A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF NOVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE APPLYING CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

by

Mandy Marie Augst

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe novice special education teachers' experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. This study was guided by Bernard Weiner's attribution theory of motivation. This framework allowed for the examination of teachers' causal attributions for challenging behavior as well as their personal motivation in responding to challenging behaviors. This study's central research question focused on novice special education teachers' experiences attributing causes to challenging behavior. The researcher employed a transcendental phenomenological approach, engaging participants as co-researchers to understand their lived experiences. A sample of 11 participants was recruited from primary and secondary schools to take part in mind-mapping, narrative journal prompts, and semi-structured virtual interviews. The data were analyzed using Moustakas's modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, and four themes were identified: acceptance, understanding, management, and motivation. These themes correspond with the theoretical framework of this study. The findings indicate novice special education teachers' interpersonal and intrapersonal causal attributions reflect how they perceive their students and themselves. Findings also reinforced the need for supportive behavior management measures to reduce teacher stress and turnover potential. Further research is needed regarding the impact of imposed behavior management systems and SET-paraeducator dynamics.

Keywords: novice special education teachers, challenging behavior, attribution theory, stress-related burnout, attrition

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my loving and supportive family. You have been my listening ears, cheerleaders, coaches, and constructive critics. To my husband, Robert, thank you for making this education journey possible. Your dedication to me and our daughters gives us the opportunity to pursue our dreams. To my three lovely daughters, Loella, Adalie, and Liberty, thank you for believing in Mommy and inspiring me to cherish the beautiful family life God blessed me with while working toward my doctorate. I hope you will learn as much as you can in life and see education for the valuable adventure that it is. Loella, for you especially, since you've been in this with me from the start, thank you for cheering me on and understanding when Mommy couldn't be 100% available. To my sisters, Amy and Jodi-Beth, thank you for inspiring me by being the strong, smart women you are. To my Mom and Dad, thank you for your time, support, love, and prayers. This dissertation and the five years of hard work and sacrifice it took to get us here would not have been possible without you.

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The completion of this dissertation is a testament to the goodness and grace of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. God answered prayer after prayer to carry me through this program. I acknowledge that His plan and timing are perfect. Thank you, Lord!

Thank you to my participants, who shared their stories and expertise with me. Your dedication to your students was incredibly inspiring.

Thank you to my committee member, Dr. Wells, for your spot-on feedback and support. I was lucky you said yes. Thank you to my steadfast chair, Dr. Ziegler. In the moments when I thought it was impossible, you spoke hope and reassurance. I can't thank you enough for your kindness, guidance, and encouragement. Even though it took longer than expected, I was fortunate during that time I got to know you better and learn more from you. God bless you for hanging in there with me.

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List of Abbreviations

Antecedent Behavior Consequence (ABC)

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)

Emotional Disturbance (ED)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Intellectual Disability (ID)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Multiple Disabilities (MD)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities (PIMD)

Special Education Teacher (SET)

Specific Learning Disability (SpLD)

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Managing challenging behavior is an ongoing concern for special education teachers (SETs) (Amstad & Müller, 2020). Teaching demands associated with students' challenging behaviors have been found to correlate positively with emotional exhaustion and stress-related burnout in this population of educators (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Wink et al., 2021). Novice SETs (those with less than five years of experience) are at a higher risk than veteran teachers of succumbing to the negative effects of managing students' challenging behavior due to a lack of experience, skills, strategies, and support systems to address challenging behavior in healthy and productive ways (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). The following chapter provides key background information, a statement of the research problem, and the purpose of the study. Drawing upon existing literature and an identified gap, the significance of the study was established. A central research question and three sub-questions are presented in addition to definitions of key terms associated with novice SETs' experiences interpreting and responding to challenging behaviors.

Background

Since the 1960s, schools have struggled to recruit and retain qualified SETs while facing increased scrutiny to meet federal expectations for students with disabilities. The researcher aims to build upon the historical, social, and theoretical foundations of previous research to support this study. The historical context reveals several factors responsible for teacher shortages, including stress-related burnout and high attrition rates. The social context shows teaching demands, such as managing challenging behaviors, have a trickle-down effect that extends beyond the teacher to include students, families, administrators, and taxpayers. And finally, the theoretical context addresses approaches researchers used previously to examine teacher

shortages and their causes and presents the theoretical aim of this study.

Historical Context

Teachers are an integral part of the public education system (Hattie, 2003). In addition to physical learning environments, the curriculum, and the students themselves, teachers have considerable influence on student achievement outcomes (Fauth et al., 2019; Hattie, 2003) and other school district success metrics. Tracking the supply and demand of qualified teachers has been a priority for educational researchers since the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) began collecting annual workforce data in 1954 (National Education Association, 1957; Snyder, 1993). According to The 1957 Teacher Supply and Demand Report, while the number of college graduates qualified to teach increased during the previous decade, so too did widespread local shortages of teachers (National Education Association, 1957). The report confirmed teacher supply and demand was a mounting problem due to societal shifts toward school-age population growth, escalating performance-based expectations placed on schools, and earlier familial demands and novel employment opportunities for the predominantly female workforce (National Education Association, 1957).

Teacher shortages persisted as these and other trends impacting the education labor market continued in the latter half of the 20th century (Corcoran et al., 2004; Tobin, 2012). The issue reached a critical stage in the 1980s when the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) sounded the alarm that, although student population growth had leveled off, the diminished state of the American education system put the nation at risk of falling behind other advanced and emerging countries. According to members of the commission, severe teacher shortages in key areas, including math, science, foreign and English language learning, and special education, were particularly concerning (National Commission on Excellence in

Education, 1983). As one of its six recommendations for immediate implementation, the commission encouraged federal, state, and local entities to commit fiscal support to meet the needs of students with disabilities, among other groups "most at risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 32).

Although students with disabilities were materially absent from public schools just a decade prior due to the instructional and behavior management limitations of a typical classroom, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), passed in 1975, mandated minimum requirements for schools to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students representing a range of special needs (Snyder, 1993; Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Mandated inclusion and specialized services associated with EHA effectively created an immediate and extensive demand for qualified SETs nationwide (Smith-Davis et al., 1984). However, within a few years of its adoption, funding shortfalls and serious teacher shortages reported by more than half the country threatened to undermine early EHA gains (Smith-Davis et al., 1984).

Staffing problems that plagued special education were not representative of public education entirety. Supply outpaced demand in the 1980s as population dynamics created a surplus of general education teachers (Tobin, 2012). Tobin (2012) argued the bar for minimum teacher qualifications was raised during this time as schools could be more selective, but such a claim cannot be substantiated due to a lack of relevant and reliable data, as noted by other researchers (Corcoran et al., 2004; Sutcher et al., 2019). Regardless of any surplus of general education teachers that existed in the 1980s, data showed the surplus did not extend to special education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Smith-Davis et al., 1984). Ongoing SET shortages meant the bar could not be raised. Instead, special education positions

either went unfilled for long periods of time or were filled by under-qualified applicants out of necessity (Billingsley, 1993; Boe, 2006; Smith-Davis et al., 1984).

Special education workforce patterns in the 1980s continued into the 1990s and 2000s due in part to legislation (Boe, 2006). In 1990, amendments were enacted, and EHA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Policy updates since 1990 have resulted in increasingly stringent requirements for schools to provide least restrictive environments (LRE) for a wider range of exceptionalities, greater access to general education in inclusive classrooms, and highly qualified teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a). Continuing pressure on schools to provide FAPE to all students indicated SET shortages would not reverse course at the start of the 21st century; on the contrary, they were projected to worsen (Bergert & Burnette, 2001; Katsiyannis et al., 2003). Researchers identified multiple shortage factors. They include school-related factors such as increasing student enrollment (Katsiyannis et al., 2003; Sutcher et al., 2019), teacher-student ratio demands (Boe, 2006; Sutcher et al., 2019), and new vacancies (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Personnel-related factors are also involved, such as high levels of early retirement (Harris & Adams, 2007) and stress-related burnout (Robinson et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2017), turnover and attrition (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020), and recruitment challenges (Boe & Cook, 2006; Zhang et al., 2020).

The critical need for SETs has led to recent interest in recruitment, professional development, and long-term retention strategies (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Haydon et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020), but the data continues to indicate shortfalls in these key areas. Zhang et al. (2020) found preservice teachers associate special education with the additional workload of IDEA compliance, individualized education program (IEP) meetings and paperwork, and overwhelming instructional and behavioral management challenges. When deciding whether to

pursue a career in special education, preservice teachers tend to avoid potential burnout by opting for what they perceive as less demanding roles regardless of potential salary incentives, openings, or job security (Zhang et al., 2020).

Preservice SETs must quickly learn skills and adopt coping strategies to persist or succumb to stress-related burnout and attrition, both high in special education compared to general education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020). The terms turnover and attrition are used synonymously in the literature (Räsänen et al., 2020; Shaukat et al., 2019) or referred to in combination (Madigan & Kim, 2021) to describe the voluntary departure of teachers from their positions, schools, or the education profession. Regardless of the term used, turnover and attrition among SETs have been found to positively correlate with job-related stress and dissatisfaction across several key indicators (Robinson et al., 2019), which include teacher characteristics, school characteristics, and classroom and student characteristics (Conley & You, 2017; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Shaukat et al., 2019). Researchers found regularly managing students' challenging behaviors (e.g., intentional and unintentional class disruptions, disengagement, and aggression toward fellow students and teachers) is an especially significant indicator associated with job dissatisfaction, burnout, and intent to leave (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Conley & You, 2017; Hester et al., 2020).

Social Context

Stress-related burnout is and continues to be the leading cause of teacher attrition in public schools (Diliberti et al., 2021). Stress-related burnout and attrition among SETs is a critical issue not only for the teachers who experience it but also for special needs students and families, teachers' families, instructional teams, school administrators, district leaders, and taxpayers (Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Räsänen et al., 2020). Brunsting et al.'s

(2014) literature review spanning nearly four decades of research revealed burnout manifests in negative mental, emotional, and physical outcomes for teachers. Stress-related burnout also impacts students who miss meaningful instruction and support when their teacher disengages and suffers from emotional exhaustion (Brunsting et al., 2014; Koenen et al., 2019). Teacher stress can trickle down to their families in the form of unhealthy coping strategies and lack of availability (Cancio et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020) and colleagues as detachment and low performance (Haydon et al., 2018). Schools, district administrators, and taxpayers feel the impact of teacher burnout when it results in absences, long-term vacancies, and turnover costs (Hester et al., 2020).

Public schools need adequate staffing to operate effectively, but more importantly, they need qualified and committed SETs who are mentally and emotionally fit to manage the most severe challenging behaviors (Langher et al., 2017). Within the school community, novice SETs may lack teaching experience, behavior management skills, personal coping strategies, and supportive professional relationships that more experienced teachers use to counterbalance teaching demands (Brittle, 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Hopman et al., 2018; Langher et al., 2017; Pavlidou et al., 2022). Unmet needs in these key areas early in one's career, coupled with "complex emotional job demands" (Stark & Koslouski, 2021, p. 60) unique to special education, are recognized for their contribution to teacher retention problems (Räsänen et al., 2020). Behavior management struggles that lead to high turnover and low retention in special education are a problem not only for schools but for the local, state, and national public education programs tasked with providing FAPE to all students under Section 504. Ultimately, the grim statistic that half of new SETs will leave within the first five years (Hester et al., 2020) is reason enough to draw attention to this problem, examine what is going wrong, and develop strategies to prepare

novice SETs to persist in challenging teaching environments.

Theoretical Context

Nationwide SET shortages (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019) have resulted in researchers primarily focusing on the antecedents to this problem, specifically the causes of burnout and its effect on teachers' intent to leave (Gilmour et al., 2022; Huk et al., 2019; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Pavlidou et al., 2022). Several researchers have adopted a positive perspective and explored the topic as it relates to teachers' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and retention (De Stasio et al., 2017; Hopman et al., 2018; Shaukat et al., 2019). According to Shaukat et al. (2019), self-efficacy levels and gender play an important role in turnover. Female SETs reporting higher self-efficacy and account for a larger proportion of retention than females with lower self-efficacy or males with low or high self-efficacy.

Other researchers adopted a pragmatic approach and considered the problem in terms of teaching demands and resources. Using the conservation of resources theory, Bettini et al. (2019) discovered novice teachers who reported greater demands working with problem students were likelier to leave than teachers who reported supportive relationships with administrators. Maslach's burnout theory has also been a popular theoretical framework to account for the impact of teaching demands on teachers' stress levels and experiences (Brunsting et al., 2023; Jeon et al., 2021; Langher et al., 2017; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Robinson et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2017). Amstad and Müller (2020) pointed out that a variety of work-related stress theories can be applied to examine students' challenging behaviors and their effect on SETs. Among these, a cognitive-behavioral framework can be used to explain the relationship between stimulus and stressor. A job demands-resources model illuminates the experience of a perceived lack of resources to meet job expectations (Amstad & Müller, 2020).

This study was designed to contribute to the literature by employing a theoretical framework that focuses on teachers' psychological experiences when encountering challenging behavior. Heider (1958) first used the term 'attribution' to describe how humans perceive objects and people around them. Attribution is the human tendency to identify qualities and ascribe causes in order to make sense of something or someone. When it comes to interpersonal relations, the perceiver applies causal attributions to understand actions or behaviors of others (Heider, 1958). Though Heider (1958) first introduced the concepts of dispositional (intentional) and situational (unintentional) aspects of human behavior, Jones and Davis (1965) and Kelley (1967) were instrumental in advancing Heider's theory by identifying factors and tendencies that impact causal attributions.

Weiner (1972, 1985, 2010), looking specifically through the lens of motivation, further elucidated the theory by focusing on the mental processes by which perceivers interpret others' behavior and assign either negative or positive causal attributions. According to Weiner (1972 1985, 2010), a perceiver is more likely to apply positive causal attributions to another's actions if they believe the person is motivated by internal forces and acting in an effortful and favorable way. Positive causal attributions are likewise applied in personal situations where the perceiver believes their intentional actions are met with favorable outcomes (Weiner, 1980). Weiner's (1972, 1985, 2010) attribution theory of motivation has been applied in previous studies (Alevriadou & Pavlidou, 2016; Carroll et al., 2023; McCullough et al., 2022; Woodcock & Moore, 2021) to examine the causal attributions teachers apply to challenging behaviors. Using this theoretical framework, the researcher will attempt to understand how SETs attribute causes to students' challenging behavior and how negative causal attributions may contribute to stress-related burnout.

Problem Statement

The problem is novice special education teachers are at a high risk of developing stress-related burnout due to the challenging behavior they encounter by serving students with unique physical, intellectual, and emotional needs (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Novice teachers, by way of their inexperience and lack of accumulated resources, may develop negative self-concepts associated with feelings of inadequacy in managing students' internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Olivier et al., 2020; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Challenging behavior is a primary stressor for general education and SETs alike (Hester et al., 2020; Wink et al., 2021), but the nature of SETs' role in working with students with disabilities places them in the path of challenging behaviors more frequently (Amstad & Müller, 2020).

Research on challenging behavior and teacher stress-related burnout and attrition reveals a correlation between student behavior problems and teachers' intent to leave (Bettini et al., 2020). The high percentage of burnout and attrition among teachers has prompted researchers to examine the impact of challenging behavior in general and special education classrooms (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Park & Shin, 2020); however, research focusing on the unique experiences of SETs reveals important distinctions for this group. Recent and notable findings show some challenging behaviors are more stressful than others (Amstad & Müller, 2020). Additionally, challenging behaviors negatively impact instructional time (Cooc, 2019) and teacher self-efficacy (Haydon et al., 2018). SETs employ coping strategies to deal with work-related stress (Brittle, 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Pavlidou et al., 2022), and teaching students with the most challenging behavior is positively correlated with higher turnover (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

While significant, these recent studies are predominantly quantitative and based on

limited research. Researchers have yet to address the experiences of novice SETs in order to show how this population attributes causes to challenging behavior and how they may be personally affected by difficult interactions with students. This gap in the literature presented an opportunity for this study to examine the experiences of novice SETs using a phenomenological approach whereby participants can contribute as co-researchers and guide the development of key themes and understanding.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe novice special education teachers' experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. Within the context of this research, challenging behavior was generally defined as internalizing and externalizing behaviors exhibited by students that impede the desired outcomes for teaching and learning (Olivier et al., 2020). This study was guided by Weiner's (1972, 1985, 2010) attribution theory of motivation, which allowed the researcher to examine the lived experiences of SETs who are new to the profession (five years or less experience) by focusing on how they attribute causes to students' challenging behavior and ways in which SETs respond.

Significance of the Study

A recurring theme in the literature related to SET shortages is that the work is difficult, and novice teachers are unprepared for the behavior management and instructional demands for which they are responsible (Bettini et al., 2017; Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019; Shank, 2023; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Though researchers have explored this problem, previous studies are limited in their use of quantitative research design and theoretical frameworks that fail to fully account for the psychological experiences of novice SETs. This study builds upon previous research into challenging behavior as an attrition factor in special education, and provides a focused account

of the lived experiences of novice SETs. The following is an explanation of this study's theoretical, empirical, and practical significance.

Theoretical

Multiple studies and reviews have established the bearing of causal attributions in the classroom (Alevriadou & Pavlidou, 2016; Andreou & Rapti, 2010; Ho, 2004; Wang & Hall, 2018; Wink et al., 2021). Weiner's (1972, 1985, 2000) attribution theory of motivation is the most relevant framework to examine how novice teachers attribute causes and respond personally to students' challenging behaviors. Studies that employ the popular self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) focus too much on teachers' ability to manage challenging behavior (Cumming et al., 2021; Hopman et al., 2018), but this study was not seeking to address this aspect of the problem. Instead, this study aimed to describe teachers' perceptions and responses when encountering challenging behaviors in the classroom and how they may experience stress by misattributing students' challenging behaviors to their own shortcomings or situational problems at school. Attribution theory of motivation presents an opportunity to understand better how novice SETs interpret causes of students' challenging behaviors and attribute them to situational (unintentional) or dispositional (intentional) forces, their instructional or classroom management abilities, and other factors. When looking at causes and effects of teacher stress, burnout, and attrition, it is important to consider the psychology behind teachers' responses to challenging behaviors. To examine the topic from a unique perspective, the researcher employed a theoretical framework focusing on causal attributions to understand novice SETs' lived experiences.

Empirical

Despite international interest in the relationship between student behavior and SET

burnout (Brittle, 2020; Mulyani et al., 2021; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021), a single study accounted for this relationship within the context of novice teachers' experiences (Pavlidou et al., 2022). Previous predominantly quantitative studies emphasize the impact of challenging behavior on teachers' stress and eventual burnout (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Olivier et al., 2020; Roorda & Koomen, 2020; Wink et al., 2021). Only one qualitative study addressed the problem at hand. Haydon et al.'s (2018) case study examined various stress factors in a general way. While the study revealed student behavior and teacher perceptions were causes of stress, it did not focus on these factors exclusively. Haydon et al. (2018) failed to account for differences between challenging behavior and other stress factors, and the experiences of novice teachers were not addressed. This study sought to fill this empirical gap in the literature concerning how novice SETs attribute causes and respond to students' challenging behaviors.

Practical

This study was inspired by the long-term shortage of SETs impacting more than 40 states nationwide (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019). Special education represents a critical need because high educator attrition and low retention place a strain on federally mandated programs and force schools to fill vacancies with unqualified teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). It is vital for educators, administrators, and policymakers nationwide to understand how novice SETs experience demands associated with challenging behaviors so recruitment and retention efforts can be targeted to meet the needs of these at-risk teachers. Results from this research may support teacher preparation programs and increase retention efforts nationwide. Additionally, burnout and attrition in special education is a global issue (Brittle, 2020; Mulyani et al., 2021; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Therefore, practical

implications of this study may potentially contribute to an international impact.

Research Questions

In qualitative research, it is recommended that the researcher use a broad, open-ended central question to lay groundwork for objective data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sub-questions then examine specific aspects of the overarching topic, which in phenomenology is the phenomenon to be studied (Moustakas, 1994). While the impact of challenging behavior in special education settings and on teacher stress levels is recognized in the extant literature (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Caldarella et al., 2021; Hopman et al., 2018), it is important to further examine experiences of novice teachers who are at a greater risk of burnout and attrition due to the development of negative self-concepts (Jeon et al., 2021; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). The following research questions were intended to allow study participants to describe how they attribute causes and respond to students' challenging behavior in a classroom context.

Central Research Question

How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences with challenging behaviors?

Sub-Question One

How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences determining causes of challenging behaviors?

Sub-Question Two

How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences of successes and failures in addressing challenging behaviors?

Sub-Question Three

How do novice special education teachers describe their motivation to continue teaching

through their experiences with challenging behaviors?

Definitions

1. *Attrition* - Sometimes used as a synonym for turnover, but most often refers to a teacher leaving the profession altogether for personal reasons or another occupation outside of education (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Madigan & Kim, 2021).
2. *Causal Attribution* - The process by which a perceiver interprets the internal or external causes of someone else's behavior (Heider, 1958).
3. *Challenging Behavior* - The internalizing and externalizing behaviors exhibited by students that undermine classroom norms and/or impede desired outcomes for teaching and learning (Olivier et al., 2020).
4. *Dispositional Attribution* - Behavior perceived as internal, intentional, and stable (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Wiley et al., 2012).
5. *Externalizing Behavior* - Behaviors categorized as being externally visible or audible to others and considered disruptive to the environment in which they are carried out (Olivier et al., 2020).
6. *Inclusive Classroom* - A least restrictive general education classroom wherein students with and without disabilities learn together (Jeon et al., 2021).
7. *Internalizing Behavior* - Behaviors categorized as being internally felt or experienced, and as a result, difficult for others to perceive; however, internalized behaviors can be problematic when associated with student disengagement (Olivier et al., 2020).
8. *Self-contained Classroom* - A dedicated class reserved exclusively for students with disabilities (Hester et al., 2020).

9. *Situational Attribution* - Behavior perceived as external, unintentional, and unstable (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Wiley et al., 2012).
10. *Stress-related Burnout* - "Occurs when teachers undergoing stress for long periods of time experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment" (Brunsting et al., 2014, p. 681).
11. *Turnover* - Sometimes used as a synonym of attrition, but most often refers to a teacher leaving their position for another school or position (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020).

Summary

Novice SETs are at a high risk of developing stress-related burnout as a result of the challenging behavior they encounter by serving a particularly challenging student population. Relevant research reveals the most challenging behaviors are more stressful for teachers and contribute to high turnover (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). This study sought to address this problem empirically by involving novice teachers as co-researchers. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe novice SETs' experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. This study aimed to illuminate the impact of challenging behavior and motivation on novice teachers' career intentions. This chapter outlined the historical, social, and theoretical basis for this research. The significance of the problem was established as it relates to broader special education teacher shortages and the ongoing need for qualified teachers to serve students with disabilities. The central research question and sub-questions are intended to propel future discourse and meet a need for additional qualitative examination of the experiences of novice SETs in the hope that results of this study may inform retention efforts in the future.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This systematic review of the literature aims to establish the role of causal attributions in novice special education teachers' (SETs) experiences attributing and responding to challenging behaviors. Attribution theory of motivation, a theoretical framework used to explain behavior perception and causal attributions, will be discussed, followed by a synthesis of relevant literature. Applying a broad to narrow approach, the author will present scholarly perspectives pertaining to the long-term SET shortage, turnover and attrition, stress-related burnout, protective factors, the unique experiences of novice SETs, and the impact of challenging behavior in a special education context. To conclude, a gap in the literature will be presented, which supported the need for this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Weiner's (1972, 1980, 1985, 2000) attribution theory of motivation related to novice SETs' experiences interpreting and responding to students' challenging behavior. The application of this theory for this study is two-fold. Attribution theory of motivation was used to describe how novice SETs apply causal attributions to students' challenging behavior to understand underlying motivations, as well as how attributions contribute to teachers' personal feelings of motivation. While this study utilized Weiner's theory primarily, additional theorists and frameworks associated with attribution theory are included for background and context.

Weiner's theoretical framework represents the significant discourse surrounding Heider's (1958) seminal work on attribution. Heider (1958) introduced the psychological theory of attribution to explain the human tendency to attribute meaning to other people's behavior.

Heider's (1958) theory is based on dichotomous causal attributions for behaviors that can be attributed to personal causes, such as a person's disposition or beliefs, and those that are attributed to impersonal causes, including environmental or situational factors (Malle, 2011; Weiner, 1985, 2010). This dichotomous relationship is referred to in terms of dispositional versus situational attributes (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967) but is also described as internal versus external (Buss, 1978; Weiner, 1985, 2010) and intentional versus unintentional (Harvey & Tucker, 1979).

Subsequent attribution theorists Jones and Davis (1965) focused on personal perception and intentional (dispositional) behaviors. They developed the correspondent inference theory; positing correspondence occurs when a perceiver observes intentional behavior matching what is already believed about a person's character (Jones & Davis, 1965). When correspondent inferences are confirmed by anticipated behaviors, the perceiver makes assertions about a person's future behavior (Jones & Davis, 1965). Another notable theoretical extension is Kelley's (1967) covariation model of attribution in which perceivers base attributions on available behavioral evidence in the form of consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency. The covariation model provides a framework for distinguishing between situational and dispositional attributions. Weiner (1985) acknowledged contributions of these researchers as well as others who laid the groundwork for his attribution theory. He contended that after nearly two decades of empirical data on the topic, three dimensions of causality are clearly identifiable: locus, stability, and controllability.

According to Weiner (1985), previous attribution theorists were erroneously preoccupied with the internal-external (dispositional versus situational) dimension of causal attribution. He posited that beyond this initial locus dimension, it was necessary to consider stability since

behaviors are prone to change over time and in different situations (Weiner, 1985). With the third and final dimension, controllability, Weiner (1985) sought to establish the role of volitional effort in behavioral outcomes. Weiner's (1985, 2010) attribution theory of motivation provided a robust causality framework that could account for a range of behaviors based on internal and external causes, those that were stable or unstable over time, and those that were controllable or uncontrollable.

Weiner (2000) later identified two interrelated attribution theories of motivation. The first is interpersonal theory, which encompasses self-directed thoughts and emotions, including self-efficacy beliefs and feelings of pride, shame, and guilt. The two primary determinants of interpersonal motivation are expectancy (subjective expectations of future success) and value (emotional effects due to goal attainment or non-attainment) (Weiner, 2000). The second theory, intrapersonal, accounts for thoughts and feelings about others as a result of perceived behaviors. Within this framework, perceivers react to the performance of others with anger or empathy and respond accordingly in the form of reward, punishment, help, or neglect (Weiner, 2000). Weiner (2000) presented metaphors of a person as a scientist and a person as a judge to illustrate the difference between self-directed (interpersonal) and other-directed (intrapersonal) causal attributions.

This study explored the lived experiences of novice SETs as they interpret and respond to challenging behaviors. Though Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory is a popular framework for classroom behavior management research (Cumming et al., 2021; Hopman et al., 2018; Park & Shin, 2020), it fails to account for the interpersonal and intrapersonal causal attributions that occur within student-teacher relationships and contribute to teachers' feelings of self-efficacy and ultimately their motivation to continue teaching. Weiner's (1985, 2000) attribution theory of

motivation provided the concepts and framework necessary to distill challenging classroom interactions, however small, into a coherent depiction of behavior management dynamics and outcomes for novice SETs. By engaging this unique population of teachers and a phenomenological research design, this study extended the utilization of Weiner's theory to reveal nuances of novice teaching experience and highlight the value of narrative, student-specific data.

Related Literature

SETs serve an essential role as per the Section 504 federal mandate to provide free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all qualifying children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2023). However, schools nationwide struggle to maintain adequate levels of qualified SETs due to ongoing shortages (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b) and work-related attrition factors (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2022). SET shortages are likely to continue without systemic reform to address attrition factors (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Retaining qualified SETs requires closer examination of their unique work-related stresses (Hester et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2021), particularly how they experience and respond to student behavior challenges (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Simó-Pinatella et al., 2022). Many novice SETs lack the experience and resources necessary to manage challenging student behavior, increasing risks for stress-related burnout and attrition in this population (Shank, 2023; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). There is a gap in the literature regarding how stress-related burnout due to challenging behavior impacts novice SETs career decisions.

This review of the literature is organized topically, beginning with the problem of the national SET shortage and novice teacher attrition. Evidence-based retention strategies and

supports for novice SETs are then presented. Work-related stresses are addressed with a particular focus on challenging behaviors commonly associated with disability types identified through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), followed by a final section devoted to data supporting the application of attribution theory to classroom behavior management.

Special Education Teacher Shortage

The SET shortage has posed a decades-long challenge for public schools (American Association for Employment in Education, 2022; Boe & Cook, 2006; Gardner, 1983). Special education continues to be a critical staffing need nationwide as all 50 states and the District of Columbia have reported multi-year SET shortages since 2015-16 (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). Twenty-one (42%) states have experienced SET shortages year over year since 2015, with some states reporting consistently severe personnel needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). California experienced 12% turnover and 9% attrition among SETs between 2016 and 2018 (Learning Policy Institute, 2019). SETs changing districts and out of education altogether resulted in 34% of positions in California being filled with unlicensed or alternatively licensed SETs during this time (Ondrasek et al., 2020). Similarly, in Texas, SET vacancies range between 17-29% annually, with licensed SETs leaving positions twice as often as other teachers (Sullivan et al., 2017).

