just starting out in the field and do not already have one:

> I know people have told you "You are an angel" or "Thank you for working with *those*
> kids," but you know those things aren't the reason you chose to go into the field of special
> education…Just remember not to lose YOU in your job.

Her advice speaks to the importance of first identifying a purpose and then effectively accessing it when needed to effectively "embrace challenges" within the educational environment.

It is also well documented that many special education teachers feel a faith-based "call to teach" SWD (Mullen et al., 2021). Gu and Day (2013) and Bennett et al. (2013) also identified a call to teach as a common attribute of veteran teachers who still felt passionate about their career. Gina, a participant in this study who has been in the field for more than 20 years now, grew up in a school where her mom was the librarian. When asked why she chose to become a special education teacher she joyfully responded, "I love being a teacher. It's my calling!" Gina also shared that after more than 20 years in the field of special education, she relies on her faith and a

"renewed sense of purpose" after returning to in-person learning in the fall of 2021.

For some participants, their sense of purpose was influenced not by a calling, but instead by early experiences in their own lives. Jessica shared her mom was a SET:

She did high school functional life skills…when we were younger, my sister and I used to go for bring your child to work day…And then as we got older…like high school and things like that, she started letting us get more involved with things with her students. So, we started going to like, Best Buddies events with her students, like prom, and things like that. And I just loved going to her class. I loved hanging out with her students, so that was it…The plan when I was younger was, I was going to be a special ed. teacher.

Others shared how the experience of being labelled as a child with a disability influenced them to become a SET and has given them a purpose to remain in the field. Lucky stated she was inspired "to make a difference" by her own struggles with dyslexia and continues to be influenced by the support she received in school to "make a difference every single day." Missy reported her "calling" to become a special education teacher was so she could make a difference in the lives of students facing challenges like what she experienced throughout her elementary and middle school years before being identified with a learning disability in high school. She shared, "That's why I try and tell these kids; it's gonna get better. You might not see it for a while, but everything will start to hopefully make sense."

Thea shared that she has relied on her sense of purpose for remaining in the field for seven years now, however, she did not express an early influence or personal experience that led to her decision. Instead, she has seemed to align her purpose with the deeper sense of personal responsibility she feels to serve as an advocate for more vulnerable populations. When asked why she wanted to become a special education teacher, Thea provided this reflection

I feel like I needed to, or I guess my purpose really, was to advocate for kids who don't

always have a voice. Where like, the kids with behavior disorders don't always look like

they have a disability, so people see them, or I guess, perceive them as 'typical' and

they're not. They need accommodations and supports, and they need somebody to

advocate on their behalf for what they need, so I feel like that's why I went into this field.

Dane got a bit emotional when she shared that "seeing the 'aha' moments and witnessing my

students overcome obstacles reminds me of my purpose and the reason I became a special

education teacher." Ruby also reflected on how she hopes her passion influences others who see

her working with her middle school SWD:

I love being in the classroom. I love being with kids. I love interacting and having fun all

day with them, and I don't just want others to be inspired by that--I want others to do that

as well.

Despite the varying pathways into special education, these participants' stories reflect a deep

sense of purpose and passion for working with students with special needs.

For other participants like Jacob, Shay, and Tasha, however, it may have been an absence

of purpose that eventually led them to a career in special education. During their personal

interviews, these three SETs each acknowledged feeling "lost" after graduating from college with

a degree in another field and struggling to find a job. When faced without any other prospects,

Jacob and Tasha were encouraged by someone they knew to apply for a position as a

paraprofessional. It was during that time that each of them felt they had found their purpose,

which then led to their pursuit of a master's degree in special education and a "brand new start"

for them as SET. Tasha, a self-described "late bloomer," on the other hand, first took a position as

a nanny which then led her to work at a summer camp as an inclusion aide. In this role, Shay's

interest in working with SWD was sparked as she describes her purpose:

> I just felt like I had kind of a strength per se, and just giving these kids that didn't really fit
> on or have a chance, to just have that light shine on them, because I just liked being social
> with all the kids…I'm trying to just keep them engaged…and especially in middle school.
> I've been doing this now for six years and I just, like, see that change in them and it's
> definitely been a great learning experience for me as well!

Personal Belief System

According to Saldaña (2021) values are "the principles, moral codes, and situational norms people live by" (p. 168) and attitudes are the way we think and feel about ourselves and others. These values and attitudes, when combined with personal knowledge, experiences, assumptions, biases, and perceptions make up one's belief system. Understanding the components of one's belief system is crucial for personal growth and development, as well as for building effective relationships with others.

SET participants shared how their values, attitudes, and beliefs shaped their lived experiences over the last four years in each of data collection methods used in this study. When categorizing SET response data according to values, attitudes, and beliefs, the three constructs represent an interconnected system of supports (see Figure 7). In their letters of advice to first-year teachers, nearly all SET participants emphasized healthy work-life balance and professional boundaries as a core belief. Tasha wrote, "If you must take work home (which will happen from time to time), designate a time frame for you to work on only that. When you're done, be done." Missy added, "Most importantly, find balance between your work life and outside life. Take breaks during your plan period and get out of the teacher's lounge for lunch."

Figure 7

Elements of Special Education Teachers' Personal Belief System
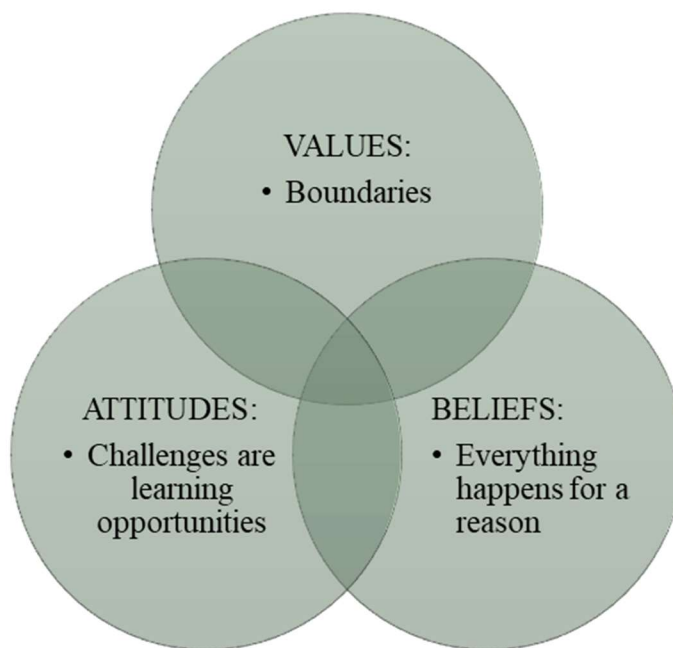
Each participating special educator also demonstrated a personal belief in the importance of pursuing additional coursework, engaging in collaborative learning communities, and adapting to the challenges of new educational technologies and methodologies that were presented in the last four years. Lucky articulated this by stating, "I've never stopped learning and most of what I pick up always has to do with sped." Also of note, all but one of the 16 participants in this study have earned at least one master's degree, and the only participant who has not yet achieved this milestone is extremely close to completion of her advanced degree as well.

Stories shared by SETs also highlight a belief that learning is more than simply earning more degrees. Gnome's approach to continued learning was more multi-faceted and driven by personal and professional interests as she reported she enjoyed "doing book studies with some of my colleagues" but also seeking out coursework for additional teaching licenses adding "I did my ESL endorsement...and then when that Wilson certification came out, I jumped on that too."

Reflexive notes from this interview recorded feelings of extreme joy, as evidenced by the broad smile shared when Gnome stated she sees "challenges as opportunities" and "there's always a learning curve." Yet with each hurdle she faced in her position over the past four years, Gnome shared she also believes that "everything happens for a reason" and that the pandemic also provided her with many opportunities for "a brand new start," demonstrating the critical role of a well-defined personal belief system in navigating the challenges and opportunities of the special education teaching profession.

Coping Skills

The effective use of internal coping skills was identified as a critical subtheme with SET participants in this study as well. While personal experiences and demands varied, participants cited the need to "just sit back and do something for me," "prioritize," or "chunk(ing) the calendar" when they became overwhelmed or needed a break from the stress of their jobs and homelives. SETs in this study who exhibited a more a positive disposition talked about how they tried to see the "silver lining" in challenging situations or focus on things that were going well, such as improved parent relationships, rather than on everything about their job that was "just hard." Taylor shared in her interview that she has learned how to cope with her personal and professional demands and not "take things seriously. Just laugh. Any chance you can... I've learned flexibility and how to be able to kind of just go with the flow."

Participants in this study also expressed both the need to establish work-life balance as well as the struggle to maintain it, given the demanding nature of their professional workload. Many noted their workloads have increased tremendously in the past four years, which, in turn, has increased their personal and professional stress levels. In her letter to a first-year SET, Marcy wrote, "Work is important but it's not everything. It can be so difficult to shut things off,

especially when there is a difficult or stressful situation at school, but it is important to compartmentalize your life, so you don't get burnt out." Dane and Taylor share a common strategy for delineating between work and their personal lives as they both shared, they have made a deliberate effort to leave their professional responsibilities at school, as challenging as that is at times. This boundary was echoed in Jessica's decision to keep her work email off her personal phone, a move that emphasizes the need to mentally disengage from work to preserve one's personal well-being.

Participants also highlighted the different ways SETs intentionally disengage from their professional lives as a way of coping with the stress of their profession. Missy advised first-year SETs in her letter to find time to "take breaks during your plan and get out of the teacher's lounge for lunch." Eden and Thea also introduced the perspective of managing expectations and finding joy in quiet moments. Thea cautioned against the pitfalls of social media comparisons between districts, programs, or classrooms which also offered unique insight into the mental and emotional strategies SETs may use to safeguard their emotional well-being during personal time and complement the physical boundaries between work and home.

