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Passion for Teaching: Self-Efficacy of Elementary Special Education Teachers Who Have Persisted in the Special Education Teaching Field for at least 5 Years.

Lisa Diane Stewart

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Passion for Teaching: Self-Efficacy of Elementary Special Education Teachers Who
Have Persisted in the Special Education Teaching Field for at Least 5 Years

By
Lisa Diane Stewart

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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2017

Approval Page

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Dedication

To Jack and Kinley....

May you strive to inspire others and always work towards being better
than the day before!

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Many prayers have been spoken and many tears have been shed over this dissertation. Proverbs 31:25 reads, “She is clothed in strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future.” All things are possible with God!

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Abstract

Passion for Teaching: Self-Efficacy of Elementary Special Education Teachers Who Have Persisted in the Special Education Teaching Field for at Least 5 Years. Stewart, Lisa Diane, 2017: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Phenomenology/Self-Efficacy/Special Education

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to gather perceptions of elementary general curriculum special education teachers who have persisted in the special education teaching profession past the 5-year mark. Based on Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory, this study sought to understand self-efficacy in elementary general curriculum special education teachers who have remained in special education for at least 5 years. Lived experiences of nine elementary general curriculum special education teachers were gathered through three in-depth interviews. Follow-up interviews provided rich, thick description and member checking was utilized to triangulate the data.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the United States, turnover in teaching is approximately 4% higher than other professions (Riggs, 2013). Moreover, special education teachers leave the profession at nearly double the rate of their general education colleagues (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2016). On top of the normal demands of teaching, special education teachers face additional pressures such as feelings of isolation (Council for Exceptional Children, 2000; Hale, 2015); lack of support (Billingsley, 2003); increased levels of stress (Lytle, 2013); and extreme amounts of paperwork (Imhoff, 2012; Klein, 2004). According to the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (2016), 49 states reported a shortage of special education teachers or related services personnel in 2014.

Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy is an important component of teaching effectiveness. Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory suggests various factors affect an individual's perception of self-efficacy. The level of self-efficacy determines how persistent one may or may not be in carrying out an action. Individuals who have high expectancies for both types of expectations are ensured greater success, as they will continue to be persistent when confronted by difficulties that hamper steady progress. Those who have low expectancies will falter in the presence of difficulty. Bandura (1978) found that lack of student success can undermine a teacher's sense of self-efficacy and that teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy experience less employment-related stress than those with a lower level of self-efficacy. Researchers have posited that teacher efficacy belief is a judgment of their capability to influence desired outcomes related to student performance, behavior, and motivation in the

classroom (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy, 1998). The level of success at which the activity is completed is also affected by an individual's perception of self-efficacy. Finally, the success level at which the past activity/experience was completed will impact an individual's perception of self-efficacy positively or negatively. This impact will affect future endeavors (Bandura, 1977). A more in-depth discussion of self-efficacy and its role in this study's theoretical framework is found later in this chapter.

Statement of the Problem

Since the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), educational leaders have faced the tough challenge of building capacity, closing the achievement gap, and providing more inclusive services for all students while building a collaborative environment (Donaldson, 2008). The intent of NCLB was to eliminate the achievement gap between Caucasian students and minority students, English-language learners, nonminority students, and students with disabilities (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010). An additional component of NCLB was the mandate that 100% of students meet academic proficiency by 2014. The intent of NCLB was to build motivation for their school districts to pay attention to its lowest achieving students, many of whom are in special education. The reality is the pressure exerted as a result of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements on faculty, curricula, and students has increased drop-out rates among low-performing students and students with special needs and penalized the schools from which they dropped out (Kozol, 2005). Teacher morale has been described as withering under NCLB due to teachers expressing feelings of being judged on factors out of their control (Hefling, 2012). The concern surrounding the test requirements to fulfill the accountability requirements of NCLB are impacting teacher burnout and are driving good teachers out of the profession (Cavanagh, 2012).

In addition to challenges within the teaching profession, high teacher attrition is expensive. Research indicating reasons teachers leave the profession is abundant. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) noted, “13% of the nation’s 3.4 million teachers move schools or leave the profession every year, costing states up to two billion dollars every year” (p. 2). Tate (2009) stated, “Local education agencies face the dilemma of filling vacant special education positions in an era of increased focus and accountability for meeting the needs of students with disabilities” (p. 8).

In addition to teachers leaving the profession, districts are experiencing difficulties retaining special education teachers for longer than 5 years. More specifically, researchers estimate over one million special education teachers move in and out of schools annually; and between 40% and 50% of special education teachers quit within 5 years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). According to the report, special education (general curriculum) ranked in the top three for hard to fill licensed areas to staff (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2015).

As reported in Table 1, special education (general curriculum) ranked as a hard-to-fill position in North Carolina 3 years in a row. The percentage rose from 46.9% (2012-2013) to 75.6% in the 2014-2015 school year.

Table 1

North Carolina Local Education Agencies Who Reported Special Education General Curriculum Positions as Hard to Fill (NCDPI, 2015, p. 10)

Year	LEAs (of 115 LEAs)	Percentage
2012-2013	54	46.9%
2013-2014	82	71.3%
2014-2015	87	75.6%

As shown in Table 1, from 2012-2015, NCDPI (2015) noted a steady increase in

the designation of special education positions as hard to fill.

With so many teachers leaving the teaching profession in North Carolina, it is important to determine factors that could help quell the rate of attrition. In that vein, this research study gathered contributing factors influencing the flip side: the 50% and 60% of special education teachers who remained as teachers in special education for more than 5 years.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this phenomenological study was to gather rich data through semi-structured interviews in order to examine reasons elementary general curriculum special education teachers from a North Carolina school district have remained in special education for more than 5 years. Participant perceptions of their self-efficacy were also explored. Initial interviews and follow-up interviews were utilized to gather rich, thick descriptions to this phenomenon. Based on information and themes developed during the second round of interviews, a third interview was conducted to determine additional information about life experiences related to both self-efficacy of teaching and the decision to stay in the field of education. It is important to note that the purpose of this study was not to determine why elementary special education teachers leave the teaching field; rather, it was to determine what factors influence elementary special education teachers to stay.

Student achievement is also impacted by teacher attrition. It is difficult to implement and sustain policies, meet standards, and make a positive change when staff is constantly changing (McLaurin, Smith, & Smillie, 2009). Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer (2007) noted, "It stands to reason that student achievement will suffer when students are continually faced with a parade of inexperienced teachers. In a vicious cycle, teacher

turnover lowers student achievement, and lower student achievement leads to teacher turnover” (p. 8).

Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, and Rivka (2010) noted that higher self-efficacy in teachers helped to lessen turnover in the profession. Considerable research supports the claim that self-efficacy is an important influence on human achievement in a wide variety of settings including education, health, sports, and work (Bandura, 1997). It is hoped that the findings provide encouragement and focus to other special education teachers and provide valuable information for administrators and district-level personnel surrounding the reasons why special education teachers continue in the teaching profession.

Theoretical Framework of Social Cognitive Concept

Bandura’s (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory provided a conceptual framework to apply to elementary special education teacher self-efficacy for persevering in the teaching profession more than 5 years. Self-efficacy is based on social cognitive theory and suggests individuals function as anticipative, purposeful, self-evaluating, proactive regulators of their motivation and behavior (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Bandura’s (1994) social cognitive theory offers an explanation for how people acquire and maintain certain behavioral patterns while also providing the basis for intervention strategies (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs, not to be confused with outcome expectations, help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles, and how resilient they will be in the face of adverse situations (Pajares, 2009).

Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy highlighted four sources from which efficacy beliefs are constructed: enactive mastery experience that individuals might use to

gauge their capabilities; vicarious experiences that give individuals comparison information to use judging their competencies; verbal persuasion that others might use to help convince an individual he or she possesses the ability to perform a certain task; and physiological and affective state suggests individual personal abilities might be influenced by mood, emotions, and stress levels. These ideas provided the theoretical framework of teacher self-efficacy beliefs.

Overview of the Study Design

Creswell (1998) stated, “Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). Lived experiences regarding special education teacher decisions to remain teaching in special education who self-reported through interviews were analyzed using Bandura’s (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory. The researcher used a phenomenological stance to gather rich descriptions based on participant lived experiences in order to develop themes as a way to explore the self-efficacy of special education teachers who have stayed in the profession for at least 5 years. Data collection involving initial interviews and follow-up interviews to increase trustworthiness took place during the school year. The researcher audiotaped the one-on-one interviews and gave participants the opportunity for member checking by allowing them to review the researcher’s transcripts and notes to ensure transcribed perceptions were accurate.

Purposefully selected participants chosen through convenience sampling provided the population of elementary general curriculum special education teachers for the study. These participants did provide significant and relevant information with regard to the purpose of this research study. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure individual teacher

anonymity.

Summary of purpose. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine lived experiences of elementary general curriculum special education teachers and their persistence in remaining in the special education teaching field for more than 5 years. The researcher used Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory to analyze teacher lived experiences through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, and physiological state.

Research site. NCDPI (2015) examined data from all of its 115 Local Education Agencies (LEAs). NCDPI reported, "Out of the 96,081 teachers in North Carolina employed during the 2014-2015 school year, 14,255 teachers were reported as attrition for their LEAs resulting in an overall state attrition rate of 14.84%" (p. 2). Compared to the reported state attrition rate, the selected research district has neither the highest nor the lowest teacher attrition in the state. The researcher chose this site due to convenience and based on this statistic reported by NCDPI: Of 4,984 total teachers employed in the research site during 2014-2015, a total of 745 teachers left. Nearly 72% of those teachers were considered career status (NCDPI).

