

PERCEPTIONS OF K-12 PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS TO IMPROVE SELF-EFFICACY  
AND WORK CONDITIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: A HERMENEUTIC  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

William T. Traylor

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

2024

PERCEPTIONS OF K-12 PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS TO IMPROVE SELF-EFFICACY  
AND WORK CONDITIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: A HERMENEUTIC  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by William T. Traylor

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2024

APPROVED BY:

Amy J. Schechter, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Darren D. Howland, Ph.D., Committee Member

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. The theory that guided this research was Bandura's theory of self-efficacy which is grounded in social cognitive theory. The theory of self-efficacy explains how individuals are agents of their own goals, actions, and destiny. The central research question that guided this study was what do K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers? A hermeneutic phenomenology was used to explore administrators' perceptions of how burnout may impact special education teacher self-efficacy. The participants included 12 public-school administrators including principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers who supervise special education teachers. Data was collected using individual interviews, focus groups, and a protocol writing prompt to explore the meaning and essence using descriptions and interpretation of the administrators' lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). An inductive coding approach was applied to develop open codes (Saldaña, 2021) to show the value of the lived experiences of administrators. Results included the following themes: absence of readiness, learn through experience, lack of awareness, need for structured training in special education, need to support special educators, building intentional relationship, tangible change and improvements to workload, acknowledging the reality of burnout, and empowering special education teachers.

*Keywords:* administrator, burnout, inclusion, self-efficacy, special education

**Copyright Page**

© 2024, William T. Traylor

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to all special education teachers who spend countless hours in the field of education to make a difference in the lives of students with disabilities. The role of a special education teacher is very demanding, and it requires a unique individual to be able to do this type of work year-after-year.

To my family, Shawn, Jimmy, and Hannah. Thank you for always encouraging me to continue to push forward even when I thought I couldn't do anymore. You each deserve so much credit for this work for allowing me time to stay home and do research while each of you had to pick up extra duties around the house when I fell behind. I love each of you and love the positive words of encouragement and your dedication to our family.

To my dear friends, Keith, Helen, Paul, Theresa, and Nancy. Thank you for always inviting my family to be a part of your family. We will always cherish the many holidays and special celebrations with each other over the years. Your encouragement over the last several years has really helped me to focus my attention on my studies and pushed me to be a better person. For this I am eternally grateful. Francis, Katie, Michelle, Karla, Rebecca, Ashley, Joy, and Jen, thank you for being a part of "Traylor's Angles" and for the work you do day-in and day-out to improve the lives of all students through the study of mathematics. I have learned so much from each of you on how to be a better special education math teacher and I am grateful to have your support.

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my savior, the one who provides me clarity, peace, and strength. I dedicate this to my family who had endured countless numbers of hours away from them while I was working on coursework and projects.

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to acknowledge all the special education teachers who have helped me over the years to learn so much about how to work with students with disabilities. Your guidance and support have made me the teacher I am today. For that, I am eternally grateful.

I would also like to acknowledge my chair, Dr. Amy Schechter, who has provided me with continuous support and encouragement to continue my journey. You have inspired me to do my best work and you have provided me with prayer when I needed it the most!

To my committee member, Dr. Darren Howland, I appreciate your energy and words of encouragement for me to continue to move forward even when I thought I couldn't. From the first class I had with you through the edits of my dissertation, I am extremely grateful for all that you have done to help me reach my goal.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Copyright Page.....	4
Dedication .....	5
Acknowledgments.....	6
List of Tables .....	14
List of Figures .....	15
List of Abbreviations .....	16
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	17
Overview .....	17
Background .....	18
Historical Context .....	19
Social Context.....	19
Theoretical Context.....	20
Problem Statement .....	23
Purpose Statement.....	24
Significance of the Study .....	24
Theoretical .....	25
Empirical.....	27
Practical.....	28
Research Questions .....	29
Central Research Question.....	29
Sub-Question One.....	29

Sub-Question Two .....	29
Sub-Question Three .....	29
Sub-Question Four .....	29
Definitions.....	29
Summary .....	30
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	32
Overview.....	32
Theoretical Framework.....	32
Self-efficacy .....	33
Related Literature.....	36
Historical Changes in Special Education.....	37
Inclusion and the Changing Role of Special Education Teachers .....	40
Co-Teaching and Special Education Teacher Self-Efficacy.....	46
Impacts and Attitudes of Inclusion .....	49
Benefits vs. Barriers of Inclusion and Co-Teaching.....	51
Self-Efficacy and Burnout .....	56
Special Education Teacher Workload.....	60
Impact of Inclusion and Co-Teaching on Special Education Teacher Self-Efficacy .....	62
Critical Shortage of Special Education Teachers.....	65
School Principals and Leadership Support .....	68
Summary .....	73
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS .....	75
Overview.....	75



Research Design.....	75
Research Questions.....	80
Central Research Question.....	80
Sub-Question One.....	80
Sub-Question Two.....	80
Sub-Question Three.....	81
Sub-Question Four.....	81
Setting and Participants.....	81
Setting.....	81
Participants.....	86
Recruitment Plan.....	87
Researcher’s Positionality.....	88
Interpretive Framework.....	89
Philosophical Assumptions.....	90
Ontological Assumption.....	90
Epistemological Assumption.....	91
Axiological Assumption.....	91
Researcher’s Role.....	92
Procedures.....	95
Data Collection Plan.....	95
Individual Interviews.....	95
Focus Groups.....	101
Protocol Writing Prompt.....	105

	10
Data Analysis .....	106
Trustworthiness.....	109
Credibility .....	110
Transferability.....	111
Dependability .....	111
Confirmability.....	112
Ethical Considerations .....	112
Permissions .....	112
Other Participant Protections .....	113
Summary .....	113
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .....	115
Overview.....	115
Participants.....	115
Cole.....	117
Kyleigh.....	117
Avery.....	118
Iris .....	118
Luke .....	119
Emma .....	119
Lily.....	120
Hannah .....	120
Leah.....	121
Oliver .....	121

Ruby .....	122
Tyler .....	122
Results.....	122
Absence of Readiness .....	123
Learn Through Experience .....	125
Lack of Awareness.....	127
Need for Structured Training in Special Education .....	128
Need to Support Special Educators.....	129
Building Intentional Relationships .....	132
Tangible Change and Improvement to Workload.....	134
Acknowledging the Reality of Burnout .....	135
Empowering Special Education Teachers .....	138
Research Question Responses.....	139
Central Research Question.....	140
Sub-Question One .....	143
Sub-Question Two .....	146
Sub-Question Three .....	148
Sub-Question Four .....	150
Summary .....	151
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	153
Overview.....	153
Discussion.....	153
Summary of Thematic Findings.....	153

Interpretation of Findings .....	156
Improving self-efficacy and working conditions .....	157
Readiness and mentorship.....	159
The need for on-going professional growth of administrators.....	159
Implications for Policy and Practice .....	160
Implications for Policy.....	160
Implications for Practice .....	161
Empirical and Theoretical Implications .....	164
Empirical Implications.....	164
Theoretical Implications .....	171
Limitations and Delimitations.....	175
Limitations .....	175
Delimitations.....	176
Recommendations for Future Research .....	177
Conclusion .....	178
References.....	180
Appendix A: IRB Approval .....	198
Appendix B: Site Approval.....	199
Appendix C: Consent.....	200
Appendix D: Research Questions .....	203
Appendix E: Teacher Quality Division and State Level Comparison .....	204
Appendix F: Teacher Quality Provisionally Licensed Teachers .....	205
Appendix G: Individual Interview Questions .....	206

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions .....	209
Appendix I: Protocol Writing Prompt.....	211
Appendix J: Participants .....	212
Appendix K: Themes and Sub-Themes .....	213
Appendix L: Theoretical Alignment and Applications.....	214

**List of Tables**

Table 1. % of Teachers in Out of Field Teaching Assignments and Inexperienced.....	84
Table 2. % of Provisionally Licensed Teachers; District vs. State Level.....	85
Table 3. Individual Interview Questions.....	97
Table 4. Focus Group Questions.....	101
Table 5. Protocol Writing Prompt.....	106
Table 6. Participants.....	116
Table 7. Themes and Sub-Themes.....	123

**List of Figures**

Figure 1 Theoretical Alignment and Application .....	170
--	-----

### **List of Abbreviations**

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Americans with Disabilities (ADA)

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)

Emotional and behavior disabilities (EBD)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Free appropriate public education (FAPE)

Magnolia County Public Schools (MCPS)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Least restrictive environment (LRE)

National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education (NCPSSERS)

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)

Qualitative data analysis software (QDAS)

Students with disabilities (SWD)

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)

World Health Organization (WHO)



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Special education teacher stress, burnout, and low job satisfaction continue to be a growing problem globally with some special education teachers deciding to leave the profession within the first few years of employment (Algozzine et al., 2011; Hester et al., 2020; Jerrim, 2021). Research has identified that teacher job satisfaction is critical for a teacher's well-being and is necessary for a teacher to remain in the profession (Dicke et al., 2020). In the United States, teacher retention is becoming difficult and as a result, there are critical shortages (Ingersoll et al., 2012) of special education teachers in many states that will impact the delivery of services to students with disabilities (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), 2022). Prior research on teacher stress and attrition suggests that poor working relationships with co-teachers were a major contributor to low self-efficacy, stress, and burnout for special education teachers (Hester et al., 2020). Another source of low self-efficacy that affects special education teacher burnout is the lack of administrative support due to limited knowledge of special education policy and practices (Robinson et al., 2019). This hermeneutic phenomenological study will explore the lived experiences of public-school administrators who work with special education teachers, and it will add to the body of knowledge of administrative leadership that may improve the working conditions for special education teachers. This research study will provide answers to the central research question: what do K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers?

Chapter One provides a historical background of reforms in special education that have increased job responsibilities for special education teachers, the social background of how the

increased responsibilities can impact their self-efficacy and affect student achievement in special education, and the theoretical background of how administrative support is necessary for effective retention of highly qualified special education teachers. The chapter will continue to explain the role of the researcher, the purpose of the study and significance for conducting the research.

### **Background**

Since the introduction of Public Law 94-142 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, special education policy and practices have continuously changed through amendments and reforms to protect the rights of students with disabilities (SWD). These reforms have changed the way special education services are provided to SWD and place more responsibility on special education teachers in the inclusive education setting (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Special education teachers with low self-efficacy, high rates of stress, and burnout are leaving the profession (Hagaman & Casey, 2018) because of low job satisfaction. There is a strong correlation between job satisfaction and supportive school leaders and administrators (Ansley et al., 2019). There are growing concerns over the number of critical shortages of special education teachers while the population of students identified with a disability continues to rise (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (NCPSSERS), 2022; Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), 2022). When special education teacher positions are not filled, this can have an impact on a school's ability to provide free appropriate public education to students with disabilities (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Mason et al., 2020).

## **Historical Context**

Over the last several decades, researchers have explored the variables that lead to stress and burnout in special education teachers. Stress can be defined as an unpleasant emotional experience that typically may include feelings of anxiety, tension, frustration, and anger (Kyriacou, 2001). Further research has indicated that special education teachers are reporting being overworked and underappreciated (Hester et al., 2020) and this can lead to low self-efficacy and low job satisfaction (Landers et al., 2011). Reforms in special education and changes to special education practices have put more responsibilities on special education teachers and contribute to stress and burnout. The occupational stress endured by teachers has a direct correlation to their decision to leave the profession (Brunsting et al., 2014). A key contributor to stress and burnout in special education teachers is the lack of support and efficacy from administrators for the work that they perform (Robinson et al., 2019; Hester et al., 2020). Over the last several years, many states have reported critical shortages in qualified special education teachers and according to the United States Department of Education in 2017, 46 states reported critical shortages in special education staff (Hester et al., 2020). Annually, the United States Department of Education provides a list of critical shortage teaching assignments by state and ranks what content areas have the greatest number of vacancies. In 2022, the United States Department of Education again reported critical shortages of special education teachers in the state of Virginia, and it has been ranked as the highest area of need for the past sixteen years over all other teaching assignments (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

## **Social Context**

Recent research has indicated special education teachers have difficult jobs that are demanding and more stressful than their peers in general education, and workload manageability

shows there is a relationship between job commitment and stress (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Park & Shin, 2020). Special education teachers are required to follow federal mandates, local state regulations, and school-level initiatives while also ensuring students with disabilities meet increased academic rigor (Haydon et al., 2018). Teacher burnout can have negative consequences for students' learning, engagement, and motivation in the classroom (Shen et al., 2015). Furthermore, when special education teachers experience low job satisfaction because of burnout, they are more likely to leave the profession. School effectiveness is influenced by teacher attrition (Dicke et al., 2020). This research seeks to understand from an administrator's perspective what knowledge is acquired in leadership programs about special education policy and practices and if administrators perceive the district offers adequate annual professional development to support growth in understanding special education. Next, this research seeks to understand what K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Exploring the background knowledge of school administrators in special education, ongoing professional development, and the perceptions concerning assessing and improving working conditions will provide insight into what future leaders need to know to promote better working conditions and improve overall attrition rates among an already scarce group of teachers.

### **Theoretical Context**

The theoretical context for this study involves special education teacher self-efficacy and burnout. There are numerous factors that contribute to anxiety and stress for special education teachers including workload manageability, poor relationships with peers, and lack of support from administrators; all have been cited as primary causes for special education teacher's low self-efficacy and burnout (Cumming et al., 21; Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Park &

Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Thakur, 2018). Low self-efficacy can lead to feelings of low self-worth that can affect a special education teacher's job satisfaction. Due to anxiety, stress, and burnout, special education teachers choose to leave the profession and create critical shortages of qualified special education teachers. (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017, Hester et al., 2020; National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2022; Nilsen, 2020). Critical shortages in special education teachers and the inability to fully staff qualified teachers can affect school districts' abilities to deliver a free appropriate public education (FAPE) guaranteed to students with disabilities in PL 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Mason et al., 2020). Teachers' perceptions of administrators can have a direct influence on overall job satisfaction (Ansley et al., 2019). Administrators who take active roles in learning more about special education policies and practices are able to reduce the stress levels of teachers (Haydon et al., 2018). Leadership programs and ongoing professional development often do not prepare principals to effectively lead inclusive schools because they lack extensive knowledge of special education policy and practices, and therefore this does not allow them to support efficacy in special education (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Special education teachers express feelings of being overworked and underappreciated by school administrators (Hester et al., 2020) who are unaware of the pressures and demands of being a special education teacher. Principals must be more fluent in the history of special education policy and practice and the changes that have led to the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream general education classrooms. In addition, administrators must also understand reforms have increased responsibilities for special education teachers putting more pressure and stress on them to meet the needs of students. This research will add to a growing body of literature on special education teacher self-efficacy, burnout, and stress by

exploring what knowledge administrators have in special education policy and practices, and the perceptions of how to assess and improve self-efficacy for special education teachers.

Self-efficacy is grounded in social cognitive theory and is part of self-reflectiveness or where an individual examines his or her own functions. The theory proposes that an individual's coping behavior will determine the effort and duration of effort when experiencing challenges (Bandura 1977, 1993). Feelings of inadequacy and low self-efficacy can create burnout in special education teachers causing some of them to leave the profession. Self-efficacy will provide the framework for understanding the pressures and demands that are put on special education teachers and why they are choosing to leave the profession. Prior research on special education teacher stress has indicated that when administrators are proficient in policy and practices it can have positive impacts on the stress level of special education teachers (Haydon et al., 2018). However, special education teacher self-efficacy can be lowered when school leadership lacks knowledge of special education policy and practice (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Administrators with limited knowledge of policy and practice in special education may correlate to low self-efficacy for special education teachers when administrators do not understand the complexities of the roles of a special education teacher. This research will establish the groundwork for understanding different learning experiences of administrators in special education policy and practices and the perceptions of what administrators need to know to improve working conditions. Future studies could focus on administrator's self-efficacy and learning experiences, and if this affects the self-efficacy of special education teachers. In human agency, learning occurs from experiences, and individuals are agents of their own experience therefore control lies within the individual (Bandura, 2001). The movement to full inclusion has changed the roles and

responsibilities of special education teachers and requires them to be agents of their own learning when teaching students with disabilities in the mainstream general education setting.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is special education teachers experience high rates of burnout and low job satisfaction; many choose to leave the profession, and this causes critical shortages in qualified special education teachers (Algozzine et al., 2011; Ansley et al., 2019; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Ingersoll et al., 2012; Jerrim, 2021; Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Sutchter et al., 2019). Reforms in special education have changed the way services are provided to students with disabilities to ensure they receive a FAPE. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) pushed for all students with disabilities to be educated to the greatest extent possible in inclusive education classrooms in a “one size fits all” (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020; O’Brien et al., 2019) model; this placed more responsibilities on special education teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Research over the last several decades has attempted to identify the factors that contribute to burnout and has focused attention on exhaustion, negativity towards the profession, and low self-efficacy. The current body of research proposes that self-efficacy and stress have a significant effect on special education teacher burnout (Park & Shin, 2020). Of the many factors that contribute to low job satisfaction and burnout, a common theme prevalent in the literature, is special education teachers do not feel supported by the administration (i.e., principal) because the supervisors lack the knowledge of special education policy and practice (Robinson et al., 2019) to make effective changes. Little research has examined the extent of what administrators need to know about special education policy and practice to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce job-related anxiety,

stress, and burnout. Prolonged experiences of burnout can lead to feelings of low self-worth and inadequacy in job performance that may eventually lead to attrition and a smaller pool of qualified special education teachers who support students with disabilities.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. At this stage in the research, self-efficacy will be defined as part of one's own self-reflectiveness or where an individual examines their own functions (Bandura, 1977, 1993). The theory that guides this research is the theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1993), grounded in social cognitive theory which explains how individuals are agents of their own goals, actions, and destinies.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study seeks to add to the literature on special education teacher burnout and how administrators in public-school settings described experiences and knowledge of special education policy and practices. Further, this study will explore what administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce job-related anxiety, stress, and burnout. Research studies to date, have identified the school principal as the leading authority in public-school settings who is responsible for ensuring the well-being of all staff and usually, they neglect to include others with authority over special education teachers (e.g., assistant principal, senior teacher). This research study will use the perspectives from all levels of administration who hold endorsements in leadership who have some governing power over special education teacher job responsibilities. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological



approach allows a researcher to explore the lived experiences of administrators and their different approaches to improving the working conditions of special education teachers. Exploring the theoretical significance of the problem of burnout, stress, and low self-efficacy, will add to the existing literature on special education teacher burnout and will add to a gap in the literature to include the perspectives of senior teachers, assistant principals, and principals of how they assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers. The contributions of this study seek to make future leaders in public education aware of the challenges of being a special education teacher and how their limited knowledge of special education policy and practices may impact a teacher's self-efficacy. In addition, understanding the perceptions from all levels of leadership may provide future direction for professional learning opportunities on how to assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers.

### **Theoretical**

Special education teachers must balance many responsibilities that “requires high demands in mental and physical energy” (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 295) that if not properly balanced can lead to burnout. Burnout among special education teachers is a growing problem that has persisted over several decades causing high attrition rates and creating critical teaching shortages in much of the United States (Robinson et al., 2019). The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) (2015) provides professional standards for educational leaders (e.g., principals) that detail the nature and quality of work that is necessary for effective leadership through 10 standards. Standard six, sub-section (h) describes the need for administrators to assist faculty and staff with balancing health and well-being. This research study will contribute to the literature on teacher self-efficacy by exploring through the lived

experiences of administrators their knowledge of special education policy and practice, and what administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. There are four sources of efficacy expectations (a) performance accomplishment, (b) vicarious experience, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) emotional arousal (Bandura, 1977). When individuals experience low self-efficacy or failures it can either motivate them to excel or cause an individual to give up (i.e., performance accomplishment). Administrators with limited knowledge of special education policy and practice may not be equipped to meet the needs of special education teachers which may impact both the administrator's self-efficacy and the special education teacher's self-efficacy. Human agency plays a critical role in human development and motivation to succeed. A component of human agency is control of one's own actions and destiny (Bandura, 2001). Control lies with an individual and learning occurs through lived experiences (Bandura, 1977). This study will explore the lived experience of administrators and how learning experiences in leadership programs prepared administrators to lead special education departments. This study will also seek to understand what the district provides as additional support and knowledge about special education policy and practice to assist administrators with understanding the complexities of being a special education teacher. Administrators must possess a level of confidence when supervising special education staff and they must take control of their own goals and destiny, usually by learning more about special education when they are on the job. This requires administrators to use self-reflectiveness to examine their own functions of what they need to know to effectively implement change for special education teachers to improve self-efficacy.

## **Empirical**

This hermeneutical phenomenological research study seeks to explore the learning experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education and what administrators believe is necessary knowledge about special education policy and practice to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce job-related anxiety, stress, and burnout. Prior qualitative research on burnout suggests that special education teachers report feeling overworked and underappreciated (Hester et al., 2020). Exploring administrators' learning experiences and what they perceive they need to know to improve working conditions for special education teacher may provide the district with an opportunity to plan and execute effective professional development for school-level leaders to help them improve their own self-efficacy when managing special education teachers. Prior research has shown that preparation programs that prepare new administrators have not adequately prepared them with the necessary pedagogy in special education (DeMatthews et al. 2020). Leadership programs do not adequately prepare educational leaders and there is an immediate need for more focus in all domains of special education (Sun & Xin, 2020). Research has indicated that some of the factors that contribute to special education teacher burnout and low self-efficacy are administrators who lack clear knowledge of special education policy and practices and therefore do not receive adequate support in their teaching roles (Robinson et al., 2020). This research will fill the gap in the literature by using a qualitative approach to explore not only the principal, but also assistant principals and senior teachers who actively have some authority over special education teachers. Furthermore, research on teacher attrition has put forward that policy makers and practitioners (e.g., school board) typically focus on selecting, assessing, and retaining teachers, however neglect to focus on the workplace and a strong working environment (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Administrators need to identify causes of stress and identify coping strategies that can lower teachers' stress levels (Kebbi, 2018) that can be provided through professional development to special education teachers who experience low job satisfaction because of burnout.

### **Practical**

This research study will explore the lived experience of administrators who supervise special education teachers in a K-12 public-school setting. Special education teachers experience high rates of burnout with many choosing to leave the field to pursue other opportunities (Algozzine et al., 2011; Hester et al., 2020; Jerrim, 2021). The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education (NCPSSERS) (2022) reports that currently there is a high need for qualified special education teachers and many schools are struggling to fill vacant positions. Data collected from the American Association for Employment in Education for teacher supply and demand, identifies that special education has severe shortages in all 10 subareas for the 2016-2017 school year (Sutcher et al., 2019). In recent years, school divisions have creatively tried to recruit new teachers through different licensure pathways, but without effective change to the current roles and responsibilities and support from administrators, these efforts are mitigated when new special education teachers choose to leave the profession after only a few short years. Administrators who share their lived experiences of working with special education teachers and the ways they assess and implement change for this minority group of educators can provide future leaders with an opportunity to understand the importance of knowing special education policy and practice that may cause burnout and stress, and administrators must work to be effective change agents to improve working conditions in their local school divisions.

## **Research Questions**

This hermeneutical phenomenological study will explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers.

### **Central Research Question**

What do K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers?

### **Sub-Question One**

How do administrators perceive learning experiences in special education policy and practices from leadership programs and professional development have prepared them to lead inclusive schools and understand special education teacher job responsibilities?

### **Sub-Question Two**

How do K-12 public-school administrators perceive burnout affects a special education teacher?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What do administrators perceive is needed from district level leaders to improve school leaderships knowledge of special education policy and practices?

### **Sub-Question Four**

What do administrators believe is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers to reduce attrition?

## **Definitions**

1. *Burnout* – a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (World Health Organization,2019).

2. *Co-teaching* – using two qualified professionals in the same class where one serves as the general education teacher, and the other serves as the special education teacher (Cook & Friend, 1995).
3. *Inclusion* – a model of special education where students with disabilities are mainstreamed into general education classrooms and educated alongside their non-disabled peers (Gilmour, 2018).
4. *Self-efficacy* – an individual’s coping behavior will determine how much effort and for how long this effort will continue when presented with challenges and adverse experiences (Bandura, 1977, 1993).
5. *Human agency* - learning takes place from experience and people are agents of their own experience therefore control lies within the individual (Bandura, 2001).

### **Summary**

Special education teacher stress, burnout, and low job satisfaction is a growing problem that continues to threaten the stability of special education services provided to students with disabilities. Reforms like the movement to full inclusion of students with disabilities have changed the way the continuum of special education services is provided which puts more responsibility on special education teachers and adds to their already overwhelming workloads. Research on special education teacher burnout points out that there are many contributing factors to burnout that include workload manageability, poor relationships with co-teachers, and lack of support and efficacy from educational leaders (e.g., principals) that causes them to leave the profession creating teacher shortages in special education. The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-

efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Despite decades of research on special education teacher burnout, little research examines an administrators' perception of how to assess self-efficacy and improve the working conditions that may improve job satisfaction for special education teachers. Research on administrators understanding of special education policy and practice often refers to district leaders or building-level principals as the primary source of information and most research studies fail to include other administrative leaders (e.g., senior teacher) in the research who may have varying perceptions of what is needed to be known to improve working conditions for special education teachers.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

A review of the literature was conducted to explore historical changes and reforms in special education that have led to increased responsibilities for special education teachers and the impacts these changes have had on self-efficacy, burnout, and attrition. Administrators in public-school settings are responsible for ensuring the well-being of all teachers (NPBEA, 2015); however, leadership programs and ongoing professional development provide minimal training in special education policy and practices (Billingsley et al., 2014; Melloy et al., 2022) and more importantly, they fail to provide knowledge on how to assess and improve working conditions to enhance self-efficacy and reduce burnout and stress. Chapter Two begins with the theoretical framework that guides this study and details how self-efficacy can lead to low job satisfaction, stress, and anxiety. The literature review commences with a detailed history of the significant changes to special education policies and practices and the movement toward inclusion. A review of the literature was conducted to explore the workload of special education teachers and the effects on self-efficacy. Critical shortages of special education teachers are then explored through the literature, and finally, a review of the literature was conducted on leadership and programs that prepare them to lead special education teachers in inclusive schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Special education teacher stress, burnout, and low job satisfaction is a growing problem in the United States with many deciding to leave the profession (Algozzine et al., 2011; Hester et al., 2020; Jerrim, 2021). The theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1993) is grounded in social cognitive theory and serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Social cognitive theory is described as an agentic perspective where individuals (i.e., agentic) have the power to control



their own goals, actions, and destiny. Under self-efficacy theory, an individual's coping behavior will determine how much effort they will expend, and for how long this effort will continue when presented with challenges and adverse experiences (Bandura, 1977, 1993).

### **Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is grounded in social cognitive theory and is considered a pivotal part of the self-reflectiveness (examining your own functions) construct. Self-efficacy is where failures can either motivate an individual to do better or it can cause a person to lose confidence in their abilities eventually causing them to give up (Bandura, 1977). The adverse experiences of some special education teachers are well documented in research today and is causing some to reconsider the profession and creating critical shortages in special education teacher staff (Algozzine et al., 2011; Hester et al., 2020; Jerrim, 2021). Bandura (1977) identified four sources of efficacy expectations to include, performance accomplishment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. The first source, performance accomplishments, is considered especially influential to an individual's efficacy. When a person experiences personal mastery, their efficacy is raised, however, repeated failure can lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). These successes and failures largely depend on the timing of the events and the overall patterns in which they occur. The second source of efficacy lies within vicarious experience. Not all self-efficacy is believed to reside in mastery through experience, but also through seeing others achieve success without negative outcomes (Bandura, 1977). When an individual sees others doing a task (modeled behavior), then the individual believes they too can accomplish the task, and this can raise self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The third source of efficacy is verbal persuasion. Verbal persuasion implies that individuals are led to success when they receive verbal confirmation that they can succeed. This is considered a weaker expectation because

unless the individual experiences accomplishment through an experiential base then the person may not truly believe they can do it. The final source of self-efficacy is emotional arousal. The values one receives from difficult situations can elicit emotional arousal and depending on the individual may be a source of their perceived self-efficacy. Feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem have caused some in the profession to question their continued commitment to teaching students with disabilities. This literature review will explore the history of reforms in special education that affect self-efficacy and the factors that contribute to feelings of being overworked and underappreciated by school administrators (Hester et al., 2020).

Social cognitive theory from an agentic perspective describes that learning takes place from experience and people are agents of their own experience therefore control lies within the individual. There are four main constructs to the human agency: (a) intention – what you plan to do, (b) forethought – motivation to act on intention, (c) self-reactiveness – making choices to execute the plan, and (d) self-reflectiveness – examining one's own functions (Bandura, 2001). With reforms in special education and the push to full inclusion, have put more responsibility on special education teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Special education teachers no longer have the autonomy of selecting evidence-based practices that meet the unique learning needs of students, but now must share responsibility for providing education to students with disabilities in the general education setting. General and special education teachers are required to collaborate to develop curriculum and co-teaching models that will address the unique learning needs of all students not only those with disabilities in the general education setting. Collaboration requires each of the teachers to have a vision of what the delivery of instruction will look like and how students will be assessed for mastery of the content within the

confounds of a general education classroom. With the push for inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, it becomes important that special education teachers who support those students have high self-efficacy so they can impact the student and improve their educational outcomes. A current trend in special education is to provide pre-service teachers with a general curriculum or generalist endorsement (Sindelar et al., 2019); however, this falls short of providing curriculum knowledge specific to content for special education teachers. Therefore, special education teachers are required to learn new skills (i.e., content-specific curriculum) and techniques for providing individualized education to students with disabilities that are not previously taught in teacher preparation programs. Inclusion and collaboration between general education and special education teachers is best summed up by “...joint activities require commitment to a shared intention and coordination of interdependent plans of action” (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms is a joint activity and requires two professionals who are equally involved in discussions and planning to make instruction effective for student learning (Pratt et al., 2017).