Shay and Ruby shared experiences that added yet another layer to the conversation about work-life balance. They endured family obligations and financial pressures that made it extremely difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Ruby navigated the stress of pregnancy and childbirth twice in the last four years and even now continues to work full time with three small children. In the last four years, Shay also was forced to juggle multiple jobs in addition to her full-time job as a teacher just to "make ends meet." While work-life balance is a strategy they both believe in, achieving it amid major life events or financial challenges has been extremely difficult for them. Their scenarios reveal pressures outside of work that can also complicate the

pursuit of work-life balance for SETs. Due to these increased pressures, Ruby described a need for taking time to disassociate from both her personal and professional lives to practice self-care to cope. She reported taking time to herself to help disconnect from everything when that is truly needed. "I disassociate through reading... it's my way where I'm like, I can't do it anymore. I need to just sit back and do something for me, and then I read."

While the struggle for work-life balance was a shared theme among the majority of the special educators who participated in this study, how each of the SETs reported achieving it was somewhat varied. The commonalities lie in first recognizing the need, establishing boundaries, and prioritizing self-care. The differences, however, are a result of personal circumstances and preferences that inform each SET's approach to navigating the demands of their personal and professional lives in a way that meets each person's individualized need.

Resilience

Resilience refers to one's ability to cope with and bounce back from adversity and is based on the premise that a person's resilience is influenced by their personal factors, such as their biological and psychological makeup, as well as their interactions with the social contexts in which they function (Mansfield, 2021). SETs consistently described experiences that were shaped by ongoing changes in the education system, evolving student needs, and personal challenges that have occurred over the past four years. A common thread was noted related to the necessity for resilience, particularly in participants' letters of advice to first year teachers. Pearl, a veteran teacher who is retiring at the end of this school year, wrote:

> Every day is a NEW day in this field. You could be smooth sailing and everything is going into place, then WHAM, behaviors go out of whack, kids fall apart that were totally put together the day before, the fantastic lesson you taught yesterday is forgotten…and you

find yourself scratching your head asking "what just happened!!" and then you re-do or recreate a new way to present the material to them over and over again…Don't give up! Tomorrow is a new day, and you get to reset your work, yourself, and you get to try again!!!

Dane's narrative also highlighted the support resilience has provided when she shared, "Despite the challenges, and sometimes feeling undervalued, I persist because I see the impact of my work on my students' growth and well-being." Her reflection highlights an internal drive to persist for the benefit of her students, which is a concept that was echoed across various accounts in this study.

The transition to virtual learning, as described by Jessica, also underscored resilience as a dynamic process of adjusting to unprecedented changes: "Everything that's happened has made me more resilient and contributed to my growth as a teacher." Lucky shared that "it's just become easier to adapt to challenges" over the past four years and Marcy added, "Every year I get to feel like a new teacher. I like challenges, so I think that keeps me going." Pearl reflected on her resilience and post-traumatic growth that has occurred as a result of her experience over the last four years: "I'm not the same teacher I was 25 years ago, and I've even said to my parents, and to the people I work with here, that I'm in the prime of my teaching right now." Her story also reflects a broader narrative of educators nationwide who navigated the complexities of remote teaching while also balancing professional and personal challenges.

In summary, these narratives collectively underscore resilience among educators as a complex interplay of persistence, adaptability, and a deep-seated commitment to their students. Their willingness to embrace a "brand new start" and "challenges as opportunities" illustrate how SET participants have persisted in their roles by exhibiting tremendous resilience. Despite the

diverse challenges faced, from the transition to virtual learning to personal reckonings with professional identity, these educators exhibited a shared resilience characterized by unwavering dedication and a capacity to thrive amidst adversity.

<div align="center">**Research Question Responses**</div>

Throughout this study, I aimed to understand the lived experiences of K-12 SETs who have demonstrated professional longevity and persisted in their current positions for more than four years. A review and analysis of triangulated data was interpreted using a deep exploration of the identified themes to develop a cohesive narrative of the participants' experiences that have enabled them to remain in their positions for the past four years or more. These narratives highlight aspects of experiences that had the greatest impact on the SET participants, as evidenced by their responses to the research questions that guided this study.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years? This study examined the experiences of K-12 SETs and provides valuable insights into the various personal, professional, and cultural factors that contribute to their resilience and commitment to their profession despite significant challenges. Having a strong sense of purpose and a positive mental outlook played a crucial role in bolstering SET participants' morale and persistence over the last four years, however, universally shared experiences related to inequality and misperceptions about their roles were also persistent.

Many SETs reflected on experiences related to how special education students and staff are viewed and treated by others in their own buildings. Some reported feeling their classrooms are treated as a "dumping ground" and that SWD are often seen as "problematic" or are blamed

for issues such as "poor behavior and low-test scores." A sense of isolation was reported across interviews as "nobody else experiences" the elevated levels of stress SETs face each day. Participants Lucky and Missy shared they both feel "isolated" within their own school community and Gnome, Jessica, Jen, Shay, and Eden shared experiences of being asked to do things that would never be asked of their general educator counterparts such as "returning to in person learning before anyone else" or "move my classroom 11 times in the last 17 years, and sometimes, with less than one day's notice."

Despite these challenges, SETs also shared personal experiences that were deeply rooted in their sense of purpose and dedication to their profession. SETs like Sal, Gina, Jessica, and Megan shared their decision to become a special educator was "a calling" while others' experiences stemmed from a personal connection to someone with a disability, the influence of family members in education, or their own successes following experiences of perceived failure. SETs reliance on personal coping skills such as "always maintaining a positive outlook" or learning "not to take things personally" helped serve as a buffer against the heightened stress associated with their roles over the past four years. In her reflection related to challenges she experiences in her building Marcy shared, "people are learning, and I might as well be a part of the change." Jessica added, "If I can do this, I can do anything."

Sub-question One

What are the personal experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years? Personal experiences of K-12 SETs reveal a dedication to overcoming professional and personal hurdles, with many driven by a sense of purpose stemming from past experiences with their own disabilities, like Missy and Lucky, or close family connections that inspired them to pursue a career in special education like seven of

the sixteen participants whose parents or spouses are also educators. Dane, Gina, Thea, and

Jessica reported the "positive impact" of "family support" as well as "being recognized" and "reinforced" for their skills upon entering the field. Each of the remaining participants experienced an "inspirational moment" in high school when given the opportunity to support a student with disabilities in a meaningful way that led to pursuing a degree in special education right out of high school or they "didn't actually plan on being a special education teacher" but struggled to find a job in their field of study after college and accepted a job as a special education paraprofessional that served as their "aha moment" and eventually led to them continuing their education to earn a license to teach SWD.

Sub-question Two

What are the professional experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years? Professionally, these teachers adapted to the evolving demands of their roles, from the shift to online and hybrid learning environments to addressing the increased complexities of student needs such as "managing behavior" when they returned. SETs also experienced "ongoing change," "felt isolated" and "like a punching bag" which led to at least three SETs being diagnosed with a mental health condition, two re-engaging outside therapy, and one prescribed medication as a result. Gnome was asked to move classrooms multiple times "on her own time" and "with little to no warning" and Pearl described "feeling sidelined" and "struggling to maintain" her role effectively in a virtual environment. Despite these challenges, all but one of the 16 SET participants stated they benefited from a building administrator who was a "supportive leader" and noted a need for building leadership that "recognizes the specialized nature" of SET positions, provides a "flexible" and supportive workplace, and "understands the legal guidelines" that govern the

special education process.

Sub-question Three

What are the experiences with public perceptions of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years? All but two participants reported feeling recognized and respected in their current position, and all but one SET reported feeling valued and appreciated in their current position, yet during personal interviews, most SET participants reported receiving mixed feedback from those outside of education. Statements such as "you're an angel" or "there's a special place in heaven for people like you" coupled with statements that hold a more negative tone such as "I wouldn't want to do your job" or "it must be nice to enjoy your summers off" were shared by SETs. Jessica tries not to take the negative comments too personally and feels "social media" has contributed to the public's "negative views" of teachers. Gina felt that "they think they know what you do because they went to school, but they have no idea." Receiving praise and "appreciation from parents" feels like an "acknowledgement" and "makes me happier to do what I'm doing."

Sub-question Four

What are the overall cultural experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years? All but five participants shared they were "not personally" impacted by racial and political issues that have occurred across the country in the past four years with Gina "vaguely" remembering something "gang related" happening downtown in a neighboring community and Gnome being "called a racist" by a student. All 16 participants reported feeling a sense of safety and security in their current position and three participants, Thea, Eden, and Tasha shared personal experiences related to their culture or the culture of others close to them that impacted them tremendously at this time and added yet

another layer of stress and challenge to their experiences.

Summary

All participants agreed that internal and external supports were a necessary part of their experience while persisting within their role as a K-12 SET over the past four years. External supports, encompassing positive relationships with families, colleagues, administrators, and access to mental health services emerged as vital in managing the heightened job-related stress SETs faced during this period. Notably, the strong emphasis on colleague and administrator support underscores the importance of a supportive work environment in enhancing job satisfaction and mitigating the challenges associated with the demands of teaching in the field of special education.

SET participants who have persisted in their positions also relied upon internal supports such as having a profound sense of purpose, effective coping skills, and resilience to navigate the complex landscape of their roles during a period marked by unprecedented challenges. This study highlights the significance of these internal supports in overcoming the adversities faced over the past four years, with a particular focus on adapting to change, maintaining emotional well-being, and persisting in their commitment to teaching SWD. Despite the wide array of internal and external support systems described by SETs in this study, the persistent stress, and repercussions on their mental and physical health spotlight the need for comprehensive support strategies for SETs who are committed to serving our most vulnerable population of students.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative study was to examine the experiences of K-12 SETs who have demonstrated professional longevity and persisted in their current positions for more than four years. The purpose of this chapter is to summarize my research and provide the reader with my interpretation of the findings. This section consists of five discussion subsections: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research. Chapter Five concludes with a comprehensive summary of the research study.