Data points to worsening teacher shortages in several disciplines coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bill et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). This is due in part to the growth in public school enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) and waning teacher recruitment that occurred until 2019 (Saenz-Armstrong, 2023). Post-COVID student population instability in some states makes it difficult to forecast short-term education

needs (Lombard, 2022), but research shows school conditions during COVID-19 positively correlate with negative perceptions of teaching and recruitment outcomes (Bill et al., 2022). Research also reveals virtual instruction experiences of SETs were especially challenging and contributed to higher levels of work-related stress (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2022). Regardless of the changes in education brought about by COVID-19, SETs continue to rank as the top need for most states (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). Recently, 64% of public schools reported special education openings in 2020-21 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). In a survey administered the same year, 40% of school administrators reported difficulties filling open SET positions, up from 17% reported in 2011-12 (Irwin et al., 2023).

Ongoing SET shortages stymy states' efforts to improve special education outcomes (Ondrasek et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2017; Virginia Board of Education, 2021). Stringent amendments to IDEA, combined with widespread inclusive instructional practices over the past 25 years, have compounded the need for qualified and committed SETs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; Williamson et al., 2020). Though IDEA amendments have brought progress, parents of students with disabilities argue IDEA can accomplish more by mandating additional qualified personnel for inclusive and self-contained classrooms (Burke & Sandman, 2015; Kleinhammer-Tramill et al., 2023). Without enough teachers to meet existing demand, an amendment such as this could exacerbate SET shortages by setting higher expectations for teacher-student ratios and qualified staff.

Attrition and Turnover in Special Education

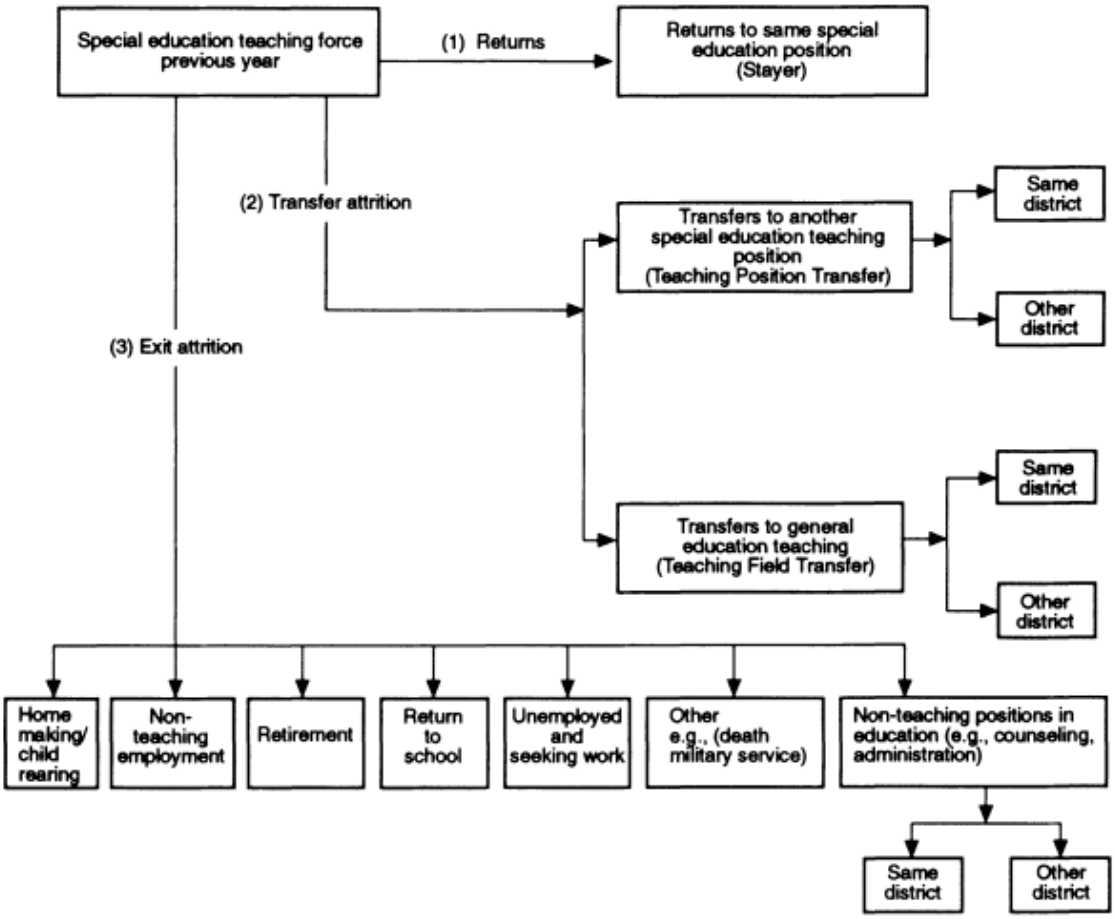
Ingersoll was instrumental in shifting the focus of teacher shortage discourse. He argued that high turnover, not shortages, was the cause of education staffing challenges (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). This viewpoint led Ingersoll to argue in favor of retention reform rather

than recruitment, and he was prolific in defending his position (Ingersoll, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2012; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Ingersoll et al., 1995, 2016; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Though shortages continue to interest researchers (García & Weiss, 2019; Peyton et al., 2021; Sutcher et al., 2019), Ingersoll's impact on the discourse is evident in studies addressing the impact of turnover on supply and demand of qualified SETs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Räsänen et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2022).

Researchers focus on attrition and turnover to understand what causes SETs to leave the profession while also examining the impact particular factors have on SET shortages (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Gilmour et al., 2023; Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Peyton et al., 2021; Ruble et al., 2023b; Stock & Carriere, 2021). Unfortunately, inconsistent use of *attrition* and *turnover* makes it difficult to distinguish empirical trends across studies (Räsänen et al., 2020). Some researchers favor the term attrition (Gilmour et al., 2023; Ruble et al., 2023a), whereas others favor turnover (Herman et al., 2023). Although turnover is commonly used to describe professional transitions, the term also describes teachers who leave the profession and never return (Räsänen et al., 2020; Stock & Carriere, 2021). Billingsley (1993) acknowledged these terminological inconsistencies relatively early in the discourse and proposed a schematic representation of various professional and personal routes teachers can take from one academic year to the next, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Paths to Special Education Teacher Retention, Transfer, and Attrition



Note: Reprinted from "Teacher retention and attrition in special and general education," by B. S. Billingsley, 1993, *The Journal of Special Education, 27*(2), 137-174. Copyright 1993 by Bonnie S. Billingsley. Reprinted with permission (Appendix N).

Billingsley's (1993) enduring framework informed valuable turnover research by Madigan and Kim (2021) and Ingersoll and Tran (2023). It illustrates paths leading to (1) retention, (2) transfer attrition that results in teachers remaining in the profession, and (3) exit attrition, which can result in teachers transitioning to non-teaching roles or leaving education altogether (Billingsley, 1993; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Economically, turnover is presented as a

personnel change resulting in a vacant position or a teacher having to be replaced (Billingsley, 1993; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Viewed in this way, turnover is a byproduct of transfer and exit attrition, and it is costly in more than just a financial sense (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

Ingersoll and Tran (2023) cited multiple studies that prove the financial costs of teacher turnover are substantial; however, the researchers stopped short of applying a specific dollar amount to teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Multiple calculation models and estimates have been proposed by other researchers (Barnes et al., 2007; Milanowski & Odden, 2007; Synar & Maiden, 2012), but these efforts have not been renewed in recent studies. Rather, dated models and estimates continue to be cited in recent literature (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). One notable estimate is that turnover costs 20-200% of a leaver's annual salary (Barnes et al., 2007; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Another is that turnover costs approximately $9,000 to $23,000 per leaver (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Milanowski & Odden, 2007). The best researchers can do is estimate costs, especially since turnover's financial impact varies from school to school based on faculty size, induction and training programs, salaries, and local teacher supply (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). However, researchers agree that turnover costs are not merely financial. Turnover places strain on school leaders and negatively impacts faculty dynamics, institutional and professional knowledge, relationships with parents, and academic outcomes for students (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; McCluskey, 2022; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). For students with disabilities, teacher turnover is especially detrimental as case-specific awareness, relationships with parents and caregivers, and vital classroom continuity are disrupted when a teacher leaves (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Ultimately, turnover creates an environment where more turnover is likely to occur (McCluskey, 2022; Peyton et al., 2021; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Though turnover is highest in urban, high-poverty, and low-performing schools (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), it is also high in schools where shortages already exist (Peyton et al., 2021). Special education is an example of long-term shortages impacting attrition and turnover rates (Sutcher et al., 2019). Data reveals attrition and turnover have been higher among SETs for decades (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Though teacher turnover was lower for all subjects during and following the recession of 2008 (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), rates jumped markedly during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023). Even with additional funding to drive retention, data shows SETs are 5% more likely to change schools and 18% more likely to transfer to general education than other teachers in the wake of COVID-19 (Stock & Carriere, 2021).

Causes of Attrition in Special Education

Considering the impact attrition has on SET shortages, researchers have devoted effort to identifying causes of attrition and the extent to which certain variables influence teachers' career decisions. Again, Billingsley (1993) proposed a conceptual framework early in the discourse to help researchers categorize and examine external, employment, and personal attrition factors. She identified specific factors such as societal expectations, economic considerations, the quality of preservice training, job commitment, school environment, work rewards, family obligations, and mental and emotional well-being (Billingsley, 1993). Billingsley's work resonates 30 years later because current research continues to confirm her categories and the influence of the attrition factors she identified (Gilmour et al., 2023; Hester et al., 2020; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Scott et al., 2022).

Subsequent research has also delivered alternatives to Billingsley's (1993) framework. For example, Räsänen et al. (2020) consolidated teachers' turnover intentions into five thematic categories: lack of commitment, workload, the school system, challenges of social interaction, and multiple factors (pp. 843-844). They discovered that while teachers' turnover intentions remained consistent over time, reasons for their career decisions could change due to new or worsening factors (Räsänen et al., 2020). Gilmour and Wehby (2020) argued school and work conditions most certainly influence turnover among SETs. Their framework, based on Demerouti et al.'s (2001) job demands-resources model, combines external and employment factors as *school characteristics* and then adds *teacher characteristics* as well as *classroom and student characteristics* (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). By separating teacher characteristics from classroom experiences, Gilmour and Wehby (2020) prove Billingsley's (1993) personal factors were much more complex than previously thought. In order to understand the very personal choice to leave one's career, researchers must examine mental and emotional aspects of SETs' career decisions.

A common theme in the literature is that special education is a highly challenging profession, and job demands in this field are some of the most extreme one can encounter in education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Hester et al., 2020; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Therefore, it is unsurprising that multiple studies show there are many reasons for SET attrition (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Shank, 2023). Some of the often-mentioned challenges for SETs include excessive paperwork and IEP meetings, policy adherence, an overwhelming number of caseloads, lack of resources and support, feelings of isolation, collaboration difficulties, and managing challenging behavior (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Scott et al., 2022). While a certain amount of attrition relates to retirement and external factors, data

reveals most SET attrition is due to internal and work-related factors—namely lack of support, unbearable workloads and classroom environments, and general job dissatisfaction (Hester et al., 2020; Hogue & Taylor, 2020; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Attrition Among Novice SETs

Researchers acknowledge attrition is high among novice SETs despite the absence of data to corroborate this assertion (Bettini et al., 2017; Redding & Henry, 2018). Data does show SETs are twice as likely to turn over as general education teachers (Sullivan et al., 2017), and all novice teachers are highly susceptible to turnover within the first five years (Papay et al., 2017). More than 30% of novice teachers leave after the first year (Papay et al., 2017). Retention rates plummet by the three- and five-year points when they fall to 50% and 30% respectively (Papay et al., 2017). High turnover in special education coupled with high turnover among novice teachers indicates early career SETs may be some of the most vulnerable to attrition (Bettini et al., 2017; Grant, 2017; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Research regarding novice SET turnover experiences is limited, but with an increasing need (8%) for SETs in the next 10 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), this gap presents an opportunity for significant research to positively impact future retention.

Novice SETs leave for a variety of reasons. According to a recent report, the biggest challenge for first-year teachers was classroom management, followed by navigating the curriculum, job demands, lack of support, time management, behavior management, difficult school/district culture, professional transition, communicating with parents, managing needs of students, work-life balance, inadequate training, and assessment (American Association for Employment in Education, 2022). The impact classroom challenges have on early career teachers is supported by other studies (McLean et al., 2020; Shank, 2023). For example, novice teachers

reported negative classroom and school experiences in their first year had an adverse effect on their mental health and career intentions (McLean et al., 2020). However, novice SETs are at an even greater disadvantage as they are often hired in high-turnover schools to fill shortages (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). These early career special educators become overburdened by a greater number of caseloads (Hogue & Taylor, 2020) and are more likely to succumb to stress-related burnout common in special education (Bettini et al., 2017; Grant, 2017; Stark & Koslouski, 2021).

The Burnout Factor

Maslach's burnout theory outlines three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished feelings of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Stress-related burnout is a primary cause for all teacher attrition (Heffernan et al., 2022), but burnout poses a significant problem for special education where mental, physical, and emotional demands of serving a non-typical student population are most severe (Gilmour et al., 2022; Jeon et al., 2021; Park & Shin, 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). It is particularly concerning considering burnout has not been shown to lessen over time (Soini et al., 2019). Continually drawing upon mental, physical, and emotional funds of energy over long periods of time leads to chronic stress and fatigue associated with burnout (Paris et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019). Novice SETs, though passionate and dedicated, may lack experience and coping strategies necessary to navigate job demands (Paris et al., 2021). This can lead to increased stress and burnout (Bettini et al., 2017; Stark & Koslouski, 2021), which then becomes a predictor of novice teachers' turnover intentions (Perrone et al., 2019).

Emotional exhaustion is described as the feeling of being emotionally drained and weary (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Some aspects of special education that lead to emotional exhaustion

include managing challenging behaviors in the classroom, instructional expectations associated with students with learning challenges, working closely with parents, additional meetings and paperwork associated with IEPs, collaborating in inclusive classrooms and feeling unsupported by administrators (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Hester et al., 2020; Räsänen et al., 2020; Stark & Koslouski, 2021; Wink et al., 2021). No issue alone accounts for SETs' attrition decisions, but rather, the combination of these factors contributes to emotional exhaustion and leads to deteriorating job satisfaction (Hester et al., 2020). Novice SETs may experience emotional exhaustion as they face demands of serving students with diverse and complex needs (Glock & Pit-ten Cate, 2021). It is not uncommon for SETs to invest a significant amount of emotional energy early in their careers to build relationships, manage challenging behaviors, and see to the unique needs of their students (Gottfried et al., 2019; Grant, 2017). In time, highly charged emotional experiences lead to a sense of depletion, making it difficult for novice teachers to provide the support and engagement their students require (Brittle, 2020; Fox et al., 2020).

Depersonalization in teaching refers to a sense of cynicism and detachment from one's students, colleagues, and work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). There are three key areas where depersonalization may impact SET job satisfaction and involvement: supporting students, engaging with parents, and cooperating with school personnel and administrators (Langher et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2019). Novice SETs may experience depersonalization when they feel overwhelmed by the emotional and behavioral challenges their students present (Grant, 2017; Hogue & Taylor, 2020). Detachment negatively impacts teachers' empathy and engagement with students, which is not conducive to a supportive learning environment (Benita et al., 2019; Sezer, 2018). Depersonalization may be used as a coping mechanism for teachers who are struggling with emotional exhaustion to maintain emotional equilibrium (Langher et al., 2017). However,

empathy is essential for teachers to maintain healthy working relationships and overall job satisfaction (Wink et al., 2021). Maintaining balance is key as experiencing high levels of empathetic anger on behalf of others, particularly students, parents, or colleagues, can undermine potential positive outcomes for teachers and lead to additional emotional exhaustion (Wink et al., 2021).

The third dimension of burnout is a diminished sense of personal achievement and effectiveness in one's work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Considering Maslach's (1998) description of personal accomplishment as "feelings of competence and productivity at work" (p. 69), it is unsurprising that researchers have established a relationship between burnout and self-efficacy and used self-efficacy assessments to determine job satisfaction and attrition decisions (De Stasio et al., 2017; Shaukat et al., 2019). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Bandura, 1977). SETs with high self-efficacy tend to experience lower levels of burnout, and conversely, SETs with low self-efficacy are at a greater risk of burnout (Cumming et al., 2021; Weißenfels et al., 2021). Additionally, working with certain disabilities, such as motor skills disorders, is associated with a higher risk of burnout regardless of self-efficacy levels (Jovanović et al., 2019).

When SETs believe in their ability to positively impact their students' lives, they demonstrate greater resilience and effectiveness (McCullough et al., 2022). However, SETs may struggle when they perceive they have not met instructional and behavior management expectations, whether self-imposed or school-mandated (Cumming et al., 2021; Wink et al., 2021). As these feeling persist, self-efficacy wanes, and SETs consider alternative employment (Bettini et al., 2020). Novice teachers are disadvantaged in this regard because they have not had

the opportunity to develop self-efficacy through trial and error and accumulated classroom successes (Räsänen et al., 2020).

Burnout and Challenging Behavior

Challenging behavior is positively correlated with stress-related burnout for SETs (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Guikas & Morin, 2021; Hester et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2021; Paris et al., 2021; Ruble et al., 2023a, 2023b). In multiple studies, SETs reported challenging behavior was more stressful than IEP paperwork and meetings, interactions with parents and families, and other job demands (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2021). Though general education teachers reported higher levels of stress than SETs for challenging behavior and working with students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Vučinić et al., 2022), SETs reported greater stress *frequency* for student challenges (Jeon et al., 2021). Accumulated stress from managing students' long-term emotional and behavioral challenges is likened to a "secondary trauma" that is especially problematic for novice SETs (Ruble et al., 2023a, p. 71).

There is considerable difference in the type and severity of challenging behaviors experienced by general education teachers and SETs. For example, a study of challenging behavior in primarily mainstream classrooms revealed disruptions, disengagement, and disrespect were among the most common challenging behaviors reported by general education teachers (Skura & Wheeler, 2023). Studies of SETs show this population frequently encounters more extreme forms of challenging behavior, such as self-injury, physical aggression, destruction of property, verbal attacks, and sexually inappropriate speech and contact (Paris et al., 2021; Skura & Wheeler, 2023). Long-term exposure to these extreme behaviors and forms of violence are associated with desensitization (Paris et al., 2021), anxiety, and depression among SETs

(Skura & Wheeler, 2023). Unsurprisingly, a study focusing on stress and coping as indicators of burnout demonstrates more than 90% of SETs exhibit high levels of stress (Herman et al., 2023).

Amstad and Müller (2020) sought to disaggregate and examine specific challenging behaviors by having SETs rank more than 90 behaviors for their perceived stressfulness. Teachers assigned relatively low ranks to behaviors typically considered stressful such as anti-social and disruptive behaviors. They confirmed self-directed and other-directed challenging behaviors that jeopardized their personal safety and the safety of students in their care were the most stressful for them (Amstad & Müller, 2020). These results align with other studies demonstrating SETs feel personally responsible for the safety and well-being of their students (Heffernan et al., 2022; Hester et al., 2020; Vučinić et al., 2022; Wink et al., 2021). SETs who perceive their schools to be safer, more supportive environments report lower stress and higher rates of coping (Cumming et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2023). However, many SETs report feeling overworked, isolated, and unhappy with their school climate (Herman et al., 2023; Hester et al., 2020).

Burnout Protective Factors

Challenging behavior is a common concern for novice SETs (Tveitnes & Hvalby, 2023). For this reason, researchers continue to explore how this unique subgroup experiences challenging behavior and what can be done to help them overcome stress-related burnout to achieve long-term persistence (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Fortunately, this is the direction nascent research is headed. Several personal and environmental protective factors that influence SET retention have been identified by researchers, including preservice training, behavior management strategies, colleague and administrator support, school climate and resources, compensation, interactions with parents and families, teacher-student relationships, and coping

strategies (Haydon et al., 2018; Herman et al., 2023; Hopkins et al., 2019; Kennedy & Haydon, 2021; McLean et al., 2020; Pavlidou & Alevriadou, 2022; Scott et al., 2022). Though the aforementioned factors have notable potential to promote effective behavior management and to combat stress-related burnout, most protective factors take time to cultivate and may not be available to novice teachers who are just starting out (Hester et al., 2020; Stark & Koslouski, 2021). For this reason, preservice training represents the essential first step in reducing burnout among novice SETs.

Preservice Training

Many novice SETs are inadequately trained to manage challenging behavior (Klopfer et al., 2019; Larson et al., 2020; Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019; Shank, 2023). This is partly due to teacher preparation programs emphasizing content and theoretical knowledge over practical strategies necessary to handle daily job demands (Shank, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). When surveyed about their preparedness, preservice teachers reported they still had questions and needed practical training on basic aspects of classroom management, including behavior management strategies and dealing with extreme behavior (Sciuchetti & Yssel, 2019). Novice teachers who acknowledge and address classroom management anxieties during preservice training are more likely to enter the workforce confident, prepared, and committed (Gottfried et al., 2019; Klopfer et al., 2019; Larson et al., 2020).

Preservice teachers need proximal learning opportunities to observe evidence-based strategies in action, apply what they have learned, and ask questions of mentors (Larson et al., 2020; Shank, 2023; Shank & Santiague, 2022). Meaningful feedback from experienced, highly qualified cooperating teachers is positively correlated with better performance outcomes for novice teachers (Mathews et al., 2023; Theobald et al., 2021). Preservice training is also a time

to equip preservice teachers with essential knowledge and skills for behavior management success. Many preservice SETs enter the field believing neuromyths that may negatively impact their ability to serve students with disabilities (Ruhaak & Cook, 2018). Overcoming these misconceptions is key to developing effective behavior management responses (Rosati & Lynch, 2023; Ruhaak & Cook, 2018). Further, preservice SETs benefit from learning the latest student-centered behavior management strategies and assistive technologies to support students with disabilities (Dewey et al., 2023; Emerling et al., 2021; Hopman et al., 2017; Riden et al., 2021). Even in situations where student-teaching cannot provide necessary experiential learning, behavior simulations combined with scenario-based coaching are found to be better preparation than none (Larson et al., 2020).

Challenging Behavior in Special Education

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022a), 7.3 million (15%) of public-school students ages 3-21 receive special education services under IDEA. Disability types covered by IDEA include specific learning disabilities, speech/language impairment, hearing impairment, other health impairments, developmental delay, intellectual disability, autism, emotional disturbance, and multiple disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). Ninety-five percent of these students with disabilities attend regular schools, and as of 2021, 67% spend at least 80% of their time in general classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). This number is up from 2010, when 61% of students with disabilities were being served in general classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Disabilities are complex. They manifest in myriad ways depending on the presence and severity of symptoms. In a classroom setting, disability symptoms can appear in the form of physical, academic, and behavior challenges. Synonymous terms, *problem behavior* and

challenging behavior, also appear in the literature (Chezan et al., 2022; David et al., 2023). Smith and Fox (2003) defined challenging behavior as a behavior pattern, whether actual or perceived, that interferes with learning and positive interactions with adults and peers. This definition is directly cited in the literature (Tal & Meyma, 2023) and is also implicitly evident in subsequent research (Groves et al., 2021; Olivier et al., 2020). Though other definitions of challenging behavior exist (Aas et al., 2023; Nicholls et al., 2020), Smith and Fox's (2003) definition effectively captures challenging behavior's negative impact on classroom environments, especially related to teaching and learning outcomes.

To examine specific behaviors more closely and accurately, it is necessary to differentiate types of challenging behavior. Alevriadou and Pavlidou (2016) applied a commonly used three-part behavior framework consisting of aggression, self-injury, and stereotypy in their study of teachers' causal attributions. While aggression and self-injury are straightforward terms, stereotypy is a less familiar term used to refer to behavior that is obsessive, compulsive, and ritualistic. This study revealed challenging behavior types serve a mediating role on causal attributions (Alevriadou & Pavlidou, 2016). An example is the positive correlation between perceived stereotypy and stable, unintentional attributions applied by teachers. Nicholls et al. (2020) applied the same behavior framework to identify the prevalence of different types of behavior. Researchers found self-injurious behavior was the most common (36.4%), followed by aggressive-destructive behavior (30.2%) and stereotyped behavior (25.9%) (Nicholls et al., 2020). It is worth noting that the Nicholls et al. (2020) study was limited to a single, all-ages special needs school and their findings may not be generalizable to a broader population or to inclusive classrooms in general education settings.

Another framework present in the literature is internalizing versus externalizing behavior. The internalizing and externalizing behavior framework aligns with attribution theory and has been used to examine teachers' causal attributions (Glock & Pit-ten Cate, 2021). In this framework, challenging behavior is categorized dichotomously as either inwardly experienced or outwardly expressed and directed (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978). For example, a student who appears to be anxious, melancholic, or socially withdrawn is exhibiting internalizing behavior (Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2022). In contrast, a student who strikes a classmate acts in a defiant manner, or fidgets uncontrollably is exhibiting externalizing behavior (Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2022). Students who struggle with challenging behavior typically demonstrate both internalizing and externalizing behavior during their school-age development (Olivier et al., 2020). Both internalizing and externalizing behaviors negatively correlate with student engagement in primary and secondary school (Olivier et al., 2020). However, data from four separate studies show externalizing behavior has a greater negative impact than internalizing behavior on teacher-student interactions and perceptions of student ability and engagement (Glock & Pit-ten Cate, 2021; Olivier et al., 2020; Roorda & Koomen, 2020; Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2022).

The two frameworks described here can be used to examine challenging behavior types in different contexts. However, the simplicity of these frameworks reveals the tendency among some researchers to consolidate students' behavior problems into simpler, analysis-friendly categories. This is evident in research conducted by Aro et al. (2022), Glock and Pit-ten Cate (2021), Nicholls et al. (2020), Olivier et al. (2020), and Zdoupas and Laubenstein (2022). Though expeditious, aggregating behavior data creates a blind spot regarding how teachers are impacted by specific challenging behaviors. There have been a few notable exceptions. Amstad and Müller (2020) asked teachers to rank more than 90 specific challenging behaviors associated

with intellectual disability for their stressfulness. They found disruptive/antisocial behaviors—specifically kicking, hitting, and biting others—among the most stressful for teachers (Amstad & Müller, 2020). A survey of speech/language pathologists identified more than 20 specific challenging behaviors, measured their frequency, and allowed participants to rank how problematic they were (Chow et al., 2023). In two similar studies, researchers examined how often interventions (Guikas & Morin, 2021) and classroom behavior management strategies (Zoromski et al., 2021) were used by teachers in response to specific challenging behaviors. Disruptive behavior, including noise, oppositional defiance, aggressive actions toward others, and intentional interruptions, were among the most frequent needs addressed by teachers (Guikas & Morin, 2021; Zoromski et al., 2021).

Each of the disability types covered by IDEA have been linked to challenging behavior (Chezan et al., 2022; Curran et al., 2021; David et al., 2023; Mensah et al., 2021; Nicholls et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021; Woodcock & Moore, 2021). Evidence suggests disabilities that contribute to academic underperformance form a reciprocated or bi-directional relationship with challenging behavior (Roberts et al., 2020). Long-term behavioral problems lead to increasingly punitive responses such as in-school and out-of-school suspension (Doubet et al., 2023). Data shows students with disabilities are more likely to be suspended for behavior problems than their typically developing peers (Doubet et al., 2023; Morgan et al., 2019). While repeated suspensions place students with disabilities at a higher risk for juvenile delinquency and eventual incarceration (Morgan et al., 2019), early identification, intervention, and academic support can break the cycle and reduce the occurrence of disciplinary actions for students with disabilities (Hurwitz et al., 2021).

General and special education teachers, as well as paraprofessional support staff, may encounter multiple challenging behaviors simultaneously and for prolonged periods depending on the number of students with disabilities being served and the setting (Olivier et al., 2020; Weißenfels et al., 2021). This is important to note, considering there may be a range of disabilities present in self-contained and inclusive classrooms (Lindner et al., 2021; Stites et al., 2021; Zagona et al., 2022). Additionally, the presence of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms may contribute to antisocial responses from typically developing students (Lekhal & Karlsen, 2021), although this negative outcome is not supported by other studies (Loeper et al., 2022; Szumski et al., 2020). Ultimately, it is difficult to distill the reality of what it is like to experience several disabilities in a classroom based on the current literature. Most studies employ a quantitative approach and impose rigid behavior frameworks. Future research could better explore the relationship between disability-specific behavior problems and classroom dynamics by allowing teachers to self-report their experiences with challenging behaviors.

Specific Learning Disability

Of the 7.3 million (15%) students with disabilities in public schools, specific learning disability (SpLD) is the most common disability type at 33% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Multiple terms and definitions are used internationally for this disability category (Aro et al., 2022; Woodcock & Moore, 2021). Research on challenging behavior associated with SpLD includes the terms learning disability, learning disorder, and specific learning difficulty. SpLD is defined under IDEA (2004) as a disorder that affects “basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language” and is evident in a student’s inability to “listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations” [Sec. 300.8 (c) (10)]. This category includes brain injury, dyslexia, brain dysfunction, and

aphasia, but excludes learning problems resulting from “visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage” (IDEA, 2004). There are seven unique disorders associated with SpLD: dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, auditory processing disorder, language processing disorder, nonverbal learning disability, and visual perceptual/visual motor deficit (Muktamath et al., 2022).