Research on special education teacher stress, burnout, attrition, and co-teaching have all identified that special education teachers have expressed that they are feeling overworked and underappreciated (Hester et al., 2020) by their collaborating co-teachers and administrators. The research has identified that special education teachers do not feel valued for their expertise and are not supported in their current roles within the general education setting. This causes many special education teachers to leave the profession creating critical shortages across the United States. Research on university programs that prepare graduates to lead special education programs has identified that many new principals lack experience in special education, and they must learn after starting their leadership roles. Because many administrators lack knowledge of

special education policy and practices, many administrators focus on compliance with legal requirements rather than making changes to special education programs (Billingsley et al., 2018). Research over the last few decades has indicated that principal preparation programs are outdated and lack a specific focus on special education, and they do not provide new principals with clinical experience with special education leaders (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Billingsley et al., 2019; Hess & Kelly, 2010,). School principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers must all possess a working knowledge of special education policy and practice and the historical changes in special education that have led to students with disabilities receiving their education in an inclusive education classroom. Most importantly, administrators must be supportive and empowered to supervise special education teachers, and this includes them understanding the roles and responsibilities of a special education teacher if they are going to be able to improve self-efficacy. Administrators who are not prepared to lead special education staff because of a lack of training from their preparation programs or district professional develop, it can affect their own self-efficacy which in turn can impact special education teachers' self-efficacy to deliver quality instruction to students with disabilities. Administrators need to provide support to their staff, and this includes how they assess and improve working conditions that can reduce stress and burnout and improve self-efficacy for special education teachers.

### **Related Literature**

Over the last several decades, changes to public law and amendment in special education have sought to protect the rights of students with disabilities, while providing them with FAPE. However, little change has occurred in improving the working conditions for special education teachers causing some of them to experience low self-efficacy and burnout (Park & Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). One of the most challenging issues in special

education today is the retention of in-service teachers due to low job satisfaction and burnout (Ansley et al., 2019; Haydon et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Special education teacher attrition continues to be a huge problem with chronic teacher shortages being reported across the United States (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2012, Mason-Williams et al., 2020). In the state of Virginia, special education teacher shortages have been ranked as the highest critical shortage teaching assignment area for over a decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). To gain a rich understanding of special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout, literature was collected using ERIC, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and ProQuest. Literature searchers included phrases that encompassed “special education” “history”, “special education teacher” “stress” “burnout” “anxiety” “inclusion” “shortage” “workload” “job satisfaction”, “administrator”, and “administrative leadership” “special education”. Multiple combinations of the key words were used to locate literature for this dissertation.

### **Historical Changes in Special Education**

Since the early 1800s, special education policies and practices have undergone numerous changes to provide better educational opportunities for students with disabilities. According to Winzer (1993), the United States adopted practices from Europe that initially placed students with disabilities in institutions with hopes that eventually one day they would become independent. These students were often sent to special schools and in some cases were denied access to education because of their disability. These early practices in special education would continue for more than half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until advocates for students with disabilities began to challenge exclusionary practices. Beginning in the 1950s support for individuals with disabilities began to develop with special interest groups and parents who began to advocate for support from the federal government for special needs students (Reddy, 1999). Two important

court cases in the 1970s emerged the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Pennsylvania and Mills v. The Board of Education in the District of Columbia would change the course of history and how services are provided to students with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), there was a significant push for school districts to provide the LRE and more inclusion of disabled students in general education classrooms. Since 2006 there has been an increased focus on human rights and social justice for students with disabilities (Bea Francisco et al., 2020) and as a result, the United States has adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that further provides protections to students with disabilities. Inclusion can be successful for some students and the least restrictive environment is essential to ensuring that students with disabilities are included as much as possible with their non-disabled peers. The least restrictive environment (LRE) has been conceptualized as more of a place where information is integrated and not separated (Maag et al., 2019). The authors further pose that when students with disabilities are not provided access to the general education classroom, it can be a violation of their civil rights. However, on the other hand, public education should not declare that placement is more important than the direct individualized instruction that some students require in a separate special education classroom to be successful (Kauffman et al., 2017). The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 encourages schools to evaluate each student on a case-by-case basis and decide what setting would meet the learning needs of the student, however, the current trend is to place students in the general education classrooms with a general and special education teacher (O'Brien et al., 2019). Some research indicates that students with disabilities have greater academic gains and social acceptance, while other researchers have found less of an impact on student performance. In recent years, research on inclusion has called into question the true

benefits of inclusion with some arguing that students with disabilities are falling further behind non-disabled peers. Special education teachers today are challenged with providing individualized instruction using evidence-based practices in inclusive classrooms with many of them finding it difficult to meet the demands of the job (Hester et al., 2020).

Special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout are not a new phenomenon but is a phenomenon that continues to plague the profession. The literature today on special education teacher burnout targets causes (e.g., support) (Hester et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020), and effects (e.g., low self-efficacy) (Hester et al., 2020) that leads to a deficit of qualified special education teachers because of attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019) and low enrollments in college preparatory programs (Sutcher et al., 2019). The research also indicates the impacts teacher shortages can have on students with disabilities when services are not received that are protected under the law (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Mason et al., 2020). While the research on inclusion is wide and covers numerous important issues in special education, it fails to focus on the changing roles and responsibilities of special education teachers and how this affects self-efficacy. In recent years, researchers have continued to grapple with the reasons why special education teachers leave the profession and conclude that administrative support is a primary cause for special education teacher attrition (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019). Research has also identified that the changing roles and responsibilities of special education teachers in inclusive classrooms have added additional workloads to the point that the jobs are unmanageable (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Thakur, 2018). Although research has identified some causes of special education teacher attrition, the field still lacks the understanding of how

administrators in public-schools assess and improve the working conditions of special education teachers when administrators are bound by federal law to provide students with disabilities inclusion as their only option for placement. The extant literature in special education lacks representation of all levels of leadership within the school setting. This research seeks to understand the perspectives of principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers who have some level of authority over the job functions of a special education teacher in a district that practices inclusion.

### **Inclusion and the Changing Role of Special Education Teachers**

One of the biggest reforms in education that impacts special education policies and practices is the movement toward full inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms. Inclusion has significantly changed the roles of special education teachers and placed more responsibilities on them (Billingsley et al., 2020, Da Fonte & Barton, 2017) and causes many of them to feel overworked and underappreciated (Hester et al., 2020). Inclusion was derived from IDEA, a federal law that requires that students with disabilities receive a FAPE in the LRE (Billingsley & Banks, 2019). Students with disabilities who previously were taught in separate classrooms are now placed to the greatest extent possible in regular education classrooms (Billingsley & Banks, 2019; Friend et al., 2010, Harvey et al., 2010; O'Brien et al., 2019) that has increased the workload of special education teachers. Inclusion has gained increased acceptance over the last several decades and since the 1980s the principles of NCLB and LRE have pushed for students with disabilities who historically were educated in separate settings to be educated with their non-disabled peers using supports and services to meet the unique learning needs of student with disabilities in the regular education setting (Billingsley & Banks, 2019; Friend et al., 2010, Harvey et al., 2010; O'Brien et al., 2019). General and special



education teachers now work collaboratively in one setting to provide education to all students in one classroom. Inclusionary practices have pushed school districts to place students into a “one size fits all” (O’Brien et al., 2019, p. 30) classroom where they are expected to achieve the same academic rigor as their non-disabled peers (Goodman et al., 2011). The assumption is that students with disabilities when provided support, services, and specialized instruction in the general education setting will be able to meet the academic demands of the classroom. A provision in NCLB states that all students and schools will achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) in academic standards through state testing therefore it is important that students with disabilities have access to the general education classroom and curriculum (Harvey et al., 2010). While students with disabilities historically have struggled to make the same academic gains as their non-disabled peers, this places more responsibility on the special education teacher to find time to incorporate specially designed instruction in the inclusive setting. Inclusion and the rights of students with disabilities is an important goal in special education that has become a global phenomenon (Deng & Zhu, 2016; Kauffman & Anastasious, 2018; Kauffman et al., 2018). Inclusion and LRE may be one of the biggest contended issues in special education policy and practice when placement is more important than efficient instruction (Kauffman et al., 2018). Over the last several decades, proponents of inclusion have pushed the education system to put more students with disabilities into general education classrooms without understanding the effects this can have on all students. The least restrictive environment and placement options should not be more important than quality instruction (Kauffman & Anastasious, 2018) and each child should be evaluated based on their disability and which placement option will allow him or her to receive a FAPE (Kauffman et al., 2023). Further, recent research indicates that many programs and evidence-based practices designed to improve performances in reading and

mathematics for students with disabilities are not being used because the programs require individualized instruction that does not meet the needs of all students in the inclusive education setting (Fuchs et al., 2023). Proponents of special education services have argued that inclusion downgrades and undermines the features of a special education teacher when they assume all responsibilities for students in general education classrooms (Kauffman & Anastasious, 2018). Although research on special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout has identified a lack of support from co-teachers and administrators as a cause of low self-efficacy, the academic literature still lacks an understanding of the perceptions of administrators on how to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. This research will be unique to the field because it will focus on prior learning experiences of principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers in special education policy and practice and how administrators perceive their ability to improve the lives of special education teachers. This research may provide a better understanding of what school districts need to do to provide additional support and services through professional development opportunities to administrators, general education, and special education teachers that can reduce anxiety, stress, and burnout.

There is a significant amount of research on the strengths and weaknesses of inclusion. Some research identifies students with disabilities who are educated in general education classrooms are more likely to make educational gains in academics and more social gains when they are educated with their nondisabled peers (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012). Students with disabilities perform higher academically, are more involved with nondisabled peers, have better role models, have less stigmatism, improved behaviors, better social skills, and have higher self-esteem (Burstein et al., 2004). Although research supports the advantages of inclusion as a service delivery model for students with disabilities, research on best practices for students with

disabilities is conflicting, but what remains true is that students with disabilities are still not meeting expectations in the general education classroom (Cole et al., 2021). While this research yields promising results and supports inclusion, there still exists a vast difference in performance between non-disabled and disabled students in the general education setting. Not all research supports inclusion as the only valid option for students with disabilities. Cipriano et al. (2016) studied exclusive education classrooms and the practices used by special education teachers to see how effective they were for students with disabilities. The study concluded that by using the right framework and positive interactions with students with disabilities, long-term and short-term academic and behavioral outcomes can improve using a self-contained service delivery model. The research by Cipriano et al. is in direct opposition to full inclusion and demonstrates that some students can make academic gains in environments other than the general education classroom. The study concludes that special education teachers who provide services in the right setting (e.g., self-contained) for students with disabilities, can have a strong impact on students' self-efficacy and future educational outcomes. Although proponents of inclusion assert that students with disabilities make greater academic gains and have better education outcomes, Goodman et al. (2011) examined the use of inclusion classrooms and student graduation rates between 2003 and 2008. It was reported that inclusion increased from 37 percent in 2002 to 60 percent in 2008 while graduation rates for students with disabilities remained less than 30% with a steady decline for 3 years. Although the inclusive education environment is meeting state and federal guidelines for accountability, it still falls short and does not provide a FAPE (Goodman et al., 2011). This should be alarming to the education community that some students with disabilities cannot meet the same expectations as their non-disabled peers since inclusion and co-teaching continue to be the most widely accepted instructional strategy in the public-school

today. Additionally, special education teachers can be affected when their school districts limit the continuum of education services to students with disabilities and these teachers see their students underperforming in the general education classroom. The lack of progress by some students can affect a special education teacher in any of the three dimensions of burnout that causes exhaustion, mental separation, and reduced efficacy (Hester et al., 2020). Since the inception of inclusion and countless amount of research on strengths and weaknesses, the research community continues to support the use of inclusion, even though special education is one of the biggest challenges of teacher education for inclusion (Symeonidou, 2017).

Research has attempted to connect inclusion to specific disciplines (e.g., mathematics). Roos (2019) completed a discourse analysis of 76 studies published from 2010 – 2016 on inclusion and the definitions and roles it plays in the mathematics classroom. The study concluded that when inclusion is used as an ideology it can be “articulated”, however if not properly “operationalized” then the use of inclusion may not have any impact in the mathematics classroom. Unfortunately, the research identifies that some schools do not have the resources to properly put into use the components of a successful inclusive education setting for students with disabilities. Not only do some students with disabilities fall further behind in their academics in the inclusive environment, but special education teachers experience higher rates of stress and anxiety when students do not perform to the same expectations as their non-disabled peers that causes many of them to re-consider the profession because of low self-efficacy (Hester et al., 2020).

In more recent years, researchers have started to challenge inclusion and argue that inclusion does not provide specially designed instruction that some students require in the general education setting (Kauffman et al., 2018; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Deng and Zhu

(2016) reported on the status of inclusion in China. The authors point out that during the time of civil rights in the West, that China's response to inclusion was to develop a three-tier service delivery option for students with disabilities. However, cultural values and the academic excellence mentality prevents China from fully implementing education for all students in the inclusive setting. The Chinese practice of inclusion is to make separate special schools a part of the regular education setting instead of them being apart from inclusion settings (Deng & Zhu, 2016). The research by Deng and Zhu on the Chinese education system is important because it shows how some cultures are addressing inclusion differently and uses other ways of addressing the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education environments. The research by Deng and Zhu, did not provide any understanding of the success that Chinese school systems have with the three-tier service delivery model.

Special education teachers have extremely difficult jobs and they have expressed in research that they do not feel supported in their current roles by administrators when the learning needs of the student are not being met in the inclusive education setting and this can cause low self-efficacy and burnout in special education teachers (Hester et al., 2020). In the United States, society has deemed that separate means that a student is not equal to their non-disabled peers and therefore pushes all students into inclusive education classrooms. Rather than identify the growing concerns with inclusion, research continues to support inclusion as the only answer to special education with little to no regard to the voices of general and special education teachers who work directly with students in the classroom that have identified that some students with disabilities are not making academic gains. Although some research has focused on inclusion and co-teaching, there is limited research on the impacts of inclusion and co-teaching on special education teacher's self-efficacy, and no research could be found that discusses the learning

experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education and what administrators perceive is necessary knowledge about special education policy and practice to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce job-related anxiety, stress, and burnout.

### **Co-Teaching and Special Education Teacher Self-Efficacy**

The movement toward full inclusion of all students to be educated in one classroom has reduced the continuum of educational services that were once predominant in special education and now requires all students to be educated together in the same general education setting. General and special education teachers now rely on the instructional strategy of co-teaching to deliver instruction to students (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016) in a classroom that will have traditional non-disabled students and students with disabilities. General and special education teachers in inclusive classrooms must work collaboratively to create an inclusive education curriculum (Scruggs et al., 2007; Somma, 2020). To provide more effective collaboration in co-taught classrooms, special education teachers require more training in general education pedagogy and instructional techniques that will support students with disabilities (Semon et al., 2020). However, some research has indicated that general education teachers do not value the input that a special education teacher brings to the classroom even when they have a basic understanding of the curriculum (Hester et al., 2020). There are several terms used to describe co-teaching that include team teaching, teaming, instructional team (Krammer et al., 2018) and collaborative teaching. Co-teaching is the idea of using two qualified professionals, one serving as the general education teacher, and the other serving as the special education teacher who both deliver instruction to students (Cook & Friend, 1995; Strogilos & King, 2019) to provide a continuum of collaborative services to students with disabilities in the general education setting.

In co-teaching models, the nature, extent, and duration of collaboration is determined by the unique needs of the child (Travers, 2020). Co-teaching as an instructional strategy is designed to integrate into inclusive classrooms techniques that allow students to achieve goals that are outlined in a student's individualized education program (IEP) that is explicitly designed to meet the needs of the student (Friend, 2015).

The literature on co-teaching has identified key components that make it successful in the inclusive education setting. The key components most identified in the research are parity between teachers, equal distribution of responsibilities, co-planning, and shared delivery of instruction (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017, Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Strogilos & King, 2019). Research has also identified that a major component of co-teaching is administrative support which can have a positive impact on co-teaching teams. Administrators must provide adequate planning between the co-teachers, listening to their needs in the classroom, and providing training on models of co-teaching (Friend et al., 2010; Scruggs et al., 2007). There is ample evidence in the extant literature that supports the need for each of the components of co-teaching for inclusive classrooms to be successful. However, research on special education teacher self-efficacy and burnout contends that special education teachers do not feel a sense of belonging in general education classrooms when the general education teacher does not share the responsibilities of the class, and this can have a direct impact to their self-efficacy (Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). There are six identified models of co-teaching that are regularly practiced in public education (Friend et al., 2010; Strogilos and King, 2019; Zach, 2020). Parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, and team teaching each allow the special education teacher to be an active participant in the classroom. This can positively affect a special education teachers' sense of belonging and improved self-efficacy. Special education teachers

have expressed that in some inclusive classrooms that general education teachers do not trust them to teach the curriculum and therefore only want them to observe the special education students and monitor behaviors. Unfortunately, when a general education teacher does not want a special education teacher to provide specially designed instruction to students in the general education setting who require it, there is a risk of the students IEP not being followed that violates their right to a free appropriate public education. More recently, some researchers have identified that there are other forms of co-teaching that exist that extend beyond the original six models because the approaches used in some inclusive classrooms cannot be placed into one single model (Lindacher, 2020).

School leadership plays a key role in the successful implementation of inclusive education programs. Administrators must provide adequate planning between the co-teachers, listening to their needs in the classroom, and providing training on models of co-teaching (Friend et al., 2010; Scruggs et al., 2007). Teachers must also be proficient in co-teaching models, and they must have knowledge on how to effectively collaborate with a co-teacher (Murawski & Lochner, 2011) and prepare lessons that accounts for student's needs (e.g., accommodations) in the inclusive classroom (Brendle et al., 2017). In recent years, research has identified that general education and special education teachers reported administrative support and high rates of teacher attrition and shortages were challenges to effective implementation of inclusion (Kim et al., 2020). When special education teachers do not feel supported in their current roles, this can lead to low job satisfaction and eventually attrition that affects the inclusive education setting. Public-school administrators who understand special education policy and practices are generally more understanding to the needs of special education teachers. However, many administrators today are not fully prepared to lead inclusive schools (Melloy et al., 2022). This study seeks to



explore the lived experiences of administrators and how leadership programs have prepared them to lead inclusive schools that support co-teaching models of education. Additionally, this study seeks to explore how administrators perceive the impacts of burnout and the effects it has on special education teacher's self-efficacy, and the perceptions of what administrators believe will improve self-efficacy and working conditions.

### **Impacts and Attitudes of Inclusion**

Special education has endured many changes over the years and likely will experience more in the future. When changes are implemented, the intent is to improve the education of students with disabilities. Advocates for inclusion believe that special education focuses more attention to the medical model of disability, and that by focusing on what a child cannot do is socially unacceptable. While others believe that special education is losing its identity because of the movement toward full inclusion. Special education is at a crossroad and is dealing with an identity crisis (Kauffman et al., 2017). Without completely understanding the impact of full inclusion and how it affects society, classrooms, and special education teachers the term inclusion could be simply a slogan that is used, and it does not value in education (Roos, 2019). Most research that has been done on inclusion has major limitations by ignoring selection bias for those students who are placed in inclusive education classrooms (Gilmour, 2018). Students who are educated in separate special classrooms have higher academic needs and some students with greater behavior problems are not included in inclusive education. These students are then compared to each other in research studies that compare inclusive and exclusive education classrooms and often research contends that students in general education classrooms make greater academic gains. However, when these students with higher academic and behavioral needs are placed in inclusive education classrooms, teachers begin to have lower self-efficacy,

and some are leaving the profession because of the demands placed on them with inclusive education (Hester et al., 2020, Robinson et al., 2019).

Teacher attitudes play an important role in the implementation of inclusion programs in schools. Gregory (2018) completed a study of several nations around the world and found that teacher attitudes and perceptions of inclusion varied depending on the nation and their levels of separate special education systems. Nations with weak special education systems did not have good attitudes about inclusion, while nations with separate parallel systems (e.g., Australia and the United States) had better attitudes towards inclusion (Gregory, 2018). Inclusion is becoming a worldwide phenomenon and the current practice in the United States is to eliminate any idea of separate educational placement for student with disabilities regardless of the level of disability or the impacts to special education teacher self-efficacy. The impact of this notion can be felt by general and special education teachers, but more importantly by the students it is meant to protect. In 2015, Dev and Haynes investigated teacher perceptions of inclusion and found that not all teachers who were interviewed felt that inclusive classrooms served as an appropriate LRE for students with disabilities. Van Steen and Wilson (2020) in their research on inclusion conclude that there was a positive effect size indicating that teachers support diverse learners in their classrooms. As time has elapsed since prior analysis the attitudes reported by teachers have greatly improved (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). However, their meta-analysis did not include perceptions of inclusion from the perspective of special education teachers who experience the highest rates of anxiety, stress, and burnout that is leading to unprecedented critical shortages in the teaching community.

Researchers continue to debate the most effective models of service delivery for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Advocates for and against inclusion

have identified benefits and weaknesses for the movement to full inclusion (i.e., education of all) in general education classrooms. Most of the literature reviewed on inclusive classrooms supports the benefits for student development when educated alongside their non-disabled peers. There is still an ongoing discussion on the effectiveness of inclusive education among the scholarly community with some research beginning to describe the concerns of special education teachers for the lack of support from administration and high demands of the job are critical reasons why they leave the profession. Within the extant literature in the field of special education, leadership, and inclusion; there is little that is known about what K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Since inclusion requires special education teachers to work collaboratively with general education, there are multiple interactions a special education teacher may have with leadership from a grade level senior teacher through principalship that can impact a special education teacher's self-efficacy that may perpetuate burnout and stress. The literature reviewed up to this point has not concretely identified what level of administration has the greatest effect on special education teacher job satisfaction. This research study seeks to understand the perspectives from all those who have direct supervision authority over a special education teacher and is needed to fill the gap in the literature on assessing and improving working conditions to improve job satisfaction for special education teachers.

### **Benefits vs. Barriers of Inclusion and Co-Teaching**

The literature reviewed up to this point recommends that inclusion and co-teaching are necessary to improve the educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, literature is limited with the impacts that inclusion has on special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout. The scholarly community has not reached a consensus on the effectiveness

of inclusion and co-teaching; however, some research studies attempt to find correlations between student outcomes and teacher development. Cook et al. (2017) found that co-teaching improved instruction, increased collaboration and teamwork, and reduced stigmatism associated with special education services. Teacher development and increased curriculum knowledge have also improved for special education teachers (Cook & Landrum, 2020; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Mofield, 2020). Co-teaching provides benefits to students by providing differentiated instruction, and it allows teachers to pair diverse groups of students to work together (Casserly & Padden, 2018). The parallel of two educators (Scruggs et al., 2007), and their individual skills and different knowledge (Lindacher, 2020) can benefit students with disabilities by giving them access to the same curriculum that is not possible when only one teacher is present in the classroom instructing students (Casserly & Padden, 2018; Mastropieri et al., 2005). Researchers have expressed that the most effective models of co-teaching include joint planning, parity between teachers, and shared responsibilities (Bešić et al., 2017; Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend et al., 2010, Friend, 2015). These research studies are critical in understanding how co-teaching is supposed to be operationalized in the inclusive environment, however, some special education teachers do not feel that full inclusion is meeting the needs of all students. Special education teachers report that inclusion is creating more work for them outside of the general education setting (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017), and prior studies fail to recognize the complexities of the unmanageable workloads of special education teachers.

In contrast to the research on the benefits of inclusion and co-teaching, some researchers have evidence that the components of co-teaching often create the greatest amount of anxiety, stress, and burnout in special education teachers (Pratt et al., 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007). Co-teaching has significant barriers at the school and personal level that affect implementation

(Chitiyo, 2017). School-level barriers are defined as daily routines, availability of resources, policies and practices, and leadership support (Chitiyo, 2017). Individual barriers that may prevent the successful implementation of co-teaching can include a lack of training in co-teaching in pre-service education programs, and more importantly a lack of willingness to participate by collaborating partners (Chitiyo, 2017). Hester et al. (2020) identified this as a major source of low job satisfaction among special education teachers.

Special education teachers have also reported that co-planning and the lack of time and willingness by the collaborating partner affect special education teachers negatively (Bešić et al., 2017; Friend et al., 2010; Pratt et al., 2017). Co-planning between a general education teacher and a special education teacher may encounter challenges when each teacher has different philosophies and teaching styles (Pratt et al., 2017). Schools do not allow adequate time for co-teachers to engage in planning (Bešić et al., 2017). When there is a lack of co-planning it can create an unequal distribution of work for either of the co-teachers and often this leads to collaborating partners using parallel teaching by separating students into two groups (Rytivaara et al., 2019). However, research has identified that depending on the model of co-teaching that is used in the inclusive educational setting (e.g., parallel teaching) it has the potential to create more job responsibilities for the special education teacher (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017).

Despite the push for full inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, there is still an overwhelming amount of support provided to these students in separate classrooms (Casserly & Padden, 2018). Inclusion requires the special education teacher to provide IEP services as well as curriculum instruction to students with disabilities therefore this can create more work for the special education teacher (Lindacher, 2020; Bešić et al., 2017; Embury & Dinnesen, 2012). This research seeks clarity from public-school administrators if

understanding the roles and responsibilities of a special education teacher and the demands of their job can create anxiety, stress, and burnout. Ashton (2016) found that special education teachers had to work additional hours preparing for inclusive classrooms to understand the curriculum and to help students with disabilities make progress in the general education setting. Lindacher (2020) investigated perceptions of general and special education teachers and their responsibilities in inclusive classrooms. Special education teachers may take on additional teaching responsibilities for students without disabilities because of their ability to provide clear and explicit instruction (Lindacher, 2020). These findings are similar to research by Bešić et al. (2017), and Embury and Dinnesen (2012) who found similar results when special education teachers assumed responsibilities for students without disabilities who struggled with the curriculum therefore it creates more work for special education teachers that can lead to stress, burnout, and low job satisfaction.

Another major source of anxiety, stress, and burnout for special education teachers who participate in co-teaching is the lack of parity among collaborating partners; who are often assigned by school-level administrators (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016; Strogilos & King, 2019). This research study seeks to understand the perceptions of administrators and how they assess working conditions like parity among teachers and how they improve those working relationships to support special education teachers. Special education teachers may be treated less like a teacher and more like an assistant (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016) and in some cases are not valued by the general education teacher for their professional roles in the classroom when the special education teacher lacks curriculum knowledge (Hester et al., 2020; Lindacher, 2020). Research has indicated that poor collaboration among co-teachers can have a negative impact on successful implementation of co-teaching strategies (Ashton, 2016; Kim et al., 2020). Other

studies have indicated that poor relationships with collaborating partners create anxiety, stress, and burnout among special education teachers causing some of them to leave the profession (Haydon et al., 2018; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hagaman & Casey, 2018; Hester et al., 2020) because they feel isolated and disconnected from the school (Robinson et al., 2019).

The literature on co-teaching is mixed with some research studies that identify the benefits of effective strategies for co-teaching, while others in the field point out the flaws in the design and implementation of effective co-teaching. One area that focuses on special education teacher self-efficacy is parity among teachers. When teachers have good parity, their self-efficacy can be higher, however, when parity is lacking, self-efficacy and low job satisfaction are often cited in research as reasons why special education teachers are leaving the profession (Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). In inclusive school settings, special education teachers must work with general education teachers and act as a cohesive and collaborative unit to ensure the needs of all students are being met. Unfortunately, research does not reach a consensus on the extent that administrators play in assessing and improving working conditions for special education teachers in an inclusive environment. Since inclusion is mandated by federal law, administrators are limited in their ability to change the structure of their local education system. By not being able to provide exclusive education, administrators must play a crucial role in finding alternative ways to improve special education teacher self-efficacy in the inclusive setting when more than one administrator is responsible for the supervision of special education teachers (e.g., assistant principal). Research is still needed to fill this gap in the literature, and this research will focus on more than just the principal by incorporating the perceptions of assistant principals, and senior teachers who may have some level of authority over special education teachers.

## **Self-Efficacy and Burnout**

Self-efficacy is grounded in social cognitive theory that emphasizes that individuals have control over their own actions (i.e., human agency) and it is a part of self-reflection upon one's own behavior (Bandura, 1993, 1997). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) defines burnout as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”. Burnout is constructed by three dimensions and includes low energy or exhaustion, mental separation and or negativity towards a job (i.e., depersonalization), and reduce efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; WHO, 2022). Special education teacher burnout and its impact on job satisfaction have been widely researched and continue to be a focus in scholarly literature. Nonetheless, there still exists a gap in the literature on how administrators assess and improve the working conditions for special education teachers when they have an obligation to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the inclusive education setting. Quantitative studies have examined the relationship between variables (e.g., student versus school culture) that can lead to burnout and attrition among special education teachers (Park & Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). Using the dimensions of burnout and variables related to students, teachers, and schools, researchers have attempted to identify which constructs of burnout are more likely to impact a special education teachers' job satisfaction. Student related variables (e.g., age, grade), teacher related variables (e.g., age, gender), and school related variables (e.g., emotional experience, resources) are often cited as contributing factors that increase special education teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Park & Shin, 2020). Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are the key factors in teacher burnout. Exhaustion was a result of time pressure (e.g., paperwork) and depersonalization was strongly associated with relationships with parents (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Park and Shin (2020) identified that



depersonalization was strongly affected by student age. Researchers have identified teacher related variables that greatly impact special education teachers and have found that self-efficacy and stress have significant effect sizes across all three dimensions of exhaustion, depersonalization, and efficacy (Park & Shin, 2020). It has also been identified that school variables can have a significant impact on special education teacher burnout. Studies have identified that school level variables (e.g., administrative support) can have an impact on special education teachers' emotional exhaustion that will hinder their work and affect their motivation to perform well (Hester et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020). This research study will look for common themes about how administrators support special education teachers in the inclusive education setting, and how they manage special education teachers who do not feel supported in their current roles. In addition to the lack of support from administrators, poor relationships with general education teachers can also have negative impacts on special education teachers that can contribute to burnout (Hester et al., 2020). Special education teachers have expressed that general education teacher do not see the job of a special education teacher as real and in some cases general education teachers do not want special education teachers to teach curriculum content in inclusive education classrooms (Hester, et al., 2020). When special education teachers experience burnout, they have attributed most of their concerns to the lack of administrative support which affects their self-efficacy and lowers their quality of life (Hester et al., 2020). In recent years, researchers have attempted to find the correlation between burnout symptoms (e.g., exhaustion) and a teacher's intentions of leaving the profession. Burnout can have a significant impact on teacher's job satisfaction, finding that exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment can each influence a teachers' decision to leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Strategies to improve job satisfaction could potentially reduce attrition of teachers,

however, efforts to reduce burnout would be a more effective approach (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Special education teachers experience low self-efficacy, stress, and burnout, with many expressing that they do not feel supported by their administrators (Kim et al., 2020) and are choosing to leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Self-efficacy and burnout have been widely discussed in the literature as reasons why special education teachers leave the profession. However, there still exists a gap in the literature on how administrators and those who have a direct influence over a special education teacher's job satisfaction can promote a healthy working environment.

Special education teacher burnout is not a phenomenon experienced only in the United States. Global research in special education workload and burnout has become more prominent in recent years. Special education teachers experience burnout at rates much higher than their general education counterparts (Thakur, 2018). Additionally, when teacher workload is high it can lead to low job performance, and this further leads to depersonalization and burnout (Thakur, 2018). A consequence of burnout among special education teachers often leads to attrition and increased rates of teachers being absent from school (Thakur, 2018). Other global researchers have focused on burnout among teachers in Greece. Pavlidou et al. (2022) determined that a teacher's gender, experience, grade levels taught, and experience in special education, would determine the level of interpersonal coping skills they would use to manage stress and burnout.