Discussion

This section presents the theoretical findings that emerged from this study in relation to the established themes and subthemes, drawing on both the research completed in Chapter Two and the current study. This approach highlights the nuanced process of qualitative analysis, where researchers must continually refine interpretations to comprehensively capture the essence of the subject matter (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Findings from this research were based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's PPCT bioecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This theoretical framework bears significant relevance to SET retention, as it provides further evidence of how factors at multiple levels can positively or negatively impact teacher burnout and attrition (Hertler et al., 2018). Two central themes were identified in this study with four sub-themes emerging from each theme. The first theme, external supports, included sub-themes of family support, collegial support, administrator support, and mental health support. The second theme, internal supports, also included the sub-themes related to professional purpose, personal belief system, coping skills, and resilience. This section also includes a discussion of the

interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of K-12 SETs who have persisted in their current positions for four or more years. SETs' experiences were examined using a Special Education Teacher Demographic & Work Experience Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, a collection of artifacts, and a writing sample. To attain data saturation and understand K-12 SET experiences, 16 participants were identified by the researcher's contacts and accepted an invitation to participate.

Following data collection and analysis, two main themes, each with four sub-themes, emerged. The main themes contributing to SET retention found in this study were internal and external supports with sub-themes that included family support, collegial support, administrative support, mental health support, professional purpose, personal belief system, coping skills, and resilience.

Despite well-documented challenges within the field of special education, findings from this study allow for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of SETs who exhibit higher than expected retention rates, particularly in times of increased workload, stress, and uncertainty, as was the case over the last four years. Herman et al. (2023) noted that starting in 2020, many SETs began reporting increased levels of stress and burnout, which are known precursors to attrition. Research has also consistently shown that during the pandemic SETs faced considerably higher levels of job-related stress when compared to their general education counterparts (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Powell et.al., 2022; Rolf et al., 2023). Findings from this study indicate an urgent need to recognize the significant demands associated with the role of SETs in a K-12

public school setting while also placing emphasis on the need for ongoing multidimensional support systems to assist SETs in effectively mitigating the impact of these demands in order to persist in their roles beyond the three to five year average (Bettini et al., 2019; Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020).

Summary of Thematic Findings

This study examined the experiences of K-12 SETs who demonstrate higher than expected rates of retention through a thematic analysis. Participants shared their lived experiences over the past four years and an analysis of the data from this study revealed two primary themes: external and internal supports, each with significant subthemes. External support encompasses a variety of factors, including the role of family, colleagues, administrators, and mental health support. Internal supports, on the other hand, include having a sense of purpose, personal belief systems, effective coping skills, and resilience, which enable SETs to navigate the challenges and complexities of their roles. These factors played a critical role in SETs effectively manage the stress and demands associated with teaching SWD, while also promoting mental, emotional, and physical well-being, and enhancing job satisfaction.

Through their narratives, SETs provided insights into the challenges and rewards associated with their profession. Many expressed struggles with balancing the demanding nature of their workloads with personal life responsibilities but identified a variety of strategies used to provide support including not putting their work email on their personal phone, not responding to emails outside of work hours, and intentionally leaving their computer at work. Internal characteristics of SETs themselves also played a part in their ability to persist in their roles. SET participants stated that maintaining a positive outlook on life, prioritizing emotional well-being, and being adaptable and flexible, contributed to their ability to navigate the heightened levels of

stress and complex challenges they continually face.

Equity and Fairness: We Still Have a Long Way to Go

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2023), over 14% of all public-school students, receive special education services in the US. This figure represents an increase of nearly 2.5 million more students receiving special education services than the 1990–91 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Additionally, SETs have more recently faced increased pressures driven by shifting demographics and increased needs within the overall K-12 student population, including increased cultural and linguistic diversity, changes in family structure, increased poverty, and challenges related to the physical and mental health of SWD (Kors, 2022).

The chronic stress experienced by SETs due to excessive workload and systemic pressures has been shown to decrease job satisfaction and pose a risk to physical and mental well-being (Maslach, 1986; Aznar et al., 2006; Seo et al., 2017). Participants in this study specifically noted the start of "panic attacks," new mental health diagnoses, and the need to start "seeing a therapist" in the past four years due to job-related stress. Their motivation for seeking outside support to help them cope with their feelings was, as one participant shared, to maintain "sanity" during a time of great stress and uncertainty. Access to outside supports and the utilization of internal supports derived from their sense of purpose, personal beliefs, coping skills and resilience were essential to managing stress and preventing burnout for SET participants. Studies have shown that educators who maintain an optimistic outlook and employ healthy coping strategies are better able to manage the demands of their roles, thereby enhancing their overall job satisfaction and resilience (Bonanno, 2004; Fox & Walter, 2022; Herman et al., 2023).

In addition to these challenges, participants in this study shared experiences over the last four years related to struggles for respect, recognition, support, and the broader fight for equality

within their own school communities. While each of them reported to share a great appreciation for their colleagues, administrators, and school community, they also shared that at times they have been made to feel like a "second class citizen," "disregarded," or "unappreciated" in the workplace. Several participants reported feeling like their job "isn't seen as important as gen. ed." because as one SET put it, "it's ok for our classroom, schedule, or students to be impacted in ways that other gen. ed. teachers or students would never be expected to do" such as return to in person instruction long before their general education counterparts, for example. From a social context, the value and contributions of SETs are overlooked, misunderstood, or underestimated, which unfortunately mirrors the challenges SWD have also historically faced (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2018).

Herman et al. (2023) and Ghasemi et al. (2023) found that SETs face significantly higher rates of burnout due to professional isolation, increased stress, and insufficient support. When framing these challenges as they relate to inequality, it becomes evident that SET resilience is essential to retention. The literature and findings from this study both suggest that fostering an environment that prioritizes the development of internal supports while also providing access to external supports for SETs is crucial to enhancing job satisfaction and emotional well-being which are factors both known to prevent burnout. Such an environment not only recognizes the unique challenges faced by SETs but also celebrates their contributions to creating an inclusive educational environment for SWD (Cancio et al., 2013; Albrecht et al., 2009).

In advocating for SET equality within K-12 public schools, it is essential to highlight the interdependence between the well-being of educators and the success of their students. The thriving nature of SETs, despite ongoing challenges, is indicative of their resilience and passion for their work. Gina expressed optimistically, "Despite facing challenges and occasionally feeling

undervalued, I persist because of the tangible impact I observe in my students' growth and well-being," underscoring why she has continued to thrive in her role. Supportive relationships, administrative understanding, and a culture that values the contributions and obligations of special education are fundamental in ensuring that SETs can continue to thrive and make a significant impact on their students' lives.

Despite these challenges, the resilience and dedication demonstrated by participants in this study shows their personal commitment to overcoming systemic barriers. This would not have been possible, however, without access to a full constellation of internal and external support. As Bartolomeo (2022) posited, there isn't a teacher shortage, but instead, a shortage of desirable working conditions and equitable pay for what is arguably one of the hardest and most important jobs in the world. This study and others before it demonstrate that because this sentiment significantly impacts SETs' job satisfaction and mental health when they are made to feel undervalued within the broader educational community (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023). Continuing to advocate for SWD despite the challenges in their own profession reflects SETs' profound alignment with principles of equity and inclusion. SETs in this study as well as other studies also emphasized that administrators who actively support SETs create a more positive working environment by showing concern for SETs and their students, which builds trust and leads to a school culture of collective responsibility for SWD (Bettini et al., 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020).

Maintaining Balance and Boundaries

The struggle to maintain work-life balance and boundaries amid the demanding nature of SET roles is a consistent theme in the literature with many SETs noting an increase in workload and stress levels in recent years (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Kush et al., 2022; Murangi et al.,

2022). Achieving work-life balance for special educators is not just a personal challenge but a critical factor that influences retention and resilience in the profession (Apyapong et al., 2022; Bettini et al., 2020; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Pressley et al., 2021) and was noted by participants in this study as well. In her letter of advice to a first-year SET Marcy shared:

> Work is important but it's not everything. It can be so difficult to shut things off, especially when there is a difficult or stressful situation at school, but it is important to compartmentalize your life, so you don't get burnt out.

When asked about personal experiences that have helped her to persist, Ruby shared that she also chooses to "disassociate through reading...it's my way where I'm like, I can't do it anymore. I need to just sit back and do something for me" The narratives shared by SETs in this study revealed a deep connection between the demands of the profession and the toll it takes on their personal lives as well as the need for balance and boundaries between work and home.

The communal aspect of SETs maintaining work-life balance using coping skills and resilience traits were illuminated in this study through shared experiences with colleagues, family, mental health professionals, and friends. A shared support system is crucial for fostering an environment where educators feel empowered to seek help without fear of judgment or professional repercussions (Downing, 2017). SETs shared stress related to caring for their families, addressing mental health needs, or financial challenges over the last four years, which demonstrates the need for a comprehensive support system that extends beyond just the initial phases of a SET's career. Even more veteran SETs in this study shared that mentoring, continued professional development, and support are needed in their roles as they continue to adapt to the evolving challenges presented throughout various stages of life and their career.

To maintain balance and manage stress, SETs in this study reported using strategies such

as "chunking" their calendars, prioritizing self-care, and establishing boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Dane shared, "I prioritize my mental health by practicing mindfulness and seeking professional help when needed." SET participants also shared strategies they used for maintaining work-life balance such as keeping work emails off personal devices and making a concerted effort to leave work at school. These practices also reflect a proactive approach to maintaining mental health and job satisfaction (Herman et al., 2023; Ghasemi et al., 2022).

The importance of setting boundaries and managing expectations to maintain emotional well-being was emphasized by Belser and Prescod (2021) and was further underscored by SET participants in this study through their advice to "take breaks" and "find joy in quiet moments," and "avoiding the pitfalls of social media comparisons that can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or stress." The experiences of SETs shared in this study illuminate the complex challenges they face to maintain a healthy work-life balance but also demonstrate its necessity for promoting retention in the field of special education. The coping mechanisms and strategies used by SETs in this study to navigate the complex nature of their professional and personal lives contributes to a broader understanding of the ongoing need for ongoing, systemic support to maintain work-life balance and overall emotional health.