While SpLD is typically identified in early education through consistently lower test scores and evident struggles in reading, writing, and math, the challenges associated with this disability type can persist into adulthood and impede long-term academic and occupational success (Muktamath et al., 2022). Broad-view studies reveal students with SpLD experience better academic and behavior outcomes when they are assessed correctly and receive behavior modification interventions (Curran et al., 2021; Mazzotti et al., 2022). Roberts et al. (2020) found simply improving academic outcomes for struggling readers has a positive impact on performance, even without behavior modification. But many SpLD disorders, like dyslexia, go unidentified (Horowitz et al., 2017) and pave the way for students to develop challenging behavior habits. Dyslexia is linked to increased anxiety-related problem behaviors, including somatic complaints, withdrawal, aggression, and delinquency (Zuppardo et al., 2023). A study of 579 students with SpLD revealed a strong correlation between learning disabilities and internalizing and externalizing behaviors, especially at school (Aro et al., 2022). Affective, anxiety, and attention-deficit symptoms were identified by teachers in more than 37% of the student population, irrespective of the type of SpLD (Aro et al., 2022). This study also showed high frequencies of oppositional defiance and conduct problems among students with SpLD (Aro et al., 2022).

While SpLD labels can be stigmatized, a vignette study shows teachers who know of a student's SpLD status provide more positive feedback and feel more sympathy toward students with SpLD than their non-SpLD classmates if the students demonstrate effort (Woodcock & Moore, 2021). This finding supports other research revealing students in special education are disciplined less often than their typically performing peers (Hurwitz et al., 2021). However, in a related study, teachers reported negative attributional responses toward students with SpLD if they disagreed with inclusive instruction practices (Woodcock & Nicoll, 2022). Focused research of this kind is vital considering teachers' perceptions and feedback are linked to positive and negative outcomes for students with SpLD (Woodcock & Moore, 2021; Woodcock & Nicoll, 2022).

Speech/Language, Hearing, and Other Health Impairments

Speech/language impairment (19%) and other health impairment (15%) are the second and third most common disability types, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). Hearing impairment (1%) is the least common type based on reported data, but that is because visual impairment, deaf-blindness, traumatic brain injury, and orthopedic impairment each account for less than .5% of the population and are excluded from reported data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). For non-educators, these disability categories are the easiest to define and detect. Impaired speech, language, vision, hearing, and even traumatic brain injury are often recognizable in the way a student communicates with others. The category *other health impairment* is less straightforward and encompasses a wider range of conditions. This category is associated with "limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli" (IDEA, 2004). It includes asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, Tourette syndrome, lead poisoning, sickle cell anemia, and attention deficit disorder (ADD) or

attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (IDEA, 2004). Like other hidden disabilities, some health impairments may go unidentified without proper assessment (Horowitz et al., 2017).

Studies link speech/language (Chow et al., 2023), vision (Barwasser et al., 2022; Mensah et al., 2021) and hearing impairments (Vermeij et al., 2021) to challenging behavior. However, the topic of behavior problems among those with health impairments is not widely researched. It is known that internalizing and externalizing behaviors can arise when a student's disability causes inattentiveness, discomfort, or anxiety (Aro et al., 2022; Chow et al., 2023; Olivier et al., 2020; Zuppardo et al., 2023). Attentiveness is of particular interest to researchers as it relates to behavior problems associated with ADHD. Studies directly address the link between ADHD and challenging behavior (Mikami et al., 2019; Van der Oord & Tripp, 2020). However, disengagement and disruptive behavior, commonly associated with ADHD, are noted as being problematic in multiple studies where ADHD is not explicitly identified (Bronstein et al., 2021; Caldarella et al., 2021; Hopman et al., 2019).

Autism

Autism accounts for 12% of students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). Autism is a development disorder which typically presents in early childhood and severely impacts verbal and nonverbal communication (IDEA, 2004). Autism diagnoses are described as a spectrum because they are highly varied in type and severity (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023). Students with autism generally encounter problems in school due to the repetitive behaviors, hyperfocus on limited interests, and resistance to certain sensory experiences and social interactions associated with this disorder (IDEA, 2004; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023; Welsh et al., 2019). Autism diagnoses have risen dramatically since data was first gathered in the 1960s (*Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder*, 2015). From 2000 to

2020, the rate increased from one in 150 to one in 36 children (*Data & statistics on autism spectrum disorder*, 2023). It is important to note that boys are four times more likely than girls to receive an autism diagnosis (*Data & statistics on autism spectrum disorder*, 2023).

The connection between autism spectrum disorder and challenging behavior is well-documented (Chezan et al., 2022; Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023). Behavior problems include defiance, aggression, and destruction of property (Chezan et al., 2022). Severe restricted and repetitive behaviors are especially challenging for teachers when a student's desire for sameness cannot be accommodated in an unpredictable classroom environment (Welsh et al., 2019). Like other disabilities, early identification and intervention are key to helping students with autism. Recent studies focus on the need for adequately trained and supported teachers who can make accurate determinations and deliver evidence-based interventions (Chezan et al., 2022; Fleury & Kemper, 2022; Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023; Welsh et al., 2019). However, evidence points to an inconsistent understanding of the causes of autism (Fleury & Kemper, 2022), its associated behaviors (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023), and the use of effective interventions by teachers (Chezan et al., 2022). Teachers in inclusive and self-contained classrooms need ongoing, specialized training to confidently meet the behavior management needs associated with autism (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023).

Developmental Delay

Seven percent of students with disabilities are diagnosed with developmental delay (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). As described in IDEA (2004), these students are identified typically between the ages of three and nine using established diagnostic measurements of physical, cognitive, communication, self-care, and social or emotional development. Students with developmental delays are more likely to exhibit challenging

behaviors and be suspended for behavior problems than their typically developing peers (Grenier-Martin & Rivard, 2022; Morgan et al., 2019). Data shows students with developmental delays have a hard time forming quality attachments with caregivers and face higher risk of forming unhealthy attachments which lead to fear, stress, and conflict (Alexander et al., 2023). These negative emotional responses can contribute to recurrent challenging behaviors and disciplinary outcomes at school.

Parents awaiting placement of their child with a developmental delay reported challenging behaviors from food selectivity, complaining, and foul language to biting, hitting, running away, and self-harm (Grenier-Martin & Rivard, 2022). A survey of speech/language pathologists working with students with language delays revealed similar challenging behaviors as well as cheating, stealing, property destruction, and inappropriate touching (Chow et al., 2023). Again, early identification and evidence-based interventions are necessary to support the formation of healthy behavior patterns among this population (Alexander et al., 2023; Lory et al., 2020). But behavior research is hindered by studies wherein developmental delay is combined with intellectual disabilities and autism. Examples of this include Grenier-Martin and Rivard (2022), Lory et al. (2020), and Walker et al. (2021). Researchers should more clearly and consistently delineate developmental delay to propose effective identification and intervention measures when behavior problems arise.

Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability (ID) is present in 6% of students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). It is characterized by below-average cognitive functioning accompanied by deficient adaptive (self-care) behavior during the developmental stage (IDEA, 2004). As aforementioned, ID is associated with learning disability, development delay, and

autism in the literature (Grenier-Martin & Rivard, 2022; Lory et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021). This confluence of disability categories makes it difficult to distinguish specific ID outcomes; however, researchers agree that students with ID are very likely to exhibit severe challenging behaviors (Alevriadou & Pavlidou, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2020) and experience complex learning barriers in school (Wakeman et al., 2021).

Challenging behaviors, as noted by parents of children with ID, include an inclination toward dangerous situations, emotional outbursts, physical aggression, self-harm, tantrums, and anxiety (Grenier-Martin & Rivard, 2022). These behaviors may occur as often as 45 times per hour (Guikas & Morin, 2021) and cause caregivers and teachers extreme mental and emotional stress as well as physical injury (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Grenier-Martin & Rivard, 2022; Simons et al., 2021). Amstad and Müller (2020) asked teachers to rank more than 90 specific challenging behaviors associated with ID for their stressfulness. They found that injurious behaviors, to self and others, were considered the most stressful to participants (Amstad & Müller, 2020).

Emotional Disturbance

Emotional disturbance (ED) is less common at 5% of the total population of students with disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023); however, the prevalence is likely much higher than reported (Klopfer et al., 2019). This category is characterized by long-term depression and unhappiness, inability to learn and maintain relationships at school, atypical thoughts and behaviors, and unreasonable and symptomatic fears (IDEA, 2004). It also includes the severe brain and behavioral disorder known as schizophrenia, though a diagnosis of this kind typically occurs after high school in late adolescence or early adulthood (McGrath et al., 2008). The synonymous terms *emotional/behavioral disorder* and *emotional and behavioral disorders*

often appear in the literature in place of ED as they more accurately emphasize the behavioral aspects of this disability (Cumming et al., 2021; Estrapala et al., 2022; Gilmour et al., 2022).

ED is associated with low academic performance and frequent challenging behavior (Caldarella et al., 2019; Cumming et al., 2021). This disability affects emotional responses and can present as a range of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, including withdrawal, anxiety, antisocial behavior, defiance, disruptive behavior, attention difficulties, destruction of property, and physical aggression (Caldarella et al., 2019; Estrapala et al., 2022; Granger et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022; Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2022). Many students with ED are served in inclusive classrooms (Caldarella et al., 2019); however, the psychological demands and potential for extreme behavior problems may preclude some from general education due to safety concerns (Curran et al., 2021; Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2022).

Teachers struggle with ED behavior problems in groups as well as one-on-one settings (Granger et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022). Data shows a strong correlation between teachers' turnover intentions and the number of students with ED in (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020). Long-term adversity managing ED problem behavior is associated with teacher burnout and negative student outcomes (Gilmour et al., 2022; Granger et al., 2021). Further, students with ED demonstrate lower self-regulatory behavior, academic self-concept, and overall engagement in school (Estrapala et al., 2022; Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2022). For these and other reasons, students with ED have the most negative academic outcomes of any group, with or without disabilities (Chen et al., 2021).

Multiple Disabilities

Multiple disabilities (MD), as a category, accounts for students who are diagnosed with two or more disabilities (Heräjärvi et al., 2020). These students represent 2% of all students with

disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). MD often involves the combination of severe physical and intellectual impairments, with the exception of deaf-blindness, which constitutes a separate category under IDEA (Heräjärvi et al., 2020; Lahaije et al., 2023; IDEA, 2004). While the presence of MD may increase the potential for challenging behavior as symptoms are compounded (Aro et al., 2022), it should not be assumed a student with MD will demonstrate challenging behavior.

MD is often referred to in the literature as *profound intellectual and multiple disabilities* (PIMD; Lahaije et al., 2023). PIMD is concerning to researchers since students are more likely to be marginalized in school settings where teachers and classrooms are not equipped to serve their unique needs (Simmons, 2021). Families of children with multiple disabilities rank their quality of life lower as the severity of the disabilities increase (Lahaije et al., 2023). When translated to a school setting, teachers may struggle to balance their role in providing for the physical and intellectual needs of students with PIMD (Skarsaune & Hanisch, 2023). In addition to adaptive needs, verbal communication is a common challenge for students with PIMD (Skarsaune & Hanisch, 2023), placing them at a higher risk for challenging behavior (David et al., 2023). Challenging behavior, especially among male students with PIMD, is associated with negative academic outcomes, including disciplinary action, dismissal, and voluntary withdrawal (Heräjärvi et al., 2020).

Applying Causal Attributions to Challenging Behavior

Causal attributions, or the process of identifying causes or reasons for behaviors, play a significant role in understanding and addressing challenging behavior in special education (Carroll et al., 2023). SETs must consider various causal factors when serving students who exhibit challenging behaviors, as accurate attributions can help teachers facilitate successful

strategies and interventions (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2019). Causal factors may include individual, environmental, and social aspects such as the student's disability diagnoses, medical condition(s), classroom experience, and peer interactions (Aas et al., 2023; Lory et al., 2020; Nah & Tan, 2021). These factors and the resulting behaviors are often categorized as either internalizing—arising from behavior patterns, lack of self-control, or personality traits—or externalizing—arising from environmental triggers (Glock & Pit-ten Cate, 2021). They are typically identified through a systematic process known as a functional behavioral assessment (Walker et al., 2021). Assessing antecedents and outcomes of challenging behavior is the crucial first step in developing an effective intervention plan (Walker et al., 2021). This time-intensive process involves extensive data collection on the part of the teacher as well as collaboration among multiple stakeholders including teachers, parents, administrators, and specialists (Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023).

Despite SETs' best intentions, attributional biases may negatively impact how they perceive and respond to students' challenging behavior (Rosati & Lynch, 2023; Ruhaak & Cook, 2018; Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023). For example, teachers with minimal knowledge of a disability or a particular student's unique circumstances may inaccurately ascribe behavior causes and develop negative responses to a student's future behavior. Effective training, dispelling neuromyths, and previous experience working with students with disabilities reduce the impact of attributional biases in special education (Blundell et al., 2015; Klopfer et al., 2019; Mikami et al., 2019; Rosati & Lynch, 2023). Self-efficacy is also linked to more positive attributions. Higher levels of classroom management self-efficacy among teachers, especially those with more years of experience, corresponded with lower rates of school-associated causal attributions for challenging behavior (Andreou & Rapti, 2010). A similar study showed 10 or more years of

experience correlated with higher levels of sympathy toward students with specific learning disabilities (Woodcock & Nicoll, 2022). Novice SETs are more likely to attribute behavior problems to their own inadequacies, which can lead to burnout (Stark & Koslouski, 2021).

In addition to years of experience, teacher characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, interpersonal style, and political views have all been found to correlate with causal attributions (locus, stability, and controllability) for challenging behaviors (Carroll et al., 2023; Pavlidou et al., 2022; Tunaz, 2017; Wiley et al., 2014). Drawing upon results from more than 75 causal attribution studies dating back to the 1970s, Wang and Hall (2018) summarized empirical evidence indicating teachers' causal attributions for student performance and behavior are moderated by education level, special education training and background, and cultural differences, as well as student ethnicity, gender, and disability type. Just as Andreou and Rapti (2010) and Woodcock and Nicoll (2022) emphasized teacher experience, so too did Wang and Hall (2018), despite their findings contradicting other studies. Wang and Hall's (2018) review of 19 studies specifically addressing the interpersonal dimension of causal attributions revealed more experienced teachers were less likely to assume responsibility for students' challenging behaviors. Data for novice teachers was not as straightforward; in fact, Wang and Hall (2018) explained recent studies contained mixed results and novice teachers had been found to assign both internal and external causes to challenging behavior. This dissonance in the literature is evidence that additional research is needed to understand unique experiences of novice SETs as they apply causal attributions to challenging behavior.

Summary

U.S. public schools have contended with a documented shortage of SETs since the 1950s (National Education Association, 1957). The adoption of Education for All Handicapped

Children Act (EHA) and its later expansion into IDEA has increased the need for qualified SETs nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a), yet special education was and continues to be a field plagued by high attrition and turnover (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). SETs are especially at risk of turnover due to burnout associated with stressors inherent in the work, such as behavior management (Robinson et al., 2019). Students with disabilities are more likely to exhibit challenging behaviors (Alevriadou & Pavlidou, 2016); however, novice SETs are often unprepared to address challenging behavior effectively (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Teachers will apply causal attributions to understand students' behavior and preserve a positive self-view (Wang & Hall, 2018), but they may lack the supportive relationships and strategies necessary to cope with stress-related burnout in the long term (Haydon et al., 2018; Hester et al., 2020). Though the connection between challenging behavior, stress, and attrition is well-established (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Wink et al., 2021), little is known about the degree to which novice SETs are impacted. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the lived experiences of novice education teachers to determine if they assume more personal responsibility for challenging behavior than veteran teachers and what can be done to better support, train, and retain them.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe novice special education teachers' (SETs) experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature concerning challenging behavior as a stress-related burnout factor for novice teachers. Weiner's (1972, 1980, 1985, 2000) attribution theory of motivation guided data collection focusing on how teachers attribute causes to challenging behavior and experience motivation based on their attributions. This chapter contains a description of the design, sites, participants, procedures, and data analysis that were used for the study.

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design to describe novice SETs' experiences attributing and responding to challenging behavior. A qualitative approach was preferred for its potential to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon (De Vaus, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2008), whereas a quantitative approach would have imposed parameters on participants' responses and control results (Bryman, 2001; Cohen et al., 2013; Lichtman, 2013). Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because the purpose was to describe how novice SETs experience and apply causal attributions to make sense of students' challenging behaviors. Participants' self-directed stories were integral to achieving a thorough account of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994).

Specifically, this qualitative study used a phenomenological research design. The goal of phenomenological research is to describe a phenomenon based on the experiences of those who

lived it (Heidegger, 1927/2008; Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research is an appropriate design for social sciences to understand shared experiences among groups of individuals (Moustakas, 1994), which for this study was novice SETs. The phenomenological researcher assumes an embedded role as the key data collection instrument but, in pursuit of validity, must bracket their presuppositions to examine the problem based on participant accounts (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological research design allowed me to explore challenging behavior as a factor for stress-related burnout from the perspectives of novice SETs who have had similar yet unique experiences. The design aligned best with the topic and theoretical framework selected for this study. Attribution theory describes the natural human tendency to assign causes or meaning to experiences to better understand them (Heider, 1958). According to Malle (2011), Heider (1958) developed his attribution theory to solve an issue inherent in phenomenology, which is how subjective sensory information can be reconciled with objective reality.

The type of design—transcendental phenomenology—was used to ensure that participant experiences were the primary focus of data collection (Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994). I attempted to "reach a transcendental state of freshness and openness" to the phenomenon as participants described it, not as I imagined it to be (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). Husserl (1931/2012) established the philosophical basis for transcendental phenomenology in the early 20th century. His early yet influential work focused on the reflective nature of participant and researcher experiences in phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) was instrumental in substantiating the validity and reliability of the design type by identifying and codifying a system of methods. Transcendental phenomenology's systematic approach to data collection and analysis resulted in significant statements and themes that lead to my discovery of the essence of the phenomenon of

novice special education SETs' causal attributions and responses to challenging behavior (Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

This study was guided by the central research question and sub-questions listed below. The questions were intended to explore novice SETs' lived experiences of challenging behavior. Causal attribution and motivation are present to address aspects of the theoretical framework which guided this study. Through the research questions, multiple participant perspectives served to inform the development of the essence of the phenomenon under study.

Central Research Question

How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences with challenging behaviors?

Sub-Question One

How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences determining causes of challenging behaviors?

Sub-Question Two

How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences of successes and failures in addressing challenging behaviors?

Sub-Question Three

How do novice special education teachers describe their motivation to continue teaching through their experiences with challenging behaviors?

Sites and Participants

This study was conducted in the authentic setting of K-12 public schools in the United States. A group of participants were selected for their common experiences as novice SETs

applying causal attributions to students' challenging behaviors. Participants met criteria regarding their education, certification, and years of special education experience to be eligible to participate.

Sites

The sites for this study were nine public elementary schools and two public high schools in the United States. The states represented include Arizona (2), California (1), Florida (1), New York (1), North Carolina (1), Ohio (1), Tennessee (1), Washington (2), and Wisconsin (1). Multiple sites were necessary to conduct this study to meet the minimum requirement for number of participants. The original plan to conduct this study exclusively in the Commonwealth of Virginia was unsuccessful despite multiple attempts to contact district gatekeepers and school principals, and recruit Virginia SETs directly. A single statewide setting was preferred initially because participants would have had to meet the same certification requirements, utilized similar standards, and experienced similar organizational structures. However, recruitment challenges resulting in multiple sites nationwide ultimately was serendipitous as participants' experiences proved to be more alike than anticipated.

The 11 sites were determined by the self-selecting participants and were representative of school districts varying in size and demographics. Three sites were in rural areas, three were in urban areas, and the five remaining sites were in suburban areas. One of the 11 sites was a magnet school. School populations ranged from 315 to nearly 1,280 students. Two of the schools, one high school and one elementary school, were designated Title I with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The average student to teacher ratio of the elementary schools was 17:1. Student to teacher ratio data was not available for the two high schools. All 11 sites had a similar leadership structure composed of a principal, assistant

principal(s), and department heads. Every site had a special education lead teacher or administrator who answered to the district director of special education. For privacy purposes, school sites represented in this study were assigned pseudonyms.

Participants

To ensure confidentiality, participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms. I recruited 11 novice K-12 SETs to participate in the study according to recommendations for phenomenological research set forth by Liberty University's School of Education. While some researchers define novice teachers as those with three years or less of experience (Bettini et al., 2017; Hester et al., 2020), Papay et al. (2017) defined novices as those receiving an entry-level salary. Therefore, novice teachers with up to five years of experience were included in their study (Papay et al., 2017), and they were also included in Mehrenberg's research (2013). In order to recruit an adequate number of novice SETs, I followed these researchers (Mehrenberg, 2013; Papay et al., 2017) and identified participants with five years or less of experience. SETs whose total teaching experience exceeds five years due to previous experience in a general education classroom were not included since their additional experience did not align with this study's emphasis on novice teachers. However, participants must have had at least one year of special education teaching experience. This criterion was based on Quinney et al.'s (2016) recommendation that participants experience a cyclical phenomenon in its entirety before being recruited to have a depth and variety of experiences from which to share. For this study, an academic year represents a complete cycle of the phenomenon. Participants had to be licensed and employed in a full-time capacity in a special education position. No other exclusionary criteria were applied.

Recruitment Plan

The narrow focus of this study on the experiences of novice SETs required an intentional recruitment plan. Purposive sampling was an ideal recruitment technique because it allowed me to target participants who met all or most of the study criteria and who could also provide high-quality data based on relevant knowledge and experience (Holley & Harris, 2019; Patton, 1990). Early efforts to recruit participants exclusively in Virginia or Mid-Atlantic states were unsuccessful. Initially, a recruitment email was sent out to several district gatekeepers and principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia, but no one was willing to assist. Recruitment was later opened to members of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and 15+ special education affinity groups on Facebook. After multiple rounds of recruitment on Facebook, two dozen qualified participants completed the eligibility questionnaire and were invited to participate.

Every effort was made to recruit participants who represented different ages, ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). An initial questionnaire consisting of basic professional and demographic questions (Appendix D) was distributed to potential participants to confirm eligibility and achieve maximum variation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Collected demographic information contributed to the analysis but was not used in an exclusionary manner during the recruitment phase. Participants who met eligibility criteria were invited to take part in the study and asked to read and sign the informed consent form (Appendix E).

While in the early planning stage, I understood recruitment challenges might require me to expand my setting to reach a willing pool of participants. This was because the “VDOE does not know how many SETs there are in Virginia” (Sabbath, 2020, p. 84). While the NCES reports the total number of students and full-time employed teachers in the United States, the site does

not include specific information regarding SETs. Therefore, the sample pool for this study was unknown. Additionally, I did not expect potential participants to be reluctant to take part. I gleaned from recruitment setbacks that novice SETs are overextended and do not have time for additional activities. For this reason, I modified my original research plan to reduce feedback requirements and increase compensation for participants.

Researcher's Positionality

The qualitative researcher's background, experiences, and interests are often inextricably linked to the research they choose to pursue. This positionality can be seen in the researcher's choice of topic, method selection and involvement, and commitment to the questions and problems which inspire them (Moustakas, 1994). While it would have been easier to explore a topic related to my background as a school librarian, I purposefully chose a topic outside my comfort zone that engages my curiosity and encourages me to grow as an educator. Growing up, I was intrigued by stories my mother shared about her inclusive classroom and the behavior challenges she learned to manage during her 27-year teaching career. Years later, I learned about my husband's formative experiences living with ADHD, how his challenging behavior was addressed at home and school, and how challenges he faced ultimately led to him quitting school in the 10th grade. I carry these stories with me as an educator. They influence the way I perceive my students and colleagues. As an educator who has struggled personally with stress-related burnout due to challenging behavior, I value SETs and their resilience. SETs are an integral part of successful schools; they need research-based solutions to improve their work experience and increase retention. I am eager to use this research opportunity to aid such a deserving group and, perhaps indirectly, improve experiences of teachers and students who are similar to my mom and husband.

Ongoing SET shortages (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2019) and growing expectations for schools to deliver FAPE (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b) make it essential to explore the topic of challenging behavior. SETs are the best suited to describe how they experience challenging behavior and stress-related burnout, and qualitative research is the best mode to collect these stories. Like other qualitative researchers, it is important that I acknowledge and reflect upon my position as an instrument of research. I can do this by revealing interpretive frameworks and philosophical assumptions that underlie my personal worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interpretive Framework

Qualitative researchers are influenced by their educational backgrounds and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In studying established interpretive frameworks, I understand why I struggle to balance my interests in subjective experiences and social interaction with my desire for clear, measurable, and objective research outcomes. The way I understand the world is reflected in both social constructivism and pragmatism. Developing the proposed study challenged me to consider which aspects of my worldview are most important. Through literature review, I determined researchers have reductively consolidated student-teacher relationships in special education to aggregate data for too long to explain work-related stress and attrition. This positivist approach does not adequately account for experiential nuances of teachers applying causal attributions to challenging behaviors and how these attributions contribute to novice teachers' burnout and career intentions. Only an interpretivist approach that relies on naturalistic observations has the potential to reveal teachers' subjective reality of their lived experiences (Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994). This discovery led me to qualitative research, specifically phenomenology, as a preferable research design because it emphasizes

participants' unique experiences in the description of the essential essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Philosophical Assumptions

Educational research is inherently values-driven (Greenbank, 2003). Researchers devote time and energy to what they value most (Holmes, 2020). Whether explicitly stated or implicitly exhibited in studies, researchers' value-laden philosophical assumptions can be detected in parts which make up the whole—in the chosen design and methods, modes of analysis, and presentation of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holmes, 2020). The researcher's personal philosophy reveals their cultural and historical experience, and can be described in terms of their ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

Ontological Assumption

My ontological assumptions align with qualitative research, specifically phenomenological research, in that I believe there can be multiple views of reality (Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994). While some argue the existence of a single reality or multiple realities (Schuetz, 1945), I prefer to focus on what can be gained by examining the different ways people perceive and experience reality. Even those who believe in a single reality must agree that perceptions color experiences and vice versa. Like others who employ phenomenology as a research design, I embrace the interrelatedness of perceptions and experiences (Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994). I believe the best way to understand reality is to look beyond one's own limited view and empathize with others.

Epistemological Assumption

My epistemological assumptions are based on the belief that knowledge is constructed through immersive learning experiences and interactions with others. This viewpoint reflects the

way social constructivism informs my interpretations. While the learner in a detached state may acquire information, if only temporarily, enduring knowledge is constructed when the learner has a personal experience with facts, information, and skills and connects to previous knowledge. In this way, it was important for me to close the distance between myself and my participants and connect what I learned from them to what I already know (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to gain knowledge of a phenomenon, I have to learn from those who have experienced it first-hand (Husserl, 1931/2012; Moustakas, 1994). I did this by collecting data in the field where participants experience the phenomenon. Even though participants' experiences are subjective, and I, as a qualitative researcher, subjectively interpreted the data I gathered, it was possible to get at the essence of the phenomenon despite subjectivity by interviewing multiple participants (Hycner, 1985; Shenton, 2004) and remaining cognizant of my presuppositions through *epoché* (Moustakas, 1994).

Axiological Assumption

My choice to become an educator and an information professional reveals I value education and lifelong learning. These values guide my axiological assumptions and were present in my study as it was carried out. I value my fellow educators and believe most teachers are capable and well-meaning. I also believe situational factors often contribute to students' challenging behaviors and most students are inherently good people learning to become better as they mature. Greenbank (2003) acknowledged values and beliefs that guide our everyday actions and interactions with others have potential to manifest as biases in research. Reflective practices helped me recognize my biases and position myself in the context and setting of my research so that my biases had minimal impact (Greenbank, 2003; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Shenton, 2004).

Researcher's Role

The researcher's role in phenomenology is delicate. The researcher is intimately involved as the human instrument of data collection while simultaneously working to minimize the impact of prejudgment (Moustakas, 1994). The practice of bracketing also referred to as *epoché* (Moustakas, 1994), requires the researcher to account for their presuppositions and biases based on personal feelings and experiences. They should endeavor to set aside presuppositions as much as possible and instead focus on what can be learned from the study's participants (Husserl, 1970; Hycner, 1985; Lauer, 1978). Despite my proximity as the human instrument, I have no connection to the phenomenon, setting, or participants I chose to study. This placed me in a favorable position to achieve the bracketing necessary to conduct this research.

I had no prior interactions with the sites or participants for this study. I have not had the opportunity to work with novice SETs in public schools in any capacity. In my current role as a teacher librarian and student advisor at an independent high school, I work closely with two experienced SETs serving our co-ed population of 500 students. Our experiences in an independent school differ from that of our peers in public schools. While my school cannot accommodate students with severe intellectual, behavioral, and physical disabilities due to limited resources, our SETs provide comprehensive individualized support to approximately 10% of the school population with documented special needs and accommodations. Our exceptional education students can access a dedicated classroom where they receive one-on-one and small group instruction during their study halls and a daily free period. Instructional and curriculum collaboration with the teachers of these students is also provided as needed. In this context of classroom support, I have had the opportunity to work with our SETs on learning and behavior management strategies for students.

Through my relationships with the SETs at my school, as well as my experiences teaching students with special needs in a general education classroom, I have developed biases about students' challenging behaviors. I have experience applying causal attributions to these behaviors and have experienced successes and failures in my efforts to address students' challenging behaviors. However, as a teacher librarian, my perspective on this topic and knowledge of SETs' experiences is limited. As a result, I approached this study from a place of curiosity and eagerness to learn instead of imposing my limited knowledge on the phenomenon.