Research Questions

Given the increased rate of hard to fill special education positions, the questions guiding this study were

1. According to elementary general curriculum special education teachers, what types of experiences are considered to be most beneficial in improving self-efficacy?
2. What factors influence elementary general curriculum special education teacher decisions to continue teaching special education for at least 5 years?

Definitions of Terms

The researcher provided the following definitions to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study. All definitions are followed by a citation.

General curriculum special education teacher. According to the job description set by the district for general curriculum special education teacher (Human Resources Exceptional Children's Teacher General Statement of Job, 2006), general statement of job requirements include

Under general supervision, provides special education services to students identified as disabled in accordance with state and federal regulations. Work involves developing and implementing the Individual Education Program in classroom settings that are compatible with the student's age and developmental level. The special education teacher is responsible for developing lesson plans, adapting materials and designing activities to assist students with disabilities to develop appropriate academic, behavioral, and social skills and to meet their Individual Education Program (IEP) goals. The teacher is responsible for monitoring student's progress and for maintaining special education records in compliance with state and federal guidelines and reports to principal. (p. 1)

Self-efficacy. Tuckman and Monetti (2011) defined self-efficacy as "The belief in oneself and one's capability to perform successfully" (p. 389).

Social learning. Tuckman and Monetti (2011) defined social learning as "Learning through observation" (p. 259).

Teacher self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy is the perception that teachers have their own capabilities as teachers to bring out desired outcomes of student motivation and

learning. Teachers regulate their own behaviors and effort in accordance with the effects they expect their actions to have (Bandura, 1986, p. 129).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions. One assumption of the study is that study participants were truthful when sharing personal lived experiences during the initial one-on-one interviews and during follow-up interviews. The researcher did explain that each participant would be given a pseudonym and no identifying information would be included in the research findings. Participants were given a consent form to sign and were reminded, prior to each interview, that they may refuse to answer any questions and that they may withdraw from the study at any time with no ramifications.

Limitations. Limitations of the study included the small selection of study participants from elementary schools. Another limitation was the small study sample of elementary special education teachers, all from one urban district in North Carolina, including eight female and one male general curriculum special education teachers. The researcher acknowledged this limitation could place restrictions on the study's conclusions. Generalization to other special education teachers should be approached with caution.

Delimitations. Delimitations included the timing of the study and population chosen for the study. The research study took place during the school year but not during instructional time. The study was purposefully designed to be convenient for teachers in order to limit classroom interruption; therefore, interviews took place after work hours at a mutually agreed upon location. The researcher chose to only study elementary special education teachers who instruct on the general curriculum. Generalizations about special education teachers who teach a different curriculum track should be approached with

caution as self-efficacy could be different among teachers.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented an overview and purpose of the study. The researcher presented Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study and included research questions along with definitions of terms used in this study. In addition to the nature of the study and significance of the study, the researcher discussed assumptions and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 includes a literature review of Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory and provides an historical review of special education and impacts on teacher attrition. The literature review includes various studies identifying teacher perceptions on leaving the teaching profession. Chapter 3 includes the detailed research methodology and design for conducting this study. The researcher provided a descriptive description of the qualitative phenomenological research design and rationale, theoretical framework, validation of instrument reliability, setting and participants, data collection, the role of the researcher, and validation of data. Chapter 4 includes information about the research participants, perceptions reported by participants, steps for data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 5 includes a study overview, overall findings, interpretation of the data, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Past researchers (Hughes, Matt, & O'Reilly, 2015; Imhoff, 2012; Jasper, 2015) identified numerous factors associated with teachers leaving the education field. Little research has focused on the driving factors associated with teachers staying in the teaching field, especially the driving factors for general curriculum special education teachers. This qualitative phenomenological study investigated lived experiences relating to self-efficacy of special education teachers who have remained in special education more than 5 years. Self-efficacy, based on Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory, created a theoretical framework for this study. Chapter 2 expands upon Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive of Self-Efficacy Theory, the history of special education, and self-reported perceptions of teacher attrition.

Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura (1977), social psychology theorist and founder of social cognitive concept of self-efficacy theory, suggested individuals affect action in their lives according to their belief in their ability to achieve a particular outcome. Teacher self-efficacy has been widely explored since it was introduced in 1977. Self-efficacy theory predicts people will avoid a situation they believe exceeds their coping skills but will get involved in situations they believe themselves capable of handling (Tuckman & Monetti, 2011). Self-efficacy is a cognitive process impacted by experience, rewards and accomplishments, encouragement, and regulation of negative thoughts and feelings (Briones, Tabernero, & Arenas, 2007). Bandura (1997) stated, "Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Perceived self-efficacy also affects

people's choice of activities, how long they will persist when faced with obstacles, and how much effort they will exert (Bandura, 1977).

Since Bandura's original work in social cognitive theory, self-efficacy has emerged as a highly effective predictor of student motivation and learning (Zimmerman, 2000). Efficacy beliefs influence whether people think unpredictably or deliberately, positively or negatively. Bernadowski, Perry, and Del Greco (2013) noted that self-efficacy is one of the critical factors motivating people to engage in pursuing their goals. Bernadowski et al. went on to state, "The development of self-efficacy, then, is tied to the concept of empowerment, and the idea of taking control of one's life, or being the master of one's own destiny" (p.71). In summary, individuals who believe in their ability to perform a specific task will work harder and persist in order to successfully reach the goal than those who do not believe in their ability.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Self-efficacy beliefs provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment. Self-efficacy beliefs are related to strategic thinking, motivations, commitment, resilience, the processing of stress and anxiety, and the attributions and analysis that shape how individuals think about what they do and what they desire to do (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001). Pajares (2002) noted, "Unless people believe their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties" (para. 14). Teacher confidence in their individual capability to influence student learning is considered to be one of the key motivational beliefs influencing student learning (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). It is important to distinguish between self-efficacy, how an individual's understanding of his or her ability to perform an action will inform the approach to the

action, and self-efficacy beliefs: beliefs specific to the conduct and likelihood of success in realizing a given task in a given situation (Chiou & Wan, 2007).

Bandura (1982) noted an aid to good performance is a strong sense of self-efficacy and the ability to continue through failures and uncertainty. The four sources of efficacy include enactive mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological state (Bandura, 1997).

Mastery experience. According to Bandura's (1986, 1997) social cognitive theory, the strongest source of self-efficacy typically comes from one's interpretations of one's own performance, or mastery experience. Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2004) noted, "Mastery experience is the most powerful source of efficacy information" (p. 5). The experience of mastery influences perspective on your abilities. Mastery experiences provide the most authentic evidence of one's potential to succeed (Bernadowski et al., 2013). Bandura (1997) noted, "Successes build a robust belief in one's personal efficacy" (p. 80). Success teaches people they can succeed, and repeated early successes provide a cushion against occasional later failures (Tuckman & Monetti, 2011). Failures undermine success, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established (Bandura, 1997). People who possess a low sense of efficacy often discount their successes rather than change their self-belief (Pajares, 2002).

Vicarious experience. People learn from their own experiences and by observing the behaviors of others (Pajares, 2002). Without undergoing the trial and error process of performing a task, vicarious learning, defined as observing someone else performing a task or handling a situation, can help one perform the same task by imitation (Pajares, 2002, para. 11). Modeling is the observation of others performing a task and developing one's self-efficacy off the effectiveness of the model (Gist, 1987). Observing people who

are similar to oneself succeed will increase one's beliefs that one can master a similar activity. Pajares (2002) noted, "If engaging in the observed behavior produces valued results and expectation, the individual is motivated to adopt the behavior and repeat it in the future" (para. 11).

Verbal persuasion. Another factor that may influence a teacher's capability to reach his or her goal is verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997). While verbal encouragement raises self-efficacy, verbal discouragement can lower it (Gist, 1987). People are led through persuasive suggestions into believing they can cope successfully with what has been overwhelming in the past (Bandura, 1977). Conversely, when people are told they do not have the skill or ability to do something, they tend to give up quickly (Bandura, 1994).

Physiological state. Muretta (2004) set out to fill in the gaps in literature to confirm the existence of the four sources of self-efficacy and to confirm the theory that strong efficacy antecedents will strengthen one's self-efficacy, while weak efficacy antecedents will weaken it. Muretta used a correlative design method that included a survey with 162 responses. Muretta concluded that "Strong mastery experience and physiological arousal correlated to higher self-efficacy, while adverse mastery experience and physiological arousal correlated to lower self-efficacy to a specific task" (p. 70). People with a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered, develop deeper interest in the activities in which they participate, form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests and activities, and recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments (Moesgaard, 2014). They sustain their efforts in the face of failure, and they attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills that are achievable. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks

(Bandura, 1993). People with a weak sense of self-efficacy tend to avoid challenging tasks, believe difficult tasks and situations are beyond their capabilities, focus on personal failings and negative outcomes, and quickly lose confidence in personal abilities (Moesgaard, 2014).

Special Education

Special education is a result of educational reform efforts and advocacy from parents to ensure students with disabilities have access to education. Prior to the 1970s, millions of children with disabilities had limited access to public education. Since the federal government first passed legislation mandating special education in 1975, the field of special education has been in constant transition and discussion (Chalfant & Van Dusen Psy, 2007). The United States Department of Education (2007) reported,

In 1975, Congress passed Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act) to support states and localities in protecting the rights of, meeting the individual needs of, and improving the results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families. (para. 4)

Between the years 1975-2006, “the number of students identified as having a learning disability has grown by almost 250%, from approximately 800,000 students to almost 3,000,000 students” (Pierangelo & Guiliani, 2006, p. 15). Since the passage of Public Law 94-142, significant progress has been made toward meeting major national goals for developing and implementing effective programs and service for early intervention, special education, and related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975) was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990.