Special Education Teacher Resilience

Resilience is the ability to maintain competent functioning in the face of significant adversity (Kaplan et al., 1996, p. 158). Research highlights that resilience is not merely an inherent trait, but a dynamic process influenced by internal as well as external factors (Masten et al., 2021). Drew and Sosnowski (2019) highlight the importance of internal factors such as self-reflection, social support, and a sense of purpose in promoting SET resilience. Resilience is not

just one trait but an ongoing process of transactions between time, person, experiences, and context.

The concept of resilience encompasses individual and ecological aspects, suggesting that fostering resilience involves enhancing personal strengths and mitigating risk factors within a nurturing social and professional context (Beltman, et al., 2011; Kuldas & Foody, 2021). Throughout this study, SETs consistently described experiences that were shaped by ongoing changes, evolving student needs, and personal challenges that have occurred over the past four years. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of resilience, showing that personal resources and support networks are invaluable for overcoming challenges. Throughout their personal interviews, SETs shared that over the past four years, they have been willing to embrace a "brand new start" and see "challenges as opportunities" demonstrating how they have been able to persist in their roles by exhibiting tremendous resilience.

Masten (2014) concluded that the "processes that lead to resilience clearly involve many systems within the individual as well as many systems outside the individual" (p. 170). As these multiple systems and contexts continually interact with one another, resilience is displayed through individual characteristics, strategies, or processes used to navigate personal well-being, professional growth, and commitment to the profession (Mansfield, 2021). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of resilience as a desired skill or personal characteristic for SETs cannot be overstated. Resilience was noted as a common thread in SET participants' letters of advice to first year teachers. According to Mansfield et al. (2016), the development of resilience should be an emphasis in special education teacher preparation programs to prepare pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and support systems to cope with challenges and thrive in the profession.

As Aiello et al. (2023) and Masten et al. (2021) noted, while disasters can often overwhelm a system, they can also mobilize more positive responses and lead to collective growth within a community. While the pandemic complicated and disrupted how schools did business for more than four years, it also provided special educators with an opportunity for individual and collective growth as resilience emerged as a desirable and indispensable asset (Masten et al., 2021). Pearl described her post-traumatic growth as a special educator in the following way: "I'm not the same teacher I was 25 years ago, and I've even said to my parents and to the people I work with here that I'm in the best prime of my teaching right now."

The crisis in teacher retention has sparked significant discussion on the necessity for educators to enhance their resilience, which implies that the burden of adaptation rests solely with the teachers themselves (Wheaton, 2022). Yet, Oldfield and Ainsworth (2021), advocate for a social-ecological perspective that acknowledges the role of environmental factors in the development of resilience. According to Mansfield et al. (2016), supportive collegial relationships are essential to developing and sustaining teacher resilience. SET participant Lucky shared in her personal interview that in the last four years, she "has been really open and I have been transparent... it's just become easier to adapt to challenges." Jen also shared, "You just learn to prioritize, and you just learn what not to stress about...I can only control what I can control in this period of time."

The retention and resilience of SETs are intricately linked. Retaining SETs in the field requires an understanding of resilience as a multifaceted construct influenced by personal characteristics, environmental interactions, contextual factors, and dimensions of time, all of which significantly impact SETs' capacity to thrive amidst challenges (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). By focusing on resilience through on-going, multi-layered support systems, SETs can

better navigate the complexities of their roles, ultimately contributing to their well-being,

professional satisfaction, as well as educational outcomes for SWD. SET participant experiences

shared throughout the course of this study reveal collective and individual growth and highlight

resilience as an essential attribute for adapting to challenges and maintaining a commitment to

students' growth and well-being. Dane shared, "Despite the challenges and sometimes feeling

undervalued, I persist because I see the impact of my work on my students' growth and well-

being."

<div align="center">**Implications for Policy and Practice**</div>

This section offers recommendations for educational policies and practices based on the

findings of this study, while also considering the conclusions drawn from similar studies

conducted by other researchers. The primary objective of this study was to inform and influence

policy and practice at local, state, and federal levels to increase SET retention and improve

outcomes for SWD. By shedding light on the critical factors contributing to SET retention, these

findings offer insights for policymakers as well as those serving in administrative or leadership

positions in schools and school districts.

Implications for Policy

This section includes recommendations for potential policy changes and initiatives based

on the findings of this study as well as other relevant research related to SET retention. These

recommendations are intended to offer educational policymakers with relevant findings to inform

future decision-making and improve outcomes for SWD.

Funding

The disparity between a teacher's salary and the salaries of college-educated nonteaching

peers, has been tracked for many years and the Economic Policy Institute 2020 analysis found

that teachers earn about 20% less than non-teacher college-educated peers, and after adjusting for inflation, the average teacher salary was 4.3% lower in 2017–2018 than in 2009–2010 (Economic Policy Institute, 2022). Darling-Hammond (2019) and Billingsley et al. (2022) argue that increasing salaries helps to retain SETs. Not only does teacher compensation increase retention, but it also impacts working conditions and morale (Mullen et al., 2021). In a study conducted by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), 16% of special educators who left the field indicated a higher salary as their reason for leaving. None of the participants in this study expressed any intent to leave their job for a higher-paying district, further demonstrating the increased financial security well-paying districts can provide to their teachers.

Increased funding could also provide more of an incentive for individuals to go into the field of special education thereby increasing the applicant pool for hard to fill positions. SET participants in this study shared several different ways financial incentives influenced their decision to enter the field of special education. Gina shared that she chose to major in special education out of high school because of her father's mistaken assumption that in the field of special education earned a higher salary compared to what general education teachers were paid. In her final year of high school, Pearl was still uncertain about how she would pay for college because her parents were divorced. At her guidance counselor's urging, she applied for and was awarded an Illinois State Special Education Tuition waiver that opened the door to her eventual 31-year long career in the field.

The disparity in compensation between teachers and their college-educated non-teaching counterparts has been a longstanding issue (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). This study provides further evidence that financial compensation influences SET retention. Policymakers must therefore consider ways to increase and/or differentiate SET compensation to attract more

individuals to the field and address current shortages. It is crucial to consider increased funding to ensure a variety of financial incentives as a means to boost the number of qualified candidates entering the profession as well. Taking these steps would help to effectively address the current shortage of SETs, while also helping to ensure the increase of a qualified SET applicant pool.

Legal Mandates

Historically, legal mandates such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), No Child Left Behind (2001), and IDEA (U.S. Congress, 2004) have prioritized SWDs' access to general education curricula within the LRE. These mandates have also contributed to significant increases in SET workloads. Nance and Calabrese (2009) and Billingsley (2020) noted that increased legal requirements and accountability measures to track the educational environment, service delivery, and evidence of student progress have drastically increased instructional and case management responsibilities for SETs. A supply of high-quality teachers is essential to the success of the nation's education system (U.S. Department of Education, 2022); however, there has been a steady decline in individuals interested in special education careers, exacerbated by policymakers' pandemic response that put teachers at risk and underscored the lack of public respect for the teaching profession (Bill et al., 2022). Considering these challenges, policymakers must carefully consider the implications of their decisions on teacher workloads, working conditions, and the overall attractiveness of the teaching profession to ensure a sufficient supply of high-quality SETs.

Implications for Practice

This section highlights a number of practical considerations and recommendations for schools, districts, and educators to improve SET retention. Despite varying SET experiences noted in this study, outcomes related to resilience and retention are quite similar. Well

documented factors such as administrative support (Darling-Hammond, 2019), collegial support (Billingsley et al., 2021), and professional development and mentorship programs (Reitman & Karge, 2019; Schanck, 2023) have been found to increase rates of SET retention. The unique experiences of each SET participant, coupled with the interdependent nature of their own unique internal and external supports, demonstrates the need for ongoing, multi-layered systems of support to foster SET retention.

School Culture

District-level administrators must communicate a shared vision of special education and model effective collaboration and communication for building administrators to set the tone for the entire organization. This is especially true in the context of special education programming, where streamlined systems and effective communication are critical. A supportive school culture is critical for SET resilience and retention (Gimbert & Kapa, 2022; Mullen et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2022). Implementing practices that recognize and support the varied backgrounds and experiences of SETs can lead to more positive outcomes, not only for SETs but also for the students they serve (Billingsley, 2004; Gilmour et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2013). SETs in this study voiced feeling marginalized within their own school communities, at times feeling like "second-class citizens" within their own school community, or that their roles are seen as less critical compared to their colleagues in general education.

The chronic stress from systemic pressures, compounded by the complex nature of their roles, poses significant risks to SETs' overall job satisfaction and emotional well-being (Aznar et al., 2006; Maslach, 1986; Seo et al., 2017). Fostering a culture that values diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of the educational process ensures that SETs receive the support and resources they need to demonstrate resilience and remain in their roles (Mullen et al., 2021). This

can be accomplished in a variety of ways, some of which include recognizing the complexity of

SETs professional duties, examining ways to increase efficiency, and streamlining data collection

and management systems, for example (Mansfield et al., 2016). Fundamentally, however, a

school's culture is the responsibility of all stakeholders, yet it is often the responsibility of the

building administrator to uphold expectations for the community as a whole.

Administrator Support

Special education teachers depend on collaboration and communication with a variety of

stakeholders to serve their students each day, making them particularly reliant on their school and

district-level administrators for support (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Administrators must model

inclusivity by actively involving SETs in decision-making processes that affect their work and the

well-being of their students. Recognizing and valuing the expertise of SETs reinforces their

professional purpose and belief in the impact of their work. When administrators prioritize an

inclusive culture and foster collaboration between SETs and general education teachers, they

create an environment that increases SET retention rates (Billingsley et al., 2017). On the other

hand, when SETs feel their administrators are uninformed or out of touch with their professional

duties related to special education, they are more likely to consider leaving the profession (Ansley

et al., 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Walker et al., 2021).

Given the complex nature of special education guidelines, procedures, and systems, many

building administrators lack the necessary knowledge in special education to fully support SETs,

highlighting the need for increased communication, collaboration, and training for administrators.