Procedures

The first step was to request approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the supervision of my committee chair. The IRB approval letter appears in Appendix A. Following IRB approval, I recruited participants with a post in the CEC community forum and 15+ special education affinity groups on Facebook (Appendix B). After several rounds of recruitment on Facebook, I collected participant eligibility and demographic information (Appendix C) and the necessary informed consent forms from an adequate number of eligible participants (Appendix D). These participants were provided the URL (https://augstresearchstudy.weebly.com/) to a Weebly website (Appendix E) where they could access research study instructions and links. The first data collection method was mind maps (Appendix F). Following mind maps, participants were asked to respond to a journal prompt on three occasions (Appendix G). Finally, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews (Appendix H) via the Zoom virtual meeting platform. The purpose of the interviews was to achieve triangulation by giving participants time to provide further insight, confirm themes, and answer questions which emerged in the first two phases of data collection (mind maps and journaling) (Bryman, 2001; Patton, 1990; Shenton, 2004).

Data Collection Plan

I employed a systematic approach to data collection that involved careful consideration of ethical issues and site permissions, the use of effective sampling strategies, multiple methods of data collection for triangulation purposes, established methods of analysis, and proper data storage and confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 1990; Shenton, 2004). I began the data collection phase by informing participants they could withdraw at any time without penalty. The order of data collection methods was intended to progress incrementally from broad concepts to narrow, in-depth descriptions. First, participants engaged in a mind-mapping exercise to conceptualize causes of common challenging behaviors (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). Mind maps were followed by journal prompts in which participants provided narrative descriptions of observed challenging behaviors (Bowen, 2009). Finally, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews allowed for deeper examination of participant experiences and clarification of themes and questions that arose from mind maps and journal responses (Bryman, 2001; Patton, 1990; Shenton, 2004). Mind maps, text-based journals, and transcribed interview recordings were analyzed using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as described by Moustakas (1994) and recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018) for its practicality and usefulness. I sought to identify emergent themes and develop a significant statement that reflects the essence of the phenomenon (Bryman, 2001; Moustakas, 1994; Packer, 2011; Patton, 1990).

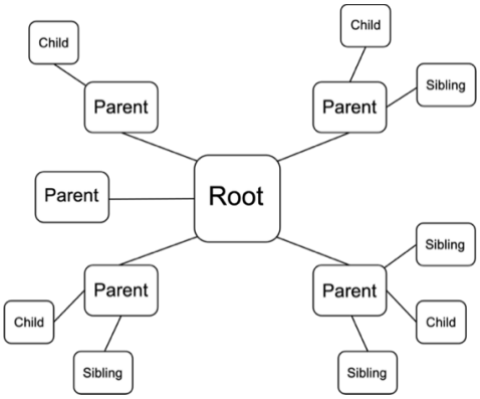
Mind Maps

Mind maps are a visual data collection method that can be used to represent concepts, ideas, and experiences in a graphical and hierarchical way (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). Mind maps follow a radial structure whereby a central topic is emphasized and related subtopics are organized as equally significant, parallel offshoots (Beel & Langer, 2011; Wheeldon & Ahlberg,

2019). Creating and utilizing mind maps requires a basic understanding of binary tree structure and node-link diagramming (Beel & Langer, 2011; Eppler, 2006). These data visualization paradigms provide the vocabulary necessary to describe relationships between units of data. Figure 2 shows the central topic in a mind map is called the *root* node (Beel & Langer, 2011). An unlimited number of *parent*, *child*, and *sibling* nodes may emanate from the root depending on the scope of the concept, idea, or experience. However, a study of more than 19,000 mind maps showed the typical mind map is comprised of 31 nodes and contains just a few words per node (Beel & Langer, 2011).

Figure 2

Generic Mind Map with Node Labels



Note. This example diagram was created by the researcher in Microsoft PowerPoint.

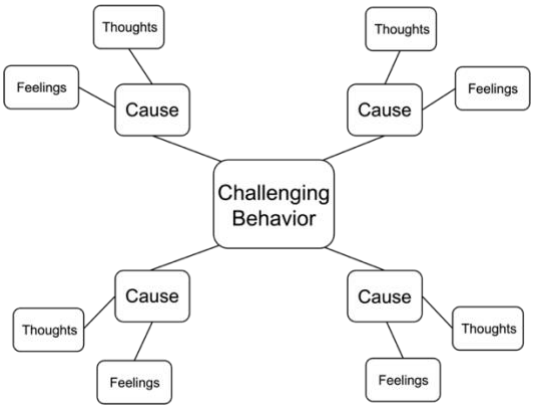
Mind maps, like other diagrammatic visualization tools, have potential to clarify complex conceptual relationships, reveal participants' unique perspectives and associations between aspects of an experience, and assist with recall when used as a qualitative data collection method (Davies, 2011; Wheeldon, 2011; Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2019; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). The non-linear, free-form structure helps to distinguish mind maps from concept and argument maps, which are similar in appearance but whose structures are dictated by a top-down hierarchy (Davies, 2011; Eppler, 2006; Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). While mind maps are considered the

least specific of the knowledge mapping tools mentioned here, they have the potential to be highly creative and comprehensive when customized with colors, images, and text (Davies, 2011; Eppler, 2006). These characteristics make mind maps a fitting data collection method for an open-ended, participant-driven phenomenological study (Wheeldon, 2011).

Upon receipt of the signed consent form, all participants received an email that contained an example mind map and instructions based on best practices presented by Wheeldon (2011) (Appendix F). Participants were instructed to create a mind map over the course of two weeks and return it by email. They could choose whether to draw their maps by hand or use the free version of a web-based mapping platform such as MindMup, Miro, or MindMeister. First, participants were instructed to identify the most common or challenging behaviors they encountered in their classroom. The behavior was to appear as the root node at the center of a mind map. Participants then listed causal attributions for the challenging behavior as parent nodes and their related thoughts and feelings as child and sibling nodes (Figure 3). To protect participants' subjectivity and minimize the researcher's impact on mind map outcomes (Tattersall et al., 2007; Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2019), participants were not limited to the number of parent, child, or sibling nodes they could include.

Figure 3

Basic Challenging Behavior Mind Map Structure



Note. This example diagram was created by the researcher in Microsoft PowerPoint.

Mind maps directly addressed the central research question and sub-question one, providing valuable insight into teachers' experiences with common challenging behaviors and the thoughts and feelings that underlie their causal attributions for these behaviors. Apart from illuminating the experience with the phenomenon, this data collection method encouraged participants to reflect as they organized cognitive and emotional impacts of challenging behavior they may not have previously considered (Wheeldon, 2011). See Appendix I for an example of a participant's mind map.

Figure 4

Complete Challenging Behavior Mind Map

Note. This example mind map was created by the researcher using MindMup, a free, web-based mind mapping tool.

Journal Prompts

Though interviews are the dominant data collection method used in phenomenological research (Bevan, 2014), Moustakas (1994) acknowledged the value of other forms of descriptive accounts. Personal documents are a worthwhile source of data to understand participants' views and beliefs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended using creative narrative data collection methods, including journaling. Journaling is an established data collection method for healthcare research (Hayman et al., 2012), and while it is not frequently associated with phenomenology, Smith and Hunt (1997) affirmed the effectiveness of journaling as a means of documenting participant experiences and feelings. Journal prompts are typically completed at the participant's convenience, allowing more time for reflection and drafting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study used a single journal prompt which participants were asked to complete three times over the course of two weeks. After submitting their mind maps, participants received an email containing instructions and a link to the journal prompt as a Google Form (Appendix G). In this form, participants were reminded of their right to drop out of the study without penalty. All participant responses to the journal prompt were secured using a password-protected Google account. Temporally separating mind maps and journal responses ensured triangulation (Shenton, 2004) and enabled participants to focus wholly on the data collection task. It also gave me time to begin thematic coding of mind map data as well as time to continue reflective bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Responding to the journal prompt multiple times allowed participants to identify different challenging behaviors, causal attributions, and affective responses. Additionally, I used multiple responses as iterative questioning to confirm participant credibility (Shenton, 2004). Credibility was further achieved as a matter of the timeliness of responses. Journal prompts were completed by participants soon after the challenging behavior was observed to gather eidetic descriptions (Van Manen, 2014). For example, participants completed a journal entry after a class or at the end of the school day when the memory was still fresh. In this way, the journal prompt questions were designed to reveal *Dasein*, or what it was like for participants to be in the experience (Heidegger, 1927/2008).

Table 1

Journal Prompt Questions

1. Describe the challenging behavior you observed. CRQ, SQ1
2. What do you believe caused the student's behavior? SQ1, SQ2
3. How did you respond to the challenging behavior? SQ2, SQ3
4. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being extremely unsuccessful and 10 being extremely successful, how successful were you at addressing the challenging behavior? Explain why you rated your performance this number. SQ2
5. How were you affected by the challenging behavior? SQ3
6. Please share anything else you feel is important to know about this experience. CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3

The first journal prompt question is designed to elicit a rich description of the challenging behavior experience. Question two directly addresses the attribution theory of motivation by asking participants to explain why students behaved the way they did. Questions two, three, and

four have potential to reveal participants' feelings of success or failure. For example, if a participant conveys causal culpability or disappointment about how they responded to the challenging behavior, it revealed negative self-views associated with low motivation (Weiner, 2000). Question five can confirm previous positive or negative responses and reveal other affective impacts of challenging behavior. Finally, question six allows participants latitude to express any perceptions or sentiments they consider relevant.

Journal prompt questions were reviewed by my chair, committee member, and SETs at my school for evaluative feedback. The questions are meant to engage participants in in-depth narrative descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) of specific challenging behaviors, causal attribution experiences, and affective responses. In this way, journaling served as a valuable source of supplementary data that cannot be collected in mind maps or interviews (Bowen, 2009). The prompt, though targeted and intended to be filled out multiple times, is brief enough to be completed in 10 to 15 minutes. A sample journal prompt response is included in Appendix J.

Individual Interviews

The primary data collection method for this study was semi-structured interviews. Interviews are an ideal method to build rapport and develop a mutual understanding of study aims (Spradley, 1979). Moustakas (1994) recommended open-ended interviews for phenomenological research because this method situates the participant in the role of co-researcher and allows them to fully describe their experiences with the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth (2018) and Rubin and Rubin (2008) likewise emphasized the suitability of in-depth interviews for phenomenological research, explaining that the social interaction inherent in interviews allows the researcher to see and understand the world from a participant's point of

view. Due to my limited experience with the phenomenon, it was important that I focus my efforts on gathering as much descriptive data as possible from participants in order to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

Participants received an invitation by email to schedule their interview after they submitted their journal entries. The email included a reminder that participants were welcome to leave the study without penalty at any time. Depending on their availability, I conducted one-on-one interviews with participants via the Zoom virtual meeting platform (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were designed to be semi-structured, meaning the interview protocol was established in advance (Appendix H), but the open-ended nature of the questions accommodated tangential thoughts and impromptu reactions on the part of participants (Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). This structure allowed me to ask additional questions as needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). The interview protocol was designed to be brief enough to avoid overwhelming participants yet detailed enough to elicit meaningful responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2008). Interviews were video-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. All video-recorded interview data was safely stored on a password-protected cloud-storage account in Zoom.

Table 2

Individual Interview Questions

Please introduce yourself to me as though we just met and describe your background serving students with special needs.

1. Describe your experience with challenging behavior in special education. CRQ
2. How often do you experience challenging behavior? CRQ
3. Which challenging behaviors are the most challenging for you? CRQ

4. Describe your experience determining the causes of students' challenging behaviors. SQ1
5. Describe your experience distinguishing between students' intentional and unintentional challenging behaviors. SQ1
6. Which factors, either internal or external, do you think have the most influence on a student's behavior? Explain why you answered in this way. SQ1
7. What does behavior management look like in your classroom? What do you want it to look like? CRQ, SQ2
8. Describe successes you have experienced in responding to students' challenging behavior. SQ2
9. Describe failures you have experienced in responding to students' challenging behavior. SQ2
10. What factors or past experiences contribute the most to your successes and failures when responding to students' challenging behaviors? SQ2
11. How did challenging behavior affect you when you started teaching? CRQ, SQ3
12. How does challenging behavior affect you now? CRQ, SQ3
13. How has your view of challenging behavior changed since you started teaching? If it has not changed, please explain why. CRQ, SQ3
14. On a scale of 1-10, with one being very unmotivated and 10 being very motivated, how motivated are you to continue teaching students with special needs who exhibit challenging behavior? Explain why you rated your motivation this number. SQ3
15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with students' challenging behavior that we haven't discussed? CRQ

Apprehension is a natural response to the uncertainty that accompanies qualitative

interviews for the participant and the researcher (Spradley, 1979). The introductory prompt and first question are written in the spirit of Spradley's (1979) grand tour question to overcome apprehension and get the participant talking (Spradley, 1979). Despite their intended use in ethnographic research (Webb & Kevern, 2001), grand tour questions are valuable in phenomenological research to encourage the participant to describe herself and her experience in her own terms (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Apart from building rapport, beginning in this way affords the participant a degree of latitude to help set the tone for the rest of the interview and share what they think is important for me to know about them (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Spradley, 1979). Questions two and three address the central research question and are intentionally open-ended so participants may answer freely, providing background and context for their current experience with challenging behavior in a classroom setting. Questions of this kind are recommended by Moustakas (1994), Giorgi (1997), and Rubin and Rubin (2008) to guide participants toward thinking and sharing about their everyday experiences. Questions one through three are specifically aimed at eliciting descriptions of participants' various school environments, which may reveal significant similarities and differences across the range of data collected as evidenced by Andreou and Rapti's study (2010).

Questions four through six directly address sub-question one and the phenomenon of applying causal attributions to students' challenging behaviors (Wang & Hall, 2018). This line of questioning emphasizes the difference between dispositional (intentional) and situational (unintentional) causal attributions (Weiner, 1972) and prompts participants to reframe their experience using concepts unique to the theoretical framework that guides this study. Question six is designed to reveal the participant's positive or negative attribution tendencies. According to Weiner's (2000) interpersonal theory of motivation, attributing the behavior of others to

external factors of controllability contributes to sympathetic responses and pro-social interaction, whereas blaming others for behavior characterized by internal controllability can result in negative responses and interpersonal strain. In this way, a participant's causal attribution tendencies can reveal if interactions with students are typical of a positive or negative response (Weiner, 1985, 2000).

Question seven is intended to segue from sub-question one's causal attributions to sub-question two's successes and failures in behavior management. Question seven has potential to reveal dissonance between a teacher's behavior management actions and their hoped-for outcomes (Caldarella et al., 2021). In questions eight and nine, participants reveal the self-efficacy attitudes and beliefs that underlie their motivation by categorizing responses to challenging behaviors as 'successes' and 'failures' in questions eight and nine (Hopman et al., 2018; Weiner, 2000). Motivation is more directly addressed in subsequent interview questions. Weiner (1985) argued attributions associated with effort and ability are the most salient of causal beliefs and can result in strong emotional responses including "anger, gratitude, guilt, hopelessness, pity, pride, and shame" (p. 549). Question 10 encourages participants to examine the causes of their own behavior. While I intentionally avoided using the theoretical framework jargon for the three psychological dimensions of causal attribution—locus, stability, and controllability—I anticipated participant responses would demonstrate the accuracy of Weiner's theory (1985, 2000) and these concepts.

Questions 11 through 14 are intended to transition from the cognitive, effective experience of applying causal attributions and determining successes and failures to the affective experience of participants' inward, emotional responses to challenging behavior (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Weiner, 2000; Wink et al., 2021). These questions encourage the participant to

reflect on their early experiences and compare them with their current experiences. These four questions are key to examining the relationship between responses to challenging behavior and teacher motivation (Wink et al., 2021). Question 14 is a rating scale question aimed at gauging self-efficacy beliefs and motivation. Question 15 is an opportunity for the participant to contribute any additional thoughts or ideas they feel were not adequately addressed in the preceding questions and responses. An example interview transcript is provided in Appendix K.

Data Analysis

I prepared for data analysis by creating a digital *epoché* journal in Google Docs (Appendix M). I used this bracketing tool to reflect upon my experiences, presuppositions, and biases before, during, and at the conclusion of data collection (Moustakas, 1994). It enabled me to engage with the data with more awareness and an intentional openness to what I might discover (Moustakas, 1994). Doing so ensured the data, and not my personal views, lead to my understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

I enlarged all mind maps in order to view the experience of the phenomenon as it was presented. All mind maps were safely secured on a password-protected cloud-storage account. Mind maps are inherently valuable as a "real-time transcribing tool" (Tattersall et al., 2007, p. 33). I analyzed this data collection method by treating each mind map as a transcription. I transcribed and transferred mind map text to Google Sheets, making sure to account for participants' node-link associations in the way I organized cells. For example, participant-selected root nodes appeared in the first column, parent nodes in the second column, and child and sibling nodes in the third column. Any additional nodes created by participants were organized in additional columns. All participant data was color-coded according to a corresponding pseudonym key to protect participants' identities. Once the data was reviewed and

deemed complete, I engaged in Husserl's phenomenological reduction as described by Moustakas (1994), which involves iterative looking and describing. To systematize this process, I used Creswell and Poth's (2018) simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) modified SCK method. Additionally, I reflected and took notes on mind map analysis throughout the process.

I initially read to gain an awareness of mind map responses as a whole (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). I then committed to multiple deep readings with the goal of identifying significant statements at each pass, a process known as horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994). This process involved assigning equal value to each statement initially, allowing significant statements to emerge naturally by eliminating ambiguous, irrelevant, and repetitive statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Horizonalized statements were copied into a new column for further analysis, and from them I derived a series of coded themes, which I organized in another column. I allowed thematic coding to remain free-form as I repeatedly reviewed and consolidated emergent themes and sub-themes, each with its own column. I also maintained an additional column where I accounted for perceived sentiments, such as participants' positive and negative word choices as well as any unexpected mind map elements.

Document analysis is used in qualitative research as a means of triangulating data (Bowen, 2009). Collecting journal entries after mind maps provided additional context for mind map responses, revealing new aspects of the phenomenon and reinforcing early thematic coding outcomes (Bowen, 2009). Collecting journal prompt data using a Google Form eliminated the need to transcribe data since it was accessible in a spreadsheet format automatically. However, I copied the cell-formatted data to my existing Google Sheets workbook for data safety, code-checking, and synthesis. Using a consistent platform for data analysis enabled me to continue applying the pseudonym color codes and thematic labels I developed during mind map analysis

(Bowen, 2009). The nature of Google Sheets further afforded me the space to continue note-taking and the ability to survey the range of participant responses in a single data column. Journal data was organized in a separate spreadsheet from mind map data in the workbook at this stage of analysis.

I analyzed journals based on Bowen's (2009) iterative process of skimming, reading, and interpreting. Bowen's (2009) sequential approach aligns well with the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method I chose to guide my data analysis. Skimming involved a broad reading of entries which provided a general sense of the whole (Bowen, 2009; Hycner, 1985). After my initial first impression was formed, I read with the goal of identifying and interpreting significant statements (Bowen, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). With each reading of journal data, I bracketed my presuppositions to allow participant descriptions of the experience to shape my understanding of the phenomenon and guide thematic coding and analysis (Bowen, 2009; Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). After completing the phenomenal analysis of journal data, I compared and consolidated codes for this method with codes that emerged from my analysis of mind maps. Additionally, I noted any responses or data outcomes I needed to clarify with participants during the interviews that followed.

Effective interview data explication begins with accurate transcription and note-taking (Hycner, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). I attempted to complete transcription as soon as possible after interviews concluded to protect participant responses' integrity (Rubin & Rubin, 2008). I ensured transcription accuracy by video-recording interviews and using Zoom speech-to-text transcription software to render video-recordings into a text file. I carefully reviewed transcriptions for discrepancies between the recording and the text rendering and amended them as necessary. Finally, I transferred transcription data to a Word form I later sent to participants

for member checking. During transcription review, I documented my process in detail in my *epoché* journal (Appendix I) and transferred handwritten notes taken during the interviews as comments in the right-hand margin of the Word document (Hycner, 1985). Interview notes included participants' non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language, hesitation), unexpected interruptions or distractions, and references to documents, artifacts, and the physical environment (Hycner, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). I engaged in member checking by emailing participants and asking them to confirm accuracy of their interview transcription before I proceeded with data analysis (Mertens, 2011). All text-based and audio-visual interview data was safely stored on a password-protected cloud-storage account in Zoom. The MS Word transcripts were stored on my personal laptop.

After completing the interview transcription and review, participant responses were transferred from MS Word to the existing Google Sheets workbook. Interview data, like mind maps and journal data, was organized in its own spreadsheet in the workbook, and participant responses were color-coded for privacy. Each interview question response was represented as a distinct data unit and captured as a cell in the spreadsheet. Initially, I read the data as a whole to get a sense of the overall meaning and document my thoughts and reactions in my *epoché* journal (Giorgi, 1997; Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990).

I then engaged in horizonalization, during which each data unit was considered equally valuable (Moustakas, 1994). Then, by re-reading responses multiple times, I slowly and organically began to identify significant, invariant statements related to the phenomenon experience (Moustakas, 1994). In order to complete this process, I identified and copied significant statements from the data units into a new column. These horizon statements were coded using inductive and deductive processes of labeling and categorizing in columns for codes,

themes, sub-themes, and sentiment analysis. Coding data is a complex process involving clustering and validating thematic units (Moustakas, 1994) that are expected, unexpected, and highly unusual (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This stage of analysis was iterative as themes emerged, merged, and incrementally revealed significant aspects of the essence of the phenomenon. Results of the interview data explication were compiled in a composite description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hycner, 1985) and contributed significantly to the collective data synthesis using the SCK method involving all three data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

This study was guided by the modified SCK method of data analysis as described by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018). As such, data synthesis began with me describing the phenomenon from my perspective to differentiate between my experience and my participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Then, based on an in-depth and iterative reading of all transcripts, notes, and research questions, I listed the most significant nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements (Moustakas, 1994). This phenomenological reduction led to invariant horizons that constituted the essential meaning of the experience and were used to develop a list of emergent themes (Moustakas, 1994). Using these themes and direct quotes from transcripts, I synthesized the invariant horizons into a textural description of *what* the participants experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

After developing a textural description of participant experiences, I engaged in imaginative variation to develop a structural description of *how* the experiences happened (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This approach required me to move from a state of concrete objectivity, in looking only at the data before me, to a state of creativity and boundless curiosity, where I considered the phenomenon from a variety of angles and possibilities

(Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation aims to intuitively describe the unseen nature of the phenomenon without imposing limits on what could be happening (Moustakas, 1994). My goal as a phenomenological researcher was to merge what is seen with what is intuited (Moustakas, 1994). My combined textural-structural description then presents a "unified statement of the essences and experiences of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). This culminating description was emailed to participants along with an invitation to verify its accuracy in describing their experience of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

All researchers should strive to substantiate their findings through rigorous methods for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By opting to conduct a qualitative study, I acknowledge positivists question the degree to which qualitative research, including my research, can achieve the rigor associated with quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). Validity and reliability, the hallmarks of rigorous quantitative research, cannot be pursued straightforwardly in the realm of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Rolfe, 2006). Instead, qualitative researchers developed and adhered to a framework of *trustworthiness* to verify their findings (Rolfe, 2006, 2007). Many researchers rely on Guba and Lincoln's (1985, 1989) conceptual framework for qualitative trustworthiness, which consists of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Some argue in favor of additional functional facets of trustworthiness, including accessibility, authenticity, and ethical considerations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 2011; Porter, 2007). I aimed to be trustworthy in all aspects of my research study, but especially through the practice of reflective bracketing, triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking of significant statements and themes, and extensive documentation and auditing of my processes (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 2011).

Credibility

Credibility is the qualitative equivalent of positivism's internal validity, or how accurately a study measures its intended variables (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Shenton, 2004). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), credibility is chief among factors for trustworthiness, and member checks are the "single most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 239). Though qualitative research is inherently subjective (Packer, 2011), I worked to achieve credibility through multiple member checks and peer checks at each phase of data collection and analysis (Rolfe, 2006; Shenton, 2004). I emailed my participants for clarification and confirmation of themes and significant statements. Timing interviews as the culminating data collection method afforded me the opportunity to ask additional clarifying questions and confirm mind map and journal prompt responses. I also engaged my chair and committee member in peer checks and evaluative debriefing regarding my coding and data analysis outcomes as well as to reflect on my biases and presuppositions (Mertens, 2011; Shenton, 2004). My *epoché* journal further contributed to the credibility of my study as a mode of self-reflection and real-time monitoring of my personal impact on research outcomes (Mertens, 2011).

Triangulation of multiple data sources is highly recommended for credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, 1989; Mertens, 2011; Shenton, 2004). I achieved triangulation through various data sources pertaining to my sites, participants, and data collection methods (Shenton, 2004). I collected data from a range of SETs representing various districts and schools. And though interviews serve as the chief source of data for my study, this popular qualitative data collection method was reinforced by multiple examples of challenging behavior participants outlined in mind maps and described in narrative format through journaling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These three focused and effective data collection methods enabled me

to maintain my involvement with my participants and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mertens, 2011; Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

In quantitative research, the concept of external validity—or generalizability as it is sometimes called—means a study's results can be used to corroborate results of other studies of the same population (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Mertens, 2011; Shenton, 2004). Guba and Lincoln (1985) proposed the analogous concept of transferability to accommodate interpretivist and naturalist aims of qualitative research. I leveraged studies that achieved transferability to develop my own study. I looked to these studies for guidance regarding selecting a suitable theoretical framework, significant conceptual understandings, participant sampling and data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. In determining the *fittingness* of previous findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Sandelowski, 1986), I benefitted from reading thorough and transparent studies.

My goal was to report my research in such a way that readers will recognize the transferability of my study and be able to apply my findings in other contexts. To this end, I worked to achieve the same level of thoroughness and transparency I valued in my review of the literature. According to Shenton (2004), it is important I include the following information for transferability: the number and location of research sites, inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants, sample size, type and duration of data collection methods used, and the overall timespan of the study. Additionally, I practiced what Guba and Lincoln (1985) refer to as thick description, or the process of describing a phenomenon in such rich detail that aspects of the phenomenon can be applied to other settings, participants, and situations. I worked to achieve

transferability by providing thick descriptions of the phenomenon and situating my results in the broader context of behavior management and educator experiences.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the positivist concept of reliability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Guba and Lincoln (1985) acknowledged the interrelatedness of dependability and credibility in that both facets of trustworthiness reveal how well a study represents the variables it intends to represent (Shenton, 2004). Where credibility measures accuracy of results, dependability measures consistency of results (Shenton, 2004). For example, if a study were replicated multiple times in the same way, would the results be the same time and time again? As the primary researcher, I pursued dependability by conducting regular inquiry audits to check for data collection and management errors (Koch, 2006). I used my document trail of notes, recordings, and datasets to periodically perform internal audits and identify points where my understanding of the phenomenon began to take shape (Mertens, 2011).

Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Shenton (2004) emphasized the value of external audits to assure the dependability of research results. I relied on the expert guidance of my dissertation chair and committee member as external auditors. I looked to them to evaluate my research design and implementation, data collection and bracketing efforts, and reflective self-appraisal (Shenton, 2004). I also called upon trusted colleagues to perform informal external audits where their skills and knowledge aligned with my research efforts. Finally, I ensured my procedures were described in detail so that other researchers may evaluate my work and replicate my study in the future (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the relative objectivity of the study and its eventual results (Mertens, 2011). While qualitative researchers can strive to be objective, their role as the human instrument places them in direct contact with their participants and the data collection process (Shenton, 2004). In this way, the qualitative researcher and their predispositions cannot be completely disentangled from their study (Moustakas, 1994; Shenton, 2004). An audit trail is necessary to make the researcher's intentions and methods transparent at every stage of the research (Holley & Harris, 2019; Mertens, 2011; Shenton, 2004). I followed Shenton's (2004) guidance to be transparent as the key data instrument. I used my *epoché* journal to describe any biases and motivations I had that may have influenced my approach or the outcomes of my data collection and analysis.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I engaged in exhaustive memoing to ensure personal discoveries and questions, no matter how small, were accounted for and included in eventual outcomes. This practice is recommended by multiple researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Groenewald, 2004; Koch, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I followed Shenton's (2004) guidance further regarding triangulation of data sources to demonstrate confirmability in my study. Koch (2006) recommended providing readers with multiple evidence-based examples to support data interpretations. The goal of data synthesis is to develop a significant, consolidated statement regarding the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To the extent I was able, I engaged in reflexive practices and engaged outside auditors to confirm my results as recommended by Shenton (2004). I also emphasized evidence in my discussion of the results that supported my conclusions, as recommended by Mertens (2011).

Ethical Considerations

As a representative of Liberty University and the education profession, I aimed to conduct myself in an ethical manner in all aspects of my research. While the interactive nature of qualitative research increases potential for ethical dilemmas, researchers are encouraged to look to their institution's IRB and the broader scholarly community for guidance throughout the planning, data collection, and analysis processes (Mertens, 2011). My foremost concern was minimizing any potential impact on participants, both in terms of mental and emotional toll as well as time commitment. Accordingly, I developed my research plan with the participant in mind. I demonstrated respect for participants by conducting myself in a professional, courteous, and efficient manner. Participants gave their informed consent to take part, and they were free to leave the study at any time. Additionally, I maintained participants' confidentiality while communicating appropriately the nature of the research and the expectations for involvement. An ethical approach also includes but is not limited to seeking and obtaining site permissions and access through the appropriate gatekeepers, acknowledging and reducing any conflicts of interest, avoiding plagiarism, and employing methods to achieve validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 1990). I conducted my study ethically by following this guidance closely and reflecting on my ethical decision-making in my *epoché* journal.