Not all research indicates that burnout and teacher well-being are compromised because of the demands of being a special education teacher. Studies that focus on the three dimensions of burnout defined by the World Health Organization indicate that areas in Switzerland and China do not experience the same levels of burnout as the United States and other global regions (Squillaci, 2021; Fu et al., 2021). Squillaci (2021) explored burnout of special education teachers

in Switzerland. Using self-assessed questionnaires, the authors concluded that special education teachers in Fribourg, Switzerland reported low emotional exhaustion and low depersonalization and had moderate levels for personal accomplishment. However, this research focused on one area of Switzerland and does not represent the entire nation. Special education teachers in the area under investigation reported that they were satisfied with their working conditions and reported to be in good mental health. Fu et al. (2021) studied burnout of special education teachers in Western China and concluded that across the three domains of burnout that only medium levels of stress were reported in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization with low levels in personal accomplishment. There is limited research on special education teacher's self-efficacy who work with students with emotional and behavior disabilities (EBD) in a self-contained classroom. This research may help to identify why self-contained special education teachers experience higher levels of self-efficacy versus teachers who work exclusively in the inclusive education setting. Cumming et al. (2021) researched working conditions, self-efficacy, and practices of special education teachers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders and found similar results in Switzerland and China. Cumming et al. (2021) focused on workload, emotional exhaustion, stress, and self-efficacy. It was concluded that participants reported better working conditions and rated their workloads as manageable with less emotional exhaustion (Cumming et al., 2021). This research study will be an important contribution to the field of educational leadership and special education job satisfaction because there is a necessity to understand how some administrators can promote better self-efficacy in special education teachers, while most of the literature on burnout supports that the lack of administrative leadership is the leading cause of special education teacher burnout and attrition. This research will seek to understand if administrators with higher self-efficacy in special

education policy and practice promote better working conditions for special education. In addition, the research will explore if there is a difference in the perceptions of senior teachers, assistant principals, and principals of how they assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers.

### **Special Education Teacher Workload**

The literature on special education teacher job satisfaction and stress have identified that workload and poor working conditions are leading causes of special education teacher burnout (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). Workload is the amount of work one person must do to be successful at their job (Thakur, 2018). The literature identifies that workload and working conditions are reasons that special education teachers choose to leave the profession. There are multiple variables that can affect the supply and demand of special education teachers (Peyton et al., 2021). States that spend more on expenditures (i.e., per pupil) can have a positive effect on student outcomes and can improve working conditions (i.e., workload) to help retain highly qualified special education teachers (Peyton et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2017). When special education teachers have excessive workloads, it can provoke stress and burnout (Thakur, 2018). Research on special education teacher workload manageability has described the role of a special education teacher as complicated and uncontrollable (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley and Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020).

The responsibilities of special education teachers may include: (a) providing accommodations, (b) making modifications, (c) special education interventions, (d) collaborating with stakeholders (e.g., general education), (e) administrative and supervisory responsibilities, and (f) academic instruction (Bettini et al., 2017). Research on the responsibilities of special

education teacher has identified that special education teachers are overwhelmed with managing a caseload of students, completing student progress monitoring, managing classrooms, development and implementation of students' IEPs, and scheduling and attending meetings with stakeholders (e.g., parents) (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020). Despite the many tasks a special education teacher is responsible for, there are some special education teachers who are successful at managing their workload along with their teaching responsibilities. What has not been identified is what administrators can do in these situations that leads to some special education teachers having a sense of belonging and what they do to improve the working conditions of these teachers. Unlike general education teachers who have defined roles and set parameters for teaching students (Bettini et al., 2017), special education teachers have a lack of clarity about their clashing and sometimes inconclusive roles and responsibilities (Billingsley et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2020; Bettini et al., 2017; Mason et al., 2020) that can cause low job satisfaction, stress, and burnout (Robinson et al., 2019). Changes to special education teacher's roles have made it difficult for special education teachers to achieve role clarity because their job responsibilities can change from year-to-year (Billingsley et al., 2020). For example, depending on the needs of the student population, special education teachers can have teaching assignments in self-contained or inclusive classrooms, they can be placed in several different content areas, and in some cases must work across multiple grade levels (Billingsley et al., 2020). When role clarity is not defined for a special education teacher this can lead to anxiety and stress that can affect their quality of work. Unfortunately, as the literature has proposed, when a teacher's quality of work is compromised, then student performance may be poor which will affect a special education teacher's self-efficacy. This research will be important to the field of education by identifying how administrators perceive

their ability to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers and how they can assist special education teachers with workload manageability to reduce burnout and improve attrition. Administrators carry an incredible number of responsibilities, and this includes assessing and improving the work conditions of special education teachers. This research could provide insight into how administrators provide better working conditions for teachers who experience low job satisfaction because of their workload and what administrators perceive they can do to reduce the workload. The literature reviewed so far has identified sources of anxiety, stress, and burnout, but does not provide resources from a qualitative approach of how administrators assess poor working conditions and increase job satisfaction for special education teachers.

### **Impact of Inclusion and Co-Teaching on Special Education Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Historically, special education teachers who enter the profession would obtain certifications in any one of the 13 disability categories (e.g., specific learning disability) and were certified to teacher in public-school settings in grades K-12 (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Over the last several decades, the trend has shifted to provide special education teachers with noncategorical licenses that allow school districts to assign special education teachers to any of the 13 disability categories (Sindelar et al., 2019) and within any number of instructional classes (e.g., math) (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Special education teacher roles and responsibilities can change from year to year that may reduce job clarity for them that can perpetuate anxiety, stress, and burnout. Some school districts departmentalize special education teachers putting them in content areas where they have the most experience, while other districts may take a team approach by having the special education teacher move with the students in inclusive classes throughout the day. Either way, there is more responsibility placed on a special education teacher

who is required to provide services and individualized instruction to students with disabilities in the inclusive education setting. Gunnþórsdóttir and Jóhannesson (2014) studied the discourse of inclusion and conclude that more demands have been placed on all teachers not just special education teachers. General education teachers are now accepting more responsibility in the inclusion setting for students with disabilities. Teachers in this study expressed that they could not meet the individual needs of all students in one single classroom because of lack of resources, and too many additional responsibilities. Research has also indicated that special education teachers who move from self-contained teaching assignments to inclusive teaching assignments were not prepared to meet the needs of all students in the inclusive education setting because of personal knowledge gaps of how to prepare curriculum to meet the needs of all students (Somma, 2020). Over the last several decades, researchers have identified that special education teachers may be assigned teaching assignments across multiple content areas where they have gaps in curriculum knowledge (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017; Kaff, 2004; Ruppert et al., 2020) that can affect a special education teachers' self-efficacy. Because special education teachers have multiple teaching assignments, their job responsibilities have increased which creates more educational accountability for students with disabilities (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019) that can contribute to burnout and feelings of being overworked and underappreciated (Hester et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020). General education teachers are fearful of inclusion because they have little real-world practice working with the challenges of educating all students in one general education setting (Lai et al., 2016) and in some cases, they may choose to have the special education teacher assume responsibility for the students with disabilities.

Research on collaboration and co-teaching has identified that poor relationships between the collaborating partners can also contribute to high levels of anxiety, stress, and burnout that causes some special education teachers to leave the profession (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017, Hester et al., 2020; NCPSSERS, 2022; Nilsen, 2020). In addition to the shared responsibilities of co-teaching students with disabilities in inclusive education classrooms, special education teachers can be responsible for legal paperwork (e.g., IEP's), facilitating eligibility and triennial meetings to determine services, and progress monitoring of IEP goals (Bettini et al., 2017; Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). When special education teachers are tasked with managing the demands of the inclusive environment as well as their regular duties, it has the potential to create an unmanageable workload. Other research on collaboration and coteaching by Ashton (2016) observed two collaborating partners and identified that the teacher had experienced discourse in an inclusive setting. The teachers had different ideas on how to implement a class project and they had no prior collaboration or planning beforehand that created conflict during instruction. Lack of adequate planning time to prepare for inclusive classrooms has been identified as a barrier to effective inclusion as well as reasons why special education teachers experience burnout (Hagaman & Casey, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019; Park & Shin, 2020). Different personality traits and differences in individuals of co-teaching teams are factors that contribute to burnout (Antonioni, Ploumpi & Ntalla, 2013). Poor relationships between general and special education teachers continue to challenge the field of education that may be a result of their initial teacher preparation programs not adequately preparing them for the inclusion setting (Pugach & Peck, 2016). The use of different pedagogy continues to divide the two communities who are trying to meet the goals of IDEA and inclusion (Pugach & Peck, 2016).



The literature on special education teacher self-efficacy has identified that there are several reasons why teachers experience high levels of anxiety, stress, and burnout in inclusion settings. In addition to the workload that many special education teachers must manage with paperwork, meetings, and specially designed and individualized instruction, they must also know curriculum and work in inclusive settings that can change periodically. As previously discussed, role clarity is important for special education teachers, however, their roles can change from year to year that can affect self-efficacy. There is an abundance of literature that supports those poor relationships between general and special education teachers are a primary source of anxiety, stress, and burnout (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017; Kaff, 2004; Robinson et al., 2019). However, there is limited knowledge of what administrators must know about special education and inclusion to assess and improve the working relationships between the collaborating partners. Immediate changes must be made to the working conditions for special education teachers to avoid the attrition of highly qualified special education teachers that currently are contributing to high rates of critical shortages. This research will contribute greatly to the prior research on inclusion and co-teaching, by offering perspectives from multiple levels of administration of how they identify areas that need improvement and how they implement those changes to improve the working relationships that can improve special education teacher self-efficacy, reduce burnout, and lower attrition.

### **Critical Shortage of Special Education Teachers**

Over the last several decades hiring and retention of special education teachers is a concern that continues to grow (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020) and in recent years it has been identified that there are critical shortages of highly qualified special education teachers. The United States Department of Education in 2017 reported that 46

states in 2017 experience drastic shortages of special education teachers (Hester et al., 2020). More recently, the NCPSSERS (2022) reports that 98% of the United States has critical shortages in hiring qualified special education teachers. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2022) in the 43rd annual report to Congress, reports the number of students identified with a disability who receive services under IDEA, Part B has increase to approximately 6,472,061 in 2019 which represents 9.7% of the student population that range in ages 6 through 21. The annual report to Congress identifies that there is an overwhelming concern for the special education teacher workforce (e.g., qualified teachers) (OSERS, 2022) that will likely continue to impact the delivery of special education services to students with disabilities (Mason et al., 2020).

Researchers have identified several reasons for special education teachers' attrition which creates shortages in many areas in the United States. In several research articles on special education teacher burnout and attrition, special education teachers report that workload manageability, poor relationships, and lack of administrative support are among the common reasons why they choose to leave (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020; Peyton et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019). Caseload size and the number of students a special education teacher must work with can contribute to attrition (Berry, 2012; Billingsley 2007; Hagaman & Casey, 2017). Novice special education teachers who experience burnout are choosing to leave the profession within the first five years of their careers (Bettini et al., 2017; Hester et al., 2020; Kaff, 2004; Mason et al., 2020). Hester et al. (2020) identified that special education teachers feel overworked and unappreciated, and this influences their decision to either switch from special education to general education or leave education (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

Several studies have examined special education teachers who leave high-needs schools that serve students with disproportionate numbers of special education students, and low-income, high-poverty schools of color (Ansley et al., 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Research has focused on population data and per capita domestic product (GDP) and whether these were causes of special education teacher critical shortages. Multiple states with high and low critical shortages identify 21.8% of special education teachers plan on leaving the profession within the next few years, but even more prominent is that 25.2% of general education teachers plan on resigning within the next few years (Peyton et al., 2021). Teachers in high-poverty schools leave the profession because of poor work conditions, lack of leadership support, poor relationships, and a school's culture (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Ultimately, with special education teacher turnover because of low self-efficacy and burnout (Hagaman & Casey, 2018) student academic achievement and rights to a free appropriate public education may be compromised (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Mason et al., 2020). Southern states have higher rates of turnover of teachers who work in low-income schools that serve students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Special education teacher turnover is among the highest with a "14.2%" (p. 13) attrition rate, while the comparisons between schools that serve low-income families and those that do not, had about an equal distribution of special education teacher attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Teachers who are trained in pedagogy in traditional settings were less likely to leave the profession after one year of service (Ingersoll et al., 2012) versus those who used an alternative approach to licensure. In 2016, California was estimated to have 64% of new special education teachers with inadequate credentials more than any other subject area (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The population of students that requires the widest range of teachers with expertise and knowledge in

different pedagogies is also among the most deficient in prepared teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). In the state of Virginia, special education teacher shortages continue to lead all other subject areas and has been ranked the number one critical shortage teaching assignment for the past sixteen years (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Special education teacher attrition is prominent in much of the literature today due to the concern that most states experience critical shortages of teachers in all areas of endorsement. Special education teachers are more likely to leave the profession due to workload, relationships, and administrative support than any other endorsement area. It is imperative that scholars begin to focus on how school level leadership can improve working conditions for an already scarce group of teachers and consider how everyone with authority over special education teachers can impact their decision to remain in the field or leave. This research will include the perspectives of senior teachers, assistant principals, and building level administrators that can begin the process of understanding where special education teachers need the most support to remain in a profession that leaves them feeling overwhelmed by their job responsibilities and unfortunately causes some of them to resign (Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). More specifically, the question that will fill the gap in the literature is what K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce anxiety, stress, and burnout.

### **School Principals and Leadership Support**

One of the key factors that contribute to low job satisfaction is a lack of support from school administrators and district leaders who lack the knowledge of special education policies and practices (Haydon, 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). This research study seeks to explore if administrators' knowledge of special education policy and

practice can influence their ability to assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers to improve self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can be a “recipe” (p. 623) for a teacher’s success in education (Francisco, 2019). Research on preparing effective leaders in inclusive schools has indicated that to be an effective leader, principals must possess skills and dispositions in special education, however, many leaders in education lack background knowledge in special education policy and practices because of poor preparation in leadership programs (Melloy et al., 2022). Effective leaders in inclusive schools must have a shared vision with stakeholders and share leadership responsibilities with teachers to create teams within schools that foster a vision of inclusion (Billingsley et al., 2018). School leaders and principals are responsible for cultivating effective special education teachers and must help to shape and work with district special education leaders to create successful inclusive schools (Bettini et al., 2017). Educational leaders must possess skills and knowledge to help support students with disabilities to succeed in inclusive school environments (Barakat et al., 2019). Administrators with limited knowledge of special education policy and practice can experience barriers that limit their ability to improve working conditions and overall job satisfaction for special education teachers. Fowler et al. (2019) in a report on the state of the special education profession, surveyed 1467 special education teachers from all 50 states and found that one-fourth of the respondents surveyed believed that their school principals were not well prepared to support them in special education policy and practices. Further, there are factors that contribute to improved student outcomes that begin with supportive administrators who have a vision for inclusion who support a collaborative school culture with resources that support smaller class sizes, and smaller caseloads for special education teachers (Fowler et al., 2019). Research on effective leadership has thus far yielded the need for district leaders and school principals to

provide effective leadership and to encourage special education teachers to work within the confounds of the law and do what is best for students. The literature on administrative leadership fails to consider the other levels within schools that can impact a special education teacher. There is a growing body of literature on administrator preparation programs that address the need for more curriculum in special education policy and practices, but nowhere in the literature was there evidence of curriculum being taught to future leaders on how to assess and improve the working conditions for special education teachers.

Principal preparation programs are criticized for not adequately preparing educational leaders in special education policy and practices (Billingsley et al., 2018; Melloy et al., 2022). Leadership programs that fail to adequately prepare principals to lead and oversee special education teachers and students with disabilities have not prepared leaders in schools that practice inclusion (Barakat et al., 2019). When principals are not adequately prepared to lead inclusive schools, this can impact special education teacher self-efficacy and student outcomes. Principals must ensure that all student's educational needs are met, and this includes students with disabilities (Melloy et al., 2022). The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2022) in the most recent annual report to Congress of school aged children ages 5-21 who are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), Part B was 6,561,998. From 2010-2019 the number of students who received their education in a general education setting for 80% or more of their school day increased from 60.5% to 64.8%. In 2022, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in a report on the conditions of education from 2009-10 to 2020-21 reported a steady increase in the number of students who are served under IDEA, and the most recent data indicates that students with disabilities increased from 13% to 15% serving nearly 7.2 million students in public-schools in the United States. Increases in the total number of students

who receive special education services requires that schools provide adequate resources to those students in order for them to be successful. However, shortages of qualified special education teachers continue to rise which will affect students with disabilities and their future educational outcomes. In the district where this study will be conducted, senior teachers are part of the administrative team and are required to possess endorsements in leadership prior to their appointment to the position. With the full inclusion movement and the need for additional resources in public-school settings (e.g., senior teachers), school principals rely on others within their school to manage day-to-day activities that require them to provide administrative support to special education teachers.

There are barriers to effective leadership in inclusive schools that include a lack of professional development, limited professionals with special education backgrounds, and outdated leadership preparation programs (Billingsley et al., 2018, Braun et al., 2011). With an increase in the demand for students to be served in special education and the need for all students to succeed in general education environments, it is important that principals and leaders in public-school settings possess knowledge and skills in effective leadership for inclusive schools. Recent research on leading inclusive schools found that mostly all principals expressed that they were not experts in disabilities and required additional training and support after they began their leadership roles (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Effective leadership has a significant correlation to the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in schools, and principals must be well-trained if they are going to be change agents for continuous improvements in public education (Campanotta et al., 2018). Successful principals are those who have a focal point on learning that is both powerful and equitable and supports teachers and students (Yell et al., 2019). Principals today have many roles with increased demands that are complicated and unclear, and they

require specialized leadership preparation along with continuous professional development (Naidoo, 2019). Many educational leaders fail to possess the necessary knowledge and skills in special education to support special education teachers' needs (Griffin, 2010). Principals have rigorous demands that are placed on them, and they must balance those demands with building relationships with staff (Du Plessis, 2017). In recent years, leadership programs that prepare new principals to lead inclusive schools have started to focus on resources and the development of administrators with improved knowledge of special education policy and practices (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Research on program quality in leadership has started to recognize the importance of continuously evaluating and assessing their programs to prepare effective principals as school leaders (Campanotta et al., 2018).

One of the most frequent sources of teacher burnout is feeling unsupported by administrators and the climate of the school (Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Kaff, 2004). Administrators do not have knowledge in special education and do not provide support to special education teachers (Robinson et al., 2019). Special education teachers have voiced concerns for the need of support from leadership, more time to plan with co-teachers, and reduced caseloads (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Far more interesting and revealing from this study was that administrators were less likely to identify training and the number of students placed on special education teacher's caseload as reasons why special education teachers would leave the profession (Hagaman & Casey, 2018), however, special education teachers identified these areas as significant reasons why a teacher would choose to resign. Students with disabilities may struggle with equal opportunities in education because of shortages and attrition of special education teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). More importantly, special education teachers who work in high poverty schools and who serve more students of color are far more likely to



leave the profession which creates further gaps in learning for minority students with disabilities (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). There continues to be a growing body of literature on principals' self-efficacy, and some principals are choosing to leave the profession due to the high demands of their jobs and accountability reasons (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This hermeneutical research study will seek to understand the perceptions of administrators on how to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce burnout and stress. This study could lead to further discussion about the difficulties of being an administrator and how the demands that are placed on them may limit their ability to be effective change agents for special education teacher's self-efficacy. This study could also provide the district with an understanding of what their administrators need from the district in the form of professional development to help assess and improve the working conditions for their teachers.

### **Summary**

Research indicates that reforms in special education such as inclusion over the last several decades have caused a shift in the roles and responsibilities that place additional responsibilities on special education teachers that create anxiety, stress, and burnout. Because of the high demands placed on special education teachers, it can be difficult for them to achieve their own personal goals and they need support from administrators to be successful in the inclusive educational environment. Special education teachers who have high self-efficacy are generally more driven to do well in the profession, but when self-efficacy is low it can cause stress and burnout and eventually lead to attrition. The literature reviewed throughout this literature review has focused solely on the school principal and fails to include the perspectives of all those who have direct authority over special education teachers. This study seeks to include

multiple levels of leadership that make up the administrative team and what administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers.

What is well documented in the extant literature is that special education teachers report increased workloads, low job satisfaction, stress, and burnout that is affecting their well-being and health. Special education is currently in distress with critical shortages of qualified teachers and the profession cannot afford to lose more teachers due to burnout. This study is necessary to begin the process of understanding from the lived experiences of what administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. This will add practical value to the field of education and may offer suggestions from school administrators about what supports (e.g., professional learning) are needed from district level leaders to improve job satisfaction for special education teachers. In extant literature the lack of support from school level administrators is a major contributor to low self-efficacy and burnout in special education teachers. Some research has explored administrators learning experiences in special education policy and practice, and some research has explored perceptions from both special education teachers and administrator, but no research has been found that explores the leadership role beyond the title of principal. Assistant principals and senior teachers can play a critical role in assessing and improving working conditions for special education teachers. This research study will fill the gap in the literature by exploring the learning experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education and what administrators believe is necessary knowledge about special education policy and practice to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce job related anxiety, stress, and burnout.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Understanding the background knowledge of school administrators in special education, their perceptions concerning the impacts of burnout, what training they received in leadership programs regarding burnout and stress, and their abilities to effectively implement change may help administrators to promote better working conditions for special education teachers who feel overworked and underappreciated (Hester et al., 2020). This chapter begins with a discussion of the research design and research questions followed by a description of the setting and participants. Chapter three outlines the data collection process and analysis used in this hermeneutic phenomenology study. Finally, a discussion of strategies to establish trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed.

### **Research Design**

This research study applied a qualitative approach to explore the learning experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education and what administrators believe is necessary knowledge (Robinson et al., 2019) about special education policy and practice to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce job related anxiety, stress, and burnout. Using a qualitative approach allows a researcher to explore a problem to develop an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Prior research on special education teacher stress and burnout has indicated that special education teachers are feeling overworked and underappreciated by school level

leaders (Hester et al., 2020) and this causes many of them to leave the profession. Prior quantitative studies indicate the lack of administrative support is a leading cause of special education teachers' low self-efficacy, anxiety, stress, and burnout (Park & Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). While these studies have added to the field of special education teacher job satisfaction and the role that principals play in managing the well-being of teachers, they fail to include the experiences of assistant principals and senior teachers who also have a direct impact on special education teacher job satisfaction.

A qualitative study will add to the literature by permitting the voices of all levels of leadership in a public-school setting. Administrators shared their lived experiences that have led them to their current positions, and they discussed whether they perceive their leadership programs provide them with adequate training to lead inclusive schools. Furthermore, this study allowed administrators to share their perceptions of how they assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers who in recent years have expressed they are overwhelmed with their job responsibilities (Hester et al., 2020).

This research study applied a hermeneutic phenomenological research design (Van Manen, 2016) to explore the lived experiences of administrators and their learning experiences in special education. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is appropriate because it allows me as a researcher to disclose my biases as a special education teacher. Van Manen (2016) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as a branch of human science that studies individuals in the "lifeworld" (p. 2) and it is often referred to as interpretive phenomenology (Neubauer et al., 2019). Using this approach allowed for the exploration of how administrators perceive their own learning experiences and how this may impact their abilities to work with special education teachers. Hermeneutics encourages a researcher to look at the parts of the phenomenon and how

it relates to the whole, as well as how the whole relates to each part (Gall et al., 2007). One goal of hermeneutical phenomenology is to understand the meaning and essence of the phenomenon by using descriptions and interpretations of the lived experiences of those who have experienced the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows a researcher to explore textural reflections through the lived experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research captured the reflections of administrators on how they construct the realities of their own lived experiences (Gall et al., 2007) and allowed the researcher to understand the meaning and essence of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Researchers who use a hermeneutic approach aim to remain as close to the object as possible to display the richness and depth and to produce knowledge of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is appropriate because it allowed for interactions with participants, so administrators become co-creators of the themes developed from the research.

Action knowledge is “empirical” (p. 22) data that is based on lived experiences, which can never be fully generalized (Van Manen, 2016). Lived experiences consist of “antinomy of particularity” (i.e., uniqueness) (p. 23) of what makes the phenomenon essential. Through descriptions, a researcher validates the lived experience by inserting oneself as a participant in the research (Van Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to make known his or her own biases and assumptions without concealing a researcher’s prior experience with the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes individuals cannot dismiss their experiences of the lifeworld, and these experiences are valuable in helping the researcher obtain knowledge by acknowledging their preconceptions of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). This researcher’s experience working in special education has led one to

recognize that some special education teachers experience low self-efficacy and poor working conditions as a result of being overworked due to the demands of the job. This researcher has also worked for some school administrators who have very little experience working with special education departments and their knowledge of policy and practices often inhibits their abilities to help improve self-efficacy and working conditions. Transcendental phenomenology asserts that a researcher must bracket out their experiences with the phenomenon, however hermeneutics allows one to express their own biases and experiences with the phenomenon and is therefore the better method to use in this research study.

Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy, and it draws on the work of German mathematician Edmund Husserl (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology seeks to gain insightful descriptions of how humans experience the world to obtain a better understanding of the nature and meaning of human experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology is the study of essence, and it allows one to uncover the true meaning of a phenomenon by describing the structures of lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Meaning and essence focus on the intuition and self-reflection of the researcher to discover what is real and what is imagined, and the basis for all knowledge is discovered through the shared experiences of a phenomena that is the beginning point for an investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology allows a researcher to explore phenomena by questioning those who have experienced the phenomenon and having them reflect on their past experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology generates a discussion about the subjective and objective experiences of those who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The structures of hermeneutical phenomenology are found within six research activities that guide a research study: (a) the researcher should have interest in the phenomenon, (b) investigate the phenomenon as it is lived, (c) reflect on themes,

(d) describe it through written text, (e) keep a strong relation to the phenomenon, and (f) consider the parts and whole of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). The position of hermeneutical phenomenology is to allow the researcher to provide textural descriptions of the essence by having participants recall the experience through reflection (Van Manen, 2016). As a society, people have known through common sense and assumptions about the experiences of humans before researchers ever understood the phenomenological research question (Van Manen, 2016). A researcher should not ignore his or her own knowledge of the phenomenon, rather one should embrace what is known and use that as a starting point for research (Van Manen, 2016). When conducting hermeneutic phenomenology, the goal of the researcher is to obtain descriptions from others to become more knowledgeable of the phenomenon to improve one's own understanding of the experience (Van Manen, 2016). To obtain depth and richness of a phenomenon, a researcher would engage in "conversational interviews" (p. 63) with participants going back and forth allowing them to be co-creators of descriptions and themes (Van Manen, 2016).

Prior research on administrators and leadership has failed to explore the leadership role beyond the principal and fail to include assistant principals and senior teachers who all have leadership authority over special education teachers. A qualitative hermeneutical phenomenology is needed to understand the lived experiences of principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers that will fill the gap in the literature and investigate how the different levels of management describe their experiences in special education policy and practices. This qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Administrators in public-school settings are responsible for ensuring the well-being of all teachers (NPBEA, 2015)

and research has identified that there is a correlation between job satisfaction and supportive school administrators (Ansley et al., 2019). It is important to understand the lived experiences of administrators and the training that is provided to them through leadership programs and ongoing professional development to lead inclusive education settings. Since administrators are responsible for the well-being of all teachers, it is important to understand how they perceive burnout can impact special education teachers and what administrators believe is needed to improve self-efficacy and working conditions.

### **Research Questions**

This hermeneutical phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. The following questions guide this study:

#### **Central Research Question**

What do K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers?

#### **Sub-Question One**

How do administrators perceive learning experiences in special education policy and practices from leadership programs and professional development have prepared them to lead inclusive schools and understand special education teacher job responsibilities?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

How do K-12 public-school administrators perceive burnout affects a special education teacher?



**Sub-Question Three**

What do administrators perceive is needed from district level leaders to improve school leaderships knowledge of special education policy and practices?

**Sub-Question Four**

What do administrators believe is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers to reduce attrition?

**Setting and Participants****Setting**

The setting that was used for this hermeneutic phenomenological research study was a school district located in the Eastern portion of the United States, in the state of Virginia; and will be identified using the pseudonym Magnolia County Public Schools. The district used for this hermeneutic phenomenological study was selected for several reasons. School level administration teams are made up of senior teachers, assistant principals, and principals, each of whom is required to hold a valid license with leadership endorsements from the state of Virginia. Senior teachers in the district perform administrative duties that include supervision of special education teachers. This district is one of the largest districts in the area with 26 schools across four corridors of the county that provided a minimum of 12 participants from elementary, middle, and high schools serving on administrative teams. There is diversity in leadership, and diversity of schools that serve students across urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout the county with five of the schools being Title I schools. Teacher quality reports indicate that there is diversity among the teaching staff in the district with many veteran teachers and some teachers who have less than one year of experience teaching. In addition, it has been reported that 5.3% of the teachers in the district are inexperienced which is equivalent to the state level, but there are

5.9% of inexperienced teachers in low poverty areas as compared to 4.5% at the state level. In special education, it has been reported that 0.7% of the teachers are working with a provisional license indicating that they may be newly appointed teachers who can be vulnerable to the pressures and demands of being a special education teacher. Special education teachers are feeling overworked and unappreciated and many beginning teachers are leaving the field within the first five years of employment (Hester et al., 2020). Understanding the lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016) of administrator's learning experiences in special education and what administrators perceive is necessary knowledge about special education policy and practice to improve self-efficacy and working conditions may help the district to develop professional learning opportunities to help improve attrition and close the gap in unfilled positions. The data indicates that this district may be employing a higher percentage of new special education teachers compared to all new teachers in the district who hold a provisional license in other content specific areas. Exploring the knowledge of administrators in special education policy and practices will provide the district with information on what administrators need to know about special education to help improve self-efficacy that can lead to improved working conditions. Understanding the perceptions of administrators on how they assess and improve working conditions can provide the district with information on developing professional learning opportunities to share with other administrators in the district of how to improve self-efficacy and reduce burnout. By improving the working conditions for special education teachers, it could be beneficial to the district to help reduce attrition as well as reduce the number of new inexperienced and provisionally licensed teachers.

In the state of Virginia, annual reports are produced by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) that provide information on the quality of schools within each division in the

state. The reports include information on accreditation, assessment results, enrollments, college and career readiness, finance, learning climate, teacher quality, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and school readiness. In addition, information specific to students with disabilities is reported that provides a snapshot of how students with disabilities compare to the rest of the student population. The VDOE reports that this school district has students enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and has a total student population of 17,066.