IDEA states all students with disabilities must have equal access as their

nondisabled peers to the same curriculum with adequate support (Lasky & Karge, 2006). All states receiving federal funding must provide all students with disabilities between the ages of 3-21 access to an appropriate and free public education and ensure teachers are adequately qualified to teach special education. Overall, the concept behind IDEA is to provide children with disabilities the same opportunity for education as students who do not have a disability.

NCLB was passed to improve the academic achievements of all students in the United States (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyanni, 2006). NCLB set a high standard and quality for instruction delivery for all students. School districts and individual schools are held accountable and are monitored closely to ensure students with disabilities are appropriately placed and not underserved (Yell et al., 2006).

IDEA was revised and is currently known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004. IDEIA (2004) stated students with disabilities should be included in the general education classroom whenever possible except for when supplementary aids fail in order to allow the same level of success as nondisabled peers (Yell et al., 2006). The major provisions of IDEIA (2004) are to ensure children with disabilities from ages ranging 3-21 years old (a) receive free and appropriate education; (b) have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) created to meet their specific needs; (c) are educated in their least restrictive environment, (d) have access to attend and participate in all school activities; and (e) have rights to confidentiality, due process, and nondiscriminatory assessments (IDEIA, 2004).

Each of these federal laws establishes the legal framework for providing services for individuals with disabilities and for educating students with disabilities. These legislative initiatives influence the inclusion of more students with disabilities in the

general education environment. Moreover, students with disabilities are expected to meet the same standards as their peers without disabilities, and special educators are playing a much larger role than ever before in the direct education of this population of students with disabilities in the general education environment (Katsafanas, 2006).

NCLB, set expectations which stated all school districts must master state-mandated tests at a 100% pass rate by 2014 (Yell et al., 2006). Howard (2011) noted, “Ensuring we recruit quality professional educators and provide them with resources to assist our students then we will move forward in meeting the NCLB mandate” (para. 4). Along with recruiting quality professionals, it is important to retain teachers.

Reasons for Special Education Teacher Attrition

Teacher burnout rates are a serious concern in special education due to their contribution to the shortage of special education teachers. Research indicates teacher levels of self-efficacy are associated with job satisfaction; job related stress (Betoret, 2009); and teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Historical research indicates the retention of special education teachers is influenced by numerous factors including paperwork, high caseloads, parental demands, working conditions, professional development, and lack of administrative support (Otto & Arnold, 2005). Special education teachers who are experiencing burnout may feel less competent due to their inability to help their students succeed academically and may feel discouraged (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

Billingsley (2004) stated, “efforts to reduce attrition should be based on an understanding of the factors that contribute to special educators’ decisions to leave the field” (p. 39). Financial impacts on teacher attrition, including teachers who leave the teaching field and teachers who move from one school or district to a different one, are

not minimal. The impact of teacher turnover extends beyond the schools, and turnover can provide a significant financial strain on school districts. Additionally, the National Commission on Teaching and Americas Future (NCTAF) places the cumulative costs of all school districts across the United States to hire, recruit, and train replacement teachers at \$7.34 billion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2013) studied 8 years of data, from 2001-2009, that included 850,000 observations of fourth- and fifth-grade students. Key findings from the research indicated

1. Reducing teacher turnover from 40% to 0% increased student achievement in math by 2% to 4% of a standard deviation;
2. When measuring student achievement results across grade levels within the same year and school to rule out the effects of other factors such as a new school principal, student test scores were 7.4% to 9.6% of a standard deviation lower in math and 6% to 8.3% of a standard deviation lower in English language arts; and
3. Students of teachers who remained in the same grade and school from one year to the next were harmed by turnover (Ronfeldt et al., 2013, pp. 15-16).

The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (2016) stated, “The demands for highly qualified professionals is increasing at a time when the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates the shortage is acute” (para. 1). As the demands for highly qualified special educators increase annually, this nation continues to witness significant attrition rates among special educators in elementary and secondary school settings (Imhoff, 2012). A teacher’s behavior is often influenced and impacted by surroundings. Great leaders provide authentic praise and work effortlessly to implement, maintain, and sustain a positive morale (Connors, 2000). More specifically, self-efficacy

may be strengthened through the influence of the building principal or leader. Benefits of retention of highly qualified and effective teachers include (a) stability and growth among the teacher force, (b) equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers, (c) increased student achievement, and (d) saves districts money (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

Whitehead, Ryba, and O'Driscoll (2000) noted many teachers reported being under high stress in their jobs due to classroom size, long work days, and stress related to high stakes testing results; however, those surroundings also include an environment partially produced in the teacher's mind (Bandura, 1986). Negative thoughts have the power to create negative reactions. Teachers who have a negative outlook on life also tend to have a negative job outlook and report more stress and experience feelings of negative self-efficacy (Cenkseven-Onder & Sari, 2009).

In 2012-2013, the national average starting teacher salary was \$36,141 with North Carolina teachers averaging \$30,778 (National Education Association, 2013). Low salary combined with an increased amount of work responsibilities contribute to a rise in work stress and teacher attrition statistics (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Understanding the characteristics of the teacher, organization, and school, along with understanding teacher self-efficacy, helps to provide information on teacher retention and its effects on the teaching profession (Hughes, 2001). Understanding information about teacher retention will in turn help provide support for educators.

Perceptions on paperwork. Since the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act in 1975, there has been a shortage of special education teachers. Research shows one of the main reasons for leaving the special education classroom or teaching altogether is the burden of paperwork associated with the job in addition to teaching students with special needs (Imhoff, 2012). Historically, Billingsley

(1995) found 60% of special educators who planned to leave teaching listed paperwork as a main reason. Continuing with paperwork burden, Wilmshurst and Brue (2006) found,

Frustration with paperwork and non-teaching responsibilities was high on the list for reasons special education teachers leave their profession. The special education teachers who responded to the TCER survey indicated they spent an average of 57.9 hours per month, or approximately 1.4 weeks per month engaged in non-teaching activities. Non-teaching activities included planning, paperwork, meetings and participating on committees. (para. 3)

More recently, Ahearn (2011) found among the research on paperwork burdens three main themes of paperwork emerged which included (a) paperwork related to individual education programs, behavior support plans, assessments, and progress reports; (b) administrative forms issued after the 2004 reauthorization; and (c) current paperwork and administrative reports related to job requirements, physician requests, specialist requests, and district requests. The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE, 2013) noted, “The typical special education teacher spends five hours per week completing forms and doing administrative paperwork” (p. 1). The number of hours spent on paperwork depends on the school district’s size and location. All special education teachers in the Mid-South region of the United States spend an average of 4.8 hours per week compared to the Western region at 5.0 hours per week and the Northeast region at 3.3 hours per week (SPeNSE, 2013).

Perceptions of administrative support. Principals may have the ability to help develop a sense of efficacy for individual teachers and for the entire school. Historically, a principal might enhance commitment through fostering a collegial environment (Singh & Billingsley, 1998). Dr. Greg Adkins, superintendent of Lee County Schools in Florida,

asked nine teachers with various years of teaching experience why they thought 50 percent of new teachers left teaching before finishing 5 years (Jasper, 2015). Lack of support by leadership was a common theme that emerged from the responses. Leaders need to be well-prepared individuals who know how to create a vision, share responsibility, and work collaboratively in a team (Jasper, 2015).

Fauske (1999) noted, “Consensus is built around shared goals and vision” (p. 8). Goal sharing is important to organizations. Furthermore, Collins (2005) stated, “Success breeds support and commitment, which breeds even greater success, which breeds more support and commitment” (p. 24). When people feel connected to an organization, people become connected to something deeper (Lewin & Regine, 2000).

Hughes et al. (2015) examined the relationship between principal support and retention of teachers in hard-to-staff schools. In the study, teachers provided insight into the forms of support they valued most from their principals. Hughes et al. used Dr. Yvonne Balfour’s Administrative Support Survey to measure administrative supports expected and received by special education teachers. The four domains of support researched in Balfour’s study included emotional, technical, instructional, and environmental supports. According to Hughes et al., emotional and environmental support was rated as the highest reason for leaving. Findings of this study also demonstrated principals and teachers in hard-to-staff schools have different perceptions of teacher support. In fact, “Principals perceived their support for teachers was greater than the support the teachers felt they received” (Hughes et al., 2015, p. 132).

A significant relationship between special education teacher retention and supportive leadership exists. In a study of teachers in eight districts in Michigan and Indiana, Jones, Youngs, and Frank (2013) found improving relationships could be tied

directly to retention. A quality relationship with the school principal is a key consideration when teachers make plans to stay in teaching (Jones et al., 2013).

Drago-Severson (2009) declared, “Leaders play a crucial role in systemically establishing structures that support the process of dialogue, critical reflection, and shared governance” (p. 158). Creating an environment where leaders and adults feel safe to problem solve is important. Fullan (2001) stated, “The role of leadership is the ‘cause’ to greater capacity in the organization in order to get better results” (p. 65). The Billingsley and McLeskey (2004) study suggested major findings concerning building-level support which included the following issues related to the school principal:

Lack of understanding of what teachers do in their classrooms; failure to recognize the significance of teachers’ work challenges and accomplishments; limited assistance with specific problems; and reluctance to involve teachers in determining the shape of the school’s special education programs. (p. 3)

Fullan (2001) stated, “If you want to develop leadership, you should focus on reciprocity, the mutual obligation and value of sharing knowledge among organizational members” (p. 132). Pounder (1998) noted, “When we speak of changing schools into more collaborative organizations, what we really mean is we want to change the nature of the relationship or patterns of relating” (p. 29). The key to developing leadership is to share knowledge so it is accessible to the organization (Fullan, 2001).