Permissions

I began by requesting preliminary site permission to conduct this study with each of the school district gatekeepers in my original plan. However, due to a lack of interest, I was able to request IRB modification approval under supervision of my committee chair (Appendix A). After receiving IRB approval, I implemented a direct recruitment approach which involved posting a call for participants to the CEC community forum and 15+ special education affinity groups on Facebook (Appendix C). All research participants were told their participation was

voluntary, and informed consent was obtained (Appendix E). Participants' consent was accepted as site permission to begin data collection in a timely manner.

Other Participant Protections

From the outset of participant recruitment, I was transparent and specific with my participants about what was expected of them and their protections. I obtained signed letters of informed consent from all participants and made them aware of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty, in which case their data would be destroyed and would not appear in the final report. I reported this important information often in correspondence and reiterated the protections available to participants when I spoke with them via Zoom.

As soon as participants provided informed consent, I assigned them a random pseudonym, which was used for the remainder of the study and appeared in my final manuscript. Only the participant and I know the identity of the participant. I used a color-coded system that corresponded with assigned pseudonyms in my data management process so the identity of participants remained confidential throughout data analysis. All email correspondence and data were stored on password-protected accounts. I periodically updated my passwords for these cloud-based accounts as an extra precaution to protect participant data. Any physical data or materials associated with this study will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Additionally, I will follow guidance by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Liberty University to destroy any physical and electronic data I collect after three years.

The risks to potential participants were low for this study. Participants may have been inconvenienced by the time involved in creating mind maps, completing journals, and meeting with me for interviews. They also may have experienced mild emotional distress when recounting their experiences with challenging behavior. However, I was flexible and

understanding regarding participants' temporal and emotional needs. While I anticipate results of my study may benefit special education leaders and policymakers, there were no direct benefits for participants other than their receiving a gift card as a sign of appreciation for their time and input. All research study components were tracked to ensure completion (Appendix L).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe novice SETs' experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. I described how I collected data through mind maps, journal prompts, and interviews. In this chapter, I outlined the details of the design, setting, participants, procedures, and data analysis I used for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe novice special education teachers' (SETs) experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. Transcendental phenomenology reduces the researcher's impact allowing participants to lead the development of a rich description of their shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). This study was guided by the central research question: How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences with challenging behaviors?

Triangulated data were collected from 11 novice SETs using participant-generated mind maps, journal prompt responses, and semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method and a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Four themes emerged from the data: Acceptance, Understanding, Management, and Motivation. This chapter presents individual descriptions of the purposive-selected participants, an introduction to the results, textural and structural descriptions of the four themes and eight sub-themes, descriptions and examples of outlier data, and answers to the central research question and sub-questions. The chapter concludes with a summary and description of novice SETs experience attributing causes to challenging behavior.

Participants

The novice SETs who participated in this study were selected using purposeful criterion sampling methods. Eligible SETs were selected for full-time employment status in a U.S. public primary or secondary school with at least one year of experience but less than five. Of the 24 potential participants, 11 filled out the eligibility questionnaire, submitted consent forms, completed all three data collection procedures, and performed post-interview member checking.

The participant group consisted of 11 novice SETs with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of experience in special education. The group included 10 females and one male, aged between 21 and 54 years. All participants held teaching licenses in their respective states. The participants' educational qualifications ranged from bachelor's to master's degrees. Their teaching experience in special education varied from two to four years. The instructional settings they worked in included self-contained, resource, and inclusive/co-taught classrooms, covering a broad range of grade levels from Pre-K to 12+. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants and the schools involved in the study. See Table 3 for demographic data for each participant.

Table 3

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Special Ed Experience	Classroom Type	Grade Level(s)
Allen	Male	29	Bachelor's	3	Inclusive/Co-Taught	9, 11
Beth	Female	21	Bachelor's	2	Self-Contained	2, 3
Carrie	Female	34	Bachelor's	4	Self-Contained	K - 6
Dana	Female	24	Bachelor's	3	Resource	2 - 4
Emma	Female	27	Bachelor's	4	Inclusive/Co-Taught	9 - 12+
Faye	Female	36	Bachelor's	2	Self-Contained	Pre-K
Gina	Female	54	Bachelor's	3	Resource	K - 5
Holly	Female	26	Master's	2	Self-Contained	K

Teacher Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Special Ed Experience	Classroom Type	Grade Level(s)
Iris	Female	32	Master's	4	Self-Contained	Pre-K
Jane	Female	26	Bachelor's	3	Self-Contained	Pre-K - 2
Kate	Female	36	Bachelor's	4	Self-Contained	Pre-K, K

Allen

Allen comes from a family of educators in southeast Asia. He credits his mother and grandmother for inspiring him to pursue a career in education despite his early lack of interest in the field. Allen initially studied elementary education, but, after working in a special education classroom, discovered a passion for supporting students with special needs. After four years of general and special education experience working in a private school in his native country, Allen embraced an opportunity to teach in the United States on a temporary employment visa. He eagerly accepted a high school special education position to experience another culture first-hand and further develop his professional skills with an older student population. Allen has three years of special education experience.

Beth

Prior to earning her Psychology degree and SPED certification in 2022, Beth experienced the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) program at her school as a student and volunteer. She learned alongside students on the autism spectrum in inclusive classrooms and volunteered with her mother, a paraeducator turned behavior specialist, before and after school. Despite being relatively new to the field, Beth's background has given her confidence and extensive first-hand knowledge of challenging behaviors associated with ASD as well as effective behavior

management strategies.

Carrie

Carrie served in the U.S. Air Force and worked in animal welfare before becoming a SPED teacher specializing in severe disabilities. She was inspired to enter the field after her son was diagnosed with Multiple Disabilities (MD). Carrie has experience working with students with Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Intellectual Disabilities (ID), and ASD. She has held multiple SPED positions, including aide and resource teacher, and she now works in a self-contained kindergarten classroom.

Dana

Dana has dual degrees in elementary education and special education (K-12, mild to moderate). Despite starting her career just three years ago, Dana has worked with a range of ages and special needs. She began in a high school MD classroom, and has since worked with fifth and sixth graders, and now is an intervention specialist and resource teacher serving students in second through fourth grades. Dana attributes her interest in becoming a SPED teacher to her student teaching experience. During that time, she shadowed an intervention specialist. Dana enjoyed seeing the differences between general education and special education, and ultimately discovered her passion for working with students with special needs.

Emma

Growing up in a family of educators, Emma's path as an educator seemed destined, despite her initial resistance during college. Emma ultimately embraced her calling in special education, inspired by experiences assisting in her mother's classroom and the energy she felt interacting with the students. Emma has remained at the rural high school where she was hired during Covid. There she shares a diverse caseload of 30 students with the school's other SPED

teacher. Emma specializes in the life skills program for grades 9-12 and the transition program for students aged 18-21. Despite having a broad K-12 special education certification, Emma asserts that life skills are her passion and wheelhouse.

Faye

Faye has been working with children since she was 12, starting with babysitting and volunteering in a daycare. This evolved into teaching in a preschool at 19 and later nannying while attending college. Before the birth of her first child, Faye decided to pursue teaching full-time. She completed her degree online while student teaching in a specialized behavior program for preschoolers. After graduation and receiving her certification, Faye continued working in the program for preschoolers with potential emotional disabilities and behavior disorders. Currently, she teaches students aged three to five, including those with Level 3 ASD, which requires maximum support. Faye finds great fulfillment in her work and relationships with her paraeducator staff.

Gina

After graduating college with a dual major in Biology and Psychology, Gina pursued a career in healthcare. She took a break to raise her children, but actively volunteered in their elementary classrooms. Encouraged by a teacher who noticed her enthusiasm, Gina became a paraeducator and worked in that role for nine years. She was drawn to special education and enjoyed working the student population, and after a few years, she had the opportunity to work with a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) who inspired her to return to school and earn a master's degree. Gina went on to receive dual certification in elementary and special education. She is passionate about her students and discovering effective ways to manage challenging behavior.

Holly

Holly has a deep-rooted passion for teaching and supporting students with diverse needs. Even at a young age, she desired a future career in education and found that she gravitated to children who needed extra support, including those on the autism spectrum and with ADHD. Holly attributes her interest and ability to her own ASD diagnosis and the example her mother set as a caregiver and advocate. Motivated by rewarding experiences as a camp counselor and later as a student teacher, Holly pursued specialized field placements in special education and completed a comprehensive five-year program. During her final year of school, she served as a teaching assistant in an Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) preschool, and upon graduating, accepted a teaching position in the same program. Recently, Holly transitioned to a public school where she teaches in a self-contained autism classroom.

Iris

Iris originally aimed to teach kindergarten. She pursued a degree in Early Childhood Education, where she student taught in second and third grades. Despite her disappointment that these placements were with older students, she changed course when she experienced a kindergarten classroom and realized it was not her calling after all. She faced a tough job market following graduation, and after five years of subbing and working as an assistant, Iris returned to school to attain a master's in special education. With this additional endorsement, Iris worked in a K-2 SPED classroom, and this past year was transferred to a Pre-K SPED self-contained classroom two weeks before the school year began.

Jane

After gaining early experience with a company specializing in autism support following high school, Jane pursued a bachelor's degree in general education. However, after a year in the

field, she realized it wasn't the right fit. She subsequently completed a licensure program in special education and taught with an emergency license for three years. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Jane provides respite care for children with autism. Currently, she manages a demanding schedule as a full-time teacher and part-time afterschool caregiver while pursuing a master's degree. Jane teaches preschool through second grade in a self-contained classroom where students' disabilities range from moderate to severe.

Kate

With a BCBA certification, Kate began her career in a private agency specializing in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). After seven years, she transitioned to a local school district as a Behavior Analyst where she supported elementary and middle school students for a couple of years. Kate's commitment to professional growth led her to attain an early childhood special education credential in 2021. Currently, she serves as a self-contained classroom teacher, where she continues to employ ABA practices with students with moderate to severe disabilities. Kate feels blessed to have a background in behavior management, noting many SPED teachers are underprepared for the behavior challenges they may encounter.

Results

The focus of this phenomenological study was to describe novice special education teachers' (SETs) lived experiences of attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. This study was guided by a central research question and three sub-questions. All 11 participants submitted a user-generated mind map in handwritten or digital form via email. Two participants (Allen and Beth) submitted three unique mind maps prior to that data collection method being modified to stimulate recruitment. In total, 15 mind maps were collected and analyzed. All 11 participants responded to the journal prompt three times in Google Forms. In

total, 33 journal prompt responses were collected and analyzed. All 11 participants completed an in-person interview via the password-protected Zoom platform. Post-interview member checking was completed by all participants via email.

Data collection and analysis for this study adhered to Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological design. According to this design, I attempted to bracket my presuppositions by reflecting in an *epoché* journal (Appendix M) throughout data collection and analysis. I applied the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994) to all my transcribed data. This process involved a preliminary review of the data, followed by deeper, iterative reading for significant, irrelevant, and ambiguous statements. Horizonalized statements were then open-coded and consolidated for emergent themes, leading to textual and structural descriptions and a composite description of the shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). Four primary themes and nine sub-themes are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes and Sub-themes for Triangulated Data Sources

Theme	Sub-themes
Acceptance	Severe Behaviors Recurring Behavior Challenges
Understanding	Communication Deficits Dispositional Attributes
Management	Behavior Management Staff Management Classroom Management
Motivation	Path and Passion Long-Term Strain

Acceptance

The first theme identified through data analysis was acceptance, and the two sub-themes that emerged were severe behaviors and recurring behavior challenges. Participants' acceptance reveals early recognition that persistent and severe challenging behaviors are characteristic of special education settings. Data showed notable adaptability among participants who have grown accustomed to behavioral demands despite their limited experience. All 11 participants across the three data sources acknowledged challenging behavior is a typical and unsurprising part of their classroom experience. Allen explained challenging behavior is "a battle every day I'll have to face and to deal. But I'm getting used to it. It's just like they're becoming normal." In her interview, Beth explained how she has adapted:

> A good half of my students display challenging behaviors on a regular basis. They look like screaming, hitting, kicking, scratching, biting, cursing. … Last year was my first year teaching, and I had a very challenging student who's now in our intensive behavioral unit. … Every single day there was some sort of incident where I was physically attacked. So, I've gotten used to a lot, and I've learned a lot, from him and from my other students.

Severe Behaviors

Mind maps, journal responses, and interviews revealed novice SETs are responsible for a range of behaviors. Using deductive coding based on Kim's (2023) classification of challenging behaviors, disruptive behaviors (coded 56 times) were the most cited by participants in mind maps and journal responses, followed by aggression (37), lack of self-management (26), inappropriate/immature behavior (22), harming others (20), antisocial behavior (10), self-injury (9), destruction (6), and personality disorder (4). Participants confirmed Kim's (2023) assertion that challenging behaviors generally manifest in combination. For example, 62 of the 96 deductive-coded responses were multi-type challenging behaviors occurring simultaneously. A

list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Severe Behaviors

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Hitting / Punching	119
Kicking	83
Scratching	12
Spitting	11
Eloping	107
Throwing	42
Yelling / Screaming	96
Cursing	27
Dropping to Floor	60
Climbing	77

When asked in interviews which behaviors were the most challenging for them, participant responses varied. Six participants—Beth, Carrie, Emma, Faye, Iris, and Jane—selected behaviors that are more obvious based on published data (Kim, 2023). Beth shared she struggles with behaviors "that feel very personal and almost violating" such as being spat upon or having her "glasses slapped off of [her] face." Faye likewise cited spitting as particularly challenging because "it's really hard to break." Carrie and Iris agreed that students who harm other students are the most challenging. Iris said, "if they hit me, it's whatever. But it's the other kids I worry about." Emma also found aggression directed at other students difficult. "That one's really scary, because we have to evacuate the room," Emma explained in her interview. She added that verbal outbursts (swearing) cause a "domino effect" of anxious behavior among students, and eloping results in lost instructional time—both of which she finds highly challenging. Jane stated about eloping: "When they're contained in the classroom, it's easy to redirect that behavior. But once they leave the room, …it's hard to come back."

The other five participants described nuanced behaviors that may be considered less severe. For example, Holly said dropping to the floor was especially challenging not only because the student is engaging in self-injury, but because there does not appear to be a reasonable explanation for it. Kate identified verbal protest and climbing on classroom furniture, not because they are particularly severe, but for the student who exhibits these behaviors, he appears to be doing it for negative attention and therefore, the behaviors are harder to manage. Allen and Dana selected behaviors that may be considered minimally severe, but for them, these behaviors are challenging for their potential to frustrate and disrupt. Allen described inattentive, unmotivated high school students who are "busy using their phones or, like, talking." Dana, a resource teacher who works with second through fourth grade, described behaviors that require repetitive redirection as challenging, such as not listening or following instructions. She called these behaviors a "learned helplessness" that requires "someone sitting next to them 24/7." The most surprising response came from Gina, who said her greatest challenges are caused by behaviors that are beyond her ability to support. She stated:

> It's probably coming from their home environment. I work in a Title I school and I feel like some of my kids don't have their basic needs met at home, or that there is a lot of trauma in their background. And I know that what we're providing here is probably not enough to help support them. I feel like my hands are tied, and…our kids sometimes need something so much more than what we can offer here.

Recurring Behavior Challenges

While the data showed that severity of behavior varied by age group, disabilities represented, and classroom type, all 11 participants alluded to the recurring nature of challenging

behavior. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme is presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Recurring Behavior Challenges

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Repetitive	11
All the time	30
Hourly	17
Daily	23
Weekly	4

Iris, who works with Pre-K through kindergarten, explained the frequency differences between her younger and older students:

> With the kiddos that I've got, [behaviors occur] at least every day. The days I have my three-year-olds are definitely heavier, so I would say hourly on Mondays and Tuesdays, but then just here and there the rest of the week.

Nine participants agreed challenging behavior was a daily occurrence. Beth stated, "it depends on the day" but challenging behaviors are common in her classroom "on a regular basis, sometimes hourly." Similarly, Kate said she experiences challenging behavior "on an hourly basis" and "sometimes it feels like minute-by-minute." Jane shared in her interview challenging behavior occurs "every day, all day" with "six out of the eight kids every hour, between running out of the room or throwing something or hitting people." Her comments highlighted the mental and emotional toll recurring behavior challenges present; she went on to describe the frustration and annoyance she feels having to "chase a kid down the hallway 20 different times in a day." In one of her journal responses, Carrie also focused on the impact of frequent behaviors, by writing, "It can be very frustrating to go from one challenging behavior to another."

Regardless of the frequency, participants' mind map and interview responses reflect a general acceptance that recurring challenging behaviors are unavoidable in special education settings. This was especially true for participants who work in self-contained elementary classrooms and serve students with ASD. Faye, a Pre-K self-contained teacher, wrote in her mind map, challenging behaviors "often occur when students need to transition from a preferred to non-preferred activity or task." Transitions are common in special education settings where multiple students with moderate to severe disabilities are being served. Kate, who also teaches Pre-K and kindergarten self-contained, likewise confirmed this sub-theme in her interview: "I do see challenging behaviors all the time. Everyone has different challenging behaviors." She further explained, "these behaviors don't go away overnight. There is not a cure to it. These challenging behaviors are going to go on until we work at it."

Understanding

The second theme identified from data analysis was understanding. The two sub-themes which stemmed from the main theme were communication deficits and dispositional attributes. Most participants demonstrated significant understanding of students' diagnoses, their unique academic and social needs, and their family and home life factors. Participants' ability to understand causes was particularly evident in mind map data, wherein all 11 participants provided detailed explanations for student behaviors, ranging from unmet needs and sensory overload to academic anxiety and negative interactions with classmates. However, interview responses revealed some participants struggle to understand what causes certain challenging behaviors. For example, Iris said she has struggled the entire year to determine what causes behaviors since she was transferred to a new grade level and class of students. Allen also admitted he struggles to understand students' lack of motivation and disruptive behaviors when

they have access to first-rate resources and learning opportunities.

One participant, Emma, said she is still learning and becoming better at understanding causes of behaviors, yet she struggled early on to understand why students were allowing challenging behaviors to disrupt their education. Others, including Carrie, Dana, Faye, Gina, Holly, Jane, and Kate, feel confident in their ability to understand the causes of their students' challenging behaviors. These participants attributed their understanding to discussions with students' families and ongoing data collection and analysis. Most of these participants use the antecedent-behavior-consequence (ABC) model and develop their understanding of the causes for recurring behaviors based on long-term data collection. Responses across the three data points showed that despite their limited years of experience, novice SETs can effectively utilize behavior analysis tools and leverage relationships with fellow teachers, support staff, and students' families to determine the causes of challenging behaviors. Ultimately, all participants indicated understanding the causes of recurring challenging behaviors takes time, sometimes months and even up to a year or more.

Communication Deficits

Across the three data sources, all 11 participants discussed the impact communication difficulties and deficits have on student behavior. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme is presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Communication Deficits

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Communication challenges	70
Non-verbal	28
Behavior is a form of communication	20

Communication challenges are so common the maxim, “behavior is a form of communication,” attributed to Conscious Disciplines founder, Dr. Becky Bailey (2018), was referenced by Beth, Gina, and Jane. Jane stated about her self-contained students:

> If acting out is their only means of communication, then you kind of just have to let it happen…. I've gotten more patient with it, and just more understanding that behavior is a form of communication. Nine out of 10 times they're trying to tell you something, and if you just get frustrated and are mad, then you're never going to figure out what they want or need.

Understanding the impact of communication deficits enables novice SETs to navigate the challenging behaviors they encounter daily. Recognizing behavior as a form of communication has helped participants learn to cope with everyday disruptions, develop more empathetic and effective responses, and seek to understand the underlying needs and emotions that cause students’ challenging behaviors. Faye wrote about this in her mind map: “When students feel hunger but cannot express their feeling, it can lead to dysregulation. Teachers need to provide resources to help students better understand their body and what it needs.” In her mind map and interview, Carrie cited several basic needs that cause non-verbal students to exhibit challenging behavior when they are deprived, including food, water, restroom breaks and accidents, adequate sleep, and attention. She explained attending to these various needs for multiple students is overwhelming. However, even though it takes time and increased awareness, Carrie feels it is worth the effort to get to know her students well and check on them often to ensure their needs are met and challenging behaviors are avoided.

The data shows novice SETs encounter severe and recurring behaviors whether they work with non-verbal students exclusively or not. Participants reported their students with

varying communication abilities still struggle to effectively communicate their ideas, emotions, and needs. Participants demonstrated understanding the communication needs of a range of students. Multiple participants described students having difficulty processing the verbal and non-verbal communication of others. Gina brought up in her interview that many students' communication challenges are rooted in trauma, which complicates their ability to communicate with peers and teachers. Nearly all participants provided at least one example of a student who lacked the necessary coping skills to communicate unmet needs constructively. Another significant result emerged from journal responses, which provided significant evidence that students at all grade levels exhibit challenging behavior when trying to communicate their need for autonomy or control over a situation. Carrie wrote about this in her mind map: "Giving choices whenever possible is important for everyone but especially for students that feel unregulated." Participants reported students' inability to self-advocate frequently manifests as aggression, withdrawal, or elopement.

Despite the challenges communication difficulties and deficits present, some participants expressed their understanding in surprisingly positive terms. For example, Gina and Holly both likened communicating behaviors to puzzles they enjoy figuring out even though they can often be volatile. Gina shared in her interview: "Seriously, I love behavior. I'm always fascinated by it. There's a reason, and I always feel like, man, that's got to suck for that kid to be that angry and frustrated and mad all the time." Holly similarly stated: "It's kind of like a puzzle you have to figure out in your head as to what is going on. And I actually kind of find it cool." Dana shared this sentiment, stating, "I've always felt like I can have a bit more fun and flexibility with my students, and I know the challenging behaviors, you know, can make your days long and tiring and hard, but I find it honestly more enjoyable." Participants also expressed relief and excitement

when communication improved behavior outcomes. Iris relayed her excitement in this way: “I have one particular student that I've noticed, like, his language is just suddenly booming, and the behaviors are decreasing, which is super awesome for him and for me.”

Dispositional Attributes

Mind map and journal prompt data indicate a high prevalence of challenging behaviors that stem from internal and stable causes. This suggests most participants attribute behaviors to dispositional causes, which according to Weiner’s (1986) three-dimensional framework, means behaviors are internal to the student and unlikely to change over time. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Dispositional Attributes

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Internal/stable attributes	68
Unintentional	41
Intentional	17
Attention-seeking	11

Participants who perceived challenging behaviors in this way demonstrate a common understanding that their students have limited control over their actions because their behaviors are directly linked to special needs diagnoses. They frequently mentioned students’ tendencies toward oppositional behavior and aggression were consistent over time, reinforcing the finding that these behaviors are stable. Multiple participants referenced specific diagnoses—ADHD, ASD, ODD, and PTSD—when writing about or discussing students’ inability to control their behaviors. An example of this arose in Holly’s interview: “One of my students this year had been

hitting other kids completely unprovoked. They found out that it was because of the ADHD medication he was on, that it was leading to the aggressive behaviors."

The analysis also revealed an equal mix of controllable and uncontrollable behaviors, highlighting different opinions among participants regarding the intentionality behind students' behavior. Participants who perceived students' behaviors as intentional were more inclined to attribute them to attention-seeking motives. This group of participants tended to hold more negative views of students, often interpreting behaviors as being more deliberate, disruptive, and frustrating. For example, Allen attributed disruptions and work refusal to students' laziness and sense of entitlement. Gina said she looks at body language clues for intention: "When they smile at me when they're doing something, you know, naughty, I know that it's intentional." Jane also looks for facial expressions such as laughing to identify intentional behaviors. Holly said sustained eye contact is often an indicator: "If the kid's looking at you dead in the eyes and looking for your, like, reaction as they're doing something, they know they're not supposed to be doing it. Autistic or not, they know."

Holly, a participant diagnosed with ASD at the age of two, explained how personal experiences with ASD shaped her approach to assessing and managing her students' challenging behavior. Holly said that she detects more intentionality in students' behavior because she knows first-hand what students with ASD are capable of, and that they are often allowed to act out due to their diagnoses. Contrary to expectations that she might be more lenient, Holly explained she maintains higher expectations for her students because she wants to prepare them for real-world challenges.

> As I've gotten older, I've kind of learned what my mother did for me, and how she was very clear: There's no special world; we've got to learn how to live in this one. … That's

> really what for me, what drives, even if I'm a little strict with my kiddos on like behavior expectations. Yeah, they need to learn to wait. Sorry, will I purposely take them to a special five minutes early so they have to stand at the wall and wait? Yes, they need to learn to wait. They need to learn how to tolerate certain noises. They need to learn how to, you know, as I said, they need to learn how to function.

While multiple participants mentioned intentional behaviors, the majority agreed students' challenging behaviors were predominantly unintentional. According to Carrie, "the kids are rarely intentional. They don't go out of their way to upset you, and if they are responding to something inappropriately, there's only something there that caused that, and they lack the skills to do it appropriately." Consensus in the data showed participants who adopt dispositional attributions for student behavior are more focused on accommodating and understanding those behaviors. Ultimately, responses across the three data points confirm getting to know students on a personal level is the best way to determine intentionality and address behaviors accordingly.

Management

The third theme identified from data analysis was management, and the three sub-themes that emerged were behavior management, staff management, and classroom management. All 11 participants wrote about or discussed management aspects that are required of them within their special education role. These include managing behaviors, paraprofessional staff, expectations of administrators and general education teachers, and classroom environments. Management responsibilities served as a source of stress, and multiple participants described having to manage more students and severe behaviors with less time, less resources, and less support. Kate stated in her interview: "The funny thing about the public education system is that we're always poor. We're always broken. We're always short." The three sub-themes represent areas where novice

SETs struggle to supervise and address challenging behaviors.

Behavior Management

Novice SETs face several challenges and concerns regarding behavior management. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Behavior Management

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Home vs. school	54
Behavior management systems	41
Trial and error	18
Inadequate training	4

One significant issue multiple participants identified during interviews is imposed behavior management systems which do not align with the specific needs of SETs or their students. These school- or district-mandated programs can be cumbersome to implement and ineffective, particularly reward systems. Carrie, Dana, and Faye described complex reward systems that involve tracking scores and monitoring charts for weekly or monthly prizes. For SETs who are already overextended, additional data tracking associated with mandated systems can interfere with essential behavior management efforts.

Gina and Jane reported their school prizes are unappealing to students, especially students with special needs. Gina admitted she does not participate fully in the reward system at her school, stating, “I not a big fan. … I shouldn't have to bribe you to get your work done. … Seldom do I ever hand them out. I forget.” Jane provided a thorough explanation for her dissatisfaction with the reward system:

The regular ed kids have kindness cubes, and they have to earn cubes and fill up their jar.

> If I had a jar, it would get dumped out a hundred times a day, so that's not going to work. And then they do shoutouts where, if they do something good, their name gets called and they go to the office and they get a pencil. We tried that, and the kids had no interest in getting a pencil, so it was more of a hassle and struggle to transition to the office and back to get said pencil than anything else.

Jane said she plans to implement her own themed behavior system in the coming school year, choosing to "ask for forgiveness later" when she can show that her approach is more effective.

Another challenge novice SETs face regarding behavior management is the necessity to rely on trial and error for suitable student-specific behavior management strategies. Beth described it this way: "A lot of it [is] trial and error, like, if I give more attention, does this stop? If I give less attention, does it stop? If I'm able to get them to communicate what they want, does that help?" Faye, Holly, and Kate discussed their process in terms of individualized data collection, analysis, implementation, evaluation, and reflection. This long-term, multi-step approach reveals the complex thinking and commitment required of novice SETs when immediate results are rare, and setbacks are frequent. In one of her journal responses, Kate wrote a student's biting left her "frustrated because this is something we have been working on every day for the past nine months." In her interview, Kate shared a more positive experience of students removing their shoes:

> It took us a year and a half to work on this to be honest…. I tried the "first, then" contingency. I made social stories for them. Just repeated learning opportunities to work on this, and just really blood, sweat, and tears. And she's not taking off her shoes, and her feet are safe, and that's that. That's a big win for me.

Additionally, there is a significant disconnect between school and home expectations for

students. Multiple participants, including Dana, Emma, Gina, Iris, Jane, and Kate, expressed frustration over negative carry-over behaviors and lack of responsibility placed on students at home. Dana concluded in her mind map that the identified behavior was due to the student not being "responsible for carrying out tasks at home," which would necessitate "a conversation with the parents." She admitted: "This makes me nervous because the parents may feel that I am criticizing their parenting style or telling them how to parent their kid. I am a younger teacher so this could upset the parents." Similarly, Kate contributed a student's verbal protest, climbing, and aggression to "the lack of attention at home." She further explained in her mind map, "I feel conflicted because I know he needs the attention but doesn't seek attention appropriately."

Low expectations at home often lead to students not using the tools they have been trained to use, such as communication devices for non-verbal students. As Jane pointed out, a lack of support from parents such as this can lead to further behavior problems at school. "If they're getting away with these things at home, you know, climbing on the counters or running out of a room, it's going be really hard to correct that at school," Jane explained in her interview. The disconnect between school and home is particularly problematic following breaks. Several participants mentioned students' behavior regresses and much of the trained progress is lost when they return to school, leading to additional frustration as they must start over from scratch. Dana explained: "I feel like we kind of figured it out, and then, you know, Christmas break hits, and then it's like restarting again."

Lastly, multiple participants admitted to feeling unprepared for the demands of behavior management in previous and current roles. Emma pointed out her training lacked specific focus on behavior management, and she felt pressure to learn as much as she could on the job to make up for it. Dana, a double major in general education and special education (mild to moderate),

felt unprepared for her first placement out of college with high school students with severe disabilities. Similarly, Iris shared she was transferred just two weeks before the start year to a younger, larger caseload of students with more severe behaviors. These experiences confirmed Kate's concern that schools are placing novice SETs out of necessity and not providing adequate support and training to ensure their success.