School leaders must prioritize partnerships with special educators to identify needs, discuss

issues, and plan for effective program implementation. While many building-level administrators

have at least a basic familiarity with special education, most lack the training and experience

needed to truly support SETs with challenges they face in their roles. Administrators who actively support SETs create a more positive working environment by sharing a vision for meeting the needs of all students. Tasha's narrative illustrates the profound impact of administrative supports on teacher retention, suggesting that when SETs feel valued and supported, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction and maintain their commitment to the profession (Billingsley et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2023).

Special Education Teacher Support

Challenges within the field of special education underscore the urgent need for interventions aimed at fostering the resilience and retention of SETs. Investing in comprehensive professional development programs that address both the technical and emotional aspects of teaching can significantly impact SET retention (Billingsley et al., 2021). Such supports, typically only offered to novice teachers through mentorship programs, should be provided to veteran SETs as well, acknowledging that pressures and demands of the profession do not diminish with time (Schanck, 2023). Therefore, professional development related to stress management, conflict resolution, and work-life balance are encouraged to support SETs professional experiences, mental health, and overall well-being.

Creating time or space before, during, or after school for physical exercise classes or groups would also benefit SETs physical and emotional health. Not only would this provide SETs with practical strategies to alleviate stress, but it would also promote a culture of wellness within the school community. Facilitating access to areas for staff to engage in meditation, relaxation, and self-care would also provide opportunities for SETs to access internal supports to help them effectively cope with job-related stress throughout the school day and enhance their ability to access internal resources for support.

Strong relationships with staff and a supportive work environment were noted by SETs in the current study as another reason for staying in their current position. Teachers' relationships with their colleagues are a key factor that has been shown to increase SET retention rates (Bettini et al., 2019; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). District and building-level administrators should look to create opportunities to strengthen relationships among staff to enhance job satisfaction and retention. This could be accomplished through informal social gatherings, teambuilding activities, or staff retreats that would allow staff time to connect on a more personal level. Social gatherings could also serve as a platform for sharing experiences, offering support, and building a sense of community.

When SETs feel connected and supported by their colleagues, their sense of loyalty and dedication to their school is strengthened. This heightened sense of community and belonging can significantly impact SETs' job satisfaction and retention. SET participants in this study shared that spending time outside of work with colleagues has helped to build long-term relationships that have kept them more connected and committed to their school community. These experiences highlight the significance of collegial relationships in navigating the complex challenges SETs face each day.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was implemented to examine the lived experiences of a diverse group of participants using personal interviews, a collection of artifacts, and a writing sample to investigate the phenomenon of K-12 SET retention. This section addresses the theoretical and empirical implications of this study, which differs from previous research on SET retention in that it examines SET experiences specifically during the four years between the 2019–20 and 2023–24 school years. By examining SET retention within this

timeframe, this study aimed to provide novel insight to supports that influence SET retention. Resources that influence the retention and resilience of K-12 SETs were also examined through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (2001, 2005) PPCT theory. The relationship between empirical findings and the PPCT theoretical framework provides a deeper understanding of the complex factors that influence SET retention.

Empirical Implications

Over five decades of research confirms that not only is teaching a highly stressful profession, but the impacts of occupational stress for teachers are linked to poor health (Boe et al., 2008), reduced job satisfaction (Farmer, 2020), poor work performance, (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1979), early retirement (Farmer, 2020), emotional exhaustion, and compassion fatigue (Fimian, 1986). The present study aligns with and extends previous research that has demonstrated the effects of prolonged stress on the emotional well-being and retention of SETs (Billingsley et al., 2019; Ondrasek et al., 2020). SET participants in this study identified internal and external supports that contributed to their resilience and retention, despite experiencing the emotional and physical repercussions of stress and burnout from their positions.

Burnout not only affects job performance but also increases the risk of developing depression, cardiovascular disease, and various illnesses (Nil et al., 2010). In this study, at least three participants received diagnoses of anxiety and/or depression in the last four years specifically, despite being self-described as "adaptable," "flexible," "self-aware," and "introspective." These traits, often associated with enhanced emotional stability, underscore the profound influence of work-related stress on individuals and demonstrates that even those with strong internal support systems are not immune to its effects.

Finstad et al. (2022) studied coping strategies and post-traumatic growth in the workplace

following the COVID-19 pandemic and found that coping skills are essential for managing work-related stress. Teachers who report less stress, anxiety, and burnout can effectively self-regulate and cope under stress, adapt to change, and maintain healthy boundaries, which leads to increased rates of retention (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Fox and Walter (2022) also found that teachers with a more optimistic outlook tend to focus more on the positive aspects of their work and find the good in difficult situations, rather than dwelling on challenges.

Theoretical Implications

Bronfenbrenner's (2006) PPCT bioecological systems theory served as the theoretical framework for investigating the factors that influence special education teacher retention. This theory posits that an individual's development is shaped by synergistic experiences and simultaneous interaction between various internal and external systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Hertler et al., 2018; Tudge et al., 2016). The emphasis on internal supports (e.g., resilience, sense of purpose) and external supports (e.g., administrator support, mental health support) extends the application of the PPCT model by highlighting how these elements interact to support SET retention, especially during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic. A component of the bioecological systems theory, the PPCT model emphasizes the significance of the ongoing interactions between the person, their environment (context), the processes they engage in, and the time period in which they live (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2016).

Drew and Sosnowski (2019) emphasized the role of internal factors such as self-reflection and a sense of purpose in fostering resilience among educators. At the *person* level, SET retention in this study was influenced by internal factors that included professional purpose, one's personal belief system, coping skills, and resilience that each teacher brings to their profession. Moreover, the ability to maintain competent functioning in the face of adversity is a testament to the

resilience inherent within these individuals (Kaplan et al., 1996).

The *process* aspect involves the transactions that occur between SETs and their environment that can either support or challenge their resilience (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Navarro et al., 2022). Positive relationships with colleagues, for instance, have been identified as more predictive of an individual's capacity to adapt to stress (Aiello et al., 2023; Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). This highlights the importance of nurturing collegial and administrative support as well as engaging in meaningful self-care activities to enhance resilience and foster SET retention.

The evolving landscape of the K-12 public education system over the past four years, or *context*, has been marked by cultural norms, policy shifts, and technological advancements, which have significantly influenced SET resilience and retention. The context in which SETs operate today is markedly different than it was a decade ago, necessitating adaptability and continuous learning. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, underscored the need for SETs to draw upon both personal resources and external support systems to navigate unprecedented challenges (Lu & Hua, 2022; Aiello et al., 2023).

Time, the fourth component of Bronfenbrenner's model, reflects the continual changes that occur over the lifespan of an individual and the historical period in which they live. The generational and cultural shifts experienced by SETs, alongside the changes brought on by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have shaped their resilience. This resilience is not static but evolves as SETs encounter new challenges and adapt to changing circumstances (Masten, 2014).

This study contributes to the PPCT framework by presenting how SETs' multi-faceted experiences and professional commitments are influenced not only by close personal interactions but broader social issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying political and

cultural conflicts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2016). The emphasis on access to ongoing multi-layered internal and external supports while navigating the professional challenges regularly experienced by SETs extends the theory by highlighting critical components of the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

By integrating the lived experiences of SETs with Bronfenbrenner's theoretical insights, this study not only corroborates but extends existing research. It also suggests that future inquiries into SET retention could benefit from a biological approach, considering both the proximal and distal influences on teacher experiences and decisions to remain in the profession. This perspective encourages a holistic view of SET resilience, suggesting interventions that address both personal and systemic factors to enhance retention (Scott et al., 2022; Tudge et al., 2016).

<div align="center">**Limitations and Delimitations**</div>

Limitations and delimitations affect all research. Limitations are potential weaknesses within a study that are beyond the researcher's control. Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the boundaries of a study. Understanding both limitations and delimitations is essential to accurately interpreting and applying research findings.

Delimitations

SET participants in this study were required to have been working full-time in their current position since the 2019-20 academic year. Therefore, individuals who transferred positions, even if it was within the same district, were excluded from this study, as were those employed in part-time positions. While Learning Behavior Specialist (LBS) licensure in the State of Illinois certifies individuals to teach SWD, aged 5-21. This study did not include participants from preschool special education programs that serve students between the ages of three and five or transition special education programs that serve students between the ages of 18 and 22. The

focus of this study was K-12 SETs specifically because not all districts have preschool and/or transition programs.

In addition, the selection of participants from a part of the state that has one of the world's largest and most diversified economies, with the lowest unemployment rates in the state of Illinois was also purposeful (World Business Chicago, 2023). The financial stability of a school district is significant in this study because districts with greater financial stability can offer better salaries, resources, and working conditions for teachers, which has historically positively impacted the recruitment and retention of staff (Sutcher et al., 2019). While financial stress was noted in two participants' narratives, their experiences were related to difficulties with financial obligations associated with major life events (e.g., medical cost of childbirth) and continuing education costs rather than frustration with their rate of compensation. None of the remaining 14 participants made mention of financial stress or their salaries compared to other school districts or professions. Given that low teacher pay has real-life implications for those in the field of special education who are forced to work second or third jobs to make ends meet, it is also telling that the SET participants in this study did not make mention of any experiences related to their salaries (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019).

Limitations

Despite the contribution to literature this study provides, limitations also existed. Convenience sampling was used for this study to recruit SET participants with a minimum of four years teaching experience who were currently employed full-time in the K-12 setting to ensure results were comprehensive and reliable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This selection process allowed for a collection of insights and data that were both meaningful and representative of the broader SET population who have experienced the phenomenon of retention.

A concerted effort was made to recruit additional male SET participants through a heavy concentration of recruitment emails (see Appendix B), however, out of 103 recruitment emails sent, these efforts elicited only three responses from male teachers who expressed their willingness to participate in this study. Upon review of the three Special Education Teacher Demographic & Work Experience Questionnaires (see Appendix C) completed by male SETs, one was not eligible to participate in this study because he had only been in his current position for three years. The second male potential participant who completed the demographic survey did not respond to repeated emails or text messages to schedule the 1:1 virtual interview and was assumed to have changed his mind about participation, which left only one male in this study out of 16 participants.