Perceptions on preservice training. Walker (1992) noted,

Controversy over the quality of teacher education programs and the products of such programs as they enter the professional educational setting, has generated a wealth of research studies on the problems of inducting a new generation of teachers properly into the classroom. (para. 1)

The literature on preservice teachers and self-efficacy indicates education majors begin their education program with high levels of self-efficacy (Walker, 1992). Thus, the first few years of teacher development could be critical to the long-term development of teaching efficacy (Hoy, 2004).

Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) stated, “Teacher’s beliefs in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplishing a specific teaching task in a particular context” (p. 233). Also, Allinder (1994) found teachers with a high sense of efficacy beliefs engaged in a high level of planning and organizing. In a study of urban preservice teacher self-efficacy and the accuracy of assessing their own academic learning, Chen and Bembenuddy (2005) discovered preservice teachers who had higher self-efficacy and used time and study environment management strategies exerted more effort at planning than those with lower efficacy.

Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2012) found, “Pedagogy was strongly related to teacher attrition. Beginning teachers who had taken more courses in teaching methods and strategies, learning theory or child psychology, or materials selection were significantly less likely to depart the teaching field” (p. 33).

Lee, Patterson, and Vega (2011) examined special education intern teachers’ perceived levels of teaching efficacy and the roles of teaching resources, teacher backgrounds, support from school districts, teacher preparation programs, and pupil parents. Participants of the study were special education teachers (n=154) possessing intern credentials in a teacher preparation program in California. The study revealed intern teachers reported the highest level of support was from the university intern supervisors. The study also revealed participants ranked school district personnel as a low source of support. As a result of this study, it was suggested that years of experience

alone cannot explain teacher levels of self-efficacy given that the intern teachers in this study displayed high levels of confidence in their ability to promote student learning (p. 62).

Nationwide, “The national shortage of highly qualified special education teachers is 11.2%” (Imhoff, 2012, p. 8). Approximately, 45,514 of those serving as special education teachers do not meet required standards of being highly qualified (Imhoff, 2012).

Perceptions of teacher leadership. Drago-Severson (2009) noted collaboration, cross-functional teams, or thinking across educational department boundaries can increase thinking outside of traditional, functional roles. Historically, Troen and Boles (1992) reported teachers viewed leadership as a collaborative effort with other teachers to promote professional development, growth, and the improvement of educational services. Danielson (2006) discussed the importance of leaders possessing the skill of analysis to be able to determine solutions to problems, maintain employee output and satisfaction, and effectively manage the organization. Committees involving teachers in the investigation of future innovations provide an ongoing structure to encourage and perpetuate leadership among teachers.

Education is always changing; however, giving the effective tools to problem solve can assist in “building strong institutions, not creating heroic leaders” (Fullan, 2001, p. 134). President of Education Trust, Kati Haycock (as cited in The Wallace Foundation Report, 2008), stated,

When you meet leaders in the place that are really getting the job done, they are not the kind of leaders that just turn things around by the sheer force of their personality. Especially in the larger schools, the principals know that they cannot

get it all done themselves. Those are the places that improve. Leadership is not about one person; it's about building a shared commitment and building a leadership team. (p. 2)

In collaboration, equal partners work together to move things forward. Million and Vare (1997) noted those teachers participating in the collaborative effort are seen as having equitable roles in decision making as well as in work carried out. When roles are viewed as equal, the problem is centered on strategic objectives and not on blaming individuals. Hattrup and Bickel (1993) observed that in collaborative relationships, equal partners resolve their conflict through discussion and agreement rather than authoritarian decisions. Pounder (1998) stated, "When we speak of changing schools into more collaborative organizations, we want to change the nature of relationships or patterns of relating" (p. 29).

Summary

Chapter 2 described the literature review of Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory, provided an historical review of special education, and reported reasons for teacher attrition. Bandura (1977) explained personal self-efficacy determines how much a person can endure in future circumstances in the classroom, and personal self-efficacy determines how much effort will eventually be put into teacher and classroom work (Bandura, 1977). Many different factors impact personal self-efficacy (Pajares, 1995).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The focus of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine lived experiences of elementary general curriculum special education teachers who have remained in the teaching profession for more than 5 years to better understand self-efficacy. This chapter presents the methodology employed to complete this study. The reported perceptions of general curriculum special education teacher decisions to remain in the special education teaching field for more than years were analyzed.

The research questions are presented in this section along with an introduction to the study participants, research site, data analysis, role of the researcher, and the validation of the data. This section also contains a detailed description of the data collection procedures including the initial interview session and the follow-up interview sessions. Information and details about member checks (Moustakas, 1994) and coding of interview responses (Seidman, 2006) are also included.

Methodology

Phenomenology as research design. Creswell (2014) noted that phenomenology research is a distinct qualitative method for discovering the underlying structure of shared essences of some social phenomenon. Phenomenology offers a qualitative method of inquiry that can be applied to experiences. It allows the researcher to examine the different perspectives of lengthy experiences and gives the ability to examine the combination of experiences as it relates to a single moment. Research conclusions provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through examinations of experiences and can provide “the focus on understanding from the perspective of the person or persons being studied” (Willis, 2007, p. 107).

The western tradition of phenomenology can be classified under three major headings that include transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, or existential phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) defined transcendental phenomenology as the process the researcher uses to look at the phenomenon of the experience and brackets, or removes, him/herself from the experience (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived. In hermeneutic phenomenology, a definitive answer is rarely possible and the reader interprets the text producing more of a reflective interpretation of events (Van Manen, 1990). Existential phenomenology cannot detach viewpoints as in transcendental phenomenology or hermeneutic phenomenology.

This study utilized a descriptive transcendental phenomenological approach because it described the fundamental structure of world perceptions by emphasizing the description of a person's lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the researcher's viewpoint was removed to the fullest extent possible by extracting personal information before interviewing participants.

Grbich (2007) explained phenomenology as an approach to understanding the hidden meaning and the essence of an experience together. Van Manen (1990) noted phenomenology is appropriate to use when the researcher wishes to explore the phenomena of pedagogical significance as a response to how a person orients to lived experiences.

The researcher used participant perceptions to describe the lived experiences of individuals surrounding the phenomenon of elementary general curriculum special education teacher decisions to remain in the teaching field for at least 5 years. Patton (1990) outlined a clear detailed explanation of phenomenological research that included

the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to the identity of the essences of the phenomenon. (p. 70)

The researcher used phenomenological inquiry as part of uncovering meaning in general curriculum special education teachers' lived experiences in the classroom as it relates to their own self-efficacy. The researcher used the method of epoche, or taking oneself out of the study, by not discussing personal experiences about the phenomenon in this researcher study. The researcher used rich, thick description to convey meaning so shared experiences become more realistic to the reader. In addition, the researcher used Creswell's (2014) suggestions to "review all the data, make sense of it, and organize it into categories or themes that cut across all the data sources" (p. 186).

Research rationale. Phenomenology focused on an individual's meaning making as the quintessential element of the human experience (Patton, 2002). The researcher sought to uncover how general curriculum special education teachers interpret their experiences, construct their world, and attribute meaning to their experiences. A phenomenological approach was employed in order to gather thick descriptions to a unique and largely unstudied phenomena, namely the self-efficacy of special education general curriculum teachers remaining in the teaching field for at least 5 years. In this study, nine participants were interviewed multiple times to provide an example of the range of experience and insights into the research phenomenon.

Research questions. Based on the review of the literature and Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self Efficacy Theory, two research questions were used to

examine special education teacher perceptions surrounding decisions to remain in the special education teacher field for at least 5 years. The theoretical framework assisted in collecting perceptions of study participants. This qualitative study did “explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4).

The research study sought to understand the following research questions.

1. According to elementary general curriculum special education teachers, what types of experiences are considered to be most beneficial for improving self-efficacy?
2. What factors influence elementary general curriculum special education teacher decisions to remain teaching special education for at least 5 years?

Reliability of Instrument

To minimize limitations of the research study, a validation of instrument reliability was conducted. The validation of instrument reliability was used as a way to solidify and refine interview questions for the research study and to allow the researcher to become familiar with the process. This step provided insight for ensuring the quality and validity of the questions being asked during the research study initial interview session. The pilot study included three participants and allowed the opportunity to offer suggestions to clarify interview questions. These questions were then adjusted based on feedback. Participant responses were not transcribed or collected as a way to gather lived experiences for the research study.

Interviews were administered with three general curriculum special education teachers to increase validity with interview questions. The researcher completed interview sessions with two participants to validate reliability of the instrument. The first

interview was completed in 5 minutes, while the second interview was completed in 8 minutes. While interview responses were not long in length, responses did elicit responses that could be more closely examined in a follow-up interview. Additional questions such as, “How would you describe your first year as a teacher?” and “How would you describe your work with other team members at your school?” were added to allow opportunity to generate more detailed responses. The second interview participant offered one suggestion for Question 7, “Why have you stayed in the teaching profession?” Based on suggestions, the researcher adjusted the question to ask, “Why have you stayed in the special education teaching profession?” to ensure the question directly correlated to participant current teaching areas and the phenomenon being researched.

The researcher completed a third interview after adding two additional questions. The third interview was completed in 18 minutes. The third interview session provided responses that were more detailed and allowed more opportunity for the participant to recall specific experiences. Based on feedback from the third interview participant, the researcher changed Question 4, “What is your highest level of education,” because responses were limited “bachelor’s degree” or “master’s degree.” Question 4 was changed to “Describe your educational experience.” By changing the structure of Question 4, it allowed opportunity for the participant to describe any aspect of their education.