Staff Management

All 11 participants mentioned the collaborative aspects of their job. Some described the relationships in negative terms while others focused on the positive interactions with general education teachers, administrators, and aides. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme is presented in Table 10.

Table 10

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Staff Management

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Paras	39
Gen Ed	5
Admin	9

The two participants who work in inclusive settings expressed concerns about having to defer to general education teachers for behavior issues. Allen, who has self-contained experience, was instructed not to engage in behavior management in the general education classroom. He stated, "as an inclusion teacher, we don't have the authority of conducting or implementing behavior management." As a result, Allen typically waits to address challenging behaviors until the end of class or long after the behavior occurs. He explained this imposed discretion impacts his ability to support his students in the moment. Emma shared that her high school students often elope from their general education classes when they become frustrated

with the teacher or the content. These students will seek assistance in Emma's room when she is teaching her Life Skills course, causing her other students to miss out on instructional time and attention. Despite feeling limited in how they can manage behaviors, Allen and Emma agreed it is more important to maintain collaborative relationships with general education teachers in order to confer about behavior challenges and support students academically.

The data revealed differing opinions on the level of support participants receive from general education teachers and administrators. Most participants expressed general education teachers do not understand the unique challenges of special education. Gina and Iris reported instances where teachers complained about students' behaviors in shared spaces, increasing pressure on them to exert more control or alter their routines. Carrie and Gina also noted general education teachers sometimes say or act in ways that trigger challenging behaviors. This can exacerbate problems and perpetuate negative reactions to students with special needs. Some participants felt administrators could do more to help to alleviate strained relationships with general education staff. Emma provided an example of this in her journal response:

> I feel administration and I need to come up with a better plan to handle this situation. Me being gone from my class is impacting the students' learning, and the student who is eloping isn't getting their instruction in their class either. If admin and I could come up with a plan, they could take over for me when I am with the eloping student, and I can support my students in class.

The data further highlighted concerns about administrative support. Gina, Iris, Jane, and Kate held similar opinions that administrators were failing to provide adequate support and intervention. Gina felt administrators failed to enforce appropriate consequences for negative behaviors and fell short in fostering a respectful school culture. Iris contributed her

overwhelming caseload to administrators' unrealistic expectations. Similarly, Jane felt administrators held unrealistic expectations which was evident in their selection of unqualified aides and insistence that mandated behavior management strategies be used despite their ineffectiveness. Finally, Kate provided a candid criticism of administrators, saying they are more concerned with avoiding due process and appeasing parents instead of supporting teachers. She explained, "just the lack of support…it kills the joy I have for teaching, or anything that concerns special education students." She added that administrators "don't help us at all…they see us as numbers." Despite these negative perceptions, some positive experiences were reported. For example, Allen shared that he felt very supported by his special education administrator because she actively encourages teachers to pursue professional development and leads by example. Faye also mentioned receiving substantial administrative support in the form of a manageable caseload, ample classroom resources, and qualified support staff.

A recurring theme that emerged in the journal prompts and interviews was the significant impact paraeducators have on behavior management success. Negative experiences reported by participants often stemmed from unqualified support staff or conflicting approaches to behavior management. Carrie and Emma both cited paraeducator ineffectiveness in their mind map and journal responses. One participant, Jane, shared negative interactions with paraeducators caused her to consider quitting midway through the year. She stated in her interview, "My old paras were, you know, old enough to be my mom or my grandma. They'd been paras for years and were set in their ways." After both paraeducators quit during winter break, Jane was assigned two new paras who she found more receptive to training. When asked if she expected the new paras to return, she said, "I sure hope so or I might threaten to quit. Then they'll give them back."

A common view among participants was that there is not enough para support. Emma

mentioned this in her mind map. Similarly, Gina said in her interview that her school's paraeducators were stretched thin between self-contained and inclusive responsibilities. Any paraeducator absences created support gaps down the line in classrooms across her school. While Iris reported having "two really strong paras," she had "one that is not as strong and helpful. So sometimes that kind of escalates things because she's a little dramatic." Of the 11 participants, Faye and Kate were the only participants to report that they had consistent, qualified paraeducator support. The data showed paraeducators can make or break the classroom experience for novice SETs, confirming the need for proper paraeducator training, clear communication, and strong collaborative relationships.

Classroom Management

Data showed classroom management is of critical importance to novice SETs. Participants emphasized effectively managing their classroom environment allows them to observe, identify, and manage challenging behaviors more efficiently. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme is presented in Table 11.

Table 11

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Classroom Management

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Visuals / materials	85
Calm space	46
Timer	44
Layout / configuration	5

Elements of classroom management mentioned by participants include classroom layout, adaptive furniture, visuals, calming spaces, timers, and other materials. Holly noted the effectiveness of visual schedules and timers in her mind map, pointing out these tools "have been super effective in reducing" students' challenging behavior when transitioning from "preferred to

[a] less preferred activity or space." Emma shared she utilizes the calming space in her classroom regularly to help students self-regulate and de-escalate challenging behavior. Gina, Holly, Iris, and Kate also described the use of calming or "safe space" for behavioral de-escalation in their journal responses.

Faye provided multiple classroom management examples in her mind map, journal, and interview responses. Firstly, she utilizes choice boards or "first/then" boards, giving students more control over their experiences and reducing the occurrence of challenging behaviors. She uses laminated pages throughout the classroom to protect against a student who spits, and bean bags for protection when students are physically aggressive. Faye also emphasized the importance of age-appropriate furniture to ensure students' safety: "We had one last week who climbed up on the table trying to elope from the group. Luckily, our tables are really tiny, 'cause it's preschool, so he wasn't too high off the ground."

While participants agree these classroom management measures decrease the impact of challenging behaviors, some participants noted it can be difficult to execute them considering the time and effort involved. Dana and Jane mentioned in their mind maps that preparing and using visuals is time consuming, and Dana admitted it could be overwhelming to implement them effectively in addition to all her other management responsibilities. Jane specifically addressed difficulties associated with timers:

> We have a "take a break" spot with a timer. It's like a two-minute break. So, if they're climbing on the counter, they go take a break for two minutes. They run out of the room; they take a break for two minutes. I honestly don't think it does anything, but that is what the school district said we needed to do. That was how they wanted us to deal with the behaviors. And they just keep saying that eventually they'll get it…and they'll stop doing

> it. But, I mean, for a whole year it didn't stop anyone. They thought sitting in the chair was the funny part.

Iris's situation was a notable example of the classroom management challenges faced by novice SETs who accept placements under less than ideal circumstances. She was transferred to a new role just two weeks before the start of the school year. In addition to a younger, larger caseload with more diverse needs, she was teamed with paraeducators with whom she had never worked before. Her classroom only became fully staffed midway through the year. Due to these issues, Iris admitted she had not had the time to prepare the necessary visuals or effectively manage her classroom. As a result, Iris was candid about her struggles in her interview:

> I had a harder time remaining calm when behaviors came up just because my schedule was busier. So, I think the workload on my end caused me to not have the patience, or just have a shorter fuse with the kiddos, which they definitely can pick up on. They smell fear. They can pick up on if any of us are stressed or in a mood…. I think managing my own stress is probably a big factor in how I respond to the kids.

Motivation

The fourth theme identified from data analysis was motivation, and the two sub-themes that emerged were path and passion and long-term strain. When asked to rate their motivation to continue teaching students with challenging behavior from 1 to 10, participants' average rating was 8.5, with four of the 11 participants rating their motivation a 10 out of 10. Participants provided the following reasons for their relatively high motivation: They enjoy the unpredictability of special education as opposed to the routine nature of a traditional classroom; they perceive dealing with challenging behavior as an opportunity to develop advanced professional skills; they feel personal satisfaction from observing students' progress and achieve

unexpected and positive outcomes; and they feel they have made an impact on students' lives and have helped them overcome immense challenges. Overall, participants contribute their motivation to initial inspiration and ongoing passion for the students they serve.

Although participants reported high motivation, mind map, journal, and interview responses belie contradictory thoughts and feelings that may be concealed below the surface. For example, Carrie reported a high level of motivation and mentioned she "loves" and "adores" her students four different times during her interview. However, Carrie's mind map and journal responses revealed challenging behavior has resulted in her feeling sad, frustrated, overwhelmed, disheartened, anxious, fearful, guilty, and not trusted by administrators on multiple occasions. These results reveal some participants may feel uncomfortable admitting they struggle with the long-term strain of challenging behavior.

Path and Passion

Multiple participants shared their professional paths and personal passions were an integral part of their motivation to teach students with special needs. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme is presented in Table 12.

Table 12

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Path and Passion

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Passion for special needs	28
Self-efficacy	15
Family of educators	5
Inspired	4

Five of the 11 participants described the influence of familial connection on their decision to pursue a career in special education. Beth's mother was a paraeducator before

becoming the behavior specialist at the school where Beth is currently employed. In her interview, Beth fondly recounted her experience volunteering in the Pre-K self-contained classroom and the intensive behavioral unit alongside her mother before and after school. Emma likewise said that education is "a family thing," and she discovered she shared her mother's passion for special education in college. Carrie's path was inspired by her eldest son who has multiple disabilities. She began her career as an aide and later, after completing her degree, transitioned to her current role working with students with ASD, ID, down syndrome, and cerebral palsy. Holly presented a unique perspective for this sub-theme in that her path was shaped by her personal ASD diagnosis at a young age. She admired the way her mother helped her learn to navigate despite her diagnosis and felt drawn to others who "needed a little extra help."

Three participants—Gina, Jane, and Kate—described their professional paths in relation to their previous experience. Gina left a career in healthcare to volunteer in her children's school, and it was in this role that she discovered her passion for special education. She worked for several years as a paraeducator before returning to school and accepting her current teaching position. She attributed this decision to a former colleague who recognized her enthusiasm and aptitude for the job. Now she asserts, "special education is kind of my sweet spot. I love it." Jane and Kate both began their careers working for agencies serving students with special needs. Kate received formal training in her role and earned her BCBA certification. These two participants spoke in terms of self-efficacy and commitment to the job rather than motivation, highlighting the possibility that inspiration may wane over time as the harsh realities of the work set in.

Long-Term Strain

Despite their passion and dedication, participants acknowledged the significant long-term

strain associated with their profession. A list of open codes leading to the development of this sub-theme is presented in Table 13.

Table 13

Open Codes in Relation to Sub-theme: Long-Term Strain

Open Codes	Occurrence Across All Data
Frustration	135
Stress	74
Time and effort	40
Overwhelmed	18
Exhaustion / fatigue	15
Aging out / facing the inevitable	6
Burnout	4
Disrespect	3

All 11 participants candidly described feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted due to their work. Jane described the experience as,

> Mentally drain[ing], that pretty much sums it up. I'd go home, and I'd be like I can't do this. And then I'd show up the next day and then say it again, “I can't do this.” But here we are, so, we did it; we're going to do it again.

Frustration and stress were referenced numerous times throughout the three data sources, stemming from negative interactions with parents and paraeducators, a lack of resources and support, and feeling disrespected or limited in their capacity to make necessary changes. However, determining the causes of and managing students’ challenging behaviors were chief among participants’ frustrations and sources of stress. For multiple participants, frustration is a common feeling when students do not respond positively to interventions after multiple attempts. In a journal response addressing a student’s noncompliance, Holly wrote, “I’m getting frustrated. I don’t know what else I can do for this child and the district is dragging their feet.” Dana

admitted to feeling frustrated in all three of her journal responses when students' challenging behaviors persisted.

These examples reveal a significant problem facing novice SETs: managing challenging behavior in a special education context requires sustained time and effort. Students' challenging behaviors are inextricably linked to their diagnoses and developmental delays. For many participants, this realization and the associated workload is overwhelming. Dana shared in her interview,

> My first year…I had, you know, the yelling, the avoidance of tasks, the students, just, you know, plopping down in the hall, not moving, the aggression. But now it's less severe, but it's almost more challenging…like right now, my challenging behaviors are, like, not following directions, and you know, not being able to do anything individually. A lot of losing focus and inattentiveness. You know, they're always out of their seat. They're always calling out things. So that's what I'm dealing with now, and that can be challenging, because I just feel like I just repeat myself all day long.

Participants acknowledged their frustration and stress contribute significantly to feelings of exhaustion and fatigue. Gina and Kate both shared that at the end of the school day, they require solitude and complete quiet to deal with overstimulation. Kate described the experience this way,

> I'm exhausted, I mean some days I just, I mean my husband knows it enough now, because I've been doing this for years. I tell him like, "Hey, husband, I just need an hour to myself. Don't talk to me, don't bother me, and I just need to sit in silence." Because a lot of people seem to think…oh, you're so patient because they're hitting you and they're tantruming. But it's so much more than that. It's just bunch of non-verbal students just

babbling really, all at the same time. That auditory input for six hours is just so exhausting, so exhausting, because there is not a moment of silence.

Another significant result was the common concern about aging and injuries, which participants felt would eventually force them to seek other work. One of the youngest participants said she had no intention of leaving special education soon, but she did not know if she would feel the same in 10 years. Gina, who considers herself an older career switcher, also admitted uncertainty regarding how long she would be able to continue due to the physical demands. For Jane, the physical impact is an immediate concern. She suffered a hip injury chasing an eloping student and now requires surgery that will sideline her for six weeks.

Though relatively new to the field, participants' responses reveal that they see the path ahead and realize they will be unable to work in special education until retirement. Kate shared this concern in her interview: "I don't see myself being a self-contained special education teacher for the rest of my life just because I don't think my body could handle it." Awareness of the physical demands and potential for long-term strain confirms the complex and challenging nature of a special education career. It further highlights the need for additional support and resources to retain these passionate professionals.

Outlier Data and Findings

The outlier in this study is one of only two high school teacher participants and the singular male participant. Allen, from southeast Asia, presented a unique perspective influenced by his cultural background and the context of teaching in a foreign country on a temporary work visa. He specifically highlighted cultural differences as a significant challenge in communicating and connecting with his high school students. Additionally, Allen was the only participant to describe his students' challenging behavior as "lazy" and to focus on the negative impact of

technology, particularly cell phones, on students' academics and behavior. Despite these challenges, he expressed building trust with his students through shared interests has been a key strategy in overcoming barriers. In his interview, Allen explained the approach he has adopted to forge connections:

> In the beginning coming here, … I didn't get the chance to build a trust and confidence because I'm an international teacher. I'm not local; I'm, I should say, "alien" to them. So that made me realize I have to do this first like a pattern: You get to talk, know them, who they are, what are their wants, their needs, and then build that, and then slowly you will be gaining the trust in them, and then they will start to believe and talk with you.

Research Question Responses

This transcendental phenomenological study was guided by one central research question and three sub-questions. The research questions were designed to reveal and guide the description of novice SETs' lived experiences attributing causes to students' challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. Four themes emerged during data analysis: (a) acceptance, (b) understanding, (c) management, and (d) motivation. This section provides a brief response to each of the guiding questions and exemplar quotes as evidential support.

Central Research Question

The central research question guiding this study was: How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences with challenging behaviors? This question was designed to provide a holistic view of participants' encounters with challenging behavior. Novice SETs described these experiences as an intense yet important aspect of their role. The data revealed participants, though relatively new to the field, learned to accept severe and persistent challenging behaviors as an intrinsic part of their job. Jane shared, "I didn't have a lot of

challenging behavior until this year, so, it really, like, blindsided me, and I was like, whoa, like, this is real."

Novice SETs frequently face situations where they are hit, bitten, cursed, and spat upon. Iris described her experience this way: "I had a student once who one day didn't have medication and completely destroyed the classroom, ran outside, punched a student. So, I get a lot of, like, the aggressive behaviors. But with Pre-K, I also get a lot of screamers and just throwing." Multiple participants experience these and other severe behavior challenges daily. For Holly, challenging behaviors occur "definitely a few times a day, like three or four, you know. And I'm considering challenging behaviors, the screaming. I have students drop into the floor. I'm considering that a challenging behavior."

The challenging behaviors novice SETs experience are often recurring, requiring a commitment to continual intervention and support. Jane addressed the realities of repetitive behaviors in one of her journal responses. Referring to a student headbutting, she wrote, "In the moment our ability to address the challenging behavior is high, however it is not being carried through in other settings and we have to go through the modeling and repeating multiple times every day." Novice SETs' experiences with severe, recurring challenging behaviors often result in feelings of frustration. Faye shared the following example:

> There's definitely been a few moments where, like, you ask for the same thing, and you're just getting the negative result every time. And you're just like, okay, this is getting frustrating. How can I calm myself down now because I've asked and asked and asked, and you're still refusing, or you're throwing things, or you're trying to come at me.

Sub-Question One

Sub-question one was: How do novice special education teachers describe their

experiences determining causes of challenging behaviors? This sub-question was designed to reveal the methods and mindsets that inform novice SETs' causal attributions for challenging behaviors. Participants described their experiences determining the causes of challenging behaviors as a complex process involving continual observation, data collection, evaluation, and reflection. Kate asserted,

> I'm very data driven. I take very simple ABC data, so, antecedent, behavior, consequence. So, what happened right before the behavior? What does the behavior look like? What happened right after the behavior, to kind of try to figure out the function of the behavior. And I do that for about anywhere from five to 10 consecutive days, just because it takes some time for me to see the trend of the behavior. And based on that, I determine the cause.

Despite their novice status, participants relied heavily on their knowledge of special needs diagnoses, past experiences with other students, communication with parents and colleagues, and trial and error to ascertain potential causes for students' actions. Emma described her approach involving "communication with parents, communication with paraprofessional staff, general education teachers, anyone that's coming in contact with them just to kind of get a read on what's going on, to maybe find that cause." For Beth, determining causes comes down to "trial and error, and seeing what works and what doesn't."

Participants found challenging behaviors unwelcome and upsetting, but recognized they often stem from students' lack of control over their actions. The novice SETs in this study demonstrated significant empathy and deep understanding of their students' unique developmental challenges. Faye presented an example characteristic of this empathetic response: "When students feel hunger but cannot express their feeling, it can lead to dysregulation.

Teachers need to provide resources to help students to better understand their body and what it needs."

Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two was: How do novice special education teachers describe their experiences of successes and failures in addressing challenging behaviors? This sub-question was designed to capture the highs and lows of participants' experiences. Additionally, it was anticipated that what participants considered a success versus a failure would reveal their perceptions of behavior management self-efficacy. Participants described their experiences of successes and failures in addressing challenging behaviors as a journey of learning marked by accomplishment and disappointment.

Novice SETs frequently attribute their successes to building relationships with students. Respect and understanding are integral for behavior improvement. Carrie said,

> My biggest success is…just straight up building relationships with them. And it takes time, especially with challenging behaviors, because I think a lot of people see the challenging behavior, and they get stuck in that. But it really comes from every time it's ever been successful, it's been because I know the kid.

Novice SETs also feel successful when students are receptive to the strategies and tools they have implemented. Holly described a student "who lived in this constant fight or flight mode," which caused him to engage in self-harm. Holly explained that "building up his language" and "giving him a lot of positive praise" eventually led to him realizing he could come to her for solutions. Holly said when it came time to determine his kindergarten placement, "he had a better chance of success" because he learned how to better self-regulate in her care.

Lastly, management aspects contribute significantly to novice SETs' successes and

failures. This includes managing behaviors, support staff, and the classroom environment. Kate explained she does not “shy away from managing challenging behaviors” because if “behavior is not managed, there's no teaching happening.” However, novice SETs need sufficient, qualified support staff to ensure behaviors are managed consistently and effectively. An example was Emma, who determined one of her students “thrives on the back and forth between her and the para” and will intentionally act out to fluster the paraeducator. Despite Emma’s best efforts to “work with the student on behavior regulation,” the student “keeps reverting back to the behavior because she wants the attention.”

Sub-Question Three

Sub-question three was: How do novice special education teachers describe their motivation to continue teaching through their experiences with challenging behaviors? This sub-question was designed to reveal novice SET retention indicators based on participants’ current level of enthusiasm for their work. Participants’ motivation was difficult to discern from the data. While participants self-reported a relatively high level of motivation (an average of 8.5 out of 10), their candid responses revealed similarly high levels of frustration, stress, and fatigue. These results indicate novice SETs may experience internal conflict due to the passion they feel for the students and the strain they experience on the job.

Novice SETs who receive sufficient support and resources and feel confident in their ability to manage challenging behaviors, are more likely to report higher motivation. Discussing her behavior management abilities, Beth asserted, “I think I'm pretty good at it. I think I respond pretty well.” She was also able to identify her shortcomings, sharing, “I think sometimes I'm not the most patient. Sometimes I'm at my wit's end, and sometimes I match the energy when I shouldn't.” In addition to her strong self-awareness, Beth benefits from working with a

supportive team which she can call for assistance when behaviors become too challenging. Unsurprisingly, Beth rated her motivation a nine, stating, “Yes, it's hard, but it's the most satisfying. When you see the progress, it makes it all worth it when you see how far they've come.” Conversely, novice SETs who feel unsupported, regardless of their self-efficacy, are more likely to report lower motivation. Kate said, “I feel stuck because I know what to do but I am not given the resources to do what I need to do. But I also feel conflicted because I can't just give up. I feel myself burning out.” Iris, who described feeling unsupported in her role, admitted, “I feel like right now, I'm kind of like at a six or seven, because, like, I do want to keep doing this, but, like, physically and mentally, I don't know that it's sustainable.”

Novice SETs rely on self-care strategies such as quiet time and solitude to mitigate effects of stress and fatigue. For those who struggle with motivation, these practices may not be enough to sustain them long-term. However, novice SETs derive deep fulfillment from seeing their students make progress, and they are driven by a desire to advocate for students with special needs. This intrinsic motivation enables novice SETs to continue teaching despite the challenges they face.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study regarding novice SETs’ experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. The findings reflect experiences of 11 participants with one to five years of special education teaching experience and were organized according to four themes, nine sub-themes, one outlier, one central research question, and three sub-research questions. The four themes that emerged from data analysis were (a) acceptance, (b) understanding, (c) management, and (d) motivation. In vivo quotes from participants were provided to support these themes. Results of

the mind maps, journal prompt responses, and interviews revealed novice SETs frequently face severe and persistent challenging behaviors. While many novice SETs report high motivation levels due to their passion for helping students with special needs, sustained stress and a lack of support can lead to burnout. Effective behavior management and sufficient support are integral for sustaining motivation and retaining novice SETs long-term.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe novice special education teachers' (SETs) experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. This chapter begins by discussing the emergent themes and interpretations of the significant findings. It continues with a discussion of the implications for policy and practice as well as theoretical and methodological implications. The study's limitations and delimitations are then addressed, followed by recommendations for future research. This chapter concludes with a summary of the study.

Discussion

This study examined novice SETs' lived experiences attributing causes to students' challenging behaviors in K-12 public schools. Triangulated data from 11 participants' mind maps, journal prompt responses, and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, and from which four themes emerged: (1) acceptance, (2) understanding, (3) management, and (4) motivation. This section is a discussion of the study's findings as they relate to the primary themes and interpretations supported by empirical and theoretical literature and participants' experiences. Five subsections comprise this discussion, and they are interpretation of findings, implications for policy or practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Four themes and nine sub-themes were identified through data analysis. The primary themes—acceptance, understanding, management, and motivation—aligned with the theoretical

framework of this phenomenological research study. Interpersonal aspects of Weiner's (1985, 2010) attribution theory of motivation are evident in the first two themes. Acceptance consists of two sub-themes: severe behaviors and recurring behavior challenges. This theme indicated novice SETs not only acknowledge severe and persistent challenging behaviors are typical in special education settings, but that they have adapted to these behavioral demands. The second theme, understanding, consists of two sub-themes: communication deficits and dispositional attributes. Novice SETs rely on their knowledge of special needs diagnoses, communication with colleagues and families, and behavioral analysis tools to determine the causes of challenging behaviors.

The intrapersonal sub-framework of Weiner's (1985, 2010) theory is evident in the last two themes. Three sub-themes emerged from the primary theme of management: behavior management, staff management, and classroom management. Novice SETs described significant challenges they face balancing their responsibilities to students, support staff, and the learning environment. The final theme, motivation, consists of two sub-themes: path and passion and long-term strain. Despite their reportedly high motivation to continue teaching students with challenging behavior, novice SETs exhibited indicators of burnout caused by persistent stress, frustration, overwhelming workloads, and physical injuries.

Navigating the Newcomer Experience

Multiple participants acknowledged the initial or current challenging placements they were assigned were most likely due to their newcomer status. These less-than-ideal situations reflect how administrators often address SET shortages: by filling last-minute vacancies and covering high turnover in their schools with novice teachers (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sutcher et al., 2019). However, these assignments of necessity place novice SETs at a significant

disadvantage at a time when they need more support and resources to acclimate to a new profession and workplace (Cornelius et al., 2020). One participant found herself in a multiple disability classroom, which was outside her comfort zone and expertise, while another was assigned students with severe behavioral problems, despite her preservice program focusing more on life skills instruction than behavior management. Mismatched placements such as these can stifle professional growth and lead to job dissatisfaction and retention challenges (Ruble et al., 2023; Shank & Santiague, 2022). Ensuring placements align with novice SETs' personalities, interests, and training is crucial to their long-term success (Scott et al., 2022).

This study showed novice SETs often work in isolation or in very small teams. For this reason, collaboration and mentor opportunities are vitally important as a means of gathering new ideas, discussing student behaviors and strategies, and finding camaraderie early in one's career. One participant, who is the only self-contained teacher in her school, stated she would like to meet periodically with her district counterpart, but her overwhelming caseload and duties made it impossible. Other participants frequently felt unique or misunderstood in their schools. Some mentioned general education teachers were unsure of how to support or interact with students with special needs who exhibited challenging behaviors in their inclusive classrooms. Those who work in self-contained classrooms expressed frustration that general education teachers were not welcoming students with challenging behaviors in common spaces. These participants described having to adapt routines or find alternative routes to accommodate seasoned general education teachers' requests.

Additionally, engaging new SETs in the decision-making process about behavior management systems that best suit their students' needs is crucial. Participants described imposed systems that were frustratingly ineffective and time consuming to implement. Though

these teachers believed they were in the best position to determine and address the causes of students' challenging behaviors, they felt like their requests were going unheard and they were not trusted to make decisions in their students' best interests. Novice SETs, though new to the profession, desire autonomy in their classrooms. Ultimately, participants agreed that administrator trust and encouragement would alleviate some of these concerns and improve their overall experience.

Regulate to Educate

Participants agreed they cannot achieve academic aims with students until they can effectively manage challenging behaviors. Several teachers talked about the difficulties of teaching with so many challenging behaviors, noting the loss of instructional time when students eloped or had tantrums. They mentioned students with particularly severe behaviors consumed more of their time and attention. Despite these challenges, many participants emphasized the concept of "regulate to educate," a belief that behavior management and assisting students in regulating their behaviors is a necessary first step for learning in a special education context.

For students with communication deficits and those who exhibit aggression, destruction, verbal outbursts, work refusal, and elopement, managing behavior is a complex task. Teachers often rely on trial and error in implementing various strategies to manage behaviors, which can be incredibly time-consuming. Additionally, many participants noted the academic content often exceeds the abilities of their students, leading to anxiety, work refusal, and additional behavior dysregulation. The mismatch between students' academic abilities and curriculum demands can cause students to act out or develop negative self-images. Participants agreed much of their effort is directed towards behavior management rather than academic instruction, creating a challenging and often frustrating experience for teachers who are expected to meet specific

instructional outcomes.

Connecting with Students

Participants highlighted the value of connecting with their students. They emphasized understanding students' unique backgrounds, personalities, and needs was essential for behavior management. By gaining deeper insight into the underlying causes of students' behaviors, participants could more accurately determine whether actions were intentional or unintentional. These determinations enable novice SETs to tailor interactions and strategies more effectively. Teachers described how developing meaningful relationships with their students enabled them to build trust, which could then be leveraged to encourage students to adopt better self-regulation and behaviors. Several participants reflected on the fulfillment they derive from their connections with students, noting these relationships often sustain them through the challenges of their roles. However, this study also revealed establishing such relationships requires significant time and effort.

Multiple teachers explained that by getting to know their students personally, they learned not to take challenging behaviors so personally, even though some behaviors, such as hitting, biting, and spitting, felt very personal. They noted the students often experienced triggers such as academic anxiety, challenging interactions with peers or aides, or overstimulation in the classroom that caused their behaviors instead of blaming the student for being intentionally hurtful. However, a few participants said by getting to know their students better, they were better able to sense which behaviors might be attention-seeking or intentionally hurtful.

Multiple participants observed students' home environments significantly impacted their behaviors at school. Problems were as commonplace as getting too little sleep or not using communication devices consistently to more severe issues stemming from physical and sexual

abuse and neglect. One participant spoke at length about the impact of abuse and neglect on her students, expressing sadness as she described the negative behavioral, academic, and social effects. Another participant pointed out the family of her most challenging student disregarded any suggestion that the student's behavior could improve, blaming his behavior completely on his diagnosis for which they saw no cure. According to participants, students from permissive or abusive homes tend to exhibit more challenging behaviors, while those from structured, nurturing homes are generally easier to manage. Participants noted returning after winter, spring, and summer breaks was particularly difficult as progress at school could be hindered if strategies were not supported at home. Ultimately, novice SETs want to partner with parents and guardians to maintain open communication and provide consistent structure.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The field of special education is impacted by a critical and ongoing teacher shortage (Peyton et al., 2021). The findings of this phenomenological study suggest several changes to policy and practice that could potentially reduce burnout and attrition among novice SETs, one of the most vulnerable segments of teachers (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). These changes could potentially enhance experiences of novice SETs both professionally and personally, and indirectly, improve experiences of their students, classroom parents, and support staff. Targeted improvements such as these require further investigation to establish their efficacy regarding teacher preparation programs, onboarding processes, employee support systems, and classroom management strategies.