Additionally, the number of participants in this study representing SETs from diverse backgrounds was below the state average. The lack of special education teachers of color is also a pressing issue for schools, according to studies by Billingsley and Bettini (2019) and Mason-Williams et al. (2020), who emphasize the need for equitable opportunities for SWD. Mason-Williams et al. (2020) highlight the importance of addressing the shortage of special education teachers who are people of color to create a diverse and inclusive teacher workforce.

Across Illinois, 81.3% of teachers are White as compared to 87.5% of the SET participants in this study. The limited representation of diversity makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions, particularly when applying certain aspects of the PPCT framework to SETs who are non-White. The lack of diversity within the SET participant group does present a challenge when applying the aspects of cultural or contextual factors within these groups.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research aimed to pave the way for future studies by providing a foundation for

developing targeted interventions aimed at sustaining SETs within the profession for longer than the current average of three to five years (Bettini et al., 2019; Bettini & Billingsley, 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020). High staff turnover rates have significant consequences for SWD, as the lack of continuity and experienced educators can hinder academic progress and overall well-being (Bettini et al., 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). Based on the findings, limitations, and delimitations of this study, several recommendations for future research have been made.

To gain an even more extensive understanding of SET resilience and retention, future researchers should consider replicating this study using a larger pool of participants from different states or regions within the US. Results from this study also highlight the need for equity and support in more rural, urban, or under-funded areas to increase SET retention. Future researchers should also consider SET resilience and retention related to specific to gender, race, and populations of SWD served as well as resilience and retention in special education administrators who are a vastly under-represented population in education research.

The current study did not explore these groups specifically, instead focusing primarily on experiences related to SET retention overall. Finally, several participants in this study cited some kind of meaningful interaction with students with SWD as a reason for going into the field of special education. What remains unknown is what impact the retention of these SET participants had on their students. Future researchers should consider a quantitative study to gain further insight into the impact of SET retention on students' academic and social-emotional achievement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of K-12 SETs who have demonstrated professional longevity and persisted in their current

positions for four or more years. To better understand K-12 SET experiences, the following

central research question guided this study: What are the lived experiences of K-12 special

education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years? In

addition, four sub-questions were formulated to further investigate specific areas of the

phenomenon which included the personal experiences, professional experiences, experiences with

public perception, and overall cultural experiences of K-12 SETs who have persisted in their

current positions for four or more years. A literature review was conducted and included an

examination of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT bioecological systems theory. This theoretical framework

guided the study and was used to analyze and interpret data.

A hermeneutic phenomenological research design was used to collect data related to the

lived experiences of K-12 SETs in large, suburban school districts in the Chicagoland area. The

specific region where this study took place has one of the world's largest and most diversified

economies, with the lowest unemployment rates in the state of Illinois (World Business Chicago,

2023). This is significant because districts with greater financial stability can offer better salaries,

resources, and working conditions to their teachers than neighboring districts with lower tax

bases. This trend has historically positively impacted the recruitment and retention of teachers

(Sutcher et al., 2019). This is also significant because this participant sample represents SETs who

have been working under the best possible conditions over the last four years of their career,

where SETs in far less-resourced districts have had to do considerably more with less.

To answer the research questions posed for this study, data was collected in a sequential

manner using a Special Education Teacher Demographic & Work Experience Questionnaire, a

virtual 1:1 interview, artifact sharing, and letter of advice to a first-year SET. The primary

objective of this data collection plan was to not only inform the next phase of data collection, but

also to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of K-12 SETs who have been serving in their current role for more than four years.

An analysis of the data was performed through triangulation and thematic saturation. Credibility was achieved through data triangulation, peer review, member checks, and transferability. Data analysis revealed themes including internal and external supports that contributed to SET retention and resilience. The results of this study revealed themes of external supports and internal supports with subthemes of family support, collegial support, administrator support, mental health support, professional purpose, personal belief system, coping skills, and resilience.

Future research should examine SET resilience and retention by replicating this study using a larger pool of participants from different states or regions within the US. Researchers should also consider SET resilience and retention related to specific to gender, race, and populations of SWD served as the current study focused primarily on SET experiences related to retention overall and did not consider the impact of other specific demographic factors. Finally, several participants in this study cited some kind of meaningful interaction with students with SWD as a reason for going into the field of special education yet what remains unknown is what impact the retention of these SET participants had on their students' academic and social emotional achievement. Future researchers should also consider a quantitative study to gain further insight into the impact of SET retention on students' academic and social-emotional achievement.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 13, 2023
Kimberly Wisinski
Lucinda Spaulding

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-684 Weathering the Storm: A Phenomenological Study of K-12 Special Educator Resilience and Retention

Dear Kimberly Wisinski, Lucinda Spaulding,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d): Category 2. (iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

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 ████████.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree. The purpose of my research is to examine the experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have persisted in their current positions for more than four years with the aim of identifying internal and external factors that promote resilience and retention among special educators and increase job satisfaction and commitment to the profession, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must have been in their current position since the 2019-20 academic year, possess a valid Learning Behavior Specialist (LBS1) license, and work full-time in the field of special education. Participants will be asked to take part in a one-on-one, audio and video-recorded, interview via Microsoft Teams, share an artifact, and write a letter of advice to a hypothetical new special education teacher. Participants will also be asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy verification purposes. It should take approximately 90 minutes to complete all of the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please click here (insert hyperlink to online survey) to complete the screening complete the attached survey and return it by clicking "submit" after the last question. If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to schedule a time for an interview.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, please click the link to complete and return the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

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,

Kimberly Wisinski
Liberty University Doctoral Student

Appendix C: Special Education Teacher Demographic & Work Experience Questionnaire

Section 1 of 3

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be in the same position you were at the start of the 2019-20 academic year, possess a valid Learning Behavior Specialist (LBS1) license, and work full-time in the field of special education. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. * Indicates required question

<u>Informed Consent Agreement</u>

Please take time to read the entire informed consent form before deciding whether you would like to take part in this study.

Project Title: Weathering the Storm: A Phenomenological Study of K-12 Special Educator Resilience and Retention

Criteria for Participation: To participate, you must be currently working full-time in the same special education position you were in at the start of the 2019-20 academic year and possess a valid Learning Behavior Specialist (LBS1) license in the State of Illinois.

What is the study about and why is it being done? The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have remained in the same position for four or more years.

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:

1.   Complete an online demographic and work experience questionnaire that will take more than 10 minutes.

2.   Participate in an online interview via Microsoft Teams that will be audio and video recorded and will take no more than 1 hour.

3.   Provide an artifact that helped you in difficult times when you might have considered leaving your profession. This discussion will be audio and video recorded and take no more than 15 minutes.

4.   Write a letter of advice to a hypothetical first-year special education teacher using Google Forms. This entry should take no more than 15 minutes.

5.   You will be asked to review your interview transcripts to check for verification and accuracy purposes. Any changes requested to the transcript must be made in writing within 5 days of receiving it.

How could you or others benefit from this study? The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include the opportunity to gain new insights about themselves as well as process and reflect on their experiences, which can lead to personal and professional growth.

Benefits to society include addressing a gap in the literature related to special education teachers who continue to work in the same positions as they did in the 2019-20 school year. The study also aims to mitigate special education teacher turnover by informing interventions and policies that can lead to a more stable and experienced special education workforce, ultimately resulting in better outcomes for students with disabilities.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.

- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.

- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Compensation: Participants who complete all study procedures will receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

Is participation voluntary? Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact with questions or concerns? The researcher conducting this study is Kimberly Wisinski. 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. Lucinda Spaulding at ████████████████. 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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is ████ ██████, and our email address ████████████.

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: I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and have had all of my questions about my participation answered. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

By typing your name, you agree to be in this study. A copy of this document will be provided for your records. The researcher will also keep a copy with the study records.

Name:

Date:

Section 2 of 3

Participant Teacher Demographic & Work Experience Questionnaire Please provide a pseudonym you would like to use to maintain confidentiality.

How many years of experience do you have as a special education teacher?

What is your gender?

How would you describe your ethnicity or race?

What is your age?

What is your highest level of education?

What grade or grades do you currently teach?

Describe the population of students with disabilities you serve.

How many students are currently on your caseload?

Do you feel a sense of safety and security in your current position?

Do you feel recognized and respected in your current position?

Do you feel valued and appreciated in your current position?
If you are selected for an interview in this study, what day/s of the week and time/s do you prefer to be contacted?

What is your preferred method of contact?

Please provide the phone number or email address you would like me to use when contacting you.

Section 3 of 3

Thank you for completing the demographic and work experience questionnaire!

Next Steps...

Should you be selected to participate in a 1:1 virtual interview with the researcher, you will be contacted via your preferred method of contact to schedule a time to meet.

As a reminder, all records from this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to these records.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Title of the Project: Weathering the Storm: A Phenomenological Study of K-12 Special Educator Resilience and Retention

Principal Investigator: Kimberly Wisinski, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have been in your current position since the 2019-20 academic year, possess a valid Learning Behavior Specialist (LBS1) license, and work full-time in the field of special education. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of K-12 special education teachers who have remained in the same position for four or more years.

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:
1. Participate in an online interview via Microsoft Teams that will be audio and video recorded and will take no more than one hour.
2. Provide an artifact that helped you in difficult times when you might have considered leaving your profession. This discussion will be audio and video recorded and take no more than 15 minutes. Participants will be asked to provide a release form allowing photographs and/or video recordings of artifacts to be used in the publication or as part of future presentations.
3. Write a letter of advice to a hypothetical first-year special education teacher using Google Forms. This entry should take no more than 15 minutes.
4. You will be asked to review your interview transcripts to check for verification and accuracy purposes. Any changes requested to the transcript must be made in writing within 5 days of receiving it.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include the opportunity to gain new insights about themselves as well as process and reflect on their experiences, which can lead to personal and professional growth.