Setting and Participants

Participants included nine elementary level, general curriculum special education teachers with more than 5 years of experience, all of whom were currently teaching in one North Carolina school district. To find study participants with more than 5 years of

experience teaching special education general curriculum, the researcher asked special education program coordinators and elementary school principals for names of general curriculum special education teachers who fit the study requirements. The researcher initially planned to include participants from middle and high school; however, based on availability of participants, only elementary special education teachers were included. Hycner (1999) stated, “The phenomenon dictates the method, including even the type of participants” (p. 156). The school district and participants in this study were selected based on convenience and accessibility of the researcher. Purposeful sampling from nine different schools in one school region provided a better representation for the study. Based on the requirements for participation, nine participants met requirements and were willing to participate in the study. Permission to conduct the research was requested before interviewing research participants (Appendix A).

Demographics of participants. Creswell (2014) stated, “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions” (p. 189). The sample included nine elementary level general curriculum special education teachers who were asked to volunteer to participant in the study. Table 2 outlines study participants.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

Participant	School	Years of Experience
Ava	School A	11 years
Brittany	School B	26 years
Callie	School C	19 years
Deanna	School D	16 years
Elizabeth	School E	23 years
Fran	School F	7 years
Gloria	School G	6 years
Haven	School H	6 years
Ian	School I	9 years

Note. All names used in this study were replaced by pseudonyms.

Table 2 includes information about nine study participants. Four teachers have between 5-10 years teaching experience and five study participants have more than 10 years of teaching experience.

Ava. Ava is a general curriculum special education teacher who has taught special education for 11 years. She has taught all 11 years at School A. School A has over 500 students serving Grades Prekindergarten through 5.

Brittany. Brittany has a total of 26 years in education. Currently, she is a general curriculum special education teacher at School B who has taught at this school for the past 9 years. Previously, Brittany taught as a regular education teacher and has been employed as a math curriculum facilitator. After 1 year as a math curriculum facilitator, she returned to the classroom as a special education teacher. School B has approximately 560 prekindergarten through fifth-grade students enrolled.

Callie. Callie is a general curriculum special education teacher at School C who has taught for 19 years. She has taught at School C for 10 years. School C has approximately 420 prekindergarten through fifth-grade students enrolled.

Deanna. Deanna is a general curriculum special education teacher at School D who has taught for 16 years. Deanna received a bachelor's degree in social work and a master's degree in special education. School D has approximately 450 students enrolled.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a general curriculum special education teacher at School E who has taught at School E for the past 13 years. Elizabeth has been teaching for a total of 23 years. School E has approximately 340 students enrolled in Grades Prekindergarten to 5.

Fran. Fran is a general curriculum special education teacher at School F who has taught for a total of 7 years and is in her fourth year teaching at School F. School F has approximately 350 prekindergarten through fifth-grade students enrolled.

Gloria. Gloria is a general curriculum special education teacher at School G who has taught for a total of 6 years. She has taught at School G for 3 years. School G has approximately 650 students enrolled.

Haven. Haven is a general curriculum special education teacher at School H and has taught for 5 years. School H has 675 students enrolled in Grades Prekindergarten through 5.

Ian. Ian is a general curriculum special education teacher at School I who has taught for a total of 9 years. Ian has been teaching at School I for 7 years. School I has approximately 355 students enrolled in prekindergarten through fifth grade.

Boyd (2001) regarded two to 10 participants or research subjects as sufficient to reach saturation; and Creswell (1998) recommended, "long interviews with up to 10 people" for a phenomenological study (p. 65). Creswell (1998) mentioned the more cases used, the less the depth of the study; therefore, the researcher set out to interview nine participants who meet requirements of the study. Nine general curriculum special

education teachers from nine different elementary schools in North Carolina with more than 5 years teaching experience were contacted and asked to participate in this research study.

Data Collection

Data collection took place during the 2016-2017 school year and included nine elementary level general curriculum special education teachers. Special education teachers were assured their participation was strictly voluntary, responses were confidential, and there would be no risk in participating in the study (Appendix B). The researcher conducted the initial interview session with participants in a mutually agreed upon location after instructional hours. After conducting audio recorded initial interview sessions with all nine participants, the researcher transcribed responses and established emerging codes. The researcher highlighted significant statements or quotes provided by the participants to document the research findings. The researcher met with research participants to complete member checking of the initial interview session. After member checking, a second round of interviews was conducted with each participant in a mutually agreed upon location after work hours. After the second round of interviews, responses were transcribed and coded based on themes. The researcher transcribed responses and established emerging codes. The researcher met with the research participants to complete a second round of member checking. Based on information and themes developed during the second round of interviews, a third interview was conducted to determine additional information about life experiences related to both self-efficacy of teaching and the decision to stay in the field of education.

Interview methodology. In order to describe the lived experiences of special education teachers, individual interviews were chosen as a method for collecting data. A

phenomenological study relies heavily on interviews from study participants. Therefore, the researcher used active listening during interviews and did not interrupt participant thought processes. Based on consent permission given, the researcher contacted general curriculum special education teachers to schedule the first session of interviews based on the availability of participant schedules. The researcher and participants determined a mutually agreed upon location. Based on feedback from participants who validated the reliability of the instrument, the researcher allowed between 45 minutes and 1 hour in order to gather rich descriptive data from the study participants. The researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews which focused on the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about the theme in question (Welman & Kruger, 1999). The researcher used one audiotaping device to capture perceptions in order to increase the accuracy of data collection. Participants were given the opportunity to review the researcher's transcripts and notes to ensure perceptions of the transcribed interviews were accurate.

Table 3 displays the alignment of research questions with interview questions and Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory. The initial round of interviews included 10 questions and probing questions to encourage participants to expand on thoughts of lived experiences and encourage in-depth feedback. Probing questions asked to encourage feedback included "Could you tell more about that," "What do you mean by that," and "That sounds interesting, could you tell me how you felt when that happened?"

Table 3

Alignment of Questions

Initial Interview Questions	Bandura's Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory
Tell me about your position.	Mastery Experiences
How many years have you been a general curriculum elementary special education teacher?	Mastery Experiences
Have you taught an area/subject other than general curriculum elementary special education in the past? If so, what did you teach?	Mastery Experiences Physiological State
Describe your educational experience.	Mastery Experiences Vicarious Experiences Verbal Persuasion
How would you describe your first year as a teacher?	Mastery Experiences Vicarious Experiences Verbal Persuasion
How would you describe your most recent year as a teacher?	Mastery Experiences Vicarious Experiences Verbal Persuasion Physiological State
How would you describe your work with other team members at your school?	Vicarious Experiences Verbal Persuasion Physiological State
Why did you choose special education as your teaching profession?	Mastery Experiences Vicarious Experiences Verbal Persuasion
Have you ever thought about leaving the profession?	Mastery Experiences Physiological State
Why have you stayed in the special education teaching profession?	Mastery Experiences Vicarious Experiences Verbal Persuasion Physiological State

The alignment in Table 3 allows the reader to make connections between the initial interview items and Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy

Theory. Depending on participant responses, several questions addressed more than one self-efficacy belief. For example, Questions 4, 6, 7, and 10 addressed mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological state. Initial interview questions were developed and followed an interview protocol for asking questions and recording answers (Creswell, 2014). The researcher, who took notes during the interview sessions, audio recorded all interviews and transcribed all responses.

Summary of data collection procedures. Interview questions for the initial interview were developed and validated with three participants. Research participants were invited to sign the Consent Form for Research (Appendix B). Member checking allowed research participants to review statements to validate responses (Appendix C). The second session of interview questions was developed after the initial interview responses were analyzed. Responses to the second session of interview questions were transcribed and responses were assigned a code word or statement. Participants completed a second round of member checks. The third session of interview questions was developed after the second interview responses were analyzed.

Data Analysis

The researcher used the template analysis technique to analyze participant interview data. The template is a tool to help the researcher produce an interpretation of the data to provide richness to the lived experiences of the participants. First, the researcher transcribed all nine interviews and read responses thoroughly to become familiar with lived experiences. After the participants verified the information shared during the initial interview session, the researcher analyzed the data from the interview session. The researcher highlighted each statement and assigned a code word or statement to describe the topic or theme (Moustakas, 1994). Second, initial coding of the

data assisted to identify parts of lived experiences relevant to the research questions. The researcher chose to define features as themes when they recurred several times in the participant's experience. The researcher used a thematic presentation of the findings by using a small number of cases to illustrate key themes. The purpose of highlighting significant statements or quotes provided by the participants allowed the researcher to reduce the data into significant manageable groups (Creswell, 2014). The researcher used group themes identified in the selected transcripts into a smaller number of higher-order codes to describe broader themes in the data. When relevant data did not fit in the existing themes, a change was created to allow a different theme to emerge. Descriptive statistics were used to display the most common themes. In addition, the researcher used rich, thick descriptions as well as direct quotes from participants including using shorter quotes to clarify particular points and longer quotes to give the reader a vivid picture of the study participant's experience.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, the researcher designed the study; determined participants; interviewed participants; and identified personal values, assumptions, and biases at the onset of the study. The researcher purposefully selected participants to best aid in understanding the problem (Creswell, 2014). The researcher described personal experiences with the phenomenon (Appendix D). Bracketing is the first step in phenomenological reduction, where the researcher will set aside all preconceived experiences to understand the experiences of participants in the study (Creswell, 2014). The researcher used open-ended questions to avoid leading the participant toward the researcher's point of view.

Validation of Data

Schurink, Schurink, and Poggenpoel (1998) emphasized the truth-value of qualitative research through phenomenological research design. Creswell (2014) suggested using one or more strategies to check the accuracy of findings. The researcher must anticipate any ethical considerations that may arise during the qualitative process (Creswell, 2009). Participants were informed of the time commitment before consenting to participate in this study. Participants were also informed that there would be no compensation for participating in this study and that they had the option to opt out at any time. Phenomenological research collects sensitive information through in-depth questions; therefore, there were no identifiers attached to the survey or interview items, and participant responses did remain anonymous.