Implications for Policy

The following policy changes could positively impact novice SET motivation and long-term retention. Firstly, despite factors that resulted in lower qualifications for SETs to address

staffing shortages (Peyton et al., 2021), it is imperative that policy reinforce the need for highly qualified teachers to fill special education roles. State and national qualifications for SETs should reflect the highest standards, including minimum requirements for field hours, advanced behavior management coursework, and up-to-date training on evidence-based best practices in behavior de-escalation and safety techniques. States and school districts where shortages are particularly severe should adopt policies that limit the number of international teachers who are hired temporarily to fill vacant special education positions. This is necessary to ensure novice SETs are properly trained for the complexities of their roles and the most vulnerable students in our schools receive qualified instruction and support.

To address heavy workload and high stress levels associated with special education, state and local policies should limit the number of students per caseload and set minimum requirements for the number and qualifications of support staff. Additionally, state and district policies should address potential dangers of working with a physically aggressive student population. Additional paid or mental health leave, mental health services, hazard pay incentives, and mandatory support for teachers who have been injured on the job could alleviate some of the pressures faced by novice SETs.

Implications for Practice

The following practical, school-level changes may improve novice SET motivation and retention outcomes. Onboarding is a critical stage of employment for novice SETs. Instead of using mentor and collegial support programs reactively or as a form of remediation, school leaders should normalize them by implementing them for all new hires. These programs could connect novice SETs to veteran knowledge, guidance, and tangible resources, reducing the feelings of isolation and overwhelm, which often lead to burnout (Herman et al., 2023; Musyoka

& Gentry, 2020). Administrators also should aim to provide ample time for new teachers to familiarize themselves with their role, set up their classrooms, and train their support staff. This approach would ease the transition for novice SETs and enable them to adequately prepare.

The second recommendation is establishing clear and consistent safety protocols to protect teachers, support staff, and students. This change includes implementing and regularly practicing mandatory assistance responses whereby SETs can call for backup when student behaviors escalate, or they need a break. This would enable novice SETs to prepare in advance for particularly challenging situations which require additional staff and handle them more effectively when they arise. Additionally, administrators should provide specialty protective gear, such as arm and leg guards, for novice SETs who may be at risk of personal harm.

The third recommendation concerns the school environment where novice SETs may feel misunderstood or underappreciated. Administrators can create a safer and more collaborative environment by educating general education teachers about best practices to support their special education colleagues and students. By championing a supportive school culture, challenges faced by novice SETs could be better acknowledged and addressed. Lastly, administrators should promote a professional climate where new teachers are encouraged to utilize their time off, engage in coping strategies, and connect with a professional learning network for professional development and wellbeing. These measures may create a more supportive environment for novice SETs and help improve retention rates.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This phenomenological study sought to describe novice SETs' experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. Eleven participants provided data to this end using mind maps, journal prompt responses, and semi-structured interviews. This section

presents the theoretical and empirical implications that emerged through comprehensive analysis of the data collection methods within the theoretical framework that was applied.

Theoretical Implications

This study was guided by Weiner's attribution theory of motivation (1985, 2010). Weiner's framework to explain causal attributions consists of two interrelated strands: interpersonal attributions applied to the behaviors of others, and intrapersonal attributions applied to one's own behaviors (Weiner, 2010). Causal attributions are based on three behavioral dimensions: locus of control (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable), and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable) (Weiner, 2010). For example, a teacher might attribute their classroom management success to the implementation of effective strategies (internal, unstable, controllable). Positive attributions for oneself correlate with self-esteem, expectations for future success, and motivation (Graham, 2020, Weiner, 2010). Positive attributions for others correlate with support and empathetic regard (Weiner, 2010).

The first two themes—acceptance and understanding—confirm the interpersonal aspects of Weiner's attribution theory of motivation by addressing how teachers feel about their students. Novice SETs are accepting and understanding of challenging behaviors recognizing that students' actions often reflect an internal locus, are stable over time, and may be beyond the student's control. Participants demonstrate empathy and a strong desire to help their students learn strategies to navigate communication deficiencies and strong emotions.

The latter two themes—management and motivation—correspond with intrapersonal aspects of Weiner's theory by revealing how teachers feel about themselves. Novice SETs acknowledge their successes and failures but tend to describe them in terms of the management aspects of their role. They contribute failures to imposed behavior management systems not

working, difficult relationships with general education teachers and paraeducators, and a lack of time to optimize their materials and spaces. They also hold their administration and district leaders responsible for insufficient resources. Novice SETs' motivation is linked to their interpretations of their past successes and failures. The teachers who feel that they can make a difference and are given the support to do so report higher motivation as opposed to those teachers who feel that their situations are too challenging and they do not receive the support they need, who report lower motivation.

Participants frequently mentioned behaviors related to students' effort and ability, core components of attribution theory of motivation (Graham, 2020). They spoke about students either lacking ability, such as meeting academic demands, or not exercising their abilities and not putting forth sufficient effort. These comments revealed how novice SETs' attributions regarding locus and controllability influenced their expectations for students. The findings of this study further reveal a connection between novice SETs' attributions and their motivation levels that supports Weiner's theory. Participants who attributed students' behaviors to negative causes, such as attention-seeking, exhibited lower motivation levels when self-reporting and the language they used to describe their experiences.

A significant implication of this study is that novice SETs engage with elements of the attribution theory of motivation whether they are aware of it or not. Participants described using behavior analysis tools, specifically the ABC (antecedent, behavior, consequence) model, to determine the causes of students' behaviors. This approach directly aligns with Weiner's (1985, 2010) attribution theory of motivation, which posits individuals perceive outcomes through the lens of causal antecedents, psychological consequences, and behavioral consequences (Graham, 2020). Overall, the study confirmed attribution theory of motivation provides a valuable

framework for understanding novice SETs' experiences with challenging behavior.

Empirical Implications

This phenomenological study offers a fresh perspective by focusing on the lived experiences of novice SETs as they encounter challenging behaviors in their early careers. Previous research related to this topic is either predominantly quantitative (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Chezan et al., 2022; Roorda & Koomen, 2020; Wink et al., 2021), fails to account for the experiences of novice SETs (Billingsley et al., 2020; Freire et al., 2020; Granger et al., 2021; Simó-Pinatella et al., 2023), or focuses on experiences of general education teachers (Shank, 2023; Shank & Santiague, 2022). Only one found study (Stark & Koslouski, 2021) examined emotional exhaustion among novice SETs using a qualitative design but did not specifically address the impact of challenging behavior. While this study diverges from previous research in these ways, findings align with extant literature and highlight new insights related to experiences of novice SETs.

This study confirmed the impact of the ongoing special education teacher shortage. Participants' personal stories of turnover substantiate the shortage that is well-documented in the research (American Association for Employment in Education, 2022; Peyton et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). For example, Carrie noted self-contained teachers in her district average two years of service before quitting. She attributed turnover to many of the same factors that appear in the literature (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Park & Shin, 2020). Kate also stated new SETs in her district typically leave before five years, and "every year somebody's leaving." The shortage is further evidenced by districts assigning new graduates like Dana and Emma to challenging placements or relying on temporary visa holders like Allen to fill critical vacancies.

This study further corroborated documented causes of turnover and attrition in special education. Iris referred to excessive caseloads (Hogue & Taylor, 2020), while other participants highlighted collaboration difficulties and lack of administrator support as significant challenges (Hester et al., 2020). Dana's first-year experience, which nearly led to her quitting, align with findings from McLean et al. (2020) and Stark and Koslouski (2021), which emphasize the overwhelming behavioral and other job demands for new teachers. Another implication was inadequate preservice training led to some participants, such as Emma, feeling unprepared for the behavior management expectations of her role. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Klopfer et al., 2019; Shank, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). However, there were exceptions; Faye had extensive field experience and reported feeling better prepared and more motivated to manage behavior. This supported research that links preservice experience with positive outcomes (Larson et al., 2020; Shank, 2023; Shank & Santiague, 2022).

As for challenging behavior, this study reinforced that SETs frequently experience severe and recurring challenging behaviors, confirming previous research (Paris et al., 2021; Skura & Wheeler, 2023). The shared experiences of the 11 participants showed novice SETs are exposed to challenging behaviors regardless of the type of classroom assignment. This study aligned with research showing the largest group of students with special needs, those with Specific Learning Disabilities (SpLD), are present in both co-taught/inclusive and resource classrooms, while students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Emotional Disturbance (ED) are often placed in self-contained classrooms due to their extreme behaviors (Caldarella et al., 2019; Chezan et al., 2022; Cumming et al., 2021).

Behavior-related burnout was a concern for multiple participants in this study. Participants Kate and Gina exhibited the kind of emotional exhaustion identified by Wink et al.

(2021) that develops due to long-term exposure to challenging behavior. Participants exhibited frustration and depersonalization, especially in response to behaviors they perceived as attention-seeking. This aligns with the previous literature on the physical, mental, and emotional demands of working in special education (Gilmour et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2023). While participants demonstrated passion and dedication, data suggests long-term exposure to challenging behavior may be too great, echoing findings from previous studies (Herman et al., 2023; Paris et al., 2021). However, protective measures may mitigate the effects (Black & Halstead, 2021; Haydon et al., 2018). Protective factors against burnout, including adequate support staff and effective procedures for managing severe behaviors, were noted by participants Beth, Faye, and Kate.

This study focused on the role of causal attributions in managing challenging behaviors. It confirmed that attributions play a significant role (Carroll et al., 2023; Guikas & Morin, 2021), with novice SETs relying on ABC data to determine the causes of behaviors. However, the study did not support the concept that novice SETs are more likely to attribute behavior problems to their own inadequacies (Stark & Koslouski, 2021). Instead, participants often attributed challenging behaviors to factors related to the student, their environment, or home life, which confirms other studies on the topic (Carroll et al., 2023). Although this study did not explore the impact of personal characteristics such as gender or ethnicity on causal attributions like previous studies (Calderella et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2023), it offers valuable insights into the complex experience of managing challenging behaviors in special education.

Limitations and Delimitations

All studies reflect intended and unintended outcomes regarding design and data collection (Akanle et al., 2020). These limitations and delimitations impact the scope and generalizability of research results. While limitations represent unforeseen issues that arise and

are often beyond the researcher's control, delimitations are calculated choices made by the researcher to set the study's parameters (Akanle et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section outlines the limitations and delimitations present in my study and provides my rationale for decisions where applicable.

Limitations

The primary limitation of my study was its lack of geographical focus. Initially, I planned for geographical delimitations, intending to conduct my research within my home state of Virginia. My rationale was that I could meet some participants for in-person interviews, and my pool of participants would have similar credentials and school experiences. However, after contacting several Virginia site gatekeepers by email, I only received one response, and I was told that it would be a lengthy and competitive process to apply. Due to these challenges, I was compelled to adapt my plan for location and time.

I expanded my recruitment efforts to Mid-Atlantic states and posted calls for participants on the Council for Exceptional Education community forum and 15+ special education affinity groups on Facebook. While these changes resulted in increased interest, they brought about unforeseen complications. I later learned several individuals who filled out my eligibility questionnaire were Facebook scammers with fake email addresses. I encountered three participants who completed all three phases of data collection only to learn during the interviews that they had lied about their eligibility. These individuals were working temporarily in the United States, so I had to dispose of their data. One of them even managed to deceive me into paying them.

I had to adapt my recruitment plan further and extend it nationwide. I also implemented a stricter eligibility questionnaire and confirmed the identity of each of my participants on their

school's website. I spent 15 weeks encountering and overcoming recruitment challenges. Ultimately, time constraints forced me to accept a minimal number of participants in the final weeks who met basic requirements, and I was unable to achieve as diverse of a sample as I had hoped. My study was limited because it included only one male participant, the sample was similar demographically, and most participants worked in Pre-K or lower elementary grades. While these limitations resulted in focused, reliable data, a diverse sample would have provided more data depth and richness through additional experiences. Specifically, data representing a broader range of SET backgrounds, school settings, grade levels, and student populations would have helped me achieve the scope and data saturation I intended.

Additionally, recruitment challenges led to me scaling back my data collection methods. To retain participants, I had to reduce the number of mind maps from three to one, which impacted my ability to thoroughly triangulate my data. Another limitation of my study was the inability to conduct in-person interviews, as none of the participants in my nationwide sample were near enough to visit. I anticipated being able to observe visuals and the physical layout of the space in participants' classrooms, leading to richer data. Instead, I conducted all interviews remotely via Zoom. While seven participants met with me in their classrooms, the observable area was limited. I was unable to see where challenging behaviors occurred or the spaces and resources participants used to manage behaviors. I had to rely on participants' descriptions, which were cursory at times due to their familiarity with their spaces. Most participants met with me at the end of the school day when they were eager to finish the interview and go home. The nature of a virtual meeting meant participants were less engaged than they might have been had we met in person. The data richness of the interviews suffered as a result.

Delimitations

Intentional delimitations allowed me to manage the scope of my study by defining specific research parameters. I chose to pursue a qualitative research approach since quantitative research had already been conducted on the topic of novice SETs managing challenging behaviors. Additionally, my choice of research design reflected my desire to delve deeper into the lived experiences of novice SETs as they attribute causes to challenging behaviors rather than merely identifying challenging behaviors or focusing on teacher retention data. A transcendental phenomenological design was selected because it best suited my aim of collecting and describing novice SETs' lived experiences. By focusing on subjective experiences, I was able to discover aspects of the experience I might have overlooked using quantitative methods.

I employed purposive sampling to limit my sample to participants who met strict criteria: licensed, full-time employed SETs in U.S. public primary or secondary schools with one to five years of special education experience. These criteria ensured participants had enough experience to provide meaningful insights while still being considered novice teachers. These delimitations mean the results of this study may not be generalizable for novice SETs in other contexts or those with different levels of experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe novice SETs' experiences applying causal attributions to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. A sample of 11 participants from nine different states participated in this study. While the sample was geographically diverse, participant demographics and backgrounds were similar. Future research should seek to examine a larger sample size to include a more diverse group of participants. Engaging participants from various socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how causal attributions are

applied to challenging behaviors in different special education contexts.

This study's participants were primarily elementary, self-contained teachers. Conducting separate studies focusing on different settings would provide a more robust analysis of the experiences of unique SET sub-groups. For instance, individual studies could focus on specific grade levels and different classroom types, such as self-contained, resource, and co-taught. Each of these environments presents unique behavior challenges and the opportunity to better understand varying novice SET experiences.

This study adhered to a transcendental phenomenological research design. Future research should include different methodologies. A mixed methods study that analyzes quantitative behavior data alongside qualitative perspectives of novice SETs could reveal how behavior frequency and category correspond to SETs' experiences. Longitudinal research could show evolution in SETs' experiences over time. For example, a longitudinal study that examines experiences at years one, three, and five could reveal patterns in career progression, retention, and attrition. Future qualitative research should focus on the experiences of novice SETs who leave the profession at or before the five-year mark, which could help to inform policies and practices to improve job satisfaction and retention.

The findings of this study suggest future research should focus on specific areas of concern for novice SETs. Firstly, future research should explore the impact of imposed behavior management systems on SETs' self-efficacy and job satisfaction. This study showed imposed behavior management systems are a source of stress for novice SETs and often do not meet needs of teachers or students. Future research should also address novice SET-paraeducator dynamics, as this study established these relationships are a significant source of job satisfaction or frustration for novice SETs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe novice special education teachers' experiences attributing causes to challenging behaviors in U.S. public schools. Weiner's (1985) attribution theory of motivation served as the theoretical framework of this study and was used to answer one central research question and three sub-questions. Eleven participants from nine states were recruited using purposive sampling and agreed to participate in the study. Data were collected through mind mapping, narrative journal prompts, and semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions. Data analysis, guided by Moustakas's (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, revealed four primary themes and nine sub-themes. The primary themes were acceptance, understanding, management, and motivation. Sub-themes included severe behaviors, recurring behavior challenges, communication deficits, dispositional attributes, behavior management, staff management, classroom management, path and passion, and long-term strain.

This study found novice SETs are deeply passionate about serving students with special needs. They enjoy building personal connections with students and helping them develop strategies for success both in school and in life. However, special education presents inherent challenges, and novice SETs must quickly adapt to severe and recurring behaviors, often facing stress, frustration, and physical injuries as a result. Novice SETs' interpersonal and intrapersonal causal attributions show how they perceive both their students' behavior and their own successes and failures in managing behavior. The data revealed novice SETs experience long-term strain due to the prevalence of students' dispositional attributes, which are unlikely to change over time. Managing these internal, stable behaviors contributes to burnout and higher turnover rates among novice SETs. The findings suggest the critical need for supportive behavior management

measures to reduce stress and turnover among novice SETs. Specifically, the study reinforced the importance of providing adequate and qualified paraeducator support, resources, and autonomy to retain novice SETs.

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Appendix A

Liberty University IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 12, 2024

Mandy Augst
Ellen Ziegler

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-867 A Phenomenological Study of Novice Special Education Teachers' Experiences Applying Causal Attributions to Challenging Behavior

Dear Mandy Augst, Ellen Ziegler,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

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

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

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

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

Appendix B

Recruitment Post

PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES AS A NEW SPED TEACHER

ABOUT THE STUDY

This research focuses on behavior management and teacher retention. It is IRB-approved (IRB-FY23-24-867) and poses minimal risk to participants. Participation involves mind mapping, journaling, and a semi-structured interview.

PARTICIPANT ELIGIBILITY

- 1 - 5 years of SPED teaching experience
- Currently employed full-time in a public school SPED teaching role
- Live and work in the U.S.

Scan the QR code or visit this link to find out if you're eligible to participate:
https://forms.gle/X8EZaCTfrLusHY1P8

ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

WHY PARTICIPATE?

1. Share your experiences with stakeholders

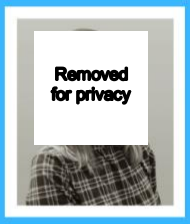
Your confidential responses will be published in a doctoral dissertation and shared with the scholarly community.

2. Make your voice heard

Your experiences are important and can help others understand how best to support new SPED teachers like you.

3. Receive compensation for your input

Participants will receive Amazon gift cards for their time and participation.



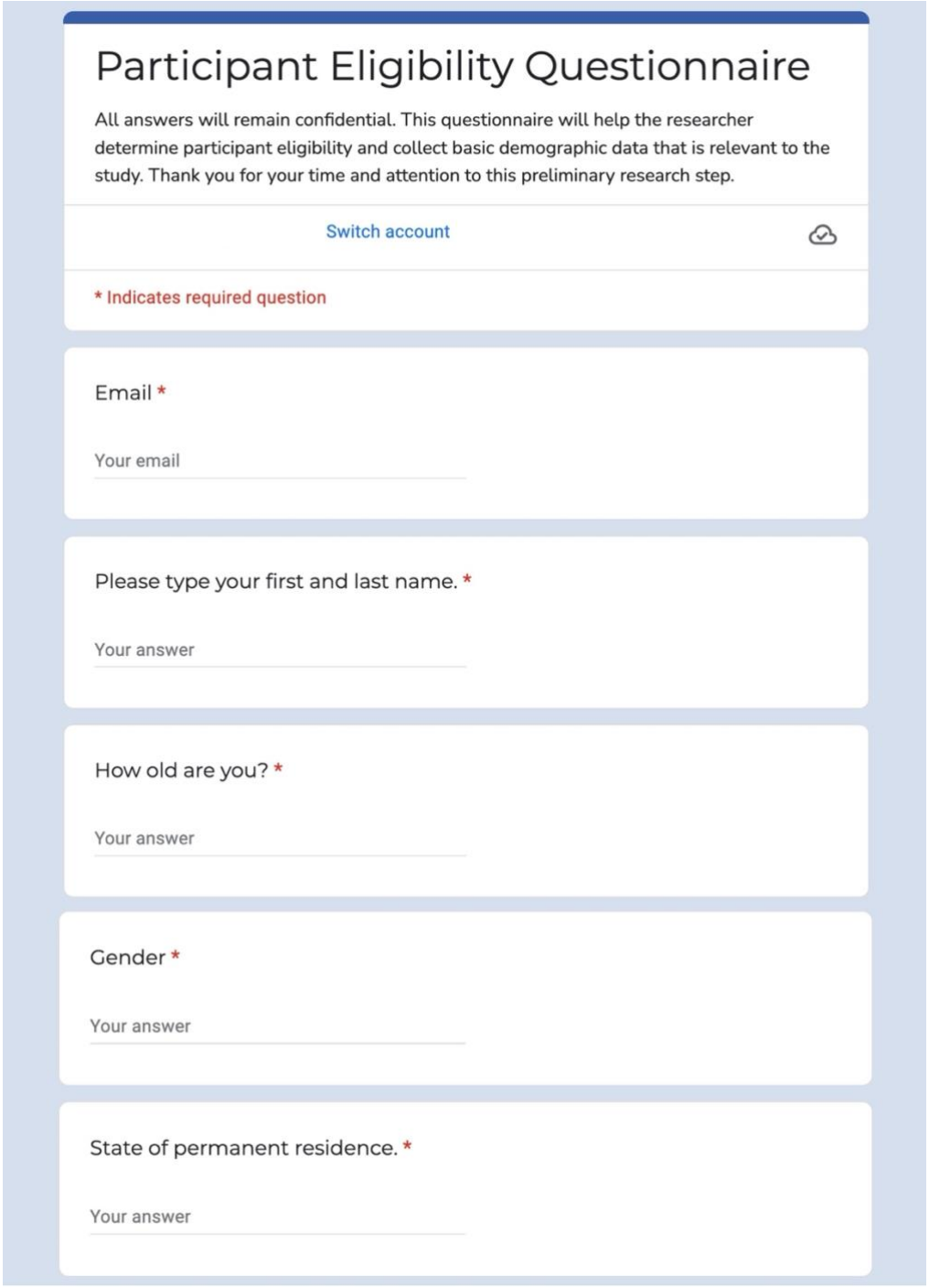
GOT QUESTIONS? CONTACT ME

Mandy Augst

Removed for privacy

Appendix C

Initial Eligibility Questionnaire



Participant Eligibility Questionnaire

All answers will remain confidential. This questionnaire will help the researcher determine participant eligibility and collect basic demographic data that is relevant to the study. Thank you for your time and attention to this preliminary research step.

Switch account

* Indicates required question

Email *

Your email

Please type your first and last name. *

Your answer

How old are you? *

Your answer

Gender *

Your answer

State of permanent residence. *

Your answer

Please type the PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT where you are currently employed full-time. *

This information will remain confidential. It is used only to verify your identity and employment status.

Your answer

Please type the NAME OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL where you are currently employed full-time. *

This information will remain confidential. It is used only to verify your identity and employment status.

Your answer

Please type your WORK EMAIL ADDRESS. *

This information will remain confidential. It is used only to verify your identity and employment status.

Your answer

Select your Special Education certification route. *

This study focuses on the experiences of Special Education teachers exclusively.

- [ ] Traditional Certificate/Bachelor's Degree
- [ ] Alternative Pathway/Provisional Certificate
- [ ] Other:

How many years have you taught full-time in Special Education? *

This study exclusively focuses on the experiences of novice Special Education teachers (1-5 years of full-time SPED experience).

Your answer

How many years of teaching experience do you have in total? *

Your answer

What is your Special Education job title? *

This study exclusively focuses on the experiences of full-time Special Education teachers.

Your answer

What grade level(s) do you teach? Check all that apply. *

- [ ] Pre-K
- [ ] Kindergarten
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3
- [ ] 4
- [ ] 5
- [ ] 6
- [ ] 7
- [ ] 8
- [ ] 9
- [ ] 10
- [ ] 11
- [ ] 12
- [ ] Other:

What type of setting do you currently teach in? *

- ◯ Self-Contained
- ◯ Inclusive/Co-Taught
- ◯ Resource
- ◯ Other:

A copy of your responses will be emailed to the address you provided.

Submit Clear form

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Appendix D

Consent Form

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of Novice Special Education Teachers' Experience Applying Causal Attributions to Challenging Behavior
Principal Investigator: Mandy Augst, 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 licensed, full-time special education teacher with one to five years of teaching experience. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of this study is to understand how novice special education teachers apply causal attributions to students' challenging behaviors. This study will explore the challenges and rewards novice special education teachers experience associated with behavior management.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Complete one mind map that will take 15 minutes.
2. Complete three journal prompts that will take 10 minutes each.
3. Complete a virtual interview that will take 30 minutes.
4. Participate in member checking, which is the process of reviewing your interview transcript for discrepancies.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include receiving the results of the study, which may result in a better understanding of behavior management.

Benefits to society include an increased public knowledge on the topic of behavior management in special education.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.
I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

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

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer or in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. After completing all three procedures (mind maps, journal prompts, and interview), participants will receive a $50 Amazon e-gift card.

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. 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 included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Mandy Augst. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted]@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Ellen Ziegler, at [redacted]@liberty.edu.

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.

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.

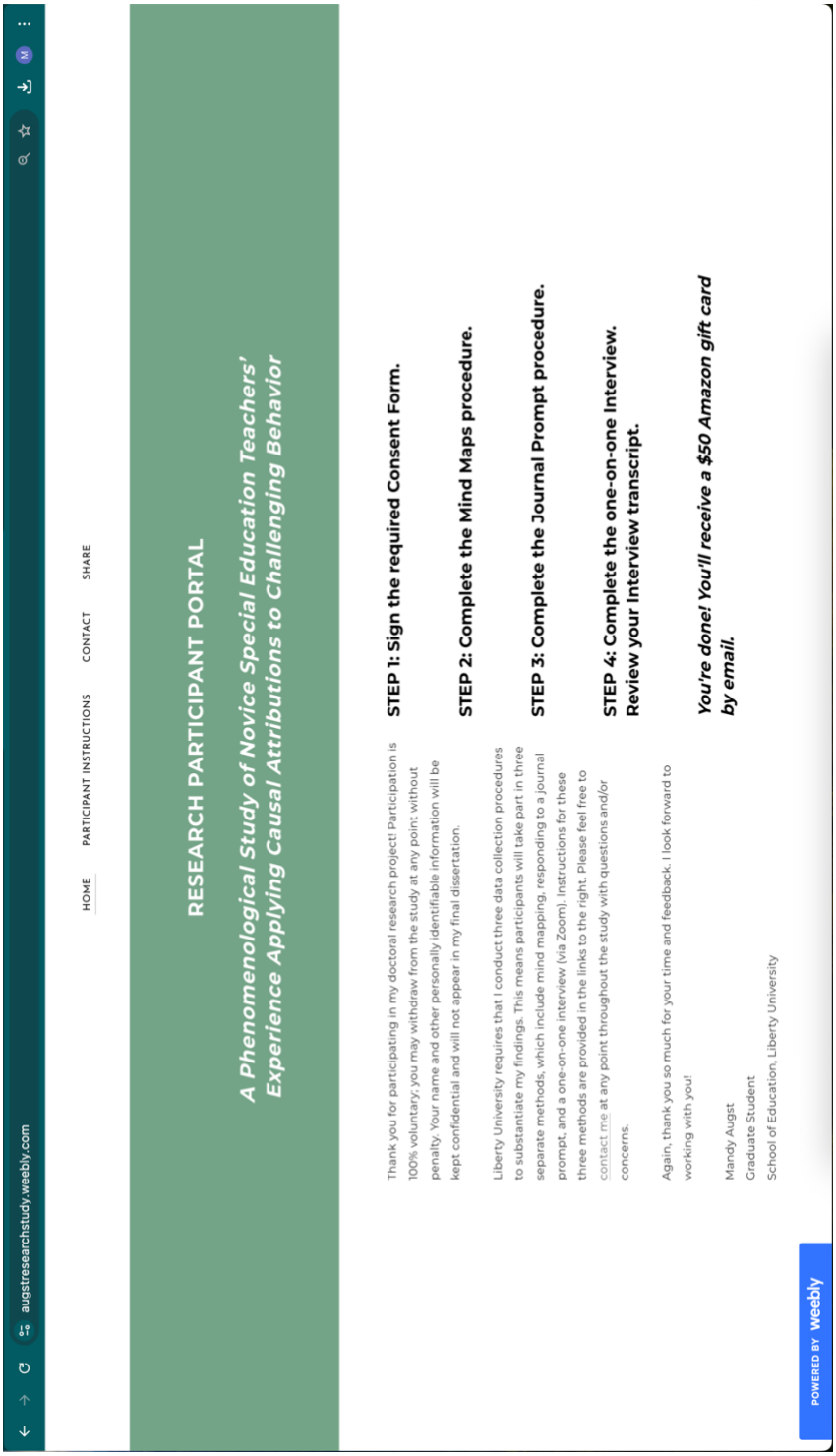
☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and/or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix E

Study Instructions Weebly Website



Appendix F

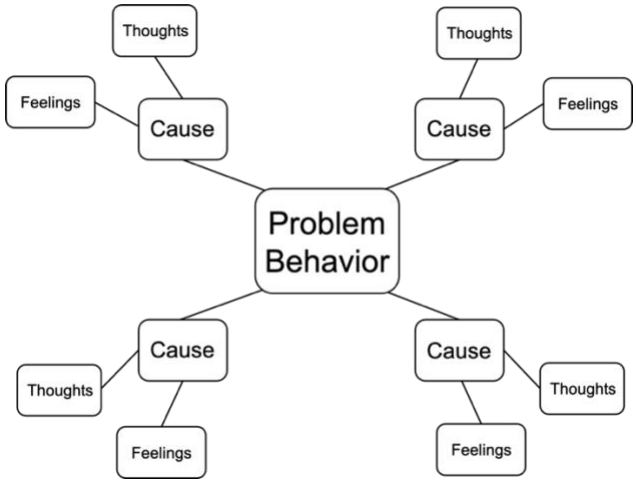
Mind Map Instructions

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Participation is voluntary; you may opt out at any time.