The division selected for this study is situated in a larger jurisdiction of the surrounding divisions and is comprised of urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout the division. The surrounding areas that border this division have three school divisions with higher total student enrollments, however, four divisions have significantly fewer total enrollments. This district is among the top four in the surrounding area with all schools in the division having received full accreditation through the VDOE. The division is divided into four corridors and has a total of 26 schools (15 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 4 high schools). The student demographics include 74.3% White, 9.1% Black, 7.3% Hispanic, 6.1% multiple races, and 3% Asian with 29.9% of the student population being identified as economically disadvantaged. Of the total student population, 14.4% or approximately 2,457 students, live with a disability and receive services under IDEA (VDOE, 2022). For the 2021-2022 academic school year, 10.3% of students with disabilities in the district dropped out of school, which is significantly higher than the state average of 7.8%. The quality report published by the VDOE also indicates students with disabilities had a high percentage of chronic absenteeism at 14.5% for the 2021-2022 school year. Finally, the most recent data on postsecondary enrollment reported for the 2018-2019 school year states 40% of students identified with a disability enrolled in institutions of higher education, which is below the state average of 47%.

The VDOE (2022) provides information on teacher quality measured by student-to-teacher ratios, poverty levels and Title 1 schools, out of field teaching assignments, inexperienced teachers, and a combination of both out of field and inexperienced teachers serving in both capacities. The out of field teacher category represents the percentage of teachers in the district who are teaching in areas in which they are not fully endorsed, while the inexperience category reflects teachers who have less than one year of teaching experience in the classroom. Table 1 shows the comparisons between the state level and the district that is being used for this research study.

**Table 1**

*Teacher quality division and state level comparison 2019-2020 school year*

All Schools			
	Out of Field Teachers	Inexperienced Teachers	Out of Field and Inexperienced
Statewide	5.2%	5.3%	1.1%
Magnolia School District	4.4%	5.3%	0.7%
Low Poverty			
	Out of Field Teachers	Inexperienced Teachers	Out of Field and Inexperienced
Statewide	3.9%	4.5%	0.7%
Magnolia School District	4.3%	5.9%	0.8%

*Note.* Table 1 shows data obtained from the Virginia Department of Education for Magnolia School District when compared to all schools in the state. Magnolia School District has a lower

percentage of out of field teachers and teachers who fall in both categories of out of field and inexperienced. However, the district shares the same percentage of inexperienced teachers as the state level. In addition, the teacher quality report compares high and low poverty areas within the state and the quality of teachers. The Magnolia School District does not report any high poverty areas but does have some low poverty areas with five schools receiving Title I funds. In both categories of out of field and inexperienced teachers, this division has a higher percentage when compared to the state (VDOE, 2022).

Table 2 shows the comparisons of provisionally licensed teachers in the state and district.

**Table 2**

*Teacher quality provisionally licensed teachers 2019-2020 school year*

All Schools		
	All Teachers	Special Education Teachers
Statewide	7.7%	2.3%
Magnolia School District	4.6%	0.7%
Low Poverty		
	All Teachers	Special Education Teachers
Statewide	6%	2.1%
Magnolia School District	4.6%	0.5%

*Note.* Table 2 shows data obtained from the Virginia Department of Education on the experience of teachers and if they are teaching outside their area of endorsement. In addition, the VDOE reports on the number of teachers who are teaching on provisional licenses for all teachers and special education teachers (VDOE, 2022)

Data reported from the United States Department of Education and the VDOE reflects that special education teachers rank among the highest on the critical shortage teaching endorsement areas (United States Department of Education, 2022; VDOE, 2022). In the state of Virginia, it has been ranked the number one critical shortage teaching assignment for the last sixteen years (U. S. Department of Education, 2022) topping all other teaching endorsement areas. Virginia reported teacher shortages in multiple disciplines of exceptionality across all grade levels. Additional information provided by VDOE further expands on critical special education teacher shortages and provides comparison data of low poverty compared to the state level of all schools within the district selected for this study. The most recent data available from the VDOE reveals information on staffing and vacancies for the 2021-2022 school year. At the state level, data indicates that there were significant shortages of special education teachers with 594.93 (5.0%) of unfilled full-time employees (FTE) in special education. At the district level, there were 9 FTE positions that were left vacant resulting in 3.5% of special education teacher positions being unfilled for the school year.

### **Participants**

The participants for this research study were administrators who hold endorsements in leadership and are currently employed as a K-12 public-school administrator in one of the 26 schools in the district selected in the state of Virginia. The study recruited 12 administrators with leadership endorsements to participate. In the MCPS district, all principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers are required to hold endorsements in leadership. Currently 174 individuals within the district have endorsements through the state of Virginia in leadership. There are 15 elementary schools in the district each employing one principal and one assistant principal that provided a pool of at least 30 participants. There are four middle schools each employing one

principal, 2 assistant principals, and four senior teachers that allowed a pool of at least 28 middle school level administrators. The county has four high schools that employ one principal, three assistant principals, and two senior teachers that make up a pool of 24 high school level administrators. In addition, there are three specialty schools in the district, each employing one principal and one assistant principal that make up a pool of 6 school level administrators. Although the district has 174 individuals endorsed in leadership, there are approximately 88 individuals serving as administrators who could be used in the pool of participants for this research study. Participants in a phenomenology research study should have experience with the phenomenon and have an interest in why the phenomenon is occurring to be co-creators with the researcher to develop descriptions and themes to help in understanding the meaning and essence of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). The study had a heterogenous group (i.e., varying age, ethnicity, gender, and experience) of 12 (Creswell & Poth, 2018) administrators ranging from senior teacher to principal across elementary, middle, and high school. This helped me to develop patterns and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that emerged from each level of education where special education services are provided.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Purposeful sampling of 12 administrators was used for this study. Administrators are responsible for day-to-day operations in their buildings, and they are responsible for creating an environment that promotes the well-being of their teachers. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to “intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). Using criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) the participants for the study met the required criteria to be included in the study. First, they hold a state endorsement in leadership; second, they are active

in their roles as administrators in one of the 26 schools within the division; and third, administrators were actively working with teachers in special education. Participants in this research study were required to understand and sign the informed consent form before they were allowed to participate in the study and used for data collection. A copy of the informed consent form is in Appendix C.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

Reforms in special education over the last several decades have increased the responsibilities a special education teacher must take on to meet the demands of providing quality education to students with disabilities. These changes and additional responsibilities create burnout among some special education teachers (Thakur, 2018) at rates much higher than their colleagues in general education and has created critical shortages in special education teacher staff (Algozzine et al., 2011; Hester et al., 2020; Jerrim, 2021). I have been a special education teacher for nearly 20 years and have witnessed the extraordinary number of changes that have occurred in special education year-after-year. I too have experienced anxiety, stress, and burnout due to overwhelming job responsibilities as a special education teacher. Over the years, I have had several different administrators, some with experience in special education policy and practice, and some that do not have any experience. In my experience, administrators who possess some level of knowledge about special education are far more receptive to the needs of a special education teacher than those who possess very little knowledge. Throughout my career, I have witnessed special education teachers leave the profession due to burnout and stress to pursue opportunities outside of education. For more than half of my teaching career, I have served as a new teacher mentor and to date only one remains as a special education teacher. When special education teachers leave the profession, this can have a profound effect on students



with disabilities when teachers are replaced with newly hired special education teachers with little to no experience. Unfortunately, in recent research, it has been discovered that some newly appointed special education teachers are choosing to leave the profession within the first five years due to the high demands of the job (Bettini et al., 2017; Hester et al., 2020; Kaff, 2004; Mason et al., 2020). With so many special education teachers choosing to leave the profession it has created critical shortages across much of the United States that causes current special education teachers to take on additional responsibilities when they must fill the gap in teacher shortages. Administrators in public-school settings need to recognize that their knowledge of special education policy and practices is important to help foster improved self-efficacy for special education teachers. This research explored the current knowledge that administrators have in special education policy and practices, and if administrators support special education staff in schools to help reduce anxiety, stress, and burnout. Special education teacher shortages must improve greatly to provide all students with an equitable FAPE. This research also explored leadership preparation programs through the lens of administrators and how administrators perceive it prepared them to understand the role and responsibilities of special education teachers. Discussions with administrators allowed school leaders the opportunity to provide perspectives on what district-level leadership can do to help support principals to assess and improve the working conditions for special education teachers to improve self-efficacy and reduce anxiety, stress, and burnout.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework that guides my research study is social constructivism. A social constructivism framework seeks to make sense of the world in which we live through the shared experiences of others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research study aimed to describe the

meaning and essence of how administrators describe their experience with assessing and improving working conditions for special education teachers.

My own experiences and background as a special education teacher have shaped my views of the high demands that are placed on special education teachers. When teachers experience prolonged burnout, it may lead to feelings of low self-efficacy, low self-worth, and inadequacy in job performance. Administrators can play a key role in the process of identifying and reducing job-related stress and burnout (Haydon et al., 2018). Using a social constructivism framework allowed me to interpret the meaning of administrators' lived experiences and perceived impacts of burnout on special education teachers and if they perceive they can be effective change agents to improve the overall job satisfaction for special education teachers.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions are the beliefs and values that underlie qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Philosophical assumptions are important because they (a) direct research goals, (b) provide the scope of our experiences, and (c) are the basis of evaluative criteria for research related decision (Huff, 2009). To address the values and beliefs of my research study, I will discuss three philosophical assumptions that include ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

The ontological assumption in qualitative research depicts the nature of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and helps us to understand the essence of lived experiences and “what it means to be” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 183). My ontological assumption is that God is the ultimate reality and the creator of all things. However, in research, people who experience a phenomenon may have multiple views of reality where they form their own unique perspective that this researcher

reported from the evidence of their words to understand the phenomenon. This researcher developed themes from the different perspectives of the lived experiences of administrators who supervise special education teachers.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Epistemological assumptions in qualitative research consider what counts as knowledge, justification for this knowledge, and what relationships exist between the researcher and the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To acquire the perceptions of what administrators, believe will improve self-efficacy and working conditions, subjective evidence was collected from the field by conducting in-person interviews and focus groups to get as close as possible to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Conducting one-to-one interviews allowed one to identify the four fundamental existentials: lived space (corporeality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived relation (relationality) (Van Manen, 2016). The existentials helped to “describe and interpret” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 101) the lifeworld and it provided subjective evidence from the voices of the participants on the “everyday situations and relations” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 101) that administrators have working with special education teachers. Using the words of the participants and the experiences that each administrator brings to the study allowed this researcher to interpret the meaning and essence of the phenomenon while also reflecting on how lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relation make up the lifeworld.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

The axiological assumption in qualitative research is characterized by the values and beliefs that a researcher brings to a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I confess that my prior experience as a special education teacher may create biases of my views that special education

teachers are experiencing anxiety, stress, and burnout. Using a Christian worldview, I interpreted the voices of administrators about their own lived experiences and their perceptions of how to improve working conditions for special education teachers. I used my own experiences to filter the interpretations of the voices of administrators that are presented in my findings. As a veteran special education teacher, I have worked with several practicum students, and I have mentored several new hires who have entered the field of special education. Over the years, I have witnessed highly qualified special education teachers leave the profession due to low job satisfaction as a result of stress and burnout. Having worked in the field for most of my career I have experienced the changing roles and responsibilities and even at times have had administrators with little to no knowledge of special education policy and practice that has affected my own self-efficacy. These experiences have provided me with a starting point to my research (Van Manen, 2016). Administrators who enter leadership programs should be well prepared in special education policy and practice prior to starting their roles as leaders, and districts need to offer more training to administrators on recognizing anxiety, stress, and burnout. To understand the perceived impacts of burnout and how administrators can play a key role in reducing anxiety, stress, and burnout, administrators described their lived experiences of learning about special education and what administrators believe is necessary knowledge to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers to reduce job related anxiety, stress, and burnout.

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher's role in this phenomenological research study was to serve as the human instrument in data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Van Manen, 2016) of the voices of administrators who supervise special education teachers. I am a special education teacher, and I

have no direct authority over any administrator who serves as a participant. Having a long career in special education, and personally witnessing the workload of special education teachers has shaped my own lived experience of special education teacher burnout and stress due to high workload manageability.

Researchers must “engage in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments (i.e., epoché)” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22), and bracket out their own biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the knowledge about the phenomenon. Due to my own personal experiences as a special education teacher, epoché cannot be achieved in this research study. Hermeneutical phenomenology allows a researcher to make the reader aware of his or her own biases and assumptions without concealing prior experience of the researcher with the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Since I am not able to fully bracket out my own personal experiences as a special education teacher, I applied hermeneutical framework to this study. Exploring the shared experiences of administrators and their learning experiences in special education policy and practices and their perceptions of how to improve self-efficacy and working conditions was the starting point and the basis of knowledge.

According to Van Manen (2016) a researcher must have an interest in the phenomenon and, through the research process, develop action sensitive knowledge that will help to progress human life by preparing them to become increasingly thoughtful of the phenomenon and to act when necessary. My interest in this project began with my observation that administrators with whom I have worked have had backgrounds in general education, almost all of them have had little knowledge and understanding of special education policy and practice; and possess little knowledge of the demanding job which often leads to anxiety, stress, and burnout.

My role as the researcher was to capture the essence of the perceptions administrators have about how to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers and their perceptions of the impacts of burnout. I have spent the last 20 years working in special education and I have witnessed several of my coworker's experience anxiety, stress, and burnout because of poor working conditions and lack of administrative support. My bias as the human instrument in this study is that I am a special education teacher and I have my own assumptions of ideas about the phenomenon. I recognize that I cannot completely dismiss my own bias that some administrators lack a basic understanding of special education policy and practice. My assumption is that an administrators' limited knowledge of special education policy and practices often limits his or her ability to make effective changes to improve the working conditions for special education teachers. Throughout the stages of data collection and analysis, I kept a researcher journal (i.e., memoing) to achieve reflexivity. Reflexivity in qualitative research is where the researcher understands their own biases, values, and personal experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This helped me to stay true to the participant's statements and not allow my own judgements and biases to shape my findings and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, member-checking allowed my participants to provide feedback on my interpretation of the findings. The analysis and synthesis of the data obtained lead to patterns and themes that may be used to offer suggestions that will help to improve the knowledge of in-service administrators and bring to light the perceptions of what current administrators perceive to be important to be able to assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers.

## **Procedures**

The procedures I used to conduct this hermeneutical phenomenology research study were to obtain necessary approvals. An application was submitted for approval to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Refer to Appendix A for Liberty IRB approval. After approval from the IRB, site approval was obtained with permission to solicit participants and data collection began. Refer to Appendix B for site approval. Three methods of data collection were used that included individual interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing prompts. Data analysis was conducted at each stage of the data collection process and reflexive notes were used to organize patterns and themes in the data. After each phase of data collection and analysis, I triangulate the data for accuracy and after individual interviews and focus group interviews, I provided email copies of the transcripts to allow for member-checking to validate the accuracy of interpretation.

## **Data Collection Plan**

In qualitative research, data collection is an essential step a researcher will take to gather substantial information that addresses the research question(s). This process can be visualized as a series of activities a researcher engages in to gather information using a variety of methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I collected data in three phases that include individual interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing prompts.

### **Individual Interviews**

In hermeneutical phenomenology research, the most widely used method of data collection is individual interviews. Conversational interviews are necessary to gain a deeper and richer understanding of a phenomenon: "The hermeneutic interview tends to turn the interviewees into participants or collaborators of the research project (Van Manen, 2016, p. 63).

Prior to starting interviews with research participants, a researcher should develop a series of questions designed to capture the full description of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. Interviews should begin as a social dialogue where the interviewer creates a comfortable environment for the participant, so he/she will provide an accurate and detailed description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

I interviewed public-school administrators who work with special education teachers to explore their knowledge and experiences in special education in-person at a neutral location as well as investigate the perceived impact burnout has on special education teachers. The use of conversational interviews allowed me to gather lived experiences from the participants as well as create a reflective session between the researcher and the interviewee through dialogue about the lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). At the start of the interview, I suggested participants think about their knowledge of special education policy and practice as well as ask them to think about the work that special education teachers perform daily as part of their job responsibilities. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) who draw on the work of Moustakas (1994) two broad questions are essential in a phenomenological research study. The first question is "what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?" and the second question is "what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience of the phenomenon?" (Moustakas, 1994, as cited by Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). Interviews serve two specific purposes: (a) to gather experiential narratives, and (b) are used to develop a conversational relationship to discover the meaning of an experience (Van Manen, 2016).



**Table 3***Individual Interview Questions**Administrators' learning experiences of special education policy and practices.*

1. Describe your educational background and career that has led to your current position as an administrator. SQ1
2. In what ways did your pre-service administrative training or coursework inform your understanding of special education? SQ1
3. Describe the special education department at your school. What role do you play in this department's supervision? SQ1
4. In what ways do you feel your leadership preparation program prepared you to help special education teachers manage stress, anxiety, and burnout with regard to their workload? SQ1

*Perceptions of what administrators believe will improve self-efficacy and working conditions.*

5. Describe what you know about self-efficacy and how this can impact a teacher's job performance? CRQ
6. What do you believe is important for you to know about special education policy and practices to help you understand workload manageability of special education teachers? CRQ
7. What do you believe are the challenges to being a special education teacher? CRQ
8. In what ways do you encourage and improve morale of special education teachers that will motivate them and improve their overall job satisfaction? CRQ

9. If a special education teacher were to approach you and indicate he or she is feeling overworked and possesses feelings of anxiety and stress, what course of action would you take? CRQ

*Perceived impacts of burnout.*

10. Describe what the typical workload is for a special education teacher in your school. SQ2
11. Describe any experiences where a special education teacher has come to you and expressed that they are overworked in their current position? SQ2
12. What does burnout mean to you? SQ2
13. What do you think are the effects of burnout on special education teachers? SQ2
14. In what ways do you offer support to special education teachers who are experiencing burnout? SQ2
15. Describe a situation where a special education teacher has left the profession to pursue other opportunities outside of education because of anxiety, stress, or burnout. SQ2
16. In what ways have you worked with your special education department to change the workload manageability for special education teachers? SQ2

*Professional development and learning.*

17. Describe the professional learning opportunities that are provided to administrators to help them improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices. SQ3
18. Please provide a description of professional learning opportunities your school district offers to administrators on recognizing and managing stress, anxiety, and burnout to improve self-efficacy and overall job performance for special education teachers. SQ3
19. Please share what professional learning opportunities your district provides directly to special education teachers that can help them to manage workload responsibilities. SQ3

*What support is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers.*

20. Please share what supports or professional learning you believe is needed from division level leaders to help administrators improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices. SQ4
21. Describe the support or professional learning you believe the district should offer to special education teachers on workload manageability. SQ4
22. Explain what you think is needed to improve special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout and how would you go about implementing it. SQ4

The purpose of questions one through four were to identify the knowledge administrators have about special education policy and practices and what experiences they have gained through leadership programs and professional development which prepares them to oversee special education teachers. In my experiences, most administrators receive minimal training in special education; however, they are responsible for supervising a unique group of teachers without really understanding what a special education teacher is responsible for in their day-to-day job responsibilities.

Questions five through nine were to engage administrators in their understanding of what efficacy means and how the concept may impact a special education teacher. Additionally, this question set explores what administrators perceive they need to know about special education policy and practices that helps them to understand the workload of a special education teacher and how workload can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Additionally, administrators described how they have previously worked with a special education teacher who have experienced job-related stress and what actions they may have taken to help the special education teacher deal with the high demands of the job.

Questions 10 through 16 focus on the perceived impacts of burnout on special education teachers. First, administrators described burnout and then shared experiences of how they have worked with special education teachers to improve work conditions to increase overall job satisfaction. Feelings of inadequacy and low self-efficacy may cause some special education teachers to question their continued commitment to teaching because of burnout. Bandura's theory on human agency developed from his work on social cognitive theory informs us that an individual (i.e., agentic) has the power to control his/her own goals, actions, and destiny.

Questions 17 through 19 focus on experiences public-school administrators have with professional learning opportunities within the district that have helped them to understand special education policy and practices. In addition, these questions explored the professional learning opportunities offered to special education teachers that can help them to manage their workload responsibilities. Question 17 specifically focused on professional learning opportunities administrators have had that can help them to identify anxiety, stress, and burnout and how in their roles, they may contribute to the improvement of self-efficacy and overall job satisfaction for special education teachers.

Questions 20 through 22 focus on the support administrators believe is needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers. In human agency, learning takes place from experience, and people are agents of their own experiences; therefore, control lies within the individual (Bandura, 2001). Depersonalization and emotional exhaustion because of the overwhelming demands of special education paperwork are key factors that contribute to burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Special education teachers who experience burnout attribute most of their concerns to a lack of administrative support, which affects their self-efficacy and lowers their quality of life (Hester et al., 2020). These final questions aimed to gauge perceptions of

administrators which may then contribute to the improvement of support systems surrounding special education teachers.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus group interviews are another way to gather information of a shared understanding from research participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Focus groups were held with administrators who conveyed the common experiences of working with special education teachers. Like the interview process, focus groups allowed me to interview small groups of administrators of at least four to five members using the online Zoom® platform and later identify patterns and themes that emerge from the collective group regarding their knowledge of special education policy and practices and the perceptions of what will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. I utilized three groups of three to five members for each focus group discussion, each lasting from 30-60 minutes. Through focus group discussions, my goal was to see if administrators can collectively identify ways to improve the workload for special education teachers to prevent stress and burnout. Focus groups allow a researcher to interact with multiple participants while assisting in triangulating the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using focus group interviews and the data collected from protocol writing prompts and individual interviews allowed one to place the retrieved information into common categories and themes to prepare for data analysis. In hermeneutical phenomenology, the goal is to interpret the data collected to understand the meaning and essence of the participants' lived experiences through descriptions of the themes emergent from the data.

### **Table 4**

#### *Focus Group Questions*

*Administrators' learning experiences of special education policy and practices.*

1. In what ways did your leadership program prepare you to lead special education programs in your school? SQ1
2. Describe how special education programs in your school are doing (who manages them, and how are they performing)? What are some successes and challenges in special education in your building? SQ1

*Perceptions of what administrators believe will improve self-efficacy and working conditions.*

3. What experiences and interactions do you have with special education teachers in your school? In what ways do these teachers express feelings of stress or burnout? CRQ
4. How does your experiences as an administrator help you to assess and improve special education teacher self-efficacy and the overall working conditions? CRQ

*Perceived impacts of burnout.*

5. Please describe the relationships between general education teachers and special education teachers in your school. Can you elaborate on any positive or negative co-teaching relationships? SQ2
6. What do you believe are causes for special education teacher burnout? What are the potential impacts of burnout on special education teachers (e.g., job performance)? SQ2

*Professional learning for public-school administrators in special education policy and practices.*

7. Explain any initiatives the district offers to administrators to assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers. SQ3
8. Describe any professional learning activities you have attended in your district that have targeted workload manageability for special education teachers. SQ3

*What support is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers.*

9. Please share what you believe should be implemented or suggested to help reduce the workload of special education teachers in your building. SQ4
10. Describe what you believe future leadership programs should offer to better prepare pre-service administrators to identify and help special education teachers to reduce burnout. SQ4
11. What supports do you believe your school district needs to offer to administrators to help them to lead special education departments? What supports do you believe your school district needs to offer to special education teachers to help reduce burnout and stress? SQ4

Focus group questions one and two are central to understand what administrators believe they need to know about special education policy and practices to effectively implement a course of action and help reduce burnout and stress in their teachers. These questions were intended to generate conversation around school level performances and allow administrators to express what works in their buildings and what doesn't work in special education.

The purpose of questions two through four was to allow administrators to describe the relationships and interactions they have with special education teachers. Recent research has indicated the importance of relationships in improving self-efficacy. Relationships play an important role in special education teacher self-efficacy and when self-efficacy is low it can result in burnout (Strogilos & King, 2019). Research indicates that support from school personnel has had a high effect on the emotional exhaustion of special education teachers (Park & Shin, 2020).

Questions five and six focus on the perceived impact(s) burnout can have on special education teachers. The purpose of question five was to generate conversation about perceived

relationships between general education and special education teachers in co-teaching classrooms. Prior research has indicated poor relationships between teachers can contribute to high anxiety, stress, and burnout which has caused some special education teachers to leave the profession (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017, Hester et. al., 2020). Question six seeks knowledge from administrators on what they perceive are the factors that contribute to burnout in special education teachers as well as what the potential impacts are when a special education teacher does experience burnout. Research has indicated factors that contribute to burnout can be hard skills (e.g., teacher pay) and soft skills (e.g., empathy); however, little research has focused on how administrators identify burnout and how they go about improving overall job satisfaction (Fernandes et al., 2021).

Questions seven and eight focus on district initiatives that may have been implemented to help administrators understand how to assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers. Question seven specifically focused on assessing and improving working conditions (co-teaching) and question eight focused on professional learning opportunities to help them to understand the workload of special education teachers.

Questions nine and 10 focus on support administrators believe is still needed and what support they have offered to special education teachers to improve their well-being. The purpose of question nine was to explore strategies administrators may have implemented to reduce the workload of special education teachers, and if this has helped to improve self-efficacy. Hester et al. (2020) examined special education teachers and burnout and found the lack of administrative support affected special education teacher self-efficacy and lowered their quality of life. Question ten specifically targets what administrators believe is still needed in leadership programs that prepare new administrators to lead schools with inclusive education settings. This



question seeks knowledge from administrators on ways to identify burnout and strategies for coping with the high demands of being a special education teacher. The purpose of question eleven was to allow administrators to express what they believe the district can offer to them and special education teachers to help administrators navigate the complex world of special education. In addition, it explores participants' perceptions of supports the district can offer in the form of professional learning that may help special education teachers to reduce burnout and stress.

### **Protocol Writing Prompt**

The final source of data collection was the use of protocol writing to collect written samples from each administrator after their initial interviews. "The most straightforward way to go about our research is to ask selected individuals to write their experiences down" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 63). Administrators were asked to write a short paragraph and to reflect (Van Manen, 2016) back on their past experiences as a new administrator. The writing prompt had administrators write a direct account (Van Manen, 2016) of what they wish they knew about special education policy and practices or what the school district could have offered to administrators to better prepare them to lead special education teachers as a newly appointed administrator. Protocol writing allows participants to participate in reflexivity of their own lived experiences by generating original text (Van Manen, 2016) that was used in this research. Administrators were provided with the writing prompt and some general guidelines to help guide them in the writing process. General guidelines included reflecting about themselves as a new administrator in 7-10 sentences or more as they lived it, and to use examples about those reflections with vividness (Van Manen, 2016).

**Table 5**

---

*Protocol Writing Prompt*

---

Please write a short paragraph to yourself (7-10 sentences or more if you choose) describing what you wish you would have known as a new administrator about special education policy and practice and/or what you wish the district would have offered you in the form of professional development to help prepare you to lead special education teachers in your current role.

---

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of taking data and organizing it into descriptions and codes to develop themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used data analysis methods identified by Van Manen (2016) for hermeneutical phenomenology to develop themes to answer my research questions. Themes are the focus of meaning that captures the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Themes are singular statements a researcher attempts to make sense of by making something out of them with openness; this process is considered “insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 88). A goal in hermeneutical phenomenology is the search for meaning and essence by developing descriptions and interpretations of the lived experiences of those who have experienced the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Data generated from interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing entered the “data analysis spiral” (p. 186) where data was organized, reviewed for ideas, coded and theme descriptions, interpretations, representations, and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis began after each individual interview and coding was completed using an inductive approach. Inductive coding allows a researcher to enter the coding process with openness to create codes based on the data (Saldaña, 2021). Interviews were recorded using a

computer assisted program (e.g., Audacity®) for accuracy of statements and transcription. After interviews were transcribed, I emailed a copy of the transcript to each participant to allow for member-checking and feedback to validate the accuracy of statements (Crewell & Guetterman, 2019). Transcribed interviews were placed in a Microsoft Word® file that allowed me to organize the data and begin the coding process. I used the “comment” feature in Microsoft Word® and did a line-by-line review of the transcript commenting on any codes that were discovered. I used Saldaña’s (2021) coding strategies to develop open codes from the interviews to show the value of the lived experiences of my participants. During open coding of the data, I began a reflective journal detailing repetitive and overlapping codes and condensed the list to a more exact list of codes and began to create categories from the codes developed. While reflection begins at the start of an interview when dialogue takes place, it must also be carried out when conducting data analysis (Van Manen, 2016). This process requires the researcher to reflect on the written transcripts to gain insight and clarity of the structures of the lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

Focus group interviews were recorded using the recording features in Zoom® as well as computer assisted recording using Audacity® to validate verbatim transcription and accuracy of statements. Data analysis from focus groups followed Van Manen’s (2016) recommendations for conducting hermeneutical phenomenology and theme development. To gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, a “collaborative discussion” (p. 100) must take place between a researcher and a participant (Van Manen, 2016). The lifeworld existentials are helpful in guiding the researcher through the reflection process to understand the structures of meaning (Van Manen, 2016). The existentials of lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation make up the lifeworld that is necessary to understand when developing themes. At this stage in

data analysis, I applied a focus coding approach by combining codes developed from individual interviews with those obtained from focus group interviews grouping the codes into specific categories and themes. Transcribed focus group interviews were also placed into a Microsoft Word® file where coding was completed using the “comment” feature. I continued to apply reflective analysis to identify which of the codes, categories, and themes developed during data analysis were most salient (Gall et al., 2007) to determine if new codes or categories need to be created or combined. Reflection can help a researcher gain essential meanings by clarifying and making explicit meaning of what we know about the structure of the lived experience (Van Manen, 2016).

Data analysis of the protocol writing prompt is another way I identified patterns and themes. Using the same strategy of placing the protocol writing prompts into a Microsoft Word® file where I continued to code the data using the “comment” feature. As I read, I reflected on each participant’s lived experience of how they learned about special education policy and practice and began the process of coding each written line of the text. At this stage, I was looking for emotional codes (Saldaña, 2021) that expresses emotions of their intrapersonal responses to themselves about their experiences in special education and what they wished the district would have provided to them as a new administrator. In this final stage of data analysis, themes from all three data collection sources were triangulated and free imaginative variation (Van Manen, 2016) was used to determine if the themes developed were essential or incidental and if they were part of the phenomenon under investigation. Triangulation of the data received from individual interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing was then compared to narrow down the categories and themes.