Trustworthiness. Qualitative studies use a smaller selection of participants which could impact the reliability and validity. Care was taken to maintain the anonymity of research subjects participating in the research study. One-on-one interview participants were assigned pseudonyms. Computer files for each participant were stored on an external storage device and, along with all hard copies of associated paperwork, were stored in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's residence.

Member checking. The researcher used member checks and provided rich, thick description of the phenomena in order to triangulate the data. Interviews were audio recorded to add to the validity of the research. Member checks were used after the researcher completed the initial data analysis. Creswell (2014) stated, "Member checking does not mean taking back the raw transcripts to check for accuracy; instead, the researcher takes back parts of polished or semi-polished product" (p. 202). Member checks involved the researcher using the participants to review the collected data. The

researcher took back specific descriptions or themes to participants to ensure accuracy of the findings. Research participants received a copy of the text to validate that it reflected their perspectives regarding the phenomenon being studied. In addition to member checks, the researcher used rich, thick descriptions as another validation strategy. The researcher hoped that rich, thick descriptions would “transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences” (Creswell, 2014, p. 202).

Data triangulation. The researcher triangulated data by examining perspectives given during the first interview to develop themes then cross checked themes in a second interview session. Once themes from the first interview were established, the researcher conducted a second interview with participants. During the second interview, the researcher was able to explore themes and create more opportunities for rich descriptions. Once themes from the second interview were established, the researcher conducted a third interview with participants.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the methodology used by the researcher in conducting this qualitative study. Chapter 3 included the research purpose, research methods, the role of the researcher, participants and settings, participant permission, and data analysis. Chapter 4 includes themes and data collected and the research findings while addressing the two research questions. Chapter 5 includes conclusions based on the researcher’s findings of this study and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 4: Data, Analysis, and Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to gather and examine the lived experiences of general curriculum special education teachers to better understand the phenomenon of special education teacher self-efficacy as perceived and reported by nine teachers in this field. The goal of this study was to provide encouragement to special education teachers and to provide valuable information to administrators and district-level personnel surrounding the reasons why special education teachers continue teaching in this field.

Upon IRB approval, all nine participants were given consent forms and asked to return the document if interested in participating in the research study. All nine research study participants signed the consent to participate in three sessions of one-on-one interviews. The researcher and participants worked together to schedule a mutually agreed upon time and location that did not interfere with student instruction or job duties of the participants. The majority of the interviews took place in participant classrooms. Data were collected over the course of 3 months through one-on-one interviews with each research participant.

This chapter presents emerging themes gathered throughout the analysis of individual interviews to answer the following research questions.

1. According to elementary general curriculum special education teachers, what types of experiences are considered to be most beneficial for improving self-efficacy?
2. What factors influence elementary general curriculum special education teacher decisions to remain teaching special education for at least 5 years?

Chapter 4 is organized into two sections. The first section provides an overview of the participants and how interviews were conducted. The second section is organized by research questions and reports the findings.

Study Overview

Participants. Participants were introduced in Chapter 3 and are described in more detail in this chapter. Information collected during the three sessions of interviews led the researcher to further clarify information surrounding participants and their pathways to an educational field. Table 4 summarizes the demographic information.

Table 4

Teacher Preparation Program and Support

Participant	Lateral Entry	Participated in Student Teaching	Assigned a Mentor
Ava	Yes	No	Yes
Brittany	No	Yes	Yes
Callie	No	Yes	Yes
Deanna	No	Yes	No
Elizabeth	No	Yes	No
Fran	No	Yes	Yes
Gloria	No	Yes	No
Haven	Yes	Yes	No
Ian	Yes	Yes	Yes

Information reported in Table 4 represents all nine participants in the study.

Three of nine participants reported being lateral entry teachers. The majority of the participants, eight of nine, reported they completed student teaching either at an elementary school, middle school, or high school. Over half of the nine participants were assigned a mentor within the same school location.

When asked, participants described their special education position in a number of ways, but all included an explanation that included working with students eligible for

special education services under one of the 14 disabilities identified in North Carolina. Besides assisting students with work on reading, writing, and math, participants noted they also helped students with their social and behavioral goals. Gloria explained, “My duties include collaborating with teachers on extended planning, attending work sessions with regular education teachers, and holding meetings with parents.” Deanna echoed Gloria but added, “I work with small groups on mostly reading and math. Fewer students on my caseload require support in the area of written expression.”

Interviews. The initial interview questions were designed to gather in-depth responses to the two research questions. Due to inclement weather, three of the initial session interviews took place via FaceTime. Each initial one-on-one interview lasted at least 40 minutes and was audio recorded to increase accuracy during the transcription process. The researcher transcribed all nine initial interviews and thoroughly read responses multiple times to become familiar with participants and their lived experiences. The researcher made multiple hard copies of the transcripts and highlighted significant statements or quotes to identify parts of lived experiences relevant to each theme. The researcher used one copy of the transcripts to cut out statements. The researcher placed statements in piles under different codes. Each time a key word or phrase was reported during participant responses given in the initial session interview, a tally mark was recorded. Table 5 outlines the initial data analysis.

Table 5

Number of Responses Related to Specific Codes Identified after Interview 1

Code	Participant									
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Total
Colleague Support	4	2	7	1	1	1	1	3	1	21
Student Impact	3	3	1	3	2	2	4	1	1	20
Disability Specific Experience	0	2	3	3	1	2	3	2	2	18
Paperwork	3	3	8	6	2	5	4	3	3	37
Caseload Size	3	1	4	3	4	5	2	4	3	29
Principal Support	1	1	3	2	4	1	2	1	2	17
Personal Families	2	4	2	3	1	1	2	2	1	18
Mentors	1	1	1	0	0	4	0	0	1	8

Table 5 identifies participants by the first letter of their name and identifies key words or key phrases based on teacher responses. Keys phrases such as “colleague support,” “student impact,” “disability specific experience with behavior,” “paperwork,” “caseload size,” “principal support,” “personal families support,” and “mentor support” emerged from the first round of participant statements.

Initial coding of the data identified parts of lived experiences relevant to the research questions. Coding was used to identify key words and phrases to find a pattern of statements. For example, if a special education teacher stated, “Coming to work is fun because of colleagues,” the researcher coded the response with “colleague support” and placed it in the pile labeled “colleague support.” If a participant stated, “I know my principal has my back,” the researcher coded it as “principal support” and placed it in the category labeled “principal support.” After initial coding, the researcher scheduled a second interview, and participants were asked to verify statements through member checking. Participants were also asked to read and check specific stories shared about experiences. Participants verified shared stories and added information or asked to

change the wording. For example, Brittany asked to change a specific word indicating how she described a student. The researcher noted the change in her response.

Participants were asked to describe their responses to the following statements listed in Table 6.

Table 6

Initial Member Checking

Key Phrases	Member Checking
Colleague Support	Teachers reported a positive experience with colleagues and noted a feeling of being part of a family. Teachers reported a sense of belonging.
Student Impact	Teachers shared stories of past students. Knowing they made a difference in a student's life was reported as being beneficial.
Disability Specific Experience	Teachers reported an increase of students with behavior difficulty. Professional Development and coaching sessions are beneficial in providing ideas on teaching strategies.
Paperwork	Teachers shared stories and reported difficulty with completing paperwork. Completing paperwork during work hours has been reported as beneficial.
Caseload Size	Teachers reported large group size and large caseload size has a negative impact on their teaching ability. Teachers reported feelings of accomplishment and increased teaching ability when group size and caseload size was smaller.
Support -Principal support -Personal families -Mentors	Support by principals, personal families, and a mentor was reported as beneficial. Principals provided support at a school level. Personal families provided emotional support. Having access to a mentor was reported as being helpful in providing professional support.

Based on themes presented during the initial interview session, a second session of interviews was conducted. The researcher met with participants one on one to complete the second interview. Each interview was after work hours and did not interfere with instruction. Table 7 aligns initial themes and second session interview

questions.

Table 7

Second Session Interview Questions

Initial Theme	Second Session
Caseload Size	Describe your caseload. Describe difficulties and successes with scheduling your groups.
Paperwork	Describe how you manage completing paperwork? Describe how the process of completing paperwork impacts your self-efficacy?
Disability Specific Experience	Tell me about difficulties you have experienced with your students. How did you overcome these difficulties? Describe a specific training that was most impacting to you.
Support -Principal Support -Personal Families -Mentors	Tell me about your experience working with your principal. Tell me about your experience working with your mentor. Describe how your family has impacted your belief in yourself? In what ways do you think your upbringing has influenced your teaching?
Colleague Support	Describe how you and your colleagues work together. Describe a piece of advice you received from a colleague that has made a lasting impression.
Student Impact	Describe your impact on students. Describe how this makes you feel as a teacher.

As shown in Table 7, the researcher asked questions about caseload size, paperwork, experience with behavior, support, colleague support, and student impact during the second interview session. During the second round of data analysis, the researcher made multiple copies of each interview transcript. Each interview provided significant information related to the initial themes developed. Significant statements were highlighted and placed in the piles of the initial themes. Coding of the data assisted in identifying parts of lived experiences relevant to the research questions. Participants

were asked to verify statements given during the second interview session. Participants agreed with statements and validated responses through member checking. When asked about support, Haven shared an additional story relating to colleague support to back up her statement. This can be found later in this chapter under colleague support.

Based on responses given during the second session of interviews, a third session of interviews was conducted with research participants. After the third session of interviews and member checking, the researcher used significant statements to develop larger themes. For example, “caseload size” and “paperwork” were codes combined and grouped into one final theme of “collaboration and planning.” Ava reported, “I have smaller group sizes this year . . . it is different this year . . . I feel I am reaching kids.” Callie stated, “We all work together . . . that makes meetings so smoother.” Table 8 aligns the third session of interview questions to final themes.