Benefits to society include addressing a gap in the literature related to special education teachers who continue to work in the same positions as they did in the 2019-20 school year. The study also aims to mitigate special education teacher turnover by informing interventions and policies that can lead to a more stable and experienced special education workforce, ultimately resulting in better outcomes for students with disabilities.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Kimberly Wisinski. 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. Lucinda Spaulding 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 IRB. Our physical address is ██ ████; our phone number is ██████████, and our email address is ██████████.

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 participate 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, video-record, and photograph me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about why you decided to become a special education teacher. CRQ

2. Tell me about your experiences over the last four years as a special education teacher. CRQ

3. What challenges, if any, have you experienced over the last four years personally? SQ1

4. How have you supported yourself through these challenges? SQ1

5. What has your experience been with accessing external support or resources to help you personally manage your emotions or feelings of stress? SQ1

6. What has your experience been with accessing external support or resources to help you professionally in your role as a special education teacher? SQ2

7. What has your experience been with how others outside of the field of education view your role as a special education teacher? SQ3

8. Tell me about how experiences related to racial conflict or civil unrest in the past four years have affected you professionally. SQ4

9. Tell me about how experiences related to racial conflict or civil unrest in the past four years have affected you personally. SQ4

10. Tell me about how you feel others outside of education perceive special education teachers and why do you think that? SQ1, 3

11. What personal experiences do you feel have contributed to your longevity in the field? SQ1, 2, 3, 4

12. What about this current time in your life has contributed to your longevity in the field? SQ1, 2, 3, 4

13. What social systems or resources do you feel contributed to your longevity in the field? SQ1,

2, 3, 4

14. What are some of the most important things you have learned from your experience as a special education teacher in the last four years? SQ1

15. What advice do you have for recruiting more candidates into the field of special education? CRQ

Appendix F: Letter Writing Prompt

1. In 500 words or less, write a letter of advice to a first-year special education teacher based upon your own thoughts and experiences. (CRQ, SQ1-4)

Appendix G: Physical Artifact Log

Description	Analysis of Meaning	Social Structures	Timeframe	Noted Similarities to other Data Collected from Participant	Noted Differences to other Data Collected from Participant
Participant:			**Date:**		

Appendix H: Sample Field Notes and Interview Summaries

Ha: Field Note and Interview Summary Form

Participant: Dane

Date: 1/27/2024

Location: Microsoft Teams (participant is at home)

Demographic Responses:

Teaching Experience: 10 years
Gender: Female
Ethnicity/Race: White
Age: 33
Educational Background: Master's Degree
Grades Taught: 6, 7, 8
Student Population: Most of my students are self-contained in a special education classroom
Caseload: 6
Feeling Safe: Yes
Feeling Respected: No
Feeling Valued: No

Observations:

- Motivated by praise and recognition
- Experiencing feelings of isolation and a lack of support from the district (became weepy)
- Demonstrates self-awareness – "negative outlook"
- Dx depression 2021 – No prior history
- "felt unfair"
- "isolating"

Summary:

Despite feeling unsupported overall, Dane remains committed to her students, driven by her personal experiences and a deep understanding of the unique needs of children with special needs. Her interview speaks to the dedication and passion special education teachers bring to their roles, despite the ongoing challenges they face. Dane experienced feelings of isolation, and a lack of support which led to a depression diagnosis in 2021. At times during the interview she became weepy and appears to continue to struggle emotionally as a result of stress from her position. She is currently managing stress by accessing outside therapy and engaging in personal hobbies. She also values support from her colleagues for professional support.

Hb: Field Note and Interview Summary Form

Participant: Shay

Date: 2/3/2024

Location: Microsoft Teams (participant is at home)

Demographic Responses:

>Teaching Experience: 6 years
>Gender: Female
>Ethnicity/Race: White
>Age: 36
>Educational Background: Master's Degree
>Grades Taught: 8
>Student Population: Most of my students spend 80% or more of their day in gen. ed.
>Caseload: 11
>Feeling Safe: Yes
>Feeling Respected: No
>Feeling Valued: Yes

Observations:
- Confident, assertive
- Softness noted when talking about her dog who has a seizure disorder being rescued during COVID
- Passion for inclusion across settings (school and community)
- Values strong relationships with colleagues
- Noted importance of "self-care"
- Weight loss journey improved health and self-esteem
- Emphasized the importance of "admin support" for sped teachers

Summary:

Shay expressed concern about where the public education system is headed with the ongoing teacher shortages and polarization of our culture, and dislikes that politics is also seeping into education. Shay highlights the importance of building strong relationships with students and colleagues, which she identifies as key to her job satisfaction. She also stresses the value of having administrators who understand special education, as this can significantly impact the support students with special needs receive.

Appendix I: Codes and Theme Development

Ia: In Vivo Initial Analysis Codes

"ADAPTING STRATEGIES"
"ADMIN IMPORTANCE"
"AHA MOMENT"
"ALCOHOL"
"ALWAYS A LEARNING CURVE"
"ALWAYS KNEW I WANTED TO BE A TEACHER"
"AMAZING SPECIAL ED TEACHERS"
"APPRECIATION FELT DIFFERENT"
"APPRECIATION FOLLOWED BY PRE-PANDEMIC ATTITUDES"
"ASK QUESTIONS
"BALANCING DEMANDS OF REMOTE INSTRUCTION"
"BE AUTHENTIC"
"BE FLEXIBLE"
"BEHAVIOR PROBLEM"
"BEHAVIORS BECOMING MORE SEVERE, MORE AGGRESSIVE"
"BRAND NEW START"
"BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS
"BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS"
"BULLYING AND CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES"
"BUNDLE OF JOY WAS ALSO THIS LIKE HANDFUL"
"CEC WEBSITE"
"CELEBRATE SUCCESSES"
"CHALLENGE OF SHARING MANUALS AMONG SPECIAL ED TEACHERS"
"CHALLENGES AS OPPORTUNITIES"
"CHALLENGES IN ATTRACTING NEW TEACHERS"
"CHUNKING THE CALENDAR"
"CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH MY SISTER"
"COLLABORATION WITH COLLEAGUES"
"COLLEAGUES MAKE THE JOB"
"COMMUNICATE REGULARLY"
"COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER"
"COMMUNICATE"
"COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT"
"COMPLETE AND TOTAL LACK OF EMPATHY"
"COMPLETE LACK OR DISRESPECT OF AUTHORITY"
"CONSTANTLY DOING SPECIAL ED"
"CONTROL WHAT I CAN"

"CULTURE SHOCK FOR SOME OF THEM"
"DID NOT SEE ANY SITUATIONS HAPPENING"
"DISCONNECT WITH THOSE FAMILIES"
"DIVERSE TEACHING EXPERIENCES"
"DO NOT TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY"
"DON'T TAKE LIFE FOR GRANTED"
"EAT HEALTHY"
"EDUCATE MYSELF"
"EMBRACE CHALLENGES"
"ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION"
"EVER SINCE COVID"
"EVERY SITUATION IS DIFFERENT, EVERY SITUATION IS UNIQUE"
"EXERCISE"
"FAMILY ACTIVITIES"
"FEARS AND ANXIETIES"
"FEEL LIKE I'M ABLE TO HELP OTHERS UNDERSTAND"
"FEELING SIDELINED"
"FIGHT FOR MATERIALS FOR AN INTERVENTION"
"FIND YOUR NICHE"
"FLEXIBLE AND ADJUSTABLE"
"FUTURE OF EDUCATION"
"GAIN NEW SKILLS"
"GIVE YOURSELF GRACE"
"GOOD CUP OF TEA AND A GOOD CRY"
"GROUP CONVERSATIONS"
"HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF RACIAL DYNAMICS"
"IMPROVEMENT WITH HIM"
"INSPIRATIONAL MOMENTS"
"INTERESTED IN PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK"
"INTROSPECTIVE"
"IRONMAN DISTANCE"
"IT'S GONNA GET BETTER"
"KEEP LEARNING"
"KEEP THAT SANITY"
"KIDS ARE HARDER NOW"
"LAUGH AND ENJOY"
"LEAVE MY COMPUTER AT WORK"
"LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY"
"MAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF"
"MAKING A DIFFERENCE" "MAKING
CONNECTIONS"

"MANAGING THE BEHAVIOR"
"MEANINGFUL TO ME"
"MEDITATION"
"MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSIS"
"MENTORSHIP MAKES ME HAPPIER"
"MENTORSHIP"
"MIXED REACTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC"
"MODEL BEING A GOOD STUDENT
"MORE INVOLVED AND ENLIGHTENED"
"NAVIGATING BUREAUCRACY"
"NAVIGATING THE TUMULTUOUS LANDSCAPE OF TEACHING DURING COVID-19"
"NEED THIS TO GET THROUGH MY DAY"
"NEVER GIVEN MY CELL PHONE NUMBER OUT TO ONE PARENT PRIOR TO THAT"
"NEVER STOP LEARNING"
"NEVER WANT MY CHILDREN TO BE EXPOSED TO THAT"
"NEW DYNAMIC"
"NOT AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS"
"NOT DONE YET"
"NOT GIVING UP"
"NOT TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY"
"OBSESSED WITH HIM"
"ONE STUDENT KIND OF MOTIVATED ME"
"ORGANIZES"
"PANIC ATTACKS"
"PARENT PERSPECTIVE AND THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE"
"PARENTS UNDERSTOOD OUR HARD WORK"
"PASSING YOU ON FOR THE SAKE OF PASSING YOU ON"
"PATIENCE AND GIFT"
"PERSEVERANCE"
"PERSONAL GROWTH"
"PERSONALIZED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT"
"POSITIVE PERSON"
"PRIORITIZE SELF-CARE"
"PRIORITIZE"
"PUNCHING BAG"
"REALIZED I WANTED TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL TO BE A SPECIAL ED TEACHER"
"REFUSED"
"REJUVENATE THOSE FEELINGS AGAIN OF WHY YOU WENT INTO THAT FIELD"
"RELATIONSHIP BUILDING"
"RELEASE FROM THE WEEK"
"RELEASES ALL THE NEGATIVE TOXINS"