Data collection was completed in three phases and began with individual interviews, then focus groups, and finally protocol writing. Using Van Manen's (2016) hermeneutical phenomenology framework for conducting conversational interviews, collaboration through focus groups, and protocol writing, I interpreted the descriptions of the lived experiences to develop themes. The hermeneutic circle played an important part in the data synthesis by understanding how each part affects the whole, and how the whole affects each part of the data collected of the learning experiences and perceived knowledge of what administrators need to know to improve the working conditions for special education teacher. The existentials of lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relation helped to "describe and interpret" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 101) of the lifeworld and it provided valuable information from the voices of the participants on the "everyday situations and relations" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 101) that administrators have working with special education teachers. Throughout each data collection phase, reflexive notes were taken to identify emerging themes or constructs that situated my proposition for the study and help to triangulate the data across all three methods of data collection.

### **Trustworthiness**

To establish trustworthiness in my qualitative research study, I will address the four ways of validation termed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability and the strategies outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) used for validation in qualitative research. Strategies used for validation in qualitative research should be viewed through the lens of the researcher, participants, and the readers to find accuracy in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Strategies used through the lens of the researcher include corroborating evidence through triangulation, discovering negative case analysis or

disconfirming evidence, and engaging in reflexivity. The strategies used through the lens of the participant include prolonged engagement in the field, collaborating with participants, and using external audits. Validation seen through the readers' or reviewer's lenses can be achieved through rich and thick descriptions, using peer reviews and debriefing of the data and the research process. Creswell and Poth (2018) further explain validation as a strength that provides rich descriptions of the lived experiences while also showing closeness of the research and the participants that can add value and accuracy to a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Credibility**

Credibility in a qualitative research study is the confidence that the findings are accurate and describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For my qualitative phenomenology research study, I achieved credibility in three ways: (a) triangulation, (b) expert reviews, and (c) member-checking. "Corroboration evidence from different sources" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260) is the process of triangulating data from different sources to validate the findings. To validate my findings, I triangulated my data from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and protocol writing prompts to help support the themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) identified in my data analysis. Credibility was also achieved through expert reviews of my research study by one committee chair and one committee member. Both professors hold doctoral degrees with one of the two professors being a Liberty School of Education certified research methodologist. Both committee members provided guidance for maintaining proper procedures in my study. The final method I used for credibility was to use member-checking to validate the accuracy of the data transcribed after each phase of the data collection process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). After individual interviews, members were contacted to check for the accuracy of findings either in-

person or in writing (e.g., emailing) and during focus group discussions member-checks confirmed the accuracy of interpretations of the findings.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the process of establishing the applicability to which my findings will transfer to another context or other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One way to achieve transferability is by having maximum variation in sites and samples used in my research study. My phenomenological research study focused on one of the largest districts in Eastern Virginia with a total of 26 schools that provided variation in sites and samples used for my study. A second way to achieve transferability was to provide thick descriptive data descriptions of the data collected from interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing. In addition, the results of the study are discussed in detail to allow the reader to determine if the results can be transferred to their own unique setting.

### **Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research can be achieved when a researcher reports the processes in detail so the study can be replicated or in some cases the same results obtained by other researchers (Shenton, 2004). Dependability in my research study was achieved through keeping a detailed audit trail of the research process. This included a description of the procedures used for the study to show that my findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another way dependability was achieved is by using an inquiry audit. This process involves a thorough review of the processes and procedures used for the study and was audited by my dissertation committee members and the qualitative research methodologist.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability in a qualitative research study is the degree of neutrality on the part of the researcher and that the data reflects the voice of the participants and not the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve confirmability, I used the strategies of (a) direct quotes, (b) audit trail, and (c) reflexivity. Direct quotes from my research study are used to represent the authenticity or the “value of the data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 256) collected from interviews and focus groups and represent the experiences of the participants. The second procedure I used to achieve confirmability was to keep a detailed audit so that my results can be repeated. The final strategy I used was to be reflexive throughout the study through the maintenance of a research journal to ensure I grasp the true meaning and essence of the phenomenon as lived by the participants.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical considerations are addressed in my research study. The initial step was to obtain approval from the Liberty Institutional Review Board (IRB) before any data collection process began. Next, I obtained approval from a representative in the district that has been chosen for this study.

## ***Permissions***

To conduct my phenomenological research study, I first requested IRB approval from Liberty University. This approval grants permission from the university to proceed forward with data collection methodologies of individual interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing prompt, and methods outlined in the request to conduct the study at the determined site. IRB approval is in Appendix A of this dissertation. Once approval was obtained from IRB, I then contacted the site and received permission from the responsible party at the school board to gain



access to the division and their faculty to conduct my research. The approval is in Appendix B of this dissertation.

### ***Other Participant Protections***

After IRB approval and site approval, I recruited participants and obtained consent from each participating member. To protect the confidentiality of the site and participants, I used pseudonyms for the location and persons involved in the study. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from participation at any time. Data collected on participants who withdraw from the study will be immediately destroyed. Data collected from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and protocol writing prompts are secured in a locked file cabinet located in my home office. Recordings from individual interviews and focus groups are electronically kept on my own personal computer and are password-protected to ensure confidentiality. After three years, data from the research study will be destroyed to protect the identity of the site and participants. There is no known risk to the site and participants and measures of confidentiality are used to protect those involved with the study. A final meeting was established with participants from the study to have a final debriefing of the study to express appreciation for their participation and to answer any final questions.

### **Summary**

This hermeneutic phenomenology aimed to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Anxiety, stress, and burnout can have serious effects on special education teachers that include low job satisfaction. When special education teachers experience low job satisfaction this can impact their self-efficacy which may impact student performance. Ultimately, special education teachers

who are unhappy and do not feel supported leave the profession and cause critical shortages in the United States. Phenomenology was appropriate for this research study to understand the lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of administrators in public-school settings who supervise teachers in special education to understand the perspectives of how an administrator might help a special education teacher to improve self-efficacy and working conditions. This study used three sources of data collection to include individual interviews, focus groups, and a protocol writing prompt. Data analysis was completed using a hermeneutical phenomenological framework developed by Van Manen (2016) and coding strategies recommended by Saldaña (2021) to manually code data into categories to develop themes. Data was collected upon IRB approval and was triangulated for accuracy that established trustworthiness of my study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

This hermeneutical phenomenological study aimed to discover and interpret the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Chapter Four begins with an introduction to each participant and a brief description of the administrator's educational background that led to their current position as an administrator in a K-12 public-school. The experiences of the participants follow with a discussion of the results of the data presented using thematic findings discovered in the study. Data analysis was completed using Van Manen's hermeneutical framework (Van Manen, 2016) and coding strategies posited by Saldaña (2021). The chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Participants**

The participants were selected using a criterion-based purposeful sampling approach of public-school administrators from the Magnolia County Public School District. Participants are public-school administrators that include principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers all of whom hold endorsements in leadership and are actively involved in the direct supervision of special education teachers. To obtain participants for this study, the direct of accreditation and accountability in the district supplied this researcher with a distribution list that included email addresses for all principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers. To ensure maximum variation sampling, an email was sent to each distribution list requesting participation in the research study. After the initial request for participation, five participants immediately volunteered by emailing their request to be a part of the research study. Snowball sampling was then applied to secure seven additional participants making a total sample size of 12 participants.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to all participants, and numeric codes were used to represent the four corridors that make up the district (i.e., east, west, central, and courthouse). Each of the corridors has multiple elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school depending on the geographic location within the district. Five of the participants are principals with two of them employed in elementary school, two in a middle school, and one in a high school. Three assistant principals were used in this study with one employed in elementary school and two in middle school. Four senior teachers were selected to participate in this study with all of them currently working in different grade levels in the middle school setting. No senior teachers from elementary or high school responded to the request for participation. Three of the four corridors were represented in this study with no participants successfully recruited from the 3rd corridor of the division. Demographic information is presented below in Table 6 and Appendix J.

**Table 6**

*Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Name	Title	Level	Corridor	Years in Education	Years in Administration
Cole	Principal	Elementary	2	18	10
Kyleigh	Senior Teacher	Middle	2	14	5
Avery	Senior Teacher	Middle	2	28	23
Iris	Assistant Principal	Elementary	2	17	4
Luke	Senior Teacher	Middle	1	20	9
Emma	Senior Teacher	Middle	4	8	2

Lily	Assistant Principal	Middle	2	9	5
Hannah	Assistant Principal	Middle	2	20	9
Leah	Principal	Elementary	1	26	18
Oliver	Principal	Middle	2	17	8
Ruby	Principal	Elementary	2	33	25
Tyler	Principal	High School	2	30	15

---

### **Cole**

Cole has 18 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for ten years. Cole stated that he has been working with kids since he was “about 14 years old” and he had an unusual route to becoming a teacher and eventually an administrator. Cole began his career in education after completing his undergraduate degree. After several years in education, Cole returned to school to pursue a post-master’s degree. While teaching in the district for several years, Cole earned his leadership endorsement and was promoted to assistant principal in the elementary school setting where he stated “70% of my job as an assistant principal was special education.” Cole is currently a principal in a school located in the 2<sup>nd</sup> corridor of the division.

### **Kyleigh**

Kyleigh has 14 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for five years across two districts. Kyleigh began her career in public education as a substitute teacher doing long-term positions in chemistry and biology. Kyleigh began her career outside of her current district and taught in another county for 11 years. In her

previous experience, Kyleigh stated she was an “admin aide” which put her in a leadership role that inspired her to pursue her postmaster certificate in administration K through 12. This is Kyleigh’s fifth year in an administrative role (three years as an administrative aide in another division) and this is her second year as a senior teacher in a school located in the 2nd corridor of the division.

### **Avery**

Avery has 28 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for 23 years all in the same district. The first five years of her career she was a classroom teacher before becoming a senior teacher. Avery had a unique experience in her career, first becoming a senior teacher prior to the requirement that all senior teachers in the division hold an endorsement in leadership. Within the past few years, Avery has successfully added her leadership endorsement and currently serves as a senior teacher in a school located in the 2nd corridor of the division. Avery was the third participant to be interviewed for this research study and the first to be regularly interrupted by other administrators who requested assistance within the building. At one point during the interview, Avery stated “that we needed to pause the interview because the school was about to conduct a fire-drill and that we would need to reconvene the interview after the fire drill.” This was truly a glimpse into how active senior teachers are in leadership and how often they are called upon for assistance by principals and assistant principals. Subsequent interviews also had interruptions that required immediate attention from all three levels of administration.

### **Iris**

Iris has 17 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for four years. Iris’ desire to work in education began when she was in the

second grade. Iris discussed that in her “college admissions essay, I talked about how I would then want to be a principal.” Iris taught in the classroom setting for 10 years and reflected on the leadership she had with a former administrator who encouraged her to pursue her leadership endorsement. Iris likes to think that she is doing the best that she can do to help teachers but admits that “you get bogged down in the meetings, or the behaviors, or this or that, and so I try my best.” Iris is currently an assistant principal in a school located in the 2nd corridor of the division.

### **Luke**

Luke has 20 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for nine years. Luke attended a university in the state of Virginia where he double majored in social science and political science. Luke taught in the classroom for eight years before going back to school to obtain his master’s degree in curriculum and instruction and extended his education for another year to obtain his licensure in supervision and administration. Luke is currently a senior teacher in a school located in the 1<sup>st</sup> corridor of the division.

### **Emma**

Emma has eight years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for two years. Emma began her career as a special education teacher having taught in self-contained and inclusive classrooms for five years. Emma stated, “I just felt like I wanted to pursue other avenues and just broaden my horizons.” Emma transitioned from special education to general education as a mathematics teacher and during that time explored leadership roles and found “that I really had a passion for that and decided to go back to school and get my leadership endorsement.” Emma is currently a senior teacher in a school located in the 4<sup>th</sup> corridor of the division.

**Lily**

Lily has nine years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for five years. Lily has always wanted to be in education since she was in middle school and knew “that I would eventually want to go beyond the classroom which kind of sounded odd because I hadn’t really been in the classroom yet.” This is Lily’s first year in her role as an assistant principal after being in the classroom for four years. During her time as a teacher, Lily was put into the role of an administrative aide where she taught six classes and had duties as an administrator. The administrative aide position inspired her to pursue her leadership endorsement. Lily’s educational philosophy is “you can’t just support the students you also must support the stakeholders and teachers.” Lily is currently an assistant principal in a school located in the 2<sup>nd</sup> corridor of the division.

**Hannah**

Hannah has 20 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for nine years. Hannah decided later in life to return to school to become a teacher. She spent 10 years in the classroom teaching mathematics and four years as a testing coordinator. During her time as the testing coordinator, Hannah went back to school to earn her master’s degree in administration and supervision. Four years ago, Hannah accepted a position as a senior teacher in a middle school and did that for two years. Hannah reflected on her time as a senior teacher and said, “I love the role of senior teacher because I love the kind of that middle person because I’m more teacher support based.” Hannah also indicated that a former administrator had encouraged her to pursue a position as an assistant principal. Hannah is currently an assistant principal in a school located in the 2<sup>nd</sup> corridor of the division.



**Leah**

Leah has 26 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for 18 years. Leah attended college to obtain a liberal studies degree teaching K-8 core academic subjects. After teaching for a few years, Leah went back to school to obtain her master's degree in administrative supervision-educational leadership. Leah pursued leadership opportunities and would eventually become a senior teacher in the middle school setting. After several years of working as a senior teacher, Leah applied to be an assistant principal in the middle school setting. Leah was an assistant principal in two different middle schools until she ultimately became principal in a third middle school. Leah is currently a principal in a school located in the 1<sup>st</sup> corridor of the division.

**Oliver**

Oliver has 17 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for eight years. Oliver stated, "in short my educational background has been 100% revolved around special education." Oliver began his educational experience as a special education teacher and has taught in self-contained and inclusive education classrooms. Oliver talked about reasons why he wanted to move into administration and suggested that one reason was that there are not a lot of administrators with special education backgrounds, and he wanted to make changes to special education programs building wide as a principal. He felt during his time as a teacher that "a whole slew of kids when I was teaching, that, for lack of resources or other reasons never had an IEP and fell between the cracks." Oliver talked about a program that he helped to develop that would prevent students from falling through the cracks. Oliver is currently a principal in a school located in the 2<sup>nd</sup> corridor of the division.

**Ruby**

Ruby has 33 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for 25 years. Ruby has worked in elementary education her entire career. Ruby has a post-master's degree in early childhood education. Ruby talked about her unique route to becoming a principal. When she was first promoted to principal, Ruby skipped the senior teacher and assistant principal levels and immediately was named the principal. Ruby stated, "that was not a good fit for me." Ruby left her position as principal of an elementary school and moved to another county where she was given an assistant principal job that she did for six years ultimately becoming principal. Ruby is currently a principal in a school located in the 2<sup>nd</sup> corridor of the division.

**Tyler**

Tyler has 30 years of experience working in public education and has been a member of the administrative team for 15 years. Tyler has worked in the high school setting for his entire 30-year career. Tyler was a classroom teacher for the first 15 years of his career and taught classes in the Career Technical Education (CTE) department. Tyler then became an assistant principal for three years, and then was moved up to principal and has done that for the last 12 years of his career. Tyler is currently a principal in a school located in the 2<sup>nd</sup> corridor of the division.

**Results**

The themes that emerged from this study describe the lived experiences of public-school administrators who have completed leadership preparation programs and who work with special education teachers to help improve self-efficacy and working conditions. Using the hermeneutical framework set forth by Van Manen (2016) and coding strategies posited by

Saldaña (2021), themes were developed according to the theoretical framework of self-efficacy derived from social cognitive theory developed by Bandura (1977, 1993). Participants in this study completed individual interviews, attended one focus group meeting, and completed a protocol writing prompt. The themes developed in this study are represented in Table 7 below and Appendix K.

**Table 7**

*Themes and Sub-Themes*

<b>Themes and Sub-Themes</b>
Theme: Absence of Readiness
Sub-Themes: Learn Through Experience Lack of Awareness Need for Structured Training in Special Education
Theme: Need to Support Special Educators
Sub-Themes: Building Intentional Relationships Tangible Change and Improvement to Workload Acknowledging the Reality of Burnout Empowering Special Education Teachers

**Absence of Readiness**

The theme *absences of readiness* emerged from data analysis using in vivo codes *law class, no preparation, zero or no preparation, not a lot, it didn't, and no experience*, coded 57 times and appeared across all three sources of data collection. The subthemes included: *learn through experience, lack of awareness, and structured training in special education*. The codes *learn through experience, learn on the go, limited training, not familiar with, need more*

*training, on the job training, no professional development, others to help you, I lack formal training, I did not go to school for that* were clustered to form the subtheme *learn through experience*, coded 24 times. The codes *unified professional learning, none, I don't know* were clustered to form the subtheme *lack of awareness*, coded 28 times. The codes *need a class, year in the life of sped/sped 101/crash course, training modules, no training/we need it, no consistency/need common framework/templates, ongoing professional development, need a sr. teacher in special education, deeper dive into how to sped, assess what we know and don't know*, were clustered to form the subtheme *structured training in special education needed*, coded 30 times. In total, the theme of *absence of readiness* was coded 139 times across interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing prompt.

Administrators who participated in this study shared their experiences of learning about special education policy and practices and how their leadership programs prepared them to lead inclusive education schools. Most of the administrators expressed in interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing that they did not feel prepared from their leadership programs to understand the complexities of special education from an administrative lens, and the theme absence of readiness emerged from the data. When administrators discussed their educational backgrounds, 10 of the 12 participants stated that during their pre-service administrative preparation the only thing that was covered was special education law. Most all the administrators agreed that what was covered was minimal with no real understanding of special education. Leah expressed, “In my program, there was a lot of leading for change and climate and culture classes that if you think about sped programming that we could apply from that lens but nothing in terms of special education regulations and the nuances of meetings.” Two administrators shared that they could not recall any preparation for leadership in special education from their pre-service leadership

programs. Avery expressed during her interview that when she was in her leadership program, she “did not have any one class, and I feel like I should have.” Many of the administrators expressed that they were not fully prepared with a clear understanding of special education considering the responsibilities they take on as administrators in public-school settings. Lily stated during her interview, “I will be the first to admit that my understanding of special education is not nearly where I would like it to be.”

The continued perception of the absence of readiness to lead special education programs in public-schools by administrators was continued when administrators talked about their responsibilities as leaders and how their respective programs prepared them for leadership roles. Most all the administrators communicated in interviews and focus groups that they understand the difficult jobs that special education teachers have and when asked about how they were prepared in leadership programs to help special education teachers manage stress, anxiety, and burnout, nine participants stated either “zero” or “none.” During interviews and focus groups, three of the administrators stated either “not a lot” or “it didn’t give me much.” Emma elaborated during a focus group, “There was never a direct focus on the specific excessive burden these staff members carry.” Lily echoed Emma and stated, “I feel like that should have been a class.” Most of the administrators interviewed during this study expressed that they were not ready to lead special education programs and what emerged was the sub-theme of learning through experience.

### ***Learn Through Experience***

Six of the participants expressed during interviews and focus groups that they learn about special education through experience. Lily stated during her interview, “It’s kind of like learning on the go.” Administrators who are placed into leadership roles bear a tremendous amount of

responsibility for overseeing special education teachers with little to no training from preparation programs on how to support special education teachers. Oliver expressed during a focus group, “Once you become an administrator there will be other people to help you navigate that, so it was kind of more like a check the box and it’s not a thorough understanding by any means.” Administrators shared their interactions with special education staff and who bears the primary responsibility for overseeing the department. In the elementary school setting, typically, the assistant principal is responsible for all things related to special education. This includes supervision of special education teachers (e.g., evaluations), conducting special education meetings (e.g., eligibility), and serving as the special education administrator in IEP meetings. Iris stated, “I didn’t go to school for that, to understand special education, but when I was made an assistant principal, I am now overseeing all of these things.” Administrators who work in secondary education in the district each expressed that they have a senior teacher for special education in each of their schools. Tyler conveyed, “I’m fortunate that I have a senior teacher in special education that is well versed in policy, IEP management, and all of those things; and working closely with her and listening to her guidance.” All four of the senior teachers expressed that part of their job responsibilities is to manage section 504 accommodation plans for students with disabilities who do not want or qualify for special education. This requires these administrators to understand what accommodations and services would best help a student access learning experiences in public-schools. In addition to supervising special education teachers and in some cases managing all aspects of special education, during interviews and focus groups, five of the 12 participants stated that they are responsible for completing evaluations on special education teachers as a primary responsibility. However, with limited training in special education this can be difficult when administrators are not sure of the policies and practices.

Avery stated, “Knowledge is power, and I just don’t feel we prepare our newest administrators with the knowledge and real-life training they need to help them feel ready to lead special education teachers.”

### ***Lack of Awareness***

Administrators who participated in this research study were asked several questions about the amount and frequency of professional learning opportunities that are provided to them and special education teachers. Often when providing responses to specific questions about improving their own knowledge or improving the lives of their special education teachers, there were several instances where an administrator answered, “I am not aware of any” or “I don’t know”. There were several instances where administrators reported that there were “none”, however, other administrators were able to identify somewhere within the district that professional development offerings were provided to staff that fall under the domains of anxiety, stress, and burnout as well as improving the knowledge for all staff in special education policy and practices.

During individual interviews, three of the administrators shared that the school district offers a Unified Professional Learning Conference (UPLC) each summer to provide yearly professional development to staff members in the district. These in-service days are provided for all staff members and cover a wide range of topics in general education and special education. Several of the administrators during focus groups discussed specially designed instruction (SDI) as the most recent focus in special education professional learning and this responsibility falls on special education teachers. Lily expressed, “I would like to see more professional learning opportunities on how to model or facilitate some of the SDI before the year gets going.” Administrators understand the necessity of providing SDI to students with disabilities to meet

their unique learning needs, and administrators also recognize that this added responsibility can contribute to anxiety, stress, and burnout for special education teachers. Two of the administrators discussed how information is provided directly to them as school level leaders. Oliver expressed, “there is a disconnect between the division and SPED teachers.” Special education teachers do not regularly communicate with special education division leaders and so information is filtered to administrator from the top down. Administrators were also asked if they were aware of any professional learning opportunities that are offered in the district about workload manageability, and most all the administrators stated that there are no professional learning opportunities that fall within that realm.

### ***Need for Structured Training in Special Education***

The administrators who participated in this research study had much to say about what they believe should be offered to administrators to improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices ranging from what Avery called, “SPED 101” to Oliver who stated, “we need more recruitment of special education teachers who are willing to get into administration.” There were many elements that led to the development of the sub-theme structured training in special education and every administrator had a different response on what is needed to improve their knowledge. In a protocol writing prompt, one administrator called for the need for division level leaders to provide training modules that could be self-paced using the school-based training platform that would further improve administrators’ knowledge of special education policy and practices. Lily expressed, “I just feel like I don’t have the best understanding of the requirements or obligations that special education teachers have.” Many of the administrators in this study agree that more training in special education is needed and Kyleigh stated in her interview, “I would love to take a class on special education policy and practices, and I would like the



opportunity to learn more about the role an administrator can play to help support special education students and teachers.”

### **Need to Support Special Educators**

The theme of *need to support special educators* was the second theme that emerged from all three data collection sources and was coded in vivo 94 times and clustered with codes of *workload, overwhelmed, overworked, IEP writing, caseloads, staffing, self-care, consistency, hands on approach, teaching classes, managing time, protect time, and specially designed instruction*, coded 106 times. The subthemes included: *building intentional relationships, tangible change and improvement to workload, acknowledging the reality of burnout, and empowering special education teacher*. The codes *conversations, talk to me, listening, validating emotions, building relationships* were clustered to form the subtheme *building intentional relationships*, coded 87 times. The codes *master schedule, dividing caseloads, on/off their plate, breaks, reduce duties, common planning, and reducing services* were clustered to form the subtheme *tangible change and improvement to workload*, coded 40 times. The codes *mental, physical, emotional, exhaustion, causes of burnout, poor relationships, effects of burnout, attrition, supporting burnout* were clustered to form the subtheme *acknowledging the reality of burnout*, coded 85 times. The codes *guidance, mentors, staffing, time, praise, support and resources* were clustered to form the subtheme *empowering special education teacher*, coded 43 times. In total, the theme of *need to support special educators* was coded 455 times across interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing prompt.

Special education teacher job responsibilities have increased over the years (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017) with many special education teachers finding the demands of the job to be overwhelming (Hester et al., 2020). Meeting these demands requires special education teachers

to have specific skill sets in workload manageability and a need for support from administrators. Elements of the theme need to support special educators were gathered by the number of times administrators talked about “workload” (e.g., caseload), overwhelmed, and overworked. Participants in this study conveyed examples of special education teachers who have expressed that they are overworked or overwhelmed with aspects of their job responsibilities. When talking about the workload of special education teachers, collectively as a group the administrators had identified 12 primary responsibilities that a special education teacher must perform regularly as part of their job responsibilities. However, individually when discussing the workload for special education teachers only four of the 12 participants identified up to six special education teacher job responsibilities. The number one job responsibility identified by administrators during individual interviews was IEP writing where eight of the administrators identified this as part of the typical workload for special education teachers. Caseloads, teaching classes, and specially designed instruction (SDI) each were identified by seven of the participants. Lily elaborated, “It’s roughly 50% serving as a case manager and then 50% being in the classroom obviously depending on the individual caseload you might have; just depending on the grade level and stuff.”

During interviews and focus groups, administrators talked about instances where a special education teacher has expressed that they are overwhelmed or overworked. Two of the 12 administrators indicated that a special education teacher has expressed that they are overworked. Oliver stated, “The overworked usually comes from not being comfortable with content, and because were not having comfortability with content, they’re overworked with building relationships with kids and when that’s not coming along, then stress levels are through the roof.” During interviews and focus groups, seven of the 12 administrators who participated in

this study expressed that special education teachers do not express that they are overworked, rather they report that they are overwhelmed with their job responsibilities. Cole and Ruby who are both in leadership in the elementary school setting communicated during a focus group that special programs like adaptive curriculum intensive supports (ACIS) are overwhelmed with the demands of the job because they must spend most of their time throughout the day with these students that leaves them no time for planning to prepare for future instruction. Iris expressed during a focus group, “because of the workload, the lack of time especially here at the elementary level, that lack of planning because a lot of the times they have kids all day that they are serving.” Ruby further explained, “honestly, it was becoming impossible to stay in compliance with the IEP, until we received support from the division.” When administrators shared incidents of their special education teachers being overwhelmed, many of them stated that their programs had too many kids being served and a lack of additional resources to help those special education teachers. During an individual interview, Iris talked about the ACIS and PBIS programs in her school and voiced, “there are supposed to be no more than six in ACIS, no more than eight in adaptive curriculum or PBIS and her ACIS teacher has 10 to 11 kids in hers and she constantly came to me overwhelmed with meeting the needs of the students.” Several of the administrators expressed during interviews and focus groups that they hear from special education teachers at intervals throughout the school year about how overwhelming the job responsibilities are to manage. These incidents usually occur during progress reporting periods or when a special education teacher has multiple IEPs that must be reviewed around the same time. Special education teachers play an important role in providing special education support to students with disabilities to ensure that they receive a quality education and students’ individual needs are being met in public education. Many of the stories shared by the participants indicate

how overwhelming the responsibilities are for a special education teacher and how these demanding roles are affecting their teachers. Although the focus of this research study was on special education teachers, many of the participants expressed that all teachers are overwhelmed with their responsibilities due to changes in public education. In the interview with Tyler he stated, “In my opinion, everyone in education is overworked at this point.” Administrators recognize the complexities of being a special education teacher and many of them empathize with the feelings that are expressed to them when they are approached by staff who indicate they are experiencing anxiety, stress, or burnout.

### ***Building Intentional Relationships***

During interviews and focus groups administrators who participated in this study shared experiences of working with special education teachers to help improve self-efficacy and working conditions and what emerged as a sub-theme was how administrators intentionally build relationships with special education teachers because they know how difficult the job has become. Ruby expressed, “I don’t know how they do it to be quite honest.” Elements of the theme building intentional relationships were gathered by the number of times administrators talked about having “conversations” with special education teachers, “talk to me”, “listening”, “validating emotions”, and “building relationships”, and these in vivo codes appeared across all sources of data collection. During the interview with Leah, she elaborated, “all her teachers have monthly outings, we decorate cookies during holidays, recently we all went out to dinner together, I feel like you have to have that interaction outside of school in order to feel that connection to someone.” Several of the administrators expressed how it was important to be seen in special education classrooms and to attend special education department meetings as much as possible to show support. Oliver stated during a focus group meeting, “I think really, just being

around and in conversations about what special education teams need, and just continually recognizing how hard your job is to making sure that I'm recognizing that in front of you guys." Several administrators discussed that when special education teachers are having a difficult time, they often praise them for doing the jobs that they do, and this helps them to form good working relationships so that special education teachers know how much they are appreciated for the work that they do day-in and day-out.

Administrators shared experiences of how they often communicate with their special education teachers and regularly check in with them to see how they are functioning in their professional lives but also in their personal lives. When discussing professional communication with special education teachers during focus groups, several of the administrators talked about the specialty programs in their schools (e.g., Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, PBIS) becoming the most challenging part of their special education departments to manage that is causing special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout. Cole elaborated, "I have had four different teachers in four years" in one of his specialty programs, and Avery expressed, "two of my special education teachers have expressed that they don't know if they can continue to work in this profession." When special education teachers have expressed feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout, it was regularly shared that the first step is to sit down and have a conversation. Emma explained, "listen to their concerns and validate them, and see how we can support them, and then try to put some of those supports in place moving forward." One administrator talked about how she worked with a special education teacher who was having a difficult time, and she made sure to call her over the weekend to check in to see how she was doing after their conversation.

### ***Tangible Change and Improvement to Workload***

Since many of the job responsibilities of a special education teacher are mandated through IDEA, administrators often struggle with finding ways to make significant changes or improvements to the workload for special education teachers. The sub-theme *tangible change and improvement to workload* evolved by the number of times administrators talked about “master schedule”, “dividing caseloads”, “on or off their plate”, and “reducing services” as ways they could try to improve the workload for special education teachers. During interviews and focus groups, three of the 12 administrators shared that recently the district held meetings with school board members from the special education department to talk about ways to build master schedules in schools that would offer more support and time for special education teachers to complete their job responsibilities. During his interview, Tyler elaborated, “We have focused a lot on reducing collaborative services to students who have accommodations but do not need collaborative classes and we have really taken a deeper dive into IEP’s and needed services.” Other administrators shared similar experiences working on master scheduling that would free up some time for special education teachers to help them meet the demands of their jobs. Emma expressed about the division during a focus group, “I also think that a better general understanding across the division of what they truly do and the amount of work that they have on their plate, and a better understanding of workloads” is needed to help support special education teachers. Several of the administrators discussed during interviews and focus groups that having conversations with special education teachers to find out what is on their plate and what they can do to assist them by removing some responsibilities (e.g., duties) to allow them to have more time to meet the demands of their jobs. Due to high work demands, and limited resources to help support special education teachers, many of the administrators expressed that special education

teachers are experiencing high rates of burnout that led to the development of the sub-theme acknowledging the reality of burnout.