Table 8

Third Session Interview Questions

Final Theme	Third Session Interview Questions
Collaboration and Planning	Describe how the number of students on your caseload impacts how effective you feel in the classroom. Describe how the ability to plan with other teachers impacts how effective you feel in the classroom.
Understanding and Training	Describe how effective you feel in the classroom after attending Professional Development. Describe how effective you feel as a teacher when your student(s) react to a new strategy.
Encouragement	Describe ways your principal makes you feel like an effective teacher. Describe ways your personal family offers encouragement to you. Describe ways your mentor offered encouragement to you.
Relationships	Describe ways your colleagues impact you as a teacher. Describe how students impact you as a teacher.

Experience was a key word indicated by all participants. Experience with students with Autism, experience with students with behavior difficulties, and experience with completing paperwork were used to create a final theme of “understanding and training.” Brittany explained, “I use information from a specific behavior training session to assist with writing a good behavior analysis and behavior intervention plan.” Elizabeth noted, “I feel more prepared when I sit one-on-one with my coordinator and she walks me through paperwork or even how to complete a behavior request.”

The researcher combined the codes “principal support,” “personal families,” and “mentors” and placed them in a final theme. For example, Brittany stated, “My parents are wonderful. They encourage me and always listen.” Deanna stated, “My parents value education and encourage me by telling me I am extra special.” A final theme of “encouragement” was created to address different avenues of support.

Significant statements revealed participants valued colleagues and acknowledged they made a difference for students. “Relationships” was a larger theme created from “colleague support” and “student impact” due to participants identifying this support differently than support received from principals, personal families, or mentors. Deanna explained, “Knowing that my students move and graduate is huge. That is a good feeling.” Participants shared success stories of previous students and how this impacted them.

Organizing data into groups allowed the researcher to develop meaning to create final themes and to align final themes with each research question. Data collected were reviewed multiple times to remove researcher bias. Table 9 presents the initial codes and final themes to address the first research question.

Table 9

RQ 1: According to Elementary General Curriculum Special Education Teachers, What Types of Experiences are Considered to be Most Beneficial for Improving Self-Efficacy?

Initial Codes	Final Themes
Caseload Size Paperwork	Collaboration and Planning
Disability Specific Experience -topics differ based on school need	Understanding and Training
Principal Support Personal Families Mentor Support	Encouragement

As shown in Table 9, initial codes and final themes are aligned to address the first research question. Participants indicated their self-efficacy, or belief in their ability to complete a task and reach goals, increases with more collaboration, time to plan, and more training on specific topics. Teachers also indicated verbal encouragement from school personnel and family increases self-efficacy. Table 10 presents the initial codes and final themes to address the second research question.

Table 10

RQ 2: What Factors Influence Elementary General Curriculum Special Education Teacher Decisions to Remain Teaching Special Education for at Least 5 Years?

Initial Codes	Final Theme
Colleague Support Student Impact	Relationships

As shown in Table 10, two initial codes and one final theme are aligned to address the second research question. Teachers indicated relationships are extremely important when deciding to remain teaching. Statements and direct quotes highlight participant candid moments and heartfelt stories to transport the reader back to the moment.

Research Question 1

Data analysis gathered through three rounds of one-on-one interviews on the perceptions and lived experiences of the research participants were used to answer Research Question 1: According to elementary general curriculum special education teachers, what types of experiences are considered to be most beneficial for improving self-efficacy?

The researcher used data to determine three main findings and supported each finding with qualitative evidence. Findings related to the first research question include collaboration and planning, understanding and training, and encouragement.

Finding 1: Collaboration and planning. Special education teachers indicated collaboration and planning with other special education teachers and other school personnel is beneficial in improving self-efficacy. Not only does it create a collaborative community around students, but it also allows time to discuss difficulties with scheduling, allows teachers to plan together, and creates a time to complete paperwork. Participants discussed that having a high number of students on their caseload decreased self-efficacy as it did not allow significant time to observe other teachers, plan with coworkers, or attend professional learning communities (PLCs) with other teachers. Brittany stated, “When I have lower number of students on my caseload then that is a lot less paperwork and [it] gives me more time for direct instruction with my students.” Teachers also described limited time to discuss and complete paperwork during the school day as an impact on self-efficacy. Teachers reported that a high number of students on their caseloads had a negative impact on their ability level in the classroom due to the increased number of groups and their size. Teachers reported that a large class size decreased their ability to work with small, specialized groups. In the opposite way,

small group sizes had a positive impact on perceived self-efficacy. Ava shared, “going from a group of 10 students last year to no more than seven students in a pull out group this year has been the most amazing change.”

Caseload size. Participants reported that an increase of students on their caseload caused extreme stress and less time to participate in collaboration with team members. Conversely, participants indicated a lower caseload size directly impacted their ability to “reach all students” and increased feelings of accomplishment with students and their perceptions of being an effective teacher.

Ava shared that a decrease in group size had been a wonderful change. The same participant shared,

It just means I get to really help each child more! I can really see what their needs are and help THEM. Also with teacher directed programs, it means the students get to read more. My reading groups this year are not bigger than five which means the students ACTUALLY get to read more words each day! I can hear better who is making mistakes. We’ve been able to keep word lists for them to write down the words they miss and review them until they can say them three different days in a row. I was not able to do that last year with my large group!

The researcher asked Ava to describe her most recent year as a teacher. She recalled,

It was overwhelming because I had big groups. So every day I felt I was failing as a teacher. I felt I couldn’t reach them all. The kids are great. I just want to leave everyday thinking I should have done something different. I didn’t feel that way. It is totally different this year . . . totally different group size.

Brittany stated,

When I have a lower caseload then progress monitoring is easier and gets done.

Also, I have more and more students who exhibit challenging behaviors so I am being called out of my classroom to assist. That takes away from all students. It impacts everyone.

Callie mentioned that having a big caseload means more hours of planning. Lower number of students on a caseload means “being more effective in the classroom.” She elaborated, “You can split larger groups and share them with other teachers. You have to think outside the box when you have a big caseload.” Deanna described how a smaller caseload meant more time meeting student needs:

I can spend more time with a child or creating materials for a child. I prefer to use my time finding cool stuff for a child to do rather than spending tons of time at the computer completing paperwork because you have to do . . . like when you have thirty meetings in one month. I could spend all that time creating more instructional materials that are aligned to my students’ needs.

Deanna echoed Callie’s comments by stating,

Higher number of students on my caseload and students with significant behaviors means more time . . . super-behaviors are not my forte. I am more effective when I have fewer students on my caseload. I cannot impact . . . anything . . . when I am pulled in different directions all day because I have too many students on my caseload.

Elizabeth mentioned her caseload size by indicating, “I have low numbers on my caseload this year.” She also stated, “As long as I stay organized then I do not get behind.” Elizabeth explained,

The number of students in each pullout group this year is fewer and I am able to get a lot accomplished with students. I have made more of an impact . . . by being

able to do more inclusion . . . instead of pulling students out of their classroom.

Fran explained, “I do not necessarily believe lower numbers of students on my caseload impacts my ability to reach all students” and continued by saying, “but you have to look at the amount of service time and also look at your groupings to see which is more impacting.” The same participant shared,

I can focus on academic instruction when I have lower numbers of students in each group. When you have more students with difficult behavior in each group then you have to switch your focus to teaching replacement behavior skills then you can teach academics . . . if you have a group of five and three of them have behavior needs . . . then I feel the other two miss out on instruction. It is difficult to find that balance.

The researcher probed Fran to expand on the idea of “finding balance.” The participant stated,

With a high caseload . . . it is difficult to track the behaviors, efficiently teach the child, develop or change interventions, and continue to have communication with the general education teachers. That can be overwhelming . . . much more draining.

During the third interview, Gloria shared she has not had time to complete home visits this year due to a high caseload. She continued,

At the beginning of this year, I was the only special education teacher at this school. That was challenging! Lower number of students on a caseload means I have more time for one-on-one instruction. We have hired another special education teacher and now I have more time for instruction and more time to form bonds with my students.

The same participant shared, “Caseload size and group size does impact my ability to reach students.” She shared,

The size of my groups is smaller now . . . it makes a big difference. I have one student who requires a check-in and check-out and I was not able to do that before. We did it during his transition to specials or to lunch . . . that was not helpful. Less students means more time to address specific needs . . . makes me feel that I am doing good . . . doing good for students . . . like a better teacher.

Haven shared,

Having a lower number of students on my caseload helps with being more efficient in the way I can individualized my instruction. I do not have time during the school day to attend a Personal Learning Community or plan with other teachers.

The same participant went on to discuss that she is able to view each grade level’s pacing guides. She stated, “I can look at each pacing guide and ask questions if needed.”

Ian echoed Haven by sharing,

Having a high caseload, in general, makes everything more challenging because of the increased number of IEP meetings and accompanying paperwork. This inherently results in lost instructional time. It also gets to the point that your instruction is no longer specialized. More problematic is when this group of students is widely varied in abilities, making effective grouping very difficult.

Ian went on to discuss that a decreased caseload allowed for more individualized attention to students and more targeted instruction. Ian disagreed with how productive a PLC was at his school:

Recently, we have not been included in PLC planning. When we were, it was

generally a waste of time and EC [special education] was an afterthought. With the exception of planning for the math block I co-teach (and planning seems to be 24/7 since we live in the same house) . . . planning happens on the fly between classes. I typically follow their [general education teachers'] plans via shared space lesson plans.

Paperwork. Interestingly, defining the term “paperwork” became imperative, as it allowed the researcher to fully understand the scope of this particular finding. One participant defined paperwork as being much more than just forms and documents. To this same participant, paperwork included data collection, progress monitoring, data notebooks, updating student work files, creating homework for some students, and planning for large groups of students ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade.