"REMEMBER YOUR IMPACT"
"RESOURCE SHARING AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS"
"RESPECT EACH OTHER"
"REWARDING EXPERIENCES"
"RUNNING MARATHONS"
"SAME LEVEL OF HARD"
"SCHOOL STUFF IS STARTING MANY PRAYERS"
"SEEING PROGRESS"
"SEEK GUIDANCE"
"SEEK OUT MORE OF WHAT SPECIFICALLY I'M NEEDING"
"SELF-ESTEEM BOOST"
"SET BOUNDARIES"
"SHARE YOUR PASSION"
"SHELTER IN PLACE"
"SHIFT IN EDUCATION"
"SHOW GENUINE INTEREST"
"SOCIAL CLIMATE"
"SOCIAL WITH SCHOOL AND DANCE GROUPS"
"STARTED DRINKING COFFEE"
"STARTED LATER IN LIFE"
"STAY CONNECTED"
"STRESS OF MONEY"
"STRETCH MY COMMUNICATION BARRIERS"
"SUCCESS STORY"
"SUPPORTING ESL FAMILIES"
"SUPPORTIVE ADMINISTRATION"
"SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP"
"TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF"
"TAPPING"
"TEACHING ASSISTANT POSITION"
"THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING"
"THE JOB IS NOT EASY"
"THERAPEUTIC DAY SCHOOL"
"THERAPY"
"THEY JUST DON'T MAKE THEM LIKE THEY USED TO"
"TO-DO LIST"
"TRAINING HAD KEPT ME GOING"
"TRANSPARENT WITH MY TEAM"
"TREMENDOUSLY PLEASED"
"UNCERTAINTY OF ANSWERS"
"USE YOUR TEAM"

"WAITING LIST FOR SERVICES"

"WANTED TO HELP A LOT"

"WHY AREN'T THEY JUST DOING THIS"

"WORK FAMILY"

"WORK LIFE BALANCE"

"WORKING A SECOND JOB"

"WORKING OUT"

"WRITTEN DOWN"

"YOU'RE A POSITIVE PERSON"

'TRUST MYSELF MORE'

"ADAPTABILITY"

"ADAPTABLE"

"ADMIN SUPPORT"

"APPRECIATED"

"BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND HOME"

"CAMARADERIE"

"COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT"

"EVEN IF I HAVE A LOT GOING ON IT GETS DONE"

"EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED HAS MADE ME MORE RESILIENT"

"FAMILY SUPPORT"

"FEELS GOOD"

"FLEXIBLE"

"I DISASSOCIATE THROUGH READING"

"I DON'T HAVE WORK EMAIL ON MY PERSONAL PHONE"

"I HAVE MORE LEFT TO GIVE"

"I JUST GET IT DONE"

"I NEED TO JUST SIT BACK AND DO SOMETHING FOR ME"

"I WAN'T OTHERS TO SEE HOW MUCH I LOVE THIS"

"I WON'T EVER QUIT"

"I'M A BIT OF A PLEASER"

"I'VE ALWAYS SEEN THINGS THROUGH, NO MATTER WHAT"

"IT (VIDEOGAMES) REALLY HELP ME DECOMPRESS"

"IT'S BEEN GOOD OVERALL"

"IT'S NICE TO COME INTO A JOB WHERE YOU GET TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE"

"LEXIPRO"

"LOVE BEING A TEACHER; IT'S MY CALLING"

"MAKE A DIFFERENCE EVERY SINGLE DAY"

"MAKE THE JOB OF TEACHING ASSISTANT MORE ATTRACTIVE"

"MAKING A DIFFERENCE"

"MEDICATION"

"MENTORSHIP"

"MY FRIENDS ARE ALL TEACHERS"

"NOT TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY"

"PERSONAL GROWTH"

"POSITIVE IMPACT"

"PRAYER JOURNAL"

"SCHOLARSHIP FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION MAJORS"

"SEEING SUCCESS STORIES"

"STARTED SEEING A THERAPIST"

"STILL HAVE MORE TO DO"

"SUPPORT FROM MY HUSBAND"

"THE BUILDING THAT I'M IN IS WONDERFUL"

"THERE'S A LITTLE BIT MORE OF A WORKLOAD FOR ME"

"TOUGH SKIN"

"VALUED"

"VERY GOOD AT COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS"

"WORK-LIFE BALANCE"

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE PATIENT"

Ib: Initial Cluster Development

Themes	In Vivo Codes
Adaptability and Resilience	"ADAPTABILITY", "ALWAYS A LEARNING CURVE", "BRAND NEW START", "CHALLENGES AS OPPORTUNITIES", "DISCONNECT WITH THOSE FAMILIES", "FLEXIBLE", "GAIN NEW SKILLS", "EVERY SITUATION IS DIFFERENT, EVERY SITUATION IS UNIQUE", "EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED HAS MADE ME MORE RESILIENT", "IT'S BEEN GOOD OVERALL", "NOT AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS", "NOT DONE YET", "NOT GIVING UP", "NOT TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY", "SEEING PROGRESS", "SEEING SUCCESS STORIES," "SEEK OUT MORE OF WHAT SPECIFICALLY I'M NEEDING", STRETCH MY COMMUNICATION BARRIERS", "TOUGH SKIN," "TREMENDOUSLY PLEASED", "TRUST MYSELF," "YOU'RE A POSITIVE PERSON"

Work-life Balance	"BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND HOME", "I NEED TO JUST SIT BACK AND DO SOMETHING FOR ME," "LEAVE MY COMPUTER AT WORK", "I DON'T HAVE WORK EMAIL ON MY PERSONAL PHONE," "RELEASE FROM THE WEEK", "PRIORITIZE"
External Support Systems	"ADMIN SUPPORT," "FAMILY SUPPORT," "CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH MY SISTER", "COLLABORATION WITH COLLEAGUES", "COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER", "IT(VIDEOGAMES) REALLY HELP ME DECOMPRESS", "MIXED REACTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC", "MY FRIENDS ARE ALL TEACHERS", "WAITING LIST FOR SERVICES", "THE BUILDING THAT I'M IN IS WONDERFUL", "SUPPORTIVE ADMINISTRATION", "SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP", "SOCIAL WITH SCHOOL AND DANCE GROUPS", "THERAPY", "WORK FAMILY"
Personal Coping Strategies	"ALCOHOL," "CHUNKING THE CALENDAR", "COMMUNICATE," "CONTROL WHAT I CAN", "DID NOT SEE ANY SITUATIONS HAPPENING", "DON'T TAKE LIFE FOR GRANTED", "I DISASSOCIATE THROUGH READING," "IRONMAN DISTANCE", "GOOD CUP OF TEA AND A GOOD CRY", "MEDITATION," "ORGANIZES", 'PRAYER JOURNAL," "WORKING OUT", "YOU'VE GOT TO BE PATIENT," "TO-DO LISTS," "STARTED DRINKING COFFEE", "NOT AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS", "LEAVE MY COMPUTER AT WORK", "IT'S GONNA GET BETTER"
Dedication to the Profession	"LOVE BEING A TEACHER; IT'S MY CALLING", "MAKE A DIFFERENCE EVERY SINGLE DAY", "IMPROVEMENT WITH HIM", "INTERESTED IN PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK", "I WON'T EVER QUIT", "I'VE ALWAYS SEEN THINGS THROUGH, NO MATTER WHAT", "IT'S NICE TO COME INTO A JOB WHERE YOU GET TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE", "MEANINGFUL TO ME", "STILL HAVE MORE TO DO", "WANTED TO HELP A LOT"
Mental Health and Well-being	"AHA MOMENT," "BALANCING DEMANDS OF REMOTE INSTRUCTION", "BEHAVIOR PROBLEM", "BEHAVIORS BECOMING MORE SEVERE, MORE AGGRESSIVE", "BULLYING AND CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES", "BUNDLE OF JOY WAS ALSO THIS LIKE HANDFUL", "EAT HEALTHY", "EDUCATE MYSELF", "EVER SINCE COVID", "FEELS GOOD," "HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF RACIAL DYNAMICS", "INTROSPECTIVE", "INSPIRATIONAL MOMENTS", "KEEP THAT SANITY", "KIDS ARE HARDER NOW", "LAUNDRY LIST OF DISABILITIES", "LEXIPRO," "MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSIS", "NEED THIS TO GET THROUGH MY DAY", "NEVER WANT MY CHILDREN TO BE EXPOSED TO THAT", "REJUVENATE THOSE FEELINGS AGAIN OF WHY YOU WENT INTO THAT FIELD", "SHELTER IN PLACE," "STARTED SEEING A THERAPIST," "PANIC ATTACKS"

Professional Identity	"ALWAYS KNEW I WANTED TO BE A TEACHER," "APPRECIATED" "APPRECIATION FELT DIFFERENT" "APPRECIATION FOLLOWED BY PRE-PANDEMIC ATTITUDES", "CHALLENGES IN ATTRACTING NEW TEACHERS", "FEEL LIKE I'M ABLE TO HELP OTHERS UNDERSTAND", "LOVE BEING A TEACHER; IT'S MY CALLING", "I WAN'T OTHERS TO SEE HOW MUCH I LOVE THIS", "CULTURE SHOCK FOR SOME OF THEM", "REALIZED I WANTED TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL TO BE A SPECIAL ED TEACHER", "I'M A BIT OF A PLEASER", YOU'RE A POSITIVE PERSON", "PATIENT", "THE JOB IS NOT EASY", "THERE'S A LITTLE BIT MORE OF A WORKLOAD FOR ME", "THEY JUST DON'T MAKE THEM LIKE THEY USED TO", "TRANSPARENT WITH MY TEAM"
Resources	"CEC WEBSITE", "CHALLENGE OF REMOTE LEARNING", "DIVERSE TEACHING EXPERIENCES", "FIGHT FOR MATERIALS FOR AN INTERVENTION", "LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY", "TRAINING HAD KEPT ME GOING", "MENTORSHIP," NEVER STOP LEARNING", "EDUCATE MYSELF", RESOURCE SHARING AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS", "SCHOLARSHIP FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION MAJORS"