### ***Acknowledging the Reality of Burnout***

Most administrators who participated in this study acknowledged that burnout in special education teachers is a growing problem causing some special education teachers to leave the profession. Elements of the theme acknowledging the reality of burnout were gathered by the number of times administrators talked about “domains of burnout”, “causes of burnout”, “relationships”, “effects of burnout”, “attrition”, and “supporting burnout”. Some of the participants were knowledgeable of the mental, physical, and emotional domains of burnout and used either one or all three domains to explain what burnout means to them. Other administrators used phrases that could be interpreted to fit any of the domains of burnout. Hannah described that burnout means to her, “just can’t do it anymore.” This statement was interpreted to mean physical exhaustion. Ruby stated, “not finding joy in what you do anymore.” This statement was interpreted to mean emotional exhaustion.

During interviews and focus groups administrators expressed their beliefs on the causes of special education teacher burnout. The most common things identified by administrators were student behavior, time, workload, and poor co-teaching relationships. Two administrators focused on student behavior as a primary cause for special education teacher burnout. During her interview, Ruby stated, “It’s consistent elevated and escalated behaviors because the students are not appropriately placed because the decisions are not made fast enough.” Cole had a similar experience and talked about having to work with division leaders to get services and support for a student. Time (e.g., lack of time) was discussed by three of the participants as the primary

cause of special education teacher burnout. During her interview, Lily suggested the cause of burnout for special education teachers is,

I really feel like the bulk of overwhelming stress, anxiety, and burnout all of that really stems from lack of time to complete the case management. I mean we are asking sped. teachers to do two really important roles at the same time with the same number of hours in a day.

Some of the administrators acknowledged that special education teachers are having to do some of their work at home and this is interfering with their personal lives. Tyler voiced, "It's finding that time and to do the job effectively, you're not going to get it done in a 7.25 hour day the way it's structured right now." Three of the administrators who participated in this study also identified workload as a cause of special education teacher burnout. During his interview, Oliver shared, "it's the workload, it's a full-time job to be a case manager, progress monitoring, IEP data collection, building relationships with families, how do you do that and teach at the same time is baffling." Another area that was identified by three administrators during interviews and focus groups was poor co-teaching relationships with general education teachers. Cole talked about his special education teachers in his interview and how they have indicated in years past that they will not work with some general education teachers. Iris stated, "It is difficult when there is not a solid working relationship because the communication is lacking." Poor working relationships have been identified as a reason why special education teachers are leaving the profession. Leah added that, "In one of my grade levels, I have had a revolving special education teacher, and this has created a lack in my general education teachers building relationships with their special education teachers." Not all relationships in co-teaching classrooms are negative, some special education teachers form strong relationships with their co-teaching partners. One



belief of why this happens came from Lily during her interview when she stated, “Since my school’s special education team is departmentalized, that my overall perception is that the collaborative relationships have grown.” Special education teachers who are departmentalized work in the same content area allowing them to focus on providing content specific services to students with disabilities. An example of this is a special education teacher who only works in math co-teaching and self-contained classrooms providing specially designed instructions to all students with disabilities no matter who the case manager is for that student.

Acknowledging the reality of burnout also identified that it could have profound consequences on special education teachers. There were several different ways that administrator felt burnout affects a special education teacher that include (a) negative student behavior increases, (b) negative attitude of special education teachers, (c) illness, (d) lack of patience, (e) impede confidence, (f) beats down self-worth, (g) not effective, (h) lose passion, (i) depression/anxiety, and (j) walk out the door/resign. Attrition among special education teachers continues to rise and all the administrators provided an example of a special education teacher who has left the profession. During individual interviews, eight participants shared stories about someone who has left education altogether due to the demands of being a special education teacher. Luke expressed,

I know of one very strong up and coming younger special education teacher but within the first three to five years very quickly burned out over the stress, behavior students, and things like that and ultimately left to work a more traditional job.

Four of the participants in this study detailed stories about someone who has left their role as a special education teacher. Three of the four had experienced situations where a special education teacher transitioned to general education, and one participant suggested that a special

education teacher transitioned to another role in special education but no longer serves students directly in the classroom.

Administrators shared experiences that they have with providing support to special education teachers who experience burnout. There were four identified ways that these administrators offered additional support to special education teachers. The first and most prevalent way was to provide them with a break. During her interview Iris explained, “as best as I can that gift of time, I think sometimes time, I know, I keep saying it but even if it’s a half a day planning, we try really hard to give and protect time for teachers.” Positive reinforcement or praises was also mentioned by several of the participants as a way that administrators provide support, Emma discussed during a focus group when she stated, “I think making sure that they know that they are an incredible educator, pointing out the positive pieces and the wonderful things that we’ve seen.” During interviews and focus groups three administrators offered some examples of support by mentioning what they can do to take the responsibility off a special education teacher’s plate. Oliver said that through his conversations with his special education teachers that he has frequently said, “If it’s something that I can take off your plate or if it’s something to support you”, he wants to provide what he can so that his special education teachers know that they are being heard when they express feelings of burnout. This led to the development of another sub-theme of empowering special education teachers to speak up when they feel overwhelmed or overworked so these administrators can provide resources and support to improve the well-being of special education teachers.

### ***Empowering Special Education Teachers***

The administrators who participated in this research study recognize the need to work with special education teachers to improve their overall well-being and job satisfaction by

providing them with resources and support. Elements of the sub-theme empowering special education teachers emerged when administrators talked about “guidance”, “mentors”, “staffing”, “time”, and “support”. Many administrators talked about how to create a supportive work environment for special education teachers by providing them with guidance and growth opportunities in their roles as special education teachers that empower them to be confident in their abilities. Administrators believe the first step to empowering special education teachers begins with pairing them with a mentor who can share ideas on how to balance the many responsibilities special education teachers assume when entering the profession. Avery stated in an interview, “I really think when we have brand-new teachers to special education, I think they’ve got to be partnered with mentors and specifically talk about workload and how to balance it.” Administrators in this research study each praised their special education teachers for the work that they do each day, and they all recognize the demands that are placed on them each year with new challenges and increasing job responsibilities. All the administrators in this study expressed that they encourage and empower their teachers by offering guidance and support to help improve the well-being of special education teachers.

### **Research Question Responses**

The research questions serve as the cornerstone for uncovering meaning and essence in a qualitative research study. This research study consisted of one central research question and four sub-questions. The following themes were developed after data analysis: absences of readiness and need to support special educators. In the theme absences of readiness, three sub-themes emerged from data analysis: learn through experience, lack of awareness, and need for structured training in special education. In the theme need to support special educators, four sub-themes emerged from data analysis: building intentional relationships, tangible change and

improvements to workload, acknowledging the reality of burnout, and empowering special education teachers. The research question and sub-questions align with the theoretical framework of self-efficacy used in this research study.

### **Central Research Question**

The central research question for this study is, what do K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers?

Administrators' perspective is that there is a need to support special education teachers. During interviews and focus groups the administrators in this study expressed that to do this, they must be intentional in building relationships with their special education teachers by hearing their concerns through conversations and using a listening ear to validate their emotions. Participants in this study had varying responses and perceptions of how to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers, however, almost all of them stated that to find the root cause of what is causing low self-efficacy requires meaningful conversations. All the administrators who participated have experienced working with special education teachers who have experienced anxiety, stress, and burnout that have affected the teachers' self-efficacy. Administrators perceived that relationships are formed when administrators take an active role in having conversations with special education teachers to hear their concerns and offer support that can help the special education teacher improve self-efficacy. Emma stated during her interview,

I always want to validate emotions and try to have empathy and sympathy. Let me support you, so can we sit down, can we chat? Can you share with me what are the things that are on your plate right now that are making you feel this way?

Administrators talked about many different reasons why they believe that special education teachers experience low self-efficacy that include negative student behaviors,

excessive paperwork in special education, no time for planning, too many job responsibilities, parent mistrust, poor working relationships with co-teachers, large caseloads, and no support for specialty programs (PBIS). Oliver stated during a focus group,

It is essentially two jobs that one person is having to carry. You could write IEP's all day and caseload all day, and contact parents all day, with caseload management and that is a job in itself; and you being asked to be a classroom teacher on top of that.

The participants in this study also shared how they assess special education teachers' self-efficacy to improve overall working conditions during individual interviews and focus groups. Avery explained during her interview, "you can just tell when a teacher is struggling or when they are struggling, and they won't admit it." Several of the administrators expressed in a focus group that sometimes special education teachers will not admit when they are struggling because they don't want to admit that they are having difficulty with self-efficacy. Another administrator Leah expressed that, "assessing is really hard and that's really tough to answer but knowing your teachers and building relationships helps." The administrators in this study agree that conversations are usually when they can identify when a special education teacher has low self-efficacy. Avery mentioned, "simply asking day in and day out, how's it going and recognizing when you have a feeling when you're Spidey senses are telling you something is not right here; calling that person and having a conversation."

During interviews and focus groups several of the participants conveyed that during formal and informal observations and general walk throughs in special education classrooms is another good indicator of self-efficacy in special education teachers. Tyler stated, "I just walk in for sometimes 30 seconds, sometimes five minutes and just really getting a feel for what they're doing in the classroom." Administrators who witness strong collaborative relationships in co-

taught classrooms where you cannot tell who the general education teacher is and who the special education teacher is can indicate high levels of self-efficacy in special education teachers when the co-teachers share responsibilities for students with disabilities. Leah also talked about walk throughs and indicated that when she leaves feedback for her teachers, they are always recognized for the positive things that they are doing in the classroom that relate to each teacher's individual goals "We see you crushing those items that's what we're highlighting and then we're giving a suggestion, I wonder if you could also, or I wonder if you thought about." There were several administrators who talked about the poor working relationships between general education and special education teachers that they are experiencing this school year. Lily communicated, "When you have a new sped teacher coming in who's working with a very seasoned content teacher, there is a little bit of a power struggle in terms of just how you're supposed to teach a collaborative class." When special education teachers have poor working relationships with their co-teachers, this can cause anxiety, stress, and burnout that perpetuates low self-efficacy.

There were several different ways that administrators believed that they could improve working conditions for special education teachers by making tangible changes to improve workload. Many of the administrators focused on master scheduling and building schedules that allow collaborating partners time for common planning. The goal is to provide special education co-teachers with time to plan out who will teach what lessons and allow time for special education teachers to create specially designed instruction (SDI) for those students who require this level of services. Time was mentioned frequently by many of the participants, whether it was lack of time, or giving time to special education teachers can help improve working conditions for special education teachers. Kyleigh stated, "y'all are juggling a lot of different hats." Giving

time to work on IEPs, data tracking, progress reports, and other job responsibilities is perceived by most administrators as a way to help improve working conditions for special education teachers. A few of the administrators used the phrase “what can I take off your plate?” When talking about improving working conditions for special education teachers, the administrators in this study frequently discussed how they try to improve the working conditions for special education teachers by offering to remove things from their plates to allow them time to focus on the more important aspects of their jobs. An example was given by Ruby who talked about temporarily removing a duty, and Cole said that he has offered to cover classes to help special education teachers if that is what is necessary to improve working conditions for special education teachers.

### **Sub-Question One**

How do administrators perceive learning experiences in special education policy and practices from leadership programs and professional development have prepared them to lead inclusive schools and understand special education teacher job responsibilities? After data analysis the theme absences of readiness was identified with the sub-themes learn through experience, lack of awareness, and need for structured training in special education.

During all three data collection phases, ten of the twelve participants in this research study identified that the only preparation they had in special education policy and practices from their leadership preparation program was on special education law. Luke stated,

I was not aware of all of the legal history of special education services, and all of the time frames, and all of the deadlines that go into the development of testing, developing an IEP, maintaining an IEP, that sort of thing.

In individual interviews and focus groups several of the participants voiced that they were not prepared to lead special education programs in their schools after completing their training because the preparation program did not have any additional coursework required for them to complete the leadership program. During interviews, two of the participants stated that they did not receive any law class or preparation from their leadership program to prepare them to lead inclusive schools and to understand special education teacher job responsibilities. This has been problematic for these administrators who are not properly prepared upon exiting their leadership programs since they have responsibilities overseeing staff who work with students with disabilities. In this district, elementary school assistant principals and principals are one-hundred percent responsible for all things special education and all the elementary school administrators expressed the need for the district to provide them with a senior teacher in special education who has the acquired knowledge and skills to manage their growing number of students who are identified with a disability. During a focus group Iris stated,

I think at the elementary level they need special education senior teachers. That's on us as assistant principals, I did not go to school for that on top of the trillion other things I have to do right as testing coordinator, field trip coordinator, discipline, transportation everything else we do.

Secondary schools in this district are fortunate to have an individual in a senior teacher position who manages all aspects of special education. Tyler mentioned,

With my current special education senior teacher in place, she really keeps me abreast of what's happening whenever there are county level meetings; she will inform me as well as our assistant principals who oversees special education just so that we stay well informed as to what things are coming down the pike.



Senior teachers who are not special education senior teachers also take on responsibilities for students who have a 504 plan that requires accommodations to help them access the curriculum. A 504 plan falls under the umbrella of special education and these senior teachers must know what accommodations are appropriate to help these students with disabilities or medical conditions. The senior teachers in this research study all identified that they manage a caseload of between 10-15 students with a 504 plan. Like IEPs, 504s must be reviewed annually and in the presence of special education teachers and an administrator. However, the lack of readiness to perform these job responsibilities was echoed by most of the senior teachers.

The consensus of all the participants in this study is that they were not well prepared to lead inclusive schools after their leadership preparation programs. Many talked about only having one course and some said they received no formal training from their programs. When talking about professional learning opportunities that were specific to special education teachers, the participants recognize that there are opportunities for special education teacher development with a primary focus now on specially designed instruction (SDI) and no real meaningful training for administrators to help them lead inclusive schools. This is concerning because all of the administrators in this study assume responsibilities for special education teachers either through directly having to conduct IEP meetings as the administrator, coaching special education teachers, and performance evaluations of special education teachers.

Further data analysis of the absence of readiness led to the development of a sub-theme learn through experience. Six of the participants in this research study mentioned in various ways that the training that they received in special education was by learning through experience and they were not provided formal training in leadership preparation programs or professional development. Cole mentions, “I don’t think, I mean again, it gave me some of that information,

but not to the degree of which you use it.” Avery further explained, “I got a lot of on-the-job training.” During interviews, Lily and Oliver both mentioned that “you learn as you go, or someone else will be there to help you once you become an administrator.” Many of the participants expressed that they had to seek out their own knowledge once on the job to further expand their understanding of special education. Tyler stated, “I did seek out opportunities through the county and even in our own building to learn more about special education.”

### **Sub-Question Two**

How do K-12 public-school administrators perceive burnout affects a special education teacher? Participants in this research study shared that there is a need to support special education teachers and all the administrators acknowledged the reality of burnout because of the demands of being a special education teacher. Avery stated, “you got to be a pretty grand multitasker, you’re an advocate and you’re a master communicator.” Avery further explained a situation where a special education teacher approached her and stated, “there just aren’t enough hours in the day.” Administrators admit that many special education teachers do not have time to complete some of their regular tasks during regular school hours and unfortunately must complete some components of their job outside of their normal schedule. Oliver stated, “It’s unfortunate it has to get done maybe sometimes after hours where that doesn’t happen with other teachers.” Eight administrators in this study have worked with a special education teacher who has expressed that they are overwhelmed and 2 of the administrators have experienced a special education teacher who has identified that they are overworked because of the demands of being a special educator which can lead to burnout.

Administrators in this research study also acknowledged the reality of burnout that can affect a special education teacher mentally, physically, and emotionally because they lose the

passion and drive for teaching and no longer enjoy what they are doing that causes teachers to not do their best because they are crippled by anxiety. Lily stated, “you reach a point where you’re like I don’t care, it’s just there and I’ll maybe get it done.” Tyler also acknowledged the reality of burnout when he stated, “You may try to forge through, but your work may not be your best, you may miss things, and so forth.” Administrators voiced that in their experience burnout does happen in special education teachers and when this happens in some cases a special education teacher becomes negative towards the job which can lead to negative student behaviors. Some participants feel that confidence can be impacted, and these teachers can experience a lack of patience that can lead to depression and anxiety that ultimately causes them to leave the profession. Participants explained that special education students generally have the highest needs and when a teacher is experiencing burnout, that students are not getting what they need. Iris stated, “if you’re in a room where you have an aggressive kid who is beating you up every day for however many hours and you’re feeling it physically, emotionally, and mentally, who wants to come back to that every day?” The ultimate impact that all the administrators have experienced when working with special education teachers who are burnout is that they eventually leave the profession. During interviews and focus groups eight administrators had identified a special education teacher who left the profession with some being novice special education teachers and others veteran special education teachers. Four administrators shared experiences where a special education teacher left to work as a general education teacher because the demands of the job were too difficult. Unfortunately, anxiety, stress, and burnout continue to be a problem that impacts special education teachers causing them to pursue other opportunities outside of education or the realm of special education.

A sub-theme that emerged from the theme need to support special educators was how administrators make tangible changes and improvements to the workload of special educators to prevent burnout. Several of the administrators talked about removing things from a special education teacher's plate, while others focused on making changes to the master schedule to allow more time for special education teachers to complete their tasks. The reality is that many of the participants detailed that staffing is a problem and that there are not many changes that administrators can make to caseloads sizes, data tracking and goal progress reporting, and writing IEPs, however, to attempt to reduce the workload, these administrators are making small but tangible changes to the workload by covering classes or removing duties that give special education teachers more time to complete their obligations. Emma offered an interesting perspective on the workload for some special education teachers when she stated during her interview, "if you are good at what you do and you are very good at dealing with difficult students, you oftentimes get the most challenging caseload and while I understand that; it makes people leave the profession."

### **Sub-Question Three**

What do administrators perceive is needed from district level leaders to improve school leadership knowledge of special education policy and practices? During data collection, it was important to talk about what professional development opportunities have already been offered to administrators before understanding their perception of what is needed. Data analysis reveals that many of the participants have a lack of awareness of what is already offered by the district. During interviews and focus groups some administrators discussed that the unified professional learning conference that is held annually offers training that is specific to special education, while others reported that it did not exist. While discussing current professional learning

opportunities specific to improving their own knowledge, most of the administrators expressed that they have the autonomy to pick what sessions they want to attend. Kyleigh stated, “I’m trying to think if I’ve ever had any that I’ve had to go to.” Other participants explained that professional learning has occurred but as an administrator, you must seek out your own learning opportunities. Lily elaborated, “if you look for something you can usually find something specific to our district, I’ve kind of had to dig a little harder for some things.” Leah further expressed, “you need to be someone who’s searching for them and take them on your own.” It was pointed out by several of the administrators that over the past few years they have seen an increase in the number of professional learning opportunities that are provided to administrators and special education teachers.

During interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing prompts administrators in this study perceive that the district must do more for them to improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices. A sub-theme that evolved from the data was the need for structured training in special education which was expressed by all the participants in their protocol writing prompts. Most administrators were quick to point out the need for training for new administrators who are placed in roles that require them to actively work with and supervise special education teachers. Lily explained during her interview, “I think go back to special education 101 when you are a brand-new administrator in this county. I think we can’t assume that you’ve been through a program that you know everything because we don’t.” Hannah voiced a similar statement when she said during a focus group, “I think it’s important that the county provides professional learning for all new administrators, and that is what’s lacking.” It was also perceived by several of the participants for on-going professional learning opportunities to occur more often than they currently do in the district. Some stated they would not mind

taking a county led course in special education, while others expressed training modules to improve administrators' knowledge of special education policy and practices. Tyler mentioned during his interview and reiterated during a focus group,

It's really finding out and assessing what building level leaders already know, and then what they don't know and then kind of gearing the professional learning towards what you need to come up to speed more instead of just the one size fits all.

#### **Sub-Question Four**

What do administrators believe is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers to reduce attrition? During all three phases of data collection administrators had many things to share about what they perceive will improve the well-being of special education teachers to improve attrition. The sub-theme empowering special education teachers evolved from data analysis when each administrator talked about different ways, they empower special education teachers and the supports they offer to improve job satisfaction. Each administrator provided a different response to how they could improve workload, or what the district should offer to special education teachers in professional development opportunities. Some administrators expressed during interviews, focus groups, and protocol writing that guidance from the district and streamlining processes, providing resources and support, share ideas across schools, and providing a pool of resources and modeling processes in special education would improve the well-being of special education teachers. An overwhelming majority of the participants communicated that improving staffing in special education would reduce workload and ultimately improve the well-being of special education teachers by reducing caseload sizes. During her interview Emma conveyed, "Staffing because the workload is manageable when there's a small number on your caseload, but the larger the caseload

obviously the more challenging it is and the less effective you are across the board.”

Empowering special education teachers requires listening to their concerns. Tyler stated, “It’s the true testimonies of people who are in the trenches of saying this is how it has worked and how at least I have managed the workload.” Special education teachers who have been successful in their roles and found a way to balance the many demands of the job can be empowering to new special education teachers by allowing novice special education teachers to witness their success. In the end administrators who participated in this study perceive that empowering special education teachers can reduce anxiety, stress, and burnout in special education teachers.

### **Summary**

This hermeneutical phenomenological research study explored the perceptions of public-school administrators of how to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Twelve participants were selected to participate in this study which allowed them to voice their lived experiences working with special education teachers. Data analysis using the hermeneutical framework posited by Van Manen (2016) and coding strategies outlined by Saldaña (2021) for qualitative data identified two themes that are absence of readiness and need to support special educators. In the theme absence of readiness, three sub-themes emerged that includes: learn through experience, lack of awareness, and need for structured training in special education. None of the participants in this study felt completely prepared to supervise all things special education, however, learning through experience was the most common lived experience among the participants. Many of the participants in this study had a lack of awareness of the resources that might be available to them to improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices, or resources to support special education teachers. The data revealed that administrators had a lack of readiness upon completing their preparation programs to lead

inclusive schools and to take on the responsibility of supervising special education teachers. The participants all expressed the need for more on-going professional learning to improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices through structured training. In the theme need to support special educators, four sub-themes emerged that includes: building intentional relationships, tangible change and improvement to workload, acknowledging the reality of burnout, and empowering special education teachers. The participants in this study recognized the complex roles a special education teacher must perform and because of this they must be intentional in building good relationships with special education teachers. To build intentional relationships, the participants shared how they hear the concerns and validate the emotions of special education teachers to understand how they can be supportive. The administrators conveyed that they form positive relationships with special education teachers by having an active role in their supervision and having real authentic conversations that will support and improve self-efficacy through praise and encouragement. Administrators in this study expressed that empowering special education teachers through resources and support can have a profound impact on reducing anxiety, stress, and burnout that ultimately can improve job satisfaction and reduce attrition.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Chapter Five begins with a summary of the thematic findings from Chapter Four and interpretations of the findings. Implications for policy and practice are discussed followed by theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations along with recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### Discussion

This section discusses the thematic findings that emerged from the data using a hermeneutical phenomenological approach. Thematic findings are aligned with each research question and a summary of the significant findings is discussed. Implications for policy and practices are discussed in this chapter. The findings in this study are then compared to the theoretical framework that guided this research and lead to empirical and theoretical implications. Finally, limitations and delimitations are discussed along with recommendations for future research.

### Summary of Thematic Findings

The purpose of this study is to identify and interpret the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrator in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. The theoretical framework that guided this research is the theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1993). Two themes emerged from this research study that include *absences of readiness* and *need to support*

*special educators*. The theme *absence of readiness* had three subthemes that emerged that included: *learn through experience*, *lack of awareness*, and *need for structured training in special education*. The theme of *need to support special educators* had four subthemes that emerged that included: *building intentional relationships*, *tangible change and improvement to workload*, *acknowledging the reality of burnout*, and *empowering special education teachers*.

The *absence of readiness* evolved when administrators communicated their lived experiences attending preparation programs in leadership that prepares them to lead inclusive schools with responsibilities to oversee special education departments. Data analysis revealed that administrators in this study were not prepared to understand the complexities of special education policy and practices. Exploring the theme *absence of readiness* led to the emergence of a subtheme *learn through experience* when administrators expressed that most of their knowledge of special education policy and practices developed after years of being on the job and learning through mentorships. The subtheme *lack of awareness* also emerged from data analysis and indicated that most of the administrators were unaware of what professional development was available to them to improve their knowledge and the well-being of special education teachers. Despite many of the administrators being on the job for several years, data analysis led to the emergence of the subtheme *need for structured training in special education* because most of the administrators who participated in this study had a desire to learn more about special education policy and practices. It was suggested that more training across the schools in the district and by grade level would streamline more processes in special education that would benefit not only administrators, but also special education teachers to improve their well-being and overall job satisfaction.

The *need to support special educators* evolved when administrators expressed that the role of a special education teacher can be stressful when they have to meet all the demands that come with the job. Each of the administrators in this study were able to share lived experiences of special education teachers who have approached them to indicate that they are either overwhelmed or overworked by the responsibilities they carry as a special educator. The participants in this study voiced a great deal of gratitude for the work that special education teachers perform in their day-to-day functions, and they recognized the difficult jobs that special education teachers have because of the high work volume to serve the needs of students with disabilities. Exploring how administrators *need to support special educators* led to the emergence of a subtheme *building intentional relationships*. It was perceived to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers begin with building relationships and fostering those relationships by validating the concerns of special education teachers and providing support when it is needed. Self-efficacy can be improved when special education teachers know they have someone to turn to for assistance when their workloads become unmanageable and *tangible change and improvement to workload* can improve overall job satisfaction when administrators make it a point to improve the well-being of special education teachers. Unfortunately, the participants in this study have each encountered a special education teacher who has left the profession to pursue other opportunities due to burnout. Burnout can have many effects on a special education teacher which led to the subtheme *acknowledging the reality of burnout* and how this can impact mental, physical, and emotional health for special education teachers. To improve the well-being of special education teachers, administrators perceive they need to provide these teachers with the necessary support and resources and *empowering special education teachers* to express what they need through conversations and

listening to address their concerns and offer guidance to help support the special education teacher who is experiencing anxiety, stress, or burnout and dissatisfaction with their job.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The framework that guided this research study is the theory of self-efficacy posited by Albert Bandura (1977, 1993). Using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework for data analysis and synthesis posited by Van Manen (2016), and Saldaña's (2021) strategies for coding was used to capture the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of public-school administrators and what they perceive can improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Participants in this study are K-12 public-school administrators who hold an endorsement in leadership and actively supervise special education teachers. There was a total of twelve administrators who volunteered for this study that included five principals, three assistant principals, and four senior teachers. I initially used criterion-based purposeful sampling to elicit participation from all three levels of administration. I had five participants email me back with interest in participating and after an initial phone conversation, they were sent the informed consent letter to review and sign to participate in the research study. Snowball sampling was then applied during my initial interviews with the first five participants. Many of the participants expressed the need for and importance of a study of this nature and an appreciation for this researcher conducting the study. Several of the initial participants offered to contact other administrators in their corridor to share their experience with this researcher and forwarded my contact information to reach out to me if they were interested in participating. This led to the addition of seven final participants who contacted me by phone and after screening them for the qualifications to participate, they were included in the study, making a final total of 12 participants. Each participant completed an individual interview ranging from 40 to 50

minutes, attended one of three focus groups ranging from 30-40 minutes, and completed a protocol writing prompt of at least seven sentences with most offering much more than the minimum. After data analysis, synthesis, and coding, themes emerged from the data that was used for the interpretation of the lived experiences of public school administrators working with special education teachers.

### ***Improving self-efficacy and working conditions***

The first significant finding of this study revealed that administrators are aware of the need to support special education teachers due to the overwhelming job responsibility that can cause special education teachers to experience low self-efficacy and high rates of burnout. Self-efficacy theory teaches us that when an individual is presented with difficult situations the amount of effort they expend depends on the individual's coping behavior (Bandura, 1977, 1993). Special education teachers have long reported that their changing roles in public education have added to their responsibilities to the point that the jobs are unmanageable (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Thakur, 2018). The findings reveal that administrators work diligently to build intentional relationships with special education teachers because they know that through professional and personal relationships this can improve self-efficacy when special education teachers have someone to turn to when they experience job dissatisfaction. These administrators take an active role in having meaningful conversations to listen to the concerns of their teachers and they try to provide tangible change and make improvements to workload to improve working conditions for special education teachers.

Burnout is considered a “syndrome of chronic workplace stress” (WHO, 2022) that if not properly managed can cause an individual to experience low energy or exhaustion, mental separation, and negativity towards a job (WHO, 2022). Public school administrators in this study

acknowledge the reality of burnout with all the administrators in this study experiencing a special education teacher who has chosen to leave the profession to pursue other opportunities because of feeling overwhelmed or overworked. These findings are like prior research that indicates that special education teachers are reporting feelings of being overworked and underappreciated for their roles causing many to rethink the profession (Algozzine et al., 2011; Hester et al., 2020; Jerrim, 2021). Further findings suggest that administrators perceive that empowering special education teachers with support and resources can have a positive impact on the well-being of special education teachers when they have a supportive workplace. Prior research on special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout has indicated that the lack of administrative support (Kim et al., 2020) is a primary cause of a special education teacher choosing to leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). The participants in this study recognize this reality and work diligently to find ways to improve the working conditions and to be supportive of their staff to improve their overall job satisfaction. The data further revealed that the perception of administrators to reduce attrition begins with recognizing the complexities of the work a special education teacher must perform, and through building professional and personal relationships it may help to support these teachers who too often are experiencing anxiety, stress, and burnout. Although the administrators in this study work diligently to improve the well-being of special education teachers, many of them expressed that they have already been notified that some of their special education teachers do not plan on returning after the current school year due to the difficult and demanding jobs. Unfortunately, this will add to the growing problem where 98% of the United States is experiencing critical shortages of special education teacher workforce (NCPSSERS, 2022; OSERS, 2022).