Mind maps are a way for you to visually demonstrate aspects of an experience, including your perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. In this first phase of data collection, please create three to five mind maps representing the most common challenging behaviors you experience in the classroom. As much as you are able, please identify the (1) the challenging behavior, (2) the various causes that contribute to the behavior, and (3) your thoughts and feelings associated with each of the causes you identify.

Based on these parameters, your map could follow this example structure:



There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to map your experiences, and complete comprehensiveness is not required; however, please attempt to account for key perceptions as well as cognitive and emotional responses to the challenging behavior in each map.

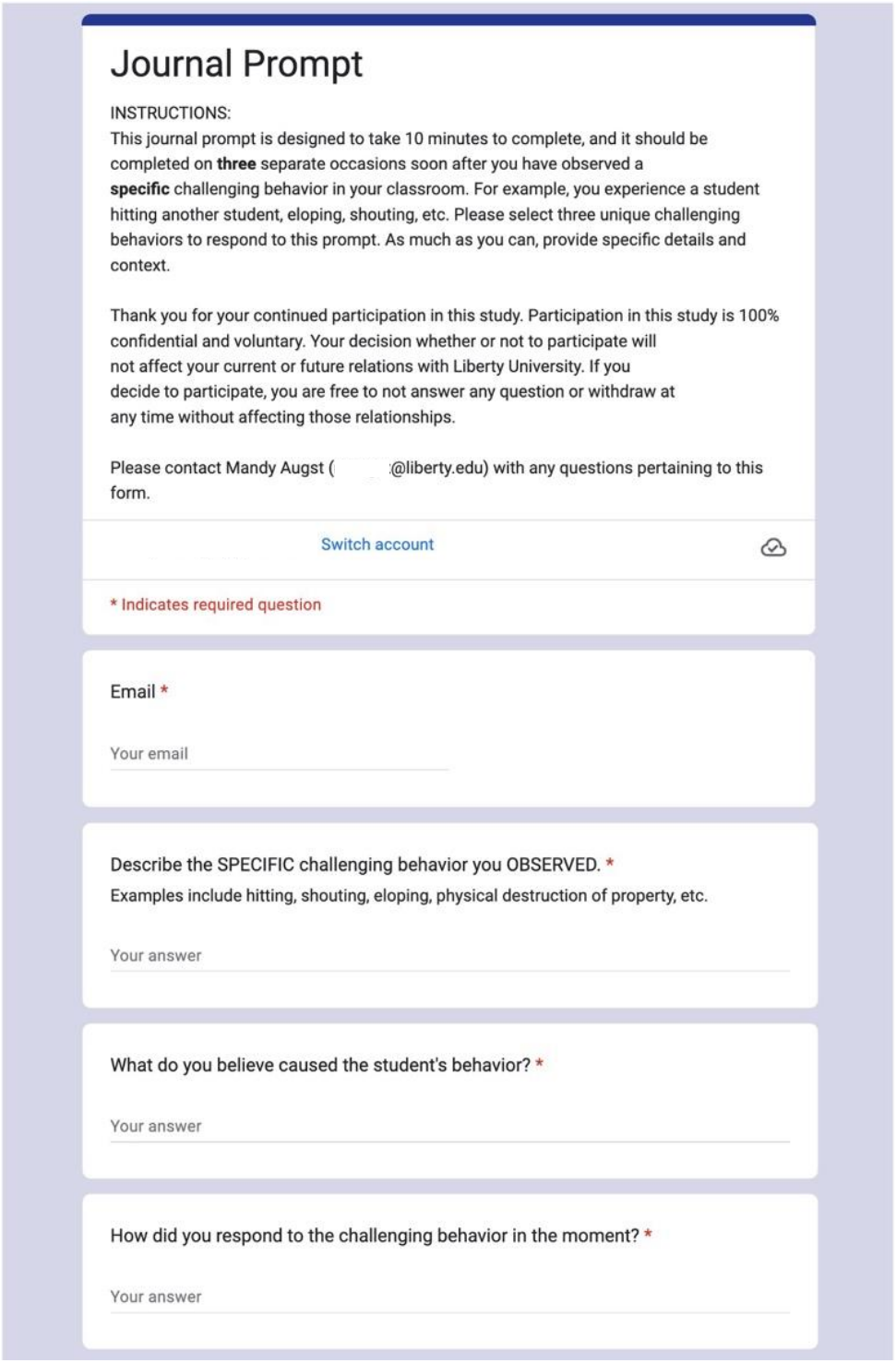
You are welcome to hand-draw your maps or use a free, web-based mapping platform such as MindMup, MindMeister, or Miro. Please limit each map to one page. Maps should be emailed to me as image files or attachments by [Date].

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Mandy Augst
Graduate Student
[redacted]@liberty.edu

Appendix G

Journal Prompt Google Form



Journal Prompt

INSTRUCTIONS:
This journal prompt is designed to take 10 minutes to complete, and it should be completed on **three** separate occasions soon after you have observed a **specific** challenging behavior in your classroom. For example, you experience a student hitting another student, eloping, shouting, etc. Please select three unique challenging behaviors to respond to this prompt. As much as you can, provide specific details and context.

Thank you for your continued participation in this study. Participation in this study is 100% confidential and voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Please contact Mandy Augst (@liberty.edu) with any questions pertaining to this form.

Switch account

* Indicates required question

Email *

Your email

Describe the SPECIFIC challenging behavior you OBSERVED. *
Examples include hitting, shouting, eloping, physical destruction of property, etc.

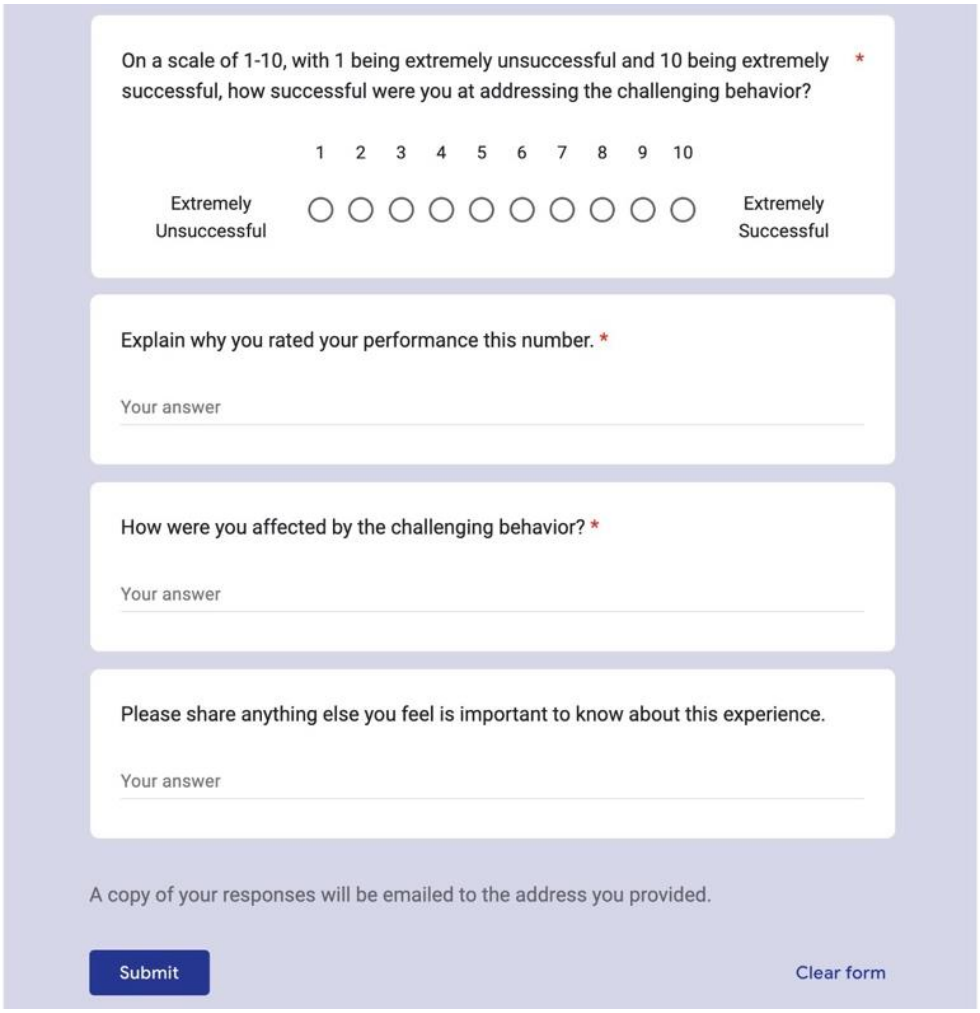
Your answer

What do you believe caused the student's behavior? *

Your answer

How did you respond to the challenging behavior in the moment? *

Your answer


On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being extremely unsuccessful and 10 being extremely successful, how successful were you at addressing the challenging behavior? *
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Extremely Unsuccessful
Extremely Successful
Explain why you rated your performance this number. *
Your answer
How were you affected by the challenging behavior? *
Your answer
Please share anything else you feel is important to know about this experience.
Your answer
A copy of your responses will be emailed to the address you provided.
Submit
Clear form

Appendix H

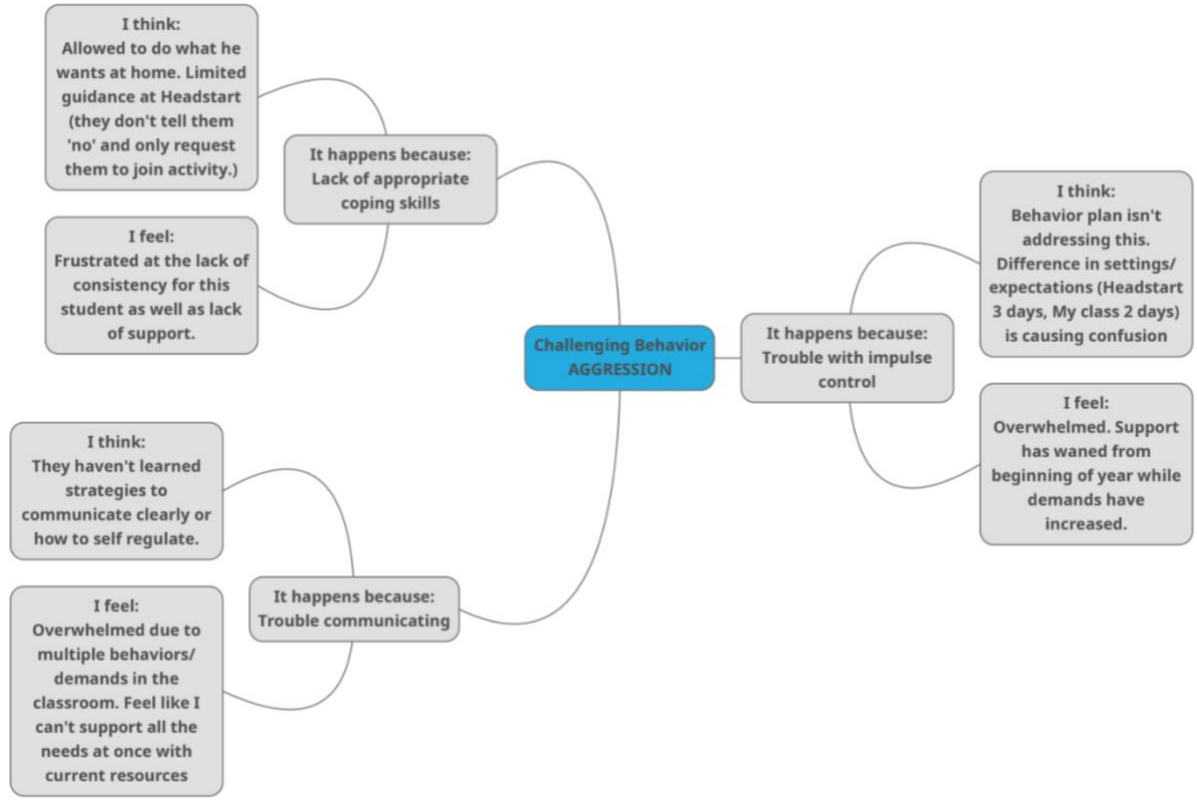
Individual Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Questions	
Start Time:	**End Time:**
Participant Name:	**Date:**
Please introduce yourself to me as though we just met and describe your background serving students with special needs.	
1.	Describe your experience with challenging behavior in special education.
2.	How often do you experience challenging behavior?
3.	Which challenging behaviors are the most challenging for you?
4.	Describe your experience determining the causes of students' challenging behaviors.
5.	Describe your experience distinguishing between students' intentional and unintentional challenging behaviors.
6.	Which factors, either internal or external, do you think have the most influence on a student's behavior? Explain why you answered in this way.
7.	What does behavior management look like in your classroom? What do you want it to look like?
8.	Describe successes you have experienced in responding to students' challenging behavior.
9.	Describe failures you have experienced in responding to students' challenging behavior.
10.	What factors or past experiences contribute the most to your successes and failures when responding to students' challenging behaviors?
11.	How did challenging behavior affect you when you started teaching?
12.	How does challenging behavior affect you now?
13.	How has your view of challenging behavior changed since you started teaching? If it has not changed, please explain why.

14.	On a scale of 1-10, with one being very unmotivated and 10 being very motivated, how motivated are you to continue teaching students with special needs who exhibit challenging behavior? Explain why you rated your motivation this number.
15.	What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with students' challenging behavior that we haven't discussed?

Appendix I

Sample Mind Map



Appendix J

Sample Journal Response

Describe the SPECIFIC challenging behavior you OBSERVED.	What do you believe caused the student's behavior?	How did you respond to the challenging behavior in the moment?	On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being extremely unsuccessful and 10 being extremely successful, how successful were you at addressing the challenging behavior?	Explain why you rated your performance this number.	How were you affected by the challenging behavior?	Please share anything else you feel is important to know about this experience.
Eloping	Change in Schedule due to Weather	Visuals (Raining = No Recess)	6	After repeating "raining=no recess" multiple times students stopped eloping from the classroom around recess time. We were able to utilize the sensory room at a different time but it was occupied at our normal recess time.	Physically, chasing children who elope down the hallway has been hard as I tore my labrum this year due to an eloping child and have not yet had surgery to fix it.	N/A

Appendix K

Sample Interview Transcript

Semi-Structured Interview Questions	
Start Time: 3:45 p.m.	**End Time: 4:15 p.m.**
Participant Name: "Beth"	**Date: 4/29/24**
Please introduce yourself to me as though we just met, and describe your background serving students with special needs. So actually my mother was a para, and so I would come after school and before school to volunteer, and so I helped out in like the Pre. K self-contained classes, our intensive behavioral unit. And then she actually became the behavioral specialist at our school. So when I was getting into college, I was into psychology, and I always had teaching in the back of my mind because I knew it was something that I would be good at, because I had volunteered in it. But I didn't know what I wanted to do, and it was during Covid. And so I was like, well, there's not really much else to explore, like, I can't go do internships or anything. So I was like, I'm gonna pursue this because this is something I know that I'm good at. And so I graduated. I wanna say, summer of 2022, yes, summer of 2022 and I took my certifications because I was a psychology major. So I have to do all the extra work, and I accepted a position as a kindergarten self-contained teacher for our ASD program.	
1. Describe your experience with challenging behavior in special education. A good half of my students display challenging behaviors on a regular basis. They look like screaming, hitting, kicking, scratching, biting, cursing. I'm trying to think what else? Throwing, attacking other students. All of those sort of things. I would say last year last year was my first year teaching, and I had a very challenging student who's now in our intensive behavioral unit. I would say, at more than half, probably 75% of the time of the school days, I was attacked every single day about 75% of the school year. Every single day there was some sort of incident where I was physically attacked. So I've gotten used to a lot, and I've learned a lot, from him and from my other students. So yeah, I've had experience with those kinds of behaviors.	
2. How often do you experience challenging behavior? They're on a daily basis, sometimes hourly. It depends on the day. Right now, I have around two to three students that display challenging behavior on a regular basis. It's always daily, but some days it's hourly.	
3. Which challenging behaviors are the most challenging for you? Probably the ones like spitting or like I get, I've gotten my glasses, throw it slapped off of my face. Those kind of ones that feel very personal and almost…violating, those ones where it's like, oh, this feels like an attack on me, and it's like, sometimes it's hard to step back and think like, oh, this is not because of you. This is because of them. They're just trying to express it. But those ones are the hardest for me, because it feels very violating.	
4. Describe your experience determining the causes of students' challenging behaviors. I think a lot of it was trial and error, like seeing, okay, if I give more attention, does this stop? If I give less attention, does it stop? Seeing if I'm able to get them to communicate what they want. Does that help? Is it that they're not able to communicate it, or is it just they don't want to do something? Seeing if all the demands are taken away, does it stop, or does it keep going and this is something else? So just trial and error, and seeing what works and what doesn't. And also we have a big behavioral support team at my school. We're supposed to have 2 behavioral specialists, but we only have one right now. But we have, technically, we should have two. And we have three program specialists. That helps. So anytime we need assistance, we can call for assistance, and they help us out, and they're able to brainstorm with us and see how we can fix it.	
5. Describe your experience distinguishing between students' intentional and unintentional challenging behaviors.	

I've seen it through different students like getting to know them and getting to know some of my students, it's very intentional, like my one last year he didn't want to work, so he was going to do those challenging behaviors so he didn't have to work. Because if you are stabbing me with a pen in the eye, you will not. You will have to leave the room. I have one now who she truly, when she's not able to regulate her emotions or communicate what she wants, she is tantruming and sometimes aggressive because she can't communicate, and she doesn't know how else to tell you what she wants. She thinks we can't understand her, so she's doing her best to tell you what she wants.

So, you're seeing that is unintentional, then?

Yes, like it's intentional, but at the same time, like it's, it's not. She's not able to control it. It's not a, oh, I'm doing this because I want to hurt you. It's I'm doing this because I don't know how else to get you to understand what I want. While the other student, he would tell me, "I'm going to hurt you. I'm going to put you in the hospital." All that sort of thing.

6. Which factors, either internal or external, do you think have the most influence on a student's behavior? Explain why you answered in this way.

I think I think it depends on their level of support needs and that sort of thing, like some of my students that need a lot more support, I think it's more internal because some of them aren't able to communicate. They use devices to communicate. I have one who refuses to even use a device, so she has no way to communicate with us. And so when she's having these behaviors, sometimes we can't figure out what's wrong. And so I think it's more of an internal thing that she can't tell us what's wrong and the way that she functions she can't. She can't express it. But others. I think it's external. It can be like out in the environment, if it's too loud, if someone's doing something they don't like. That sort of thing. I think it depends on the level of their functioning.

7. What does behavior management look like in your classroom? What do you want it to look like?

It's a lot of modeling and setting clear expectations, modeling that if IA lot of the time with my students, so my verbal ones will be like, "he's doing this to me. He won't do this." And I'm like, "Okay, you need to tell him, like, 'I don't like that'." And so, I had one who I've had him for two years now, and last year it was cursing all day long. Cursing up a storm, like, one time told him to line up, he said, "Fuck you, mind your business." And so now I've been, I model like the words like, "Instead of saying that you can say this makes me upset. I want to play more." And so things like that where I model what I want them to do, instead of being like, "Don't do that," I tell them, "Do this instead."

There's a there's a term for that. You all give them a different behavior like a replacement behavior. Is that what that is?

Yes.

And then, in an ideal world, what would your behavior management in your classroom look like?

Honestly, I think I'm pretty similar. I think I would be a little bit more patient in that world. I think a little bit more support like in classroom management. I know it's more of a support thing like if we had more people it would be better to do more one on one modeling and that sort of thing, so we can catch more behaviors before they occur rather than during while they're occurring.

8. Describe successes you have experienced in responding to students' challenging behavior.

So I think I'm pretty good at it. I think I respond pretty well. I'll give one example: So I've had an observation this year, and my student, who is now in the behavioral intensive behavioral, he was in my room at that time and our principal was in here, and he was screaming at the top of his lungs for 30 minutes, trying to hit me, trying to

rip his paper and everything. And the whole time we have our set plan of, “Okay, you can do this, or you can do nothing. But we're not going to hit. If you hit, we go to the calm room,” which is our like, I can't remember what other people call it, but we have it our calm room. It's our separate room, where, when it becomes unsafe, we go into there. And so, just keeping like a steady like, I'm not raising my voice to match his. I'm not having a bigger response. I'm not matching his energy. I'm staying low energy so that he hopefully will come down with me. And so it ended up working. He sat through the lesson and that sort of thing, I think, as well with the student I had mentioned earlier about cursing last year, I would say in our data, was probably like at times, like 50 times a day of cursing. And now we he's only said curse words twice this year. Yes. That, I think, replace the replacement behaviors of, “Okay, instead of this, you can say this” as well as other factors with him. He has medication, stuff like that, but a big thing was giving him the words to use instead of reacting to his big reactions. He didn't know what to say, and so when I would say, “Hey, it's time to work.” He didn't know what to say like, “I really don't want to. Can I work for something now?” He'll say when he doesn't want to work, he'll say, “Can I do three pages and then play?” Where before he would have a tantrum. So I think, given those replacement behaviors, and going from 50 curse words a day to two has been a really big thing.

9. Describe failures you have experienced in responding to students’ challenging behavior.

I think sometimes I'm not the most patient. Sometimes I'm at my wit's end, and sometimes I match the energy when I shouldn't. I think that's the biggest thing like, getting too heightened with them where I'm also frustrated. And I should have my emotions regulated, even though theirs aren't. I think that's where my failures come in where I'm not emotionally regulated, and I need somebody else to step in because I need a break.

Do you have that support?

Emily White: Yes, yes. Typically, yeah, we have, we have the behavior team who we call and so I can call when I have a challenging behavior like we have a code system, and so they know most of the initial. So if I need help, I'll be like code one is like, Hey, I'm trying. I don't like it cause it's not a huge deal, but I need some assistance. Code two is like, Hey, you need to come in and take over because I can't. I can't do it like it's not working. Three is like, okay, someone's about to get hurt, is that we're about to go in a restraint which we've haven't heard. Oh, yeah, I call for assistance, and I use the initial. So they know what they're coming into, what student they're coming into and then I can get assistance that way. And either they deal with it in the classroom, or they bring them to the calm room.

10. What factors or past experiences contribute the most to your successes and failures when responding to students’ challenging behaviors?

A lot of it has been watching, like growing up in the environment. I have, even when I was in elementary school, I went to the school that I actually teach at right now, and the school has always had ASD units, and so there's always been students in my class with ASD, who had a para there, and who were a little bit different than everybody else, and we all knew. We would have like little student helpers, and so I would be one of the student helpers. So I I knew about autism already, and I saw what it looked like. And then, when my mother had started working as a para, I saw how she worked with them, and how she handled behaviors. And so I think, seeing that and being around this environment for a long time has really affected the way that I see it, the way that I respond, because I'm not coming in with like, oh, I don't know anything about this. I don't know why they would act like this when now, like growing up that way, I can like oh, this could, because maybe they're acting that way because they're sick. Maybe they're banging their head on the wall because they're sick or they're hungry or they're tired rather than just be like, oh, that's weird. They're hitting their head on the wall, they must be angry when usually it's not that, at least for my students.

11. How did challenging behavior affect you when you started teaching?

I think, at first, I thought that I needed to handle it all. I think that I waited longer to ask for help. And I felt a lot of the, I took a lot of the burden on. I could have asked for help sooner, so it affected me a lot, like I had to stop what I was doing a lot to deal with the behavior that was happening across the room because I didn't want my

paras to get beaten up, or whatever. So I think in the beginning it affected me a lot because I took on the burden of the aggression, and the behaviors.

12. How does challenging behavior affect you now?

Now, I think I've gotten way better at delegating, saying, “Okay, I need to teach right now.” I need to ask for help. I think some days it really, it's really overstimulating like today was a long day. It was a very loud day, and so it affects me that way where I'm like, oh, I am so tired, and my patience sometimes goes way down towards the end of the day, when it has been a long and loud day. So I think that's how it's affected me now.

13. How has your view of challenging behavior changed since you started teaching? If it has not changed, please explain why.

I think I've learned about more ways to handle it, different strategies to try. We, with our county, we have to get restraint trained. So I do CPI training, which is crisis prevention intervention, I believe, and also safety care, which is our intensive behavior de-escalation training, which includes restraints. But a lot of those trainings include de-escalation and like learning to identify behavior. And when to do this strategy and when not to do this strategy. So I think since starting I've learned a lot of different strategies rather than just the ones I'd seen before.

14. On a scale of 1-10, with one being very unmotivated and 10 being very motivated, how motivated are you to continue teaching students with special needs who exhibit challenging behavior? Explain why you rated your motivation this number.

I'd say nine. Yes, it's hard, but it's the most satisfying. When you see the progress, it so it makes it all worth it when you see how far they've come. And when you have those little moments where it's like, Okay, you did just scream for 20 minutes, but now you're being so nice and cuddly, and you're just so sweet.

15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with students’ challenging behavior that we haven’t discussed?

I think just a little piece to put in there, like a big part of behavior is communication. Think most behaviors are communicating, if not, all behaviors are communicating something. Whether it's I'm hungry, I'm tired, I don't want to do this--I think they're all communicating something. And so it's our job to figure out what they're trying to communicate and help them still learn strategies to do it, and more appropriately.

Appendix L

Research Study Log

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education	SPED Yrs	ED Yrs	Position	Level	Type	State	Consent	Mind Map	Journal	Interview	Transcript	Member Checked	Compensated
Dana	24	Female	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	3	3	Intervention Specialist	2, 3, 4	Resource	OH	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/13/24
Emma	27	Female	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	4	4	Life Skills; 18-21 transition	9, 10, 11, 12, 18-21 instruction	Inclusive/ Co-Taught	WA	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/15/24
Faye	36	Female	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	2	5	Preschool special education teacher	Pre-K	Self-Contained	AZ	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/22/24
Gina	54	Female	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	3	3	Learning resource center 1	Kindergarten, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Resource	WA	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/23/24
Holly	26	Female	Masters Degree/initial Certificate	2	2	Special Education Teacher	Kindergarten	Self-Contained	NY	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/28/24
Iris	32	Female	BS early childhood Ed, masters special education	4	4	Preschool special education teacher	Pre-K	Self-Contained	TN	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/31/24
Allen	29	Male	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	3	6	EC Teacher	9, 11	Inclusive/ Co-Taught	NC	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/8/24
Beth	21	Female	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	2	2	ASD Self-Contained	2, 3	Self-Contained	FL	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/8/24
Carrie	34	Female	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	4	4	Self Contained ID Cluster teacher	Kindergarten, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Self-Contained	AZ	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 5/8/24
Kate	36	Female	Traditional Certificate/ Bachelor's Degree	4	4	Special Education Teacher	Pre-K, Kindergarten	Self-Contained	CA	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 6/11/24
Jane	26	Female	Alternative Pathway/ Provisional Certificate	2.5	3	Self Contained ID	Pre-K, Kindergarten, 1, 2	Self-Contained	WI	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Sent	Yes	Paid 6/7/24

Appendix M

Epoché Journal

Research Phase	*Epoché* Entry
Participant Recruitment	I do not know any of the teachers who have completed the eligibility questionnaire. I am bracketing my presuppositions and perceptions about their backgrounds, roles, and demographic data. I am determining their eligibility solely on the inclusion criteria.
Mind Maps	I am bracketing myself out of the data collection process and allowing participants to describe their experiences without interference. As I gather data, I am refraining from applying personal biases or presuppositions. I am simply transferring the data verbatim to the spreadsheet for eventual analysis.
Journal Prompts	I am bracketing myself out of the data collection process and allowing participants to describe their experiences without interference. As participants submit responses, I am setting aside my personal biases and presuppositions. I am transferring data verbatim to the spreadsheet for eventual analysis.
Interviews	Before each interview, I am consciously bracketing my biases and presuppositions so that participants can answer questions without interference. I am conscious of my face-to-face interaction so as not influence participants in any way.
Transcription	As I review video recordings and the automatic transcriptions generated by Zoom, I

	am bracketing my biases and presuppositions so as not to alter participants' responses. I am intentional about transcribing data verbatim and protecting participants' words and implications.
Data Analysis	I am bracketing my biases and presuppositions as I engage in horizonalization and open coding. I am allowing significant statements and themes to arise without influence as I analyze data units from mind maps, journal prompt responses, and interview transcripts.

Appendix N

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		Volume	27
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Instructor Name	Ellen Ziegler (disseration chair)	**Expected Presentation Date**	2023-12-20

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

The Requesting Person/Organization to Appear on the License	Mandy Augst (doctoral student)

REQUESTED CONTENT DETAILS

Title, Description or Numeric Reference of the Portion(s)	Figure: Flow chart path to retention, turnover, and attrition	**Title of the Article/Chapter the Portion Is From**	Teacher Retention and Attrition-in Special and General Education : A Critical Review of the Literature
Editor of Portion(s)	Billingsley, Bonnie S.	**Author of Portion(s)**	Billingsley, Bonnie S.
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