### ***Readiness and mentorship***

The second significant finding of this study reveals that administrators who complete leadership preparation programs experience a lack of readiness to oversee inclusive schools and the complexities involved in managing special education departments. These findings fall in line with prior research that indicates that preparation programs are outdated and lack a specific focus on special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Billingsley et al., 2019; Hess & Kelly, 2010). Pre-service leadership programs provide leaders with coursework that focuses on cultural change and administrative tasks; however, they are not adequately preparing administrators for special education policy and practices. At most, the administrators in this study were provided with a general overview of special education law, which fails to prepare administrators for understanding the intricacies of the work a special education teacher must perform to serve the needs of one of the most vulnerable student populations in education. The findings reveal that to acquire knowledge of special education policy and practices, administrators must learn through experience using a learn-as-you-go approach to improve their understanding of special education (Billingsley et al., 2018). Data further reveals that administrators rely heavily on other administrators as mentors who have been in their roles, or they rely on special education senior teachers to provide them with guidance when needed in special education policy and practices. All the administrators in this study have some direct supervision of special education teachers with many of them serving as principal evaluators further necessitating their need to be better prepared to lead inclusive schools.

### ***The need for on-going professional growth of administrators***

The study revealed that administrators have a strong desire to improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices with many of the administrators expressing their desire

for structured training in special education. Principals need to possess skills and dispositions in special education, but many preparation programs do not provide leaders in education with knowledge of special education policy and practices (Billingsley et al., 2018; Melloy et al., 2022). Most of the administrators felt they were unprepared to lead inclusive schools and their ability to provide guidance to special education teachers in policy and practices. When administrators reflected on their pre-service leadership programs, they expressed the need for leadership programs to provide a more direct understanding of special education. Administrators in this research study, similar to prior research studies, have indicated they are not experts in disabilities, and they require additional training and support after they begin their leadership roles (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Once on the job, these administrators explained that ongoing professional learning opportunities are necessary that model processes in special education that improve their understanding to be effective leaders overall for all teachers they serve in the public-school setting.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

This section focuses on the implications for policy and practice. Using the findings from this research study helped guide the implications. The findings in this research study may better prepare current and future leaders in public schools by bringing to the forefront of conversation the lived experiences of public-school administrators who work with special education teachers to assess and improve self-efficacy and working conditions and the programs that prepare new administrators to lead inclusive schools.

#### ***Implications for Policy***

Public school administrators have an overall responsibility for the well-being of all their students and staff that is guided by professional standards for educational leadership.



Administrators play a critical role in supporting and providing resources to special education teachers upon entering their roles as leaders. Part of the requirements to enter leadership is that administrators complete coursework that improves their knowledge of the professional standards. Unfortunately, many administrators feel unprepared to lead inclusive schools because they lack knowledge of special education policy and practices (Billingsley et al., 2018, Melloy et al., 2022). While most programs of study in all other areas of education require specific credit hours towards achievement, so should leadership programs that prepare leaders to lead inclusive schools. Accreditation processes for colleges and universities should be examined to ensure that leadership preparation programs are offering robust programs of study that include more structured training in special education.

The voices of administrators have expressed a need for better preparation with more emphasis on special education that extends beyond just learning special education law. Educational leaders must possess skills and knowledge to help support students with disabilities to succeed (Barakat et al., 2019). Administrators who enter the realm of leadership must be trained in the intricacies of special education so they can understand the needed support and resources that special education teachers require to be effective in their job responsibilities.

### ***Implications for Practice***

The findings of the lived experiences of public school administrators helped to provide implications for practice to help future leaders in public school settings to work with special education departments. To address improving self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers, administrators should take an active role in understanding the challenges of being a special education teacher and regularly communicate with special education departments. Administrators who take an active role in building relationships can identify causes (e.g., lack of

support) (Hester et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020) and effects of special education teachers' low self-efficacy (Hester et al., 2020), anxiety, stress, and burnout; and empower special education teachers by offering support and resources. Through regular meetings with special education departments, administrators can determine workload responsibilities and work to provide tangible change such as teacher pairings in co-taught classrooms to improve teacher parity (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Da Fonte & Barton, 2017; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016; Strogilos & King, 2019). Previous research indicates that special education teachers report caseload size and the number of students they assume responsibilities (i.e., general education students) in inclusive classrooms contributes to attrition (Berry, 2012; Bešić et al., 2017; Billingsley, 2007; Embury & Dinnesan, 2012; Haganan & Casey, 2017). Master scheduling is an intricate process that assigns general education and special education teachers to classrooms to teach content specific curriculum based on student population and special education student needs. Making improvements to master scheduling that reduces the number of co-taught and collaborative classes a special education teacher works in can provide more time for special education teachers to perform their job responsibilities. In addition, reducing caseloads and removing extra duties may facilitate improved special education teacher self-efficacy and working conditions that may support job satisfaction and lower attrition rates. Further, administrators should be well equipped with knowledge of available tools and resources within their school divisions to address concerns of special education teachers' anxiety, stress, and burnout.

Much of the research to date supports that leadership preparation programs do not adequately prepare new leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge in special education policy and practices (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Barakat et al., 2019; Billingsley et al., 2018;

Billingsley et al., 2019; Hess & Kelly, 2010; Melloy et al., 2022), newly appointed public-school administrators may also benefit from having a mentor or a buddy that can help them navigate their roles as a leader who actively supervises special education teachers and departments. Mentors should be professionals with experience in understanding the day-to-day operations of special education with extensive knowledge of the requirements and provisions of IDEA, requirements for legal documents, and workload manageability of special education teachers. Administrators' own self-efficacy may improve when they have someone who can provide support and resources to them as they gain experience in understanding special education policies and practices.

To address the barriers to effective leadership, a lack of professional development, and limited administrators with special education backgrounds (Billingsley et al., 2018; Braun et al., 2011) there is a need for ongoing professional growth. All administrators, those with experience, and newly appointed administrators may also benefit from continued education through professional learning opportunities that focus on all things special education. While administrators feel well-versed in special education law, the findings of this study suggest that administrators require ongoing structured training and professional development (Naidoo, 2019) to stay aware of regular changes that are made to special education policy and practice. Administrators with a clear understanding of the interworking of special education can be better prepared to supervise special education teachers and offer workable recommendations during evaluations of special education teachers. General education teachers may also benefit from ongoing professional learning opportunities since most teachers today work with students with disabilities in co-taught inclusive classrooms. Providing all stakeholders in education with

awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of students with disabilities can facilitate better teaching practices that use evidence-based techniques to reach the needs of all students.

### **Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

This section addresses the theoretical and empirical implications of this study. I will discuss the findings and how they align with empirical literature on special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout. Theoretical implications are discussed and how they align with the theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 1993).

#### ***Empirical Implications***

The extant literature on special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout shows the importance of administrators understanding special education policy and practices in order to make effective changes to support special education teacher self-efficacy. The focus of this study was the lived experiences of public school administrators and what they perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Most of the empirical literature focuses on the school principal and fails to include the voices of assistant principals and senior teachers who also directly supervise special education teachers. This study fills the gap in the literature by using the perspectives from all levels of administration who hold endorsements in leadership and have some governing power over special education teacher job responsibilities.

**Self-Efficacy and Working Conditions.** The empirical literature on special education teachers who experience low self-efficacy, stress, and burnout has reported that they do not feel supported by their administrators (Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Kaff, 2004; Kim et al., 2020). The thematic findings of the lived experience of administrators to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers begin with building intentional

relationships with special education teachers. This thematic finding adds to the extant literature on how administrators could provide support to special education teachers to improve self-efficacy and working conditions. The extant literature that was reviewed for this study did not indicate that administrators build intentional relationships through meaningful conversations to discover the causes of low self-efficacy. Special education teachers who experience burnout have reported that they also have low job satisfaction (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Administrators express that building professional and personal relationships can improve anxiety, stress, and burnout that leads to improved self-efficacy when a special education teacher has someone they can turn to in leadership when they experience job dissatisfaction.

Special education teachers have voiced concerns about the need for support from leadership, more time to plan with co-teachers, and reduced caseloads (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). The findings of this study do not align with much of the literature on the need for support from administrators because the participants in this study through their voices take an active role in supporting special education teachers by providing them with opportunities to share their concerns so improvements can be made to their working conditions. The findings of this study are consistent with prior research that discusses the lack of time, and increased caseloads of special education teachers. Many of the participants in this study recognize time as one of the most valuable things they can offer to special education teachers due to the excessive amount of paperwork that is required in special education. To provide more time to special education teachers, the participants in this study expressed that they have reduced additional duties that teachers must perform in school, and in some cases will cover classes to allow a special education teacher more time to catch up on paperwork.

**Knowledge in Special Education Policy and Practice.** Administrators play a critical role in the well-being of special education teachers and should be aware of the factors that can lead to burnout and low self-efficacy. The empirical literature sheds light on one of the primary factors that contribute to special education teacher burnout and low self-efficacy is administrators who lack clear knowledge of special education policy and practices and therefore do not receive adequate support in their teaching roles (Robinson et al., 2020). The thematic findings of the lived experiences of administrators demonstrate that when they begin their leadership responsibilities they have an absence of readiness and must learn through experience. This research aligns with prior research on administrators who are not adequately prepared with the necessary skills and knowledge in special education policy and practices (Billingsley et al., 2018).

The absence of readiness to lead special education departments and oversee the job responsibilities of special education teachers was demonstrated when administrators expressed that their leadership preparation programs did not provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to understand the complexities of special education. Recall that some of the barriers to effective leadership in inclusive schools were the lack of professional development and outdated leadership programs (Billingsley et al., 2018; Braun et al., 2011). This research aligns with prior research studies on leadership preparation programs because many of the participants in this study stated that they were not prepared to lead inclusive schools and lack a readiness to assume the responsibilities of managing special education departments.

Administrators in this study who were not properly prepared to lead inclusive schools relied on learning through experience. Several of the participants in this study expressed that they did not go to school to be a special education teacher and their leadership programs did not

prepare them for all the things they would be responsible for when entering their leadership roles. This includes special education meetings, special education teacher evaluations, and compliance with special education law. The experiences of the administrators in this study are consistent with the empirical literature regarding administrators who lack knowledge of special education policy and practices, and all of the participants expressed that they had to learn through experience or seek out others who could assist them with understanding special education.

**Workload and Change.** Consistent with the extant literature, administrators in this research study acknowledged that special education teachers have very demanding jobs with excessive workloads that can create feelings of being overworked or overwhelmed with their job responsibilities. Hester et al. (2020) posited that special education teachers report feeling overworked and underappreciated and this can lead to attrition. Special education teachers job satisfaction and stress have identified that workload and poor working conditions are leading causes of special education teacher burnout (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). Findings in this study are consistent with the extant literature when administrators discussed special education teachers in specialty programs (e.g., ACIS) often do not get a break during the school day due to the lack of resources that leads to increased workload and poor working conditions. Participants in this study elaborated that too many students require services and there are not enough resources to provide additional support to reduce the workload of special education teachers. When special education teachers have excessive workloads, it can provoke stress and burnout (Thakur, 2018). To improve the workload for special education teachers, administrators expressed ways that they make tangible changes to improve workload by reducing additional

responsibilities (e.g., duties), adjustments to caseloads when possible, and changes to the master schedule that allow special education teachers more time to plan and complete the requirements of their job. The administrators in this study suggest that reducing caseload sizes depends on staffing. Unfortunately, many states are experiencing critical shortages of special education teachers (NCPSSERS, 2022) which makes it difficult to reduce caseloads. Many of the administrators in this study express the need for more highly qualified special education teachers that can help to reduce the caseloads and improve working conditions for special education teachers that are feeling overworked and overwhelmed with their job responsibilities.

**Burnout.** Administrators recognize the difficult jobs that special education teachers have and recognize that burnout is a growing concern that if not dealt with can lead to special education teacher attrition. The thematic findings of this study are consistent with the empirical literature on the causes and consequences of special education teacher burnout. The participants in this study acknowledge the reality of burnout with all of them experiencing a special education teacher who has left the profession due to burnout. Participants expressed that causes of burnout are negative student behavior, time to complete work duties, workload, and poor co-teaching relationships that are consistent with the empirical literature.

The empirical literature on collaboration and co-teaching identifies poor relationships and lack of parity between co-teachers can contribute to high levels of anxiety, stress, and burnout that cause some special education teachers to leave the profession (Da Fonte & Barton, 2017; Hester et al., 2020; NCPSSERS, 2022; Nilsen, 2020; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016; Strogilos & King, 2019). The findings of this study are consistent with the empirical literature that administrators in this study have conveyed that poor working relationships with collaborating partners in the inclusive setting have and can lead to special education teachers anxiety, stress,



and burnout. The participants in this study have experienced special education teacher who refuse to work with some general education teachers due to poor relationships, while they also experience general education teachers who do not invest time in building relationships with special education teachers due to the continuous attrition of special education teachers.

Another source of special education teacher burnout is balancing the responsibilities of working in inclusive education classrooms. Special education teachers have responsibilities for legal paperwork, facilitating multiple meetings, and progress monitoring of IEP goals (Bettini et al., 2017; Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). The findings of this study are consistent with the empirical literature on the causes of burnout. Participants in this study recognize the numerous responsibilities a special education teacher assumes, that can create an unmanageable workload.

Part of acknowledging the reality of burnout is understanding the consequences of a special education teacher who is experiencing anxiety, stress, and burnout which is that they ultimately leave the profession. Empirical literature suggests that over the last several decades hiring and retention of special education teachers is a concern that continues to grow (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2020). Consistent with the empirical literature on special education teacher attrition, all the administrators in this study detailed experiences working with a special education teacher who has left the profession due to unreasonable workloads, anxiety, stress, and burnout. To combat the problems of special education teacher burnout, many of the participants expressed ways they try to help special education teachers by providing them with additional time, breaks away from the classroom, giving positive praises for the work that they do, and in some cases offering ways to remove things from their plate.

**Awareness and Professional Growth.** The lack of awareness and the need for more professional growth in special education policy and practices was another major finding in this study. Administrators in this study express that they were not well prepared to assume responsibilities for special education duties after completing their pre-service leadership programs and this is consistent with the empirical literature. The literature on administrator preparation programs suggests that new administrators have not been adequately prepared with the necessary pedagogy and there is a need for more focus on all aspects of special education (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Sun & Xin, 2020). The participants in this study acknowledge this as a weakness in their pre-service programs with many of them expressing the need for continued professional growth within the district. There was an overall lack of understanding by most administrators on what the district currently offers to them for professional growth, as well as special education teachers to help cope with the challenges of being a special education teacher. Kebbi (2018) stressed that administrators need to identify causes of stress and identify coping strategies that can lower teachers' stress levels. There is a definite need for administrators to be aware of offerings that can promote their own learning, but more importantly, professional learning opportunities that can help special education teachers with coping strategies to manage anxiety, stress, and burnout.

**Empowering Special Education Teachers.** Fowler et al., (2019) suggested that to improve working conditions for special education teachers they need support and resources as well as smaller caseloads. The findings in this study are consistent with the empirical literature when administrators empower special education teachers by providing support and resources to improve their well-being and working conditions that may lead to improved job satisfaction. The

participants expressed that a supportive work environment that provides special education teachers with a voice to share their concerns can empower them to be confident in their abilities.

Administrators in this study recommend that to be supportive they must find ways to offer positive mentorships within the school, and offer guidance that is meaningful to special education teachers. Positive mentorships can include other special education teachers who excel in their roles and who display positive relationships with collaborating partners in co-taught classrooms. Further, administrators expressed that by providing additional resources such as increased staffing can show support for special education teachers. Additional staffing can reduce caseload sizes and offer more time to special education teachers with fewer responsibilities to manage the workload and challenges of being a special educator.

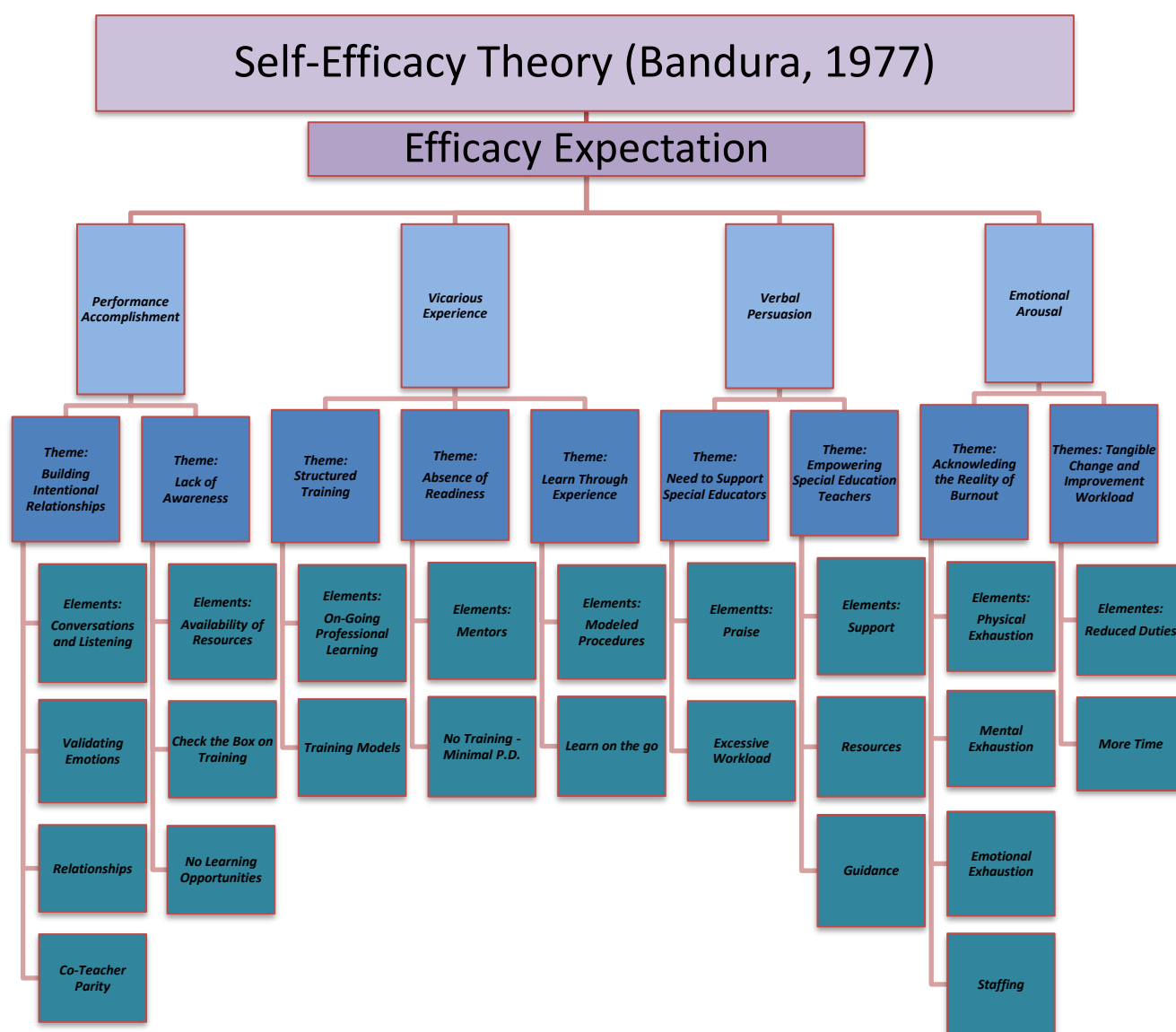
### ***Theoretical Implications***

The theoretical framework for this study is self-efficacy theory (Bandura 1977, 1993) that was used to explore through the lens of public-school administrators how to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. There are several factors that contribute to low self-efficacy that can either motivate an individual or cause them to give up (Bandura, 1977). The results of this theory explored the knowledge administrators have in special education policy and practices and whether that helps or impedes their ability to make improvements to self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. The lived experiences demonstrate that although there is an absence of readiness in preparedness to lead inclusive schools with limited knowledge of special education policy and practices, administrators employ human agency when they learn through experience, and they must take control and work to be their own agents of their learning experiences to improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices. Additionally, the participants in this study express a

desire to improve self-efficacy for special education teachers when building relationships and fostering positive communication to help special education teachers feel appreciated for the work that they perform in their roles. The thematic findings of this research study demonstrate the implications of the theory of self-efficacy and the four sources of efficacy expectations. Figure 1 and Appendix L show the theoretical alignment of themes.

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical Alignment of Themes*



**Perceptions to Improve Self-Efficacy.** The theoretical context of this study is special education teacher self-efficacy and burnout that creates feelings of inadequacy. The pressures and demands to fulfill the role of a special educator are often reported to be unmanageable and a primary reason why special education teachers leave the profession (Hester et al., 2020). The findings in this study demonstrate that administrators are intentional in building relationships with special education teachers by communicating with them and recognizing their concerns are valid. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's own ability and is part of self-reflection. According to Bandura (1977), there are four sources of efficacy expectations to include performance accomplishment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. The lived experiences of administrators demonstrate that they perceive they can improve self-efficacy for special education teachers when they pair special education teachers with mentors who are successful (i.e., vicarious experience), provide positive praise for the work that they do (i.e., verbal persuasion), and through conversations and listening they can improve feelings by making a special education teacher feel valued (i.e., emotional arousal). Providing special education teachers with time to self-reflect on their accomplishments and the work that they do with students with disabilities, administrators perceive this can have a positive effect on performance accomplishment when special educators recognize their own successes.

**Learning Experiences in Special Education.** Administrators who are proficient in special education policy and practices can make positive impacts on the stress levels of a special education teacher (Haydon et al., 2018). While administrators in this study recognize that there is an absence of readiness from their pre-service training in understanding the complexities of special education, they often must learn about special education through experience of being on the job. During this learning period administrators begin to understand the complexities of being

a special educator and how difficult and stressful the demands are of the job. Administrators demonstrate how working with other professionals (i.e., vicarious experience) within the field once on the job improves their understanding of special education and improves their own self-efficacy to be better prepared (i.e., personal mastery) to help special education teachers when they experience anxiety, stress, and burnout because of the demands of the job.

**Perceptions of Burnout.** The expertise of a special education teacher requires extensive knowledge of special education law and practices to best serve students with disabilities. Over the years, changes to the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers have pushed them into general education classrooms often leaving special education teachers with a lack of role clarity (Billingsley et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2020; Bettini et al., 2017; Mason et al., 2020). Through the lived experience of administrators in this study, they acknowledge the reality of burnout (i.e., emotional arousal) and grasp the physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion that is often associated with the role of a special education teacher that can lead to attrition. Recognizing the demands and expertise of special education teachers allows administrators in this study to make tangible changes, when possible, to reduce the workload to improve overall job satisfaction (i.e., emotional arousal).

**Improving Leadership Knowledge.** The lived experiences of administrators in this study demonstrate that most participants have a lack of awareness (i.e., performance accomplishment) of the professional learning opportunities that are made available to them in the district that can improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices. Additionally, only a few participants were able to identify sources of professional development that are provided to special education teachers on workload manageability, anxiety, stress, and burnout. Barriers to effective leadership in inclusive schools include a lack of professional development,

limited professionals with special education backgrounds, and outdated leadership programs (Billingsley et al., 2018; Braun et al., 2011). Administrators demonstrate a desire to have more structured training in special education that models procedures (i.e., vicarious experience) to improve their understanding of special education. Administrators who improve their knowledge through professional learning opportunities or on-going training in special education may better support special education teachers through guidance (i.e., emotional arousal) on how to manage the difficulties that come with being a special education teacher.

**Well-Being of Special Education Teachers.** One of the most frequent sources of teacher burnout is feeling unsupported by administrators and the climate of the school (Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Kaff, 2004). Empowering special education teachers involves creating an environment where they can voice their concerns and work with leaders to improve their well-being and job satisfaction. Administrators in this study demonstrate that they believe to improve the well-being of special education teachers they need to provide support through guidance (i.e., emotional arousal), and positive mentors (i.e., vicarious experience) that can lead to reduced anxiety, stress, and burnout that may lead to improved job satisfaction.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This section discusses the limitations and delimitations of this research study. Limitations in a research study are weaknesses identified in a study that a researcher has no control over (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Delimitations are the parameters a researcher establishes for a study depending on the method, design, and data collection strategies.

#### ***Limitations***

The state of Virginia has 8 regions with a combined total of 132 districts that serve K-12 public education. One limitation of this research study is the small sample size. A small sample

of 12 administrators was used in one school district located in one of the regions in the state. The second identified limitation of this research study was the accumulation of participants using criterion-based purposeful sampling and eventually snowball sampling within the school district. A request to all eligible principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers who hold leadership endorsement and who actively supervise special education teachers in the four sections (i.e., corridors) was sent by email for participation in the study. Three of the four corridors (1,2, and 4) were represented in this study with no participants successfully recruited from the 3<sup>rd</sup> corridor of the division which limits transferability. The next limitation identified in this study was the openness of administrators' responses during individual interviews and focus group questions. Participants were offered four available dates and times to attend one of the focus groups and during each session, there was a mix of principals, assistant principals, and senior teachers that could have affected the responses provided due to the hierarchy of leadership present at the time of the focus group meetings. Another limitation identified in this study is the quality of the writing prompts received. Some of the participants in their responses were between 7 to 10 sentences, while other participants had expanded far beyond, including much more detail in their lived experiences.

### ***Delimitations***

The delimitations of this research study were established prior to the start of the data collection process. The first delimitation was the exclusion of staff within the Magnolia County School District who held endorsements in administration and leadership who are not currently supervising special education teachers. The second delimitation that was established was only one specific school district located in one of the eight regions was selected as the sample site for participation. The final delimitation established for this research study was the central focus on



only special education teachers and did not include the experiences of general education teachers and the workload they have. Some participants attempted to generalize their responses to all teachers, and they were reminded that the focus was on special education teacher self-efficacy and workload.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings in this study revealed a need for further research on pre-service leadership programs and coursework with a focus on the extent to which leaders are prepared with specific knowledge of special education policy and practices beyond a single special education law class. This study utilized 12 participants who had already completed their leadership programs and a few areas that could be the central focus could be participants who are currently enrolled in leadership preparation programs, or newly appointed administrative leaders with less than one year of experience.

Although this study had a minimal focus on administrators' self-efficacy and focused on what administrators perceived would improve special education teacher self-efficacy, further research could explore the efficacy expectations that affect leaders when placed in supervisory positions to oversee special education programs and departments. This could add to the literature on special education leadership and self-efficacy with a focus on efficacy expectations.

Many of the participants in this research study explained a lot of concerns for specialty progress (e.g., ACIS, and PBIS) and the growing concern over those special education teachers leaving the profession more rapidly than general curriculum special education teachers. Research could focus on attrition rates and compare the two different populations of special education teachers and look at the similarities and differences in job responsibilities that are perceived by

participants in this study that is causing specialty program special education teachers to leave at rates higher than general curriculum special education teachers.

Since there are limited studies on what administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers, a larger more comprehensive study should be conducted that will provide more insight into what administrators in high versus low poverty school districts perceive they can do to improve self-efficacy and working conditions to retain highly qualified special education teachers. Recall that Billingsley and Bettini (2019) suggest that special education teachers who work in high poverty schools and who serve more students of color are far more likely to leave the profession which is causing significant learning gaps for students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators perceive is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. Using the theoretical framework of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977, 1993) and efficacy expectations that influence motivation, a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological approach helped to capture the meaning and essence of each participant. Two themes and seven subthemes emerged from data analysis and coding. The first theme absence of readiness had three subthemes of learn through experience, lack of awareness, and need for structured training in special education. The second theme identified was need to support special educators. This theme had four subthemes that include: building intentional relationships, tangible change and improvements to workload, acknowledging the reality of burnout, and empowering special education teachers.

Administrators shared their learning experiences from leadership programs and professional development and the findings reveal that administrators perceive they were not prepared to lead inclusive schools and to understand special education teacher job responsibilities. Administrators attest to the fact that their knowledge of special education is limited, however, the administrators express a desire to be given more opportunities for professional growth by the district in special education policy and practices that can help support students and teachers in all things special education.

The study's findings revealed that administrators perceive they must be intentional in building meaningful relationships by hearing concerns and validating special education teacher's experiences. Administrators talked about their lived experiences of working with special education teachers who have expressed that they are overwhelmed and overworked by their job responsibilities, and this creates burnout that also results in attrition. Administrators relate to the demands of being a special education teacher and building relationships by empowering them with support and resources that give special education teachers someone they can turn to when their jobs become unmanageable. Due to the high demands placed on special education teachers, administrators make small but meaningful changes to workload when they can to improve the overall working conditions and job satisfaction. Administrators need to be aware of how their understanding of special education policy and practice may affect the well-being of special education teachers. Special education teachers need to be aware of resources that are available to them to help balance a healthy personal and professional life while working as a special education teacher.

## References

- Algozzine, B., Wang, C., & Violette, A. S. (2011). Reexamining the relationship between academic achievement and social behavior. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 13*, 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300709359084>
- Angelle, P., & Bilton, L. M. (2009). Confronting the unknown: Principal preparation training in issues related to special education. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice, 5*(4), 5–9.
- Ansley, B. M., Houchins, D., & Varjas, K. (2019). Cultivating positive work contexts that promote teacher job satisfaction and retention in high-need schools. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 32*(1), 3–16.
- Antoniou, A. S., Ploumpi, A., & Ntalla, M. (2013). Occupational stress and professional burnout in teachers of primary and secondary education: The role of coping strategies. *Psychology, 4*(03), 349. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2013.43A051>
- Ashton, J. R. (2016). Keeping up with the class: A critical discourse analysis of teacher interactions in a co-teaching context. *Classroom Discourse, 7*(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2015.1077717>
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*(2), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist, 28*(2), 117. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep2802\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep2802_3)
- Bandura, A. (2001). SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52*(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>

- Barakat, M., Reames, E., & Kensler, L. A. W. (2019). Leadership preparation programs: Preparing culturally competent educational leaders. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 14(3), 212-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775118759070>
- Bea Francisco, M. P., Hartman, M., & Wang, Y. (2020). Inclusion and special education. *Education Sciences*, 10(9), 238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10090238>
- Berry, A. B. (2012). The relationship of perceived support to satisfaction and commitment for special education teachers in rural areas. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/875687051203100102>
- Bešić, E., Paleczek, L., Krammer, M., & Gasteiger-Klicpera, B. (2017). Inclusive practices at the teacher and class level: the experts' view. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 32(3), 329–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2016.1240339>
- Bettini, E., Benedict, A., Thomas, R., Kimerling, J., Choi, N., & McLeskey, J. (2017). Cultivating a community of effective special education teachers: Local special education administrators' roles. *Remedial and Special Education*, 38(2), 111–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932516664790>
- Bettini, E., Jones, N., Brownell, M., Conroy, M., Park, Y., Leite, W., Crockett, J., & Benedict, A. (2017). Workload manageability among novice special and general educators: Relationships with emotional exhaustion and career intentions. *Remedial and Special Education*, 38(4), 246–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932517708327>
- Billingsley, B. (2007). A case study of special education teacher attrition in an urban district. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 10, 11–20.
- Billingsley, B., Banks, A. (2019). *Handbook of leadership and administration for special education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (J. Crockett, B. Billingsley, M. Boscardin, Eds). Routledge.

Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 697–744.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>

Billingsley, B., Bettini, E., Mathews, H. M., & McLeskey, J. (2020). Improving working conditions to support special educators' effectiveness: A call for leadership. *Teacher Education & Special Education*, 43(1), 7–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406419880353>

Billingsley, B., DeMatthews, D., Connally, K., & McLeskey, J. (2018). Leadership for effective inclusive schools: Considerations for preparation and reform. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 42, 65-81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2018.6>

Billingsley, B., McLeskey, J., & Crockett, J. (2017). Principal leadership: Moving toward inclusive and high-achieving schools for students with disabilities (Revised ed., Document No. IC-8). CEEDAR Center, University of Florida. Retrieved from <https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Principal-Leadership-IC-2017-Revision.pdf>

Billingsley, B., McLeskey, J., & Crockett, J. B. (2019). *Handbook of leadership and administration for special education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (J. Crockett, B. Billingsley, M. Boscardin, Eds). Routledge.

Braun, D., Gable, R., & Kite, S. (2011). Relationship among essential leadership preparation practices and leader, school, and student outcomes in K-8 schools. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 6(3) 1-21.

Brendle, J., Lock, R., & Piazza, K. (2017). A study of co-teaching identifying effective implementation strategies. *International Journal of Special Education*, 32(3), 538–550.

- Brunsting, N. C., Sreckovic, M. A., & Lane, K. L. (2014). Special education teacher burnout: A synthesis of research from 1979 to 2013. *Education and Treatment of Children, 37*, 681-712. <https://doi.org/10.1353/etc.2014.0032>
- Burstein, N., Sears, S., Wilcoxon, A., Cabello, B., & Spagna, M. (2004). Moving toward inclusive practices. *Remedial & Special Education, 25*(2), 104-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325040250020501>
- Campanotta, L., Simpson, P., & Newton, J. (2018). Program quality in leadership preparation programs: An assessment tool. *Education, 138*(3), 219-228.
- Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). The trouble with teacher turnover: How teacher attrition affects students and schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 27*(34-39), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3699>
- Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Addressing California's growing teacher shortage: 2017 Update. In *Learning Policy Institute*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Casserly, A. M., & Padden, A. (2018). Teachers' views of co-teaching approaches in addressing pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in multi-grade classrooms. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 33*(4), 555-571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1386315>
- Chitiyo, J. (2017). Challenges to the use of coteaching by teachers. *International Journal of Whole Schooling, 13*(3), 55-66.
- Cipriano, C., Barnes, T. N., Bertoli, M. C., Flynn, L. M., Rivers, S. E., & University, Y. (2016). There's no "I" in team: Building a framework for teacher-paraeducator interactions in self-contained special education classrooms. *Journal of Classroom Interaction, 51*(2), 4-19.

- Cole, S. M., Murphy, H. R., Frisby, M. B., Grossi, T. A., & Bolte, H. R. (2021). The relationship of special education placement and student academic outcomes. *Journal of Special Education, 54*(4), 217–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466920925033>
- Cook, L. & Friend, M. (1995). Co-teaching: Guidelines for effective practice. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 28*(3), 1-12.
- Cook, S. C., & McDuffie-Landrum, K. (2020). Integrating effective practices into co-teaching: Increasing outcomes for students with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 55*(4), 221–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451219855739>
- Cook, S. C., McDuffie-Landrum, K., Oshita, L., & Cook, B. (2017). *Handbook of Special Education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (J. Kauffman, D. Hallahan, P. Pullen, Eds). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pearson.
- Cumming, M. M., O'Brien, K. M., Brunsting, N. C., & Bettini, E. (2021). Special educators' working conditions, self-efficacy, and practices use with students with emotional/behavioral disorders. *Remedial and Special Education, 42*(4), 220–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932520924121>
- Da Fonte, M. A., & Barton-Arwood, S. M. (2017). Collaboration of general and special education teachers: Perspectives and strategies. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 53*(2), 99–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451217693370>



- DeMatthews, D. E., Serafini, A., & Watson, T. N. (2021). Leading inclusive schools: Principal perceptions, practices, and challenges to meaningful change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 57(1), 3–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X20913897>
- Deng, M., & Zhu, X. (2016). Special education reform towards inclusive education: Blurring or expanding boundaries of special and regular education in China. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 16, 994–998. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12244>
- Dev, P., & Haynes, L. (2015). Teacher perspectives on suitable learning environments for students with disabilities: What have we learned from inclusive, resource, and self-contained classrooms? *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences: Annual Review*, 9, 53–64. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1833-1882/CGP/v09/53554>
- Dicke, T., Marsh, H. W., Parker, P. D., Guo, J., Riley, P., & Waldeyer, J. (2020). Job satisfaction of teachers and their principals in relation to climate and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 112(5), 1061–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000409>
- du Plessis, P. (2017). Challenges for rural school leaders in a developing context: A case study on leadership practices of effective rural principals. *Koers*, 82(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.19108/koers.82.3.2337>
- Embury, D. C., & Dinnesen, M. S. (2012). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms using structured collaborative planning. *Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching & Learning*, 10, 36–52.
- Fernandes, P. R. da S., Jardim, J., & Lopes, M. C. de S. (2021). The soft skills of special education teachers: Evidence from the literature. *Education Sciences*, 11.
- Fowler, S. A., Coleman, M. R. B., & Bogdan, W. K. (2019). The state of the special education profession survey report. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 52(1), 8-27.

- Francisco, C. D. C. (2019). School principals' transformational leadership styles and their effects on teachers' self-efficacy. *Online Submission*, 7(10), 622–635.
- Friend, M. (2015). "Welcome to co-teaching 2.0." *Educational Leadership* 73(4): 16.
- Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & Shamberger, C. (2010). Co-teaching: An illustration of the complexity of collaboration in special education. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation*, 20(1), 9–27.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410903535380>
- Fu, W., Tang, W., Xue, E., Li, J., & Shan, C. (2021). The mediation effect of self-esteem on job-burnout and self-efficacy of special education teachers in Western China. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 67(4), 273–282.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2019.1662204>
- Fuchs, D., Mirowitz, H. C., & Gilbert, J. K. (2023). Exploring the truth of Michael Yudin's claim: The more time students with disabilities spend in general classrooms, the better they do academically. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 33(4), 236–252.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073221097713>
- Gall, J. P., Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R. (2007). *Educational research: An introduction* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). United Kingdom: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.
- Gilmour, A. F. (2018). Has inclusion gone too far? Weighing its effects on students with disabilities, their peers, and teachers. *Education Next*, 18(4), 8–16.
- Goodman JI, Hazelkorn M, Bucholz JL, Duffy ML, & Kitta Y. (2011). Inclusion and graduation rates: what are the outcomes? *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 21(4), 241–252.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207310394449>

- Gregory, J. (2018). Not my responsibility: The impact of separate special education systems on educators' attitudes toward inclusion. *Educational Policy Analysis and Strategic Research*, 13(1), 127–148. <https://doi.org/10.29329/epasr.2018.137.8>
- Griffin, C. C. (2010). A summary of research for educational leaders on the induction of beginning special educators. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 23(1), 14-20.
- Gunnþórsdóttir, H., & Jóhannesson, I. Á. (2014). Additional workload or a part of the job? Icelandic teachers' discourse on inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(6), 580–600. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2013.802027>
- Hagaman, J. L., & Casey, K. J. (2018). Teacher attrition in special education: Perspectives from the field. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 41(4), 277–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406417725797>
- Harvey, M. W., Yssel, N., Bauserman, A. D., & Merbler, J. B. (2010). Preservice teacher preparation for inclusion: An exploration of higher education teacher-training institutions. *Remedial & Special Education*, 31(1), 24–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932508324397>
- Haydon, T., Leko, M. M., & Stevens, D. (2018). Teacher stress: Sources, effects, and protective factors. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 31(2), 99–107.
- Hess, F. M., & Kelly, A. P. (2007). Learning to lead: What gets taught in principal-preparation programs. *Teachers College Record*, 109(1), 244–274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810710900105>
- Hester, O. R., Bridges, S. A., & Rollins, L. H. (2020). “Overworked and underappreciated”: special education teachers describe stress and attrition. *Teacher Development*, 24(3), 348–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2020.1767189>

- Huff, A. S. (2009). *Designing research for publication*. Sage Publications.
- Ingersoll, R., Merrill, L., & May, H. (2012). Retaining teachers: How preparation matters. *Educational Leadership*, 69(8), 30–34.
- Institute of Education Sciences. (2022). *The condition of education*. US Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/>
- Jerrim, J. (2021). How is life as a recently qualified teacher? New evidence from a longitudinal cohort study in England. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 69(1), 3–26.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2020.1726872>
- Kaff, M. S. (2004). Multitasking Is multitaxing: Why special educators are leaving the field. *Preventing School Failure*, 48(2), 10–17.
- Kauffman, J.M., Anastasious, D. & Maag, J.W. (2017) Special education at the crossroad: An identity crisis and the need for a scientific reconstruction, *Exceptionality*, 25(2), 139-155,  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2016.1238380>
- Kauffman, J.M. & Anastasious, D. (2018). Naming and maintaining: Two basic requirements for viable and vibrant special education. *Inclusive Education and Special Needs*, pp. 35-54.
- Kauffman, J. M., Burke, M. D., & Anastasiou, D. (2023). Hard LRE choices in the era of inclusion: Rights and their implications. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 34(1), 61–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073221113074>
- Kauffman, J. M., Felder, M., Ahrbeck, B., Badar, J., & Schneiders, K. (2018). Inclusion of all students in general education? International appeal for a more temperate approach to inclusion. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 21(2), 1–10.  
<https://doi.org/10.9782/17-00009>

- Kauffman, J. M., & Hornby, G. (2020). Inclusive vision versus special education reality. *Education Sciences, 10*.
- Kebbi, M. (2018). Stress and coping strategies used by special education and general classroom teachers. *International Journal of Special Education, 33*(1), 34–61.
- Kim, S., Cambray-Engstrom, E., Wang, J., Kang, V. Y., Choi, Y.-J., & Coba-Rodriguez, S. (2020). Teachers' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions towards early inclusion in urban settings. *Inclusion, 8*(3), 222–240. <https://doi.org/10.1352/2326-6988-8.3.222>
- Krammer, M., Gastager, A., Lisa, P., Gasteiger-Klicpera, B., & Rossmann, P. (2018). Collective self-efficacy expectations in co-teaching teams – what are the influencing factors? *Educational Studies 44*(1), 99-114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2017.1347489>
- Kurth, J., & Mastergeorge, A. M. (2012). Impact of setting and instructional context for adolescents with autism. *Journal of Special Education, 46*(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466910366480>
- Kyriacou, C. (2001). Teacher stress: Directions for future research. *Educational Review, 53*, 27-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910120033628>
- Lai, F. T. T., Li, E. P. Y., Ji, M., Wong, W. W. K., & Lo, S. K. (2016). What are the inclusive teaching tasks that require the highest self-efficacy? *Teaching & Teacher Education, 59*, 338–346. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.07.006>
- Landers, E., Servilio, K., Tuttle, T., Alter, P.A., & Haydon, T. (2011). Defining disrespect: A teacher's perspective. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 30*(2), 13-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/875687051103000203>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

- Lindacher, T. (2020). Perceptions of regular and special education teachers of their own and their co-teacher's instructional responsibilities in inclusive education: A case study. *Improving Schools*, 23(2), 140–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480220906697>
- Maag, J. W., Kauffman, J. M., & Simpson, R. L. (2019). The amalgamation of special education? On practices and policies that may render it unrecognizable. *Exceptionality*, 27(3), 185-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2018.1425624>
- Madigan, D. J., & Kim, L. E. (2021). Towards an understanding of teacher attrition: A meta-analysis of burnout, job satisfaction, and teachers' intentions to quit. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 105, N.PAG. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103425>
- Maslach, C. & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The measurement of experienced burnout. *Journal of Occupational Behaviour*, 2, 99-113.
- Mason-Williams, L., Bettini, E., Peyton, D., Harvey, A., Rosenberg, M., & Sindelar, P. T. (2020). Rethinking shortages in special education: Making good on the promise of an equal opportunity for students with disabilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 43(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406419880352>
- Mastropieri, M. A., Scruggs, T. E., Graetz, J., Norland, J., Gardizi, W., & McDuffie, K. (2005). Case studies in co-teaching in the content areas: Successes, failures, and challenges. *Intervention in School & Clinic*, 40(5), 260–270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10534512050400050201>
- Melloy, K. J., Cieminski, A., & Sundeen, T. (2022). Accepting Educational Responsibility: Preparing Administrators to Lead Inclusive Schools. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 17(4), 358–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751211018498>

- Mofield, E. L. (2020). Benefits and Barriers to Collaboration and Co-Teaching: Examining Perspectives of Gifted Education Teachers and General Education Teachers. *Gifted Child Today*, 43(1), 20–33. <https://doi-org/10.1177/1076217519880588>
- Mostert, M.P., & Crockett, J.B. (2000). Reclaiming the history of special education for more effective practice. *Exceptionality*, 8(2), 133-143.  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327035EX0802\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327035EX0802_4)
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Murawski, W. W., & Lochner, W. W. (2011). Observing co-teaching: What to ask for, look for, and listen for. *Intervention in School & Clinic*, 46(3), 174–183.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451210378165>
- Naidoo, P. (2019). Perceptions of teachers and school management teams of the leadership roles of public school principals. *South African Journal of Education*, 39(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39n2a1534>
- National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (NCPSSERS). (2022). Retrieved from <https://specialedshortages.org/>
- National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). Professional standards for educational leaders 2015. Reston, VA: Author. Retrieved from  
[https://www.npbea.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Professional-Standards-for-Educational-Leaders\\_2015.pdf](https://www.npbea.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Professional-Standards-for-Educational-Leaders_2015.pdf)
- Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8(2), 90–97.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2>

- O'Brien, C., Beattie, J., & Sacco, D. (2019). *Teaching students with special needs: A guide for future educators*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.
- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2022). Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/osers/tag/deaf-blindness/>
- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2022). 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2021. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/index.html>
- Pancsofar, N., & Petroff, J. G. (2016). Teachers' experiences with co-teaching as a model for inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(10), 1043–1053. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145264>
- Park, E.-Y., & Shin, M. (2020). A meta-analysis of special education teachers' burnout. *SAGE Open*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020918297>
- Pavlidou, K., Alevriadou, A., & Antoniou, A.-S. (2022). Professional burnout in general and special education teachers: The role of interpersonal coping strategies. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 37(2), 191–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1857931>
- Pratt, S. M., Imbody, S. M., Wolf, L. D., & Patterson, A. L. (2017). Co-planning in co-teaching: A practical solution. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 52(4), 243–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451216659474>
- Peyton, D. J., Acosta, K., Harvey, A., Pua, D. J., Sindelar, P. T., Mason-Williams, L., Dewey, J., Fisher, T. L., & Crews, E. (2021). Special education teacher shortage: Differences between high and low shortage states. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 44(1), 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406420906618>



- Pugach, M. C., & Peck, C. (2016). Dividing practices: Preservice teacher quality assessment and the (re)production of relations between general and special education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 43(3), 3–23.
- Reddy, L. A. (1999). Inclusion of disabled children and school reform: A historical perspective. *Special Services in the Schools*, 15(1/2), 3–24.  
[https://doi.org/10.1300/J008v15n01\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J008v15n01_02)
- Robinson, O. P., Bridges, S. A., Rollins, L. H., & Schumacker, R. E. (2019). A study of the relation between special education burnout and job satisfaction. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 19(4), 295–303. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12448>
- Roos, H. (2019). Inclusion in mathematics education: An ideology, a way of teaching, or both? *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 100(1), 25–41.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-018-9854-z>
- Ruppar, A. L., Knight, V. F., McQueston, J. A., & Jeglum, S. R. (2020). Involvement and progress in the general curriculum: A grounded theory of the process. *Remedial and Special Education*, 41(3), 152–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932518806045>
- Rytivaara, A., Pulkkinen, J., & de Bruin, C. L. (2019). Committing, engaging and negotiating: Teachers' stories about creating shared spaces for co-teaching. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 83, 225–235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.04.013>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications.
- Scruggs, T. E., Mastropieri, M. A., & McDuffie, K. A. (2007). Co-teaching in inclusive classrooms: A metasynthesis of qualitative research. *Exceptional Children*, 73(4), 392–416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290707300401>

- Semon, S., Lane, D., Jones, P., & Smith, S. M. (2020). Job-embedded professional development: implementing co-teaching practices in general education classrooms. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1821448>
- Shen, B., McCaughtry, N., Martin, J., Garn, A., Kulik, N., & Fahlman, M. (2015). The relationship between teacher burnout and student motivation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85(4), 519–532. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12089>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Simon, N. S., & Johnson, S. M. (2015). Teacher turnover in high-poverty schools: What we know and can do. *Teachers College Record*, 117(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811511700305>
- Sindelar, P. T., Fisher, T. L., & Myers, J. A. (2019). The landscape of special education licensure, 2016. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 42, 101-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406418761533>
- Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2010). Teacher self-efficacy and teacher burnout: A study of relations. *Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies*, 26(4), 1059–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.11.001>
- Somma, M. (2020). From segregation to inclusion: Special educators' experiences of change. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(4), 381–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1464070>

- Squillaci, M. (2021). Analysis of the burnout levels of special education teachers in Switzerland in link with a reform implementation. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 36*(5), 844–853. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1809802>
- Strogilos, V., & King, S. M. E. (2019). Co-teaching is extra help and fun: Perspectives on co-teaching from middle school students and co-teachers. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 19*(2), 92–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12427>
- Sun, A. Q., & Xin, J. F. (2020). School principals' opinions about special education services. *Preventing School Failure, 64*(2), 106–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2019.1681354>
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2019). Understanding teacher shortages: An analysis of teacher supply and demand in the United States. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 27*(35).
- Symeonidou, S. (2017). Initial teacher education for inclusion: A review of the literature. *Disability & Society, 32*(3), 401–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1298992>
- Thakur, I. (2018). Relationship between workload and burnout of special education teachers. *Pakistan Journal of Distance and Online Learning, 4*(1), 235–242.
- Theofanidis, D., & Fountouki, A. (2018). Limitations and Delimitations in the Research Process. *Perioperative Nursing, 7*(3), 155–163. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2552022>
- Travers, M. (2020). Multidisciplinary collaboration in the development of individual education plans: Crossing boundaries - the challenges and opportunities for the teaching profession. *Reach, 33*(2), 61-81.
- United States Department of Education (2002) <https://www2.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/execsumm.pdf>

United States Department of Education (2022). Retrieved from

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.8>

Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching Lived Experience 2nd Edition*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Van Steen, T., & Wilson, C. (2020). Individual and cultural factors in teachers' attitudes towards inclusion: A meta-analysis. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 95, N.PAG.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103127>

Virginia Department of Education (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/>

Winzer, M.A. (1993). *The History of Special Education: From Isolation to Integration*;

Gallaudet University Press: Washington, DC, USA

Wong, V. W., Ruble, L. A., Yu, Y., & McGrew, J. H. (2017). Too stressed to teach? Teaching quality, student engagement, and IEP outcomes. *Exceptional Children*, 83(4), 412–427.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402917690729>

World Health Organization (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

Yell, M. L., Rogers, D., & Rogers, E. L. (1998). The legal history of special education: What a long, strange trip it's been! *Remedial and Special Education*, 19(4), 219–228.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/074193259801900405>

Yell, M.L. (2015). Special education in the United States: Legal history. *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 23, 219-224.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.86113-9>

Zach, S. (2020). Co-Teaching -- An approach for enhancing teaching-learning collaboration in physical education teacher education (PETE). *Journal of Physical Education & Sport*, 20(3), 1402–1407. <https://doi.org/10.7752/jpes.2020.03193>

Zweers, I., Bijstra, J. O., de Castro, B. O., Tick, N. T., & van de Schoot, Rens A. G. J. (2019).

Which school for whom? placement choices for inclusion or exclusion of Dutch students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties in primary education. *School*

*Psychology Review*, 48(1), 46-67. <https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2017-0008.V48-1>

## Appendix A: IRB Approval

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 29, 2024

William Traylor  
Amy Schechter

Re: Modification - IRB-FY23-24-1082 Perceptions of K-12 Public Administrators to Improve Self-Efficacy and Work Conditions for Special Education Teachers: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Dear William Traylor, Amy Schechter,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY23-24-1082 Perceptions of K-12 Public Administrators to Improve Self-Efficacy and Work Conditions for Special Education Teachers: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to no longer have participants write a letter to themselves "about [their] experiences working with special education teachers and how [they] learned about special education policy and practice" but have them write a "paragraph reflecting on what [they] wish [they] had known about special education policy and practices and/or what [they] wish the district would have provided to [them] in the form of professional development as a new administrator to prepare [them] to lead" has been approved. Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. **For a PDF of your modification 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 Modification under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. If your modification required you to submit revised documents, they can be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

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

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

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

## Appendix B: Site Approval



COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Superintendent of Schools

March 7, 2024

Mr. William T. Traylor

Dear Mr. Traylor,

I am please to share that the review committee has approved your research proposal, *Perceptions of K-12 public administrators to improve self-efficacy and work conditions for special education teachers: A hermeneutic phenomenological study*, to be conducted in [REDACTED]

We wish you the best and look forward to learning about the findings of your research and any practical implications on our practices.

Best,

[REDACTED]

Nancy [REDACTED]  
Director of Accreditation and Accountability

## Appendix C: Consent

**Title of the Study:** Perceptions of K-12 public administrators to improve self-efficacy and work conditions for special education teachers: A hermeneutic phenomenological study

**Principal Investigator:** William T. Traylor, 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 be a full or part-time public-school administrator with a state approved endorsement in leadership who has supervising authority over special education teachers. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at any time.

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 this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of K-12 public-school administrators in special education, specifically what administrators believe is necessary to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers.

### What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Individual Interviews - participants will be interviewed for up to one hour. All interviews will be requested face-to-face, however using the Zoom® platform may be necessary. All interviews will be audio and video recorded for transcription and analysis of data. After interviews are transcribed, I will email a copy of the transcript to each participant to allow feedback to validate the accuracy of statements.
2. Focus Group Interview – participants will participate in a group interview of 4-5 administrators for 30 - 45 minutes face-to-face, however using the Zoom® platform may be necessary. Focus group interview will be audio and video recorded for transcription and analysis of data.
3. Protocol Writing Prompt 30 minutes - participants will be asked to complete a short paragraph (7-10 sentences or more if they choose) reflecting on what they wish they had known about special education policy and practices as a new administrator and/or what they wish the district would have provided to them in the form of professional development as a new administrator to prepare them to lead special education teachers.

### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, if the findings in this study promote change within the district, participants may experience a positive change in special education teacher self-efficacy that may promote lower attrition rates.

Benefits to society include an understanding of what other administrators are doing to improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers. The study will assist the district in understanding from the voices of the participants what additional professional learning



activities may be necessary to improve the knowledge of special education policy and practices to promote the well-being of special education teachers.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

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

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

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

- Participants taking part in the study and responses provided will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms to identify the participant.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or 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 protected laptop and may be used for future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Individual and focus group interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password protected laptop for three years and then erased. Only the research 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 University or Magnolia County Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is William T. Traylor. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Amy Schechter, at [REDACTED].

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

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

**Your Consent**

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

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

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

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

## **Appendix D: Research Questions**

### **Central Research Question**

What do K-12 public-school administrators perceive will improve self-efficacy and working conditions for special education teachers?

### **Sub-Question One**

How do administrators perceive learning experiences in special education policy and practices from leadership programs and professional development have prepared them to lead inclusive schools and understand special education teacher job responsibilities?

### **Sub-Question Two**

How do K-12 public-school administrators perceive burnout affects a special education teacher?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What do administrators perceive is needed from district level leaders to improve school leaderships knowledge of special education policy and practices?

### **Sub-Question Four**

What do administrators believe is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers to reduce attrition?

## Appendix E: Teacher Quality Division and State Level Comparison

**Table 1**

*Teacher quality division and state level comparison 2019-2020 school year*

All Schools			
	Out of Field Teachers	Inexperienced Teachers	Out of Field and Inexperienced
Statewide	5.2%	5.3%	1.1%
Magnolia School District	4.4%	5.3%	0.7%
Low Poverty			
	Out of Field Teachers	Inexperienced Teachers	Out of Field and Inexperienced
Statewide	3.9%	4.5%	0.7%
Magnolia School District	4.3%	5.9%	0.8%

## Appendix F: Teacher Quality Provisionally Licensed Teachers

**Table 2**

*Teacher quality provisionally licensed teachers 2019-2020 school year*

All Schools		
	All Teachers	Special Education Teachers
Statewide	7.7%	2.3%
Magnolia School District	4.6%	0.7%
Low Poverty		
	All Teachers	Special Education Teachers
Statewide	6%	2.1%
Magnolia School District	4.6%	0.5%

## Appendix G: Individual Interview Questions

**Table 3**

*Individual Interview Questions*

*Administrators' learning experiences of special education policy and practices.*

1. Describe your educational background and career that has led to your current position as an administrator. SQ1
2. In what ways did your pre-service administrative training or coursework inform your understanding of special education? SQ1
3. Describe the special education department at your school. What role do you play in this department's supervision? SQ1
4. In what ways do you feel your leadership preparation program prepare you to help special education teachers manage stress, anxiety, and burnout with regard to their workload?  
SQ1

*Perceptions of what administrators believe will improve self-efficacy and working conditions.*

5. Describe what you know about self-efficacy and how this can impact a teacher's job performance? CRQ
6. What do you believe is important for you to know about special education policy and practices to help you understand workload manageability of special education teachers?  
CRQ
7. What do you believe are the challenges to being a special education teacher? CRQ
8. In what ways do you encourage and improve morale of special education teachers that will motivate them and improve their overall job satisfaction? CRQ

9. If a special education teacher were to approach you and indicate he or she is feeling overworked and possesses feelings of anxiety and stress, what course of action would you take? CRQ

*Perceived impacts of burnout.*

10. Describe what the typical workload is for a special education teacher in your school. SQ2
11. Describe any experiences where a special education teacher has come to you and expressed that they are overworked in their current position? SQ2
12. What does burnout mean to you? SQ2
13. What do you think are the effects of burnout on special education teachers? SQ2
14. In what ways do you offer support to special education teachers who are experiencing burnout? SQ2
15. Describe a situation where a special education teacher has left the profession to pursue other opportunities outside of education because of anxiety, stress, or burnout. SQ2
16. In what ways have you worked with your special education department to change the workload manageability for special education teachers? SQ2

*Professional development and learning.*

17. Describe the professional learning opportunities that are provided to administrators to help them improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices. SQ3
18. Please provide a description of professional learning opportunities your school district offers to administrators on recognizing and managing stress, anxiety, and burnout to improve self-efficacy and overall job performance for special education teachers. SQ3
19. Please share what professional learning opportunities your district provides directly to special education teachers that can help them to manage workload responsibilities. SQ3

*What support is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers.*

20. Please share what supports or professional learning you believe is needed from division level leaders to help administrators improve their knowledge of special education policy and practices. SQ4
21. Describe the support or professional learning you believe the district should offer to special education teachers on workload manageability. SQ4
22. Explain what you think is needed to improve special education teacher anxiety, stress, and burnout and how would you go about implementing it. SQ4



## Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

**Table 4**

*Focus Group Questions*

*Administrators' learning experiences of special education policy and practices.*

1. In what ways did your leadership program prepare you to lead special education programs in your school? SQ1
2. Describe how special education programs in your school are doing (who manages them, and how are they performing)? What are some successes and challenges in special education in your building? SQ1

*Perceptions of what administrators believe will improve self-efficacy and working conditions.*

3. What experiences and interactions do you have with special education teachers in your school? In what ways do these teachers express feelings of stress or burnout? CRQ
4. How does your experiences as an administrator help you to assess and improve special education teacher self-efficacy and the overall working conditions? CRQ

*Perceived impacts of burnout.*

5. Please describe the relationships between general education teachers and special education teachers in your school. Can you elaborate on any positive or negative co-teaching relationships? SQ2
6. What do you believe are causes for special education teacher burnout? What are the potential impacts of burnout on special education teachers (e.g., job performance)? SQ2

*Professional learning for public-school administrators in special education policy and practices.*

7. Explain any initiatives the district offers to administrators to assess and improve working conditions for special education teachers. SQ3

8. Describe any professional learning activities you have attended in your district that have targeted workload manageability for special education teachers. SQ3

*What support is still needed to improve the well-being of special education teachers.*

9. Please share what you believe should be implemented or suggested to help reduce the workload of special education teachers in your building. SQ4
10. Describe what you believe future leadership programs should offer to better prepare pre-service administrators to identify and help special education teachers to reduce burnout. SQ4
11. What supports do you believe your school district needs to offer to administrators to help them to lead special education departments? What supports do you believe your school district needs to offer to special education teachers to help reduce burnout and stress? SQ4

**Appendix I: Protocol Writing Prompt****Table 5**

---

*Protocol Writing Prompt*

Please write a short paragraph to yourself (7-10 sentences or more if you choose) describing what you wish you would have known as a new administrator about special education policy and practice and/or what you wish the district would have offered you in the form of professional development to help prepare you to lead special education teachers in your current role.

---

## Appendix J: Participants

**Table 6**

*Participant Demographic Information*

Participant Name	Title	Level	Corridor	Years in Education	Years in Administration
Cole	Principal	Elementary	2	18	10
Kyleigh	Senior Teacher	Middle	2	14	5
Avery	Senior Teacher	Middle	2	28	23
Iris	Assistant Principal	Elementary	2	17	4
Luke	Senior Teacher	Middle	1	20	9
Emma	Senior Teacher	Middle	4	8	2
Lily	Assistant Principal	Middle	2	9	5
Hannah	Assistant Principal	Middle	2	20	9
Leah	Principal	Elementary	1	26	18
Oliver	Principal	Middle	2	17	8
Ruby	Principal	Elementary	2	33	25
Tyler	Principal	High School	2	30	15

## Appendix K: Themes and Sub-Themes

**Table 7**

*Themes and Sub-Themes*

<b>Themes and Sub-Themes</b>
Theme: Absence of Readiness
Sub-Themes: Learn Through Experience Lack of Awareness Need for Structured Training in Special Education
Theme: Need to Support Special Educators
Sub-Themes: Building Intentional Relationships Tangible Change and Improvement to Workload Acknowledging the Reality of Burnout Empowering Special Education Teachers

### Appendix L: Theoretical Alignment and Applications

Figure 1

*Theoretical Alignment and Applications*