To other participants, paperwork was defined as being forms and documents required for eligibility and annual reviews of individual plans. Some participants explained that paperwork is not necessarily just lesson plans. Ian agreed with this statement, “Paperwork is all the documents required for developing plans and progress reports.” This participant went on to acknowledge the other day-to-day requirements are just “stuff” that needs to be done.

One theme that emerged while collecting perspectives was the amount of time special educators spend completing paperwork during their personal time. Participants described coming to school in the early hours of morning and leaving the schoolhouse after 7 o'clock as a normal occurrence; however, all participants noted paperwork was more thorough and data-driven the earlier they start completing required paperwork for IEP meetings. Callie elaborated, “I start completing paperwork early. Now everything is online . . . electronic is easier and faster. It is easier to do at home.” Participants agreed

that starting the process of drafting an individualized plan early is best. Ava agreed by indicating, “It is not done at one time but a little bit at a time.” Participants noted that their comfort level does increase as their experience with completing paperwork increases. Callie stated, “Paperwork is important. You need to learn it and learn it fast. It does get better with time and experience.”

During the second session interview, Ava was asked how she managed completing paperwork; the teacher responded,

I start early . . . I do some during the morning time . . . a lot of paperwork is done after school. I do some after my children go to bed. Sometimes on Sunday afternoon when my children are napping then I have to complete paperwork. We started doing live meetings . . . and things really changed. Before, I spent hours after the meeting making changes; but now I make changes during the meeting. That has been the biggest difference . . . so when the meeting is done then I just need to print and fax.

During the second interview session, Brittany shared,

I get here at 6 o'clock in the morning. Every single morning. That is my planning time and paperwork time. Paperwork and just getting that done is a beast. With my caseload, and scheduling, it has been really, really hard to have any planning time throughout the day at all. Sooo . . . but you know I get here in the morning and I do not take anything home. So, that is kind of the compromise. When I go home, then home is home. I have more energy in the morning and I type better.

Callie graduated from a local university and mentioned, “I thought I would be well prepared for teaching”; however, she revealed, “Then you start teaching and realize

the paperwork is completely different. They [professors] do not teach you about paperwork like they should.” Callie shared, “I create a to-do list every day and also have a planner.” The same participant noted, “I enjoy the paperwork and it does not take me long because I am considered ‘seasoned.’” The researcher asked the participant to explain what “seasoned” meant:

I get in there and do a goal and put in all the data. I set everything out and look at all the data. I can pretty quickly look and say “he is doing this” and “he is doing that” and plug it in . . . sometimes he does this and is inconsistent. Knowing what to put on each document makes your meetings run smoother and is less stressful.

Callie also gave a glimpse of what “paperwork” entailed before computer programs. She went on to say,

Back then you had to handwrite all the paperwork . . . you had to press hard because there was a pink copy, white copy, and blue copy. Can you believe all of it was handwritten . . . and I have horrible handwriting . . . that was a shocker for me! The only other option was to sit there during the meeting and use a typewriter. Of course, you don’t want to do that so you write as fast as you can . . . which was probably worse. Now we can do paperwork at home and during meetings . . . makes it [meetings] go faster and you have more data to share.

Deanna mentioned, “I do a lot of my paperwork at home.” I have morning duty and afternoon duty so it is 3pm by the time I get back to my room. I can stay until 3:45 but I use that time to make copies and prepare things. The same participant went on to explain,

It is easier for me to complete EC paperwork on the couch at my house. Just think if I logged all of those hours . . . how many snow days I could trade for or

overtime pay I would get! The reality is there are not enough hours in the day to really do it and do it well. Sometimes just need to sit quietly and think how I want to say things. I will have a stack of notes, a couple of data screens pulled up on my computer and I can spread out. Otherwise I would be here [at school] . . . we cannot stay past 6:00pm. I really prefer to work over my weeknights and not my weekends.

Deanna also noted comfort in understanding how to complete paperwork:

I am not sure if I want to go another route but for now it is working fine. I feel like I know what I need to do now. If someone hands me a file then I know what to do. Overall, I feel I am in a good spot with my knowledge base. Even if someone outside of school asks a question, then I feel I have a good knowledge base to be able to help them. It is core in me now. I understand it now. It has taken many years but after a while you get a better sense of how things work . . . I feel my comfort level is high because I understand how to do it [paperwork].

Elizabeth manages paperwork by “Completing a little each day.” She noted, “I struggle with completing paperwork but keep notes all over the place.” She continued by saying, “I have to have paperwork completed two to three days before the meeting.” When the researcher probed Elizabeth to determine if completing paperwork early had an impact on her feelings of being accomplished, the teacher responded by saying, “Feelings of understanding paperwork and having a system help me feel I can tackle it and I can accomplish it.”

Fran was asked how she completed paperwork and if it impacted her; she stated, It [paperwork] is difficult; a lot of it is done in my PJ’s at home. My progress monitoring . . . I wish I could do better. I have set aside time to analyze and

record it . . . I do not have a system to do it right then and there during classroom instruction. Doing paperwork for my meetings . . . a little bit is done at school but the majority is done at home because I do not have enough time to do it at school. I need time to think . . . so then I feel it is good and describes the child . . . I can't do that at school when I have a ton of groups.

"Planning and time management helps me complete paperwork and meet deadlines," stated Gloria. The same participant shared,

It can be overwhelming at times, especially towards the end of the year when we hold more meetings and during the beginning of the year when you have to fill out all of those forms. If there is a 10 or 15 minute gap between classes then I use that time to get stuff done . . . fax paperwork, enter information in the computer. I have a checklist and I use it . . . it has a list of upcoming meetings . . . I can double check what I need to turn in. It [paperwork] has gotten easier over the years so now it does not stress me out.

Haven mentioned, "I struggle with paperwork and being an effective teacher mostly during the spring months." She mentioned,

I usually work late after work or sacrifice the twenty minutes that I have to eat. I understand how to complete paperwork and progress monitoring . . . I do not have time to document it unless I do it on my own time . . . but I have more tools under my belt and I know the paperwork and process better now.

Ian described completing paperwork as a process. The teacher went on to describe the steps it took to complete required paperwork as being,

I have evolved to doing the special education side of paperwork by getting up around 4:30am. It is quiet in my house. I find I can attack it better by getting up

early and it gets done without taking time away from my personal children. I feel I give every single minute of every single day to someone else and by 8pm I want some time for myself.

The same participant noted, “It is a process and once you understand it [paperwork] . . . it gets better. It [paperwork] was gut wrenching in the beginning but now . . . with repetition it is easier. I know what to do to get green check marks.”

Finding 2: Understanding and training. Special education teachers indicated self-efficacy improves as understanding and training related to disability-specific experience increases. Special education teachers indicated that with experience comes understanding. Every teacher stated they do not feel they received adequate training in college prep courses or during their early years as a teacher. In discussing self-efficacy, participants discussed how lack of knowledge in special education or behavior techniques impacted their teaching. Significant statements surrounded the need for learning opportunities specific to school need and disability-specific experience. A higher number of specific training opportunities related to students with Autism and increased experience with behavior strategies was reported as being crucial. Brittany shared, “I did not feel prepared for students with behavior . . . after attending workshops I have strategies that I can use.” Elizabeth noted, “I feel more prepared when I leave a workshop and have tools that I can use.” Fran stated, “I feel more effective when I attend workshops on behavior techniques.”

Ava reported she did not complete student teaching and was a lateral entry teacher. During the second interview she questioned,

I wonder if I was starting again . . . I wonder if it would be different . . . I wonder if they have someone in the county for lateral entry teachers. I did not take an

education class, so I really didn't know about specific disabilities when I started. I just had to pass my praxis . . . so you can imagine . . . I had no clue what I was doing!

Brittany noted how difficult it was to teach when students have behaviors that significantly impact their learning and significantly impact the learning of others: "We have seen a rise in students with behavior difficulties and I do get a call during the day to assist with students who have challenging behaviors." Brittany stated,

I feel that this year and last year have been the most difficult when working with students in special education. Our district seemed to change its philosophy for serving students and philosophy for least restrictive environment. Students with significant and severe behavior difficulties were mainstreamed back into the general education classrooms. We [resource teachers] were sometimes not part of the decision making process and students were sent back to their home school. That is difficult, especially with no training in that area. We have a couple of students who are nonverbal and demonstrate significant behaviors so that is challenging.

Brittany also mentioned, "I have been to training that taught me how to use visual schedules or reward boards so students have constant activities. That is important."

Overall, Brittany noted, "You have to do the best you can do but that is hard when we [teachers] have not been trained. I have been to training and it has helped to know what to do."

Brittany and Deanna indicated a thought that had not yet been explored in conversation. Brittany, who has previously taught general education, stated,

Before you become an EC teacher I think you should have taught regular

education . . . you need to understand the struggle . . . understand what middle of the road looks like and what the high looks like. When you understand that . . . you have the ability to aim for something and understand children's developmental trajectory.

Deanna's response agreed with these sentiments:

My student teacher is in a dual program now and I think that is so important. I hate to see people dump their career just because they can't understand paperwork or have 35 kids on their caseload. I think it is important for general education teachers to have an EC background and vice versa. I think it is helpful for EC teachers to get a sense of the curriculum since we teach Kindergarten thru 5th grade. That is something that is not a challenge now but it can be overwhelming. It is almost impossible for me to know and understand what every single grade level is doing . . . knowing everything they need to know at grade level is almost impossible. I think it does help an EC teacher . . . if I have something I can go to help show me or help me understand what I need to be doing then that is better. There are some resources out there.

Callie shared she has noticed the number of behavioral difficulties each year increase. She noted,

Each year we have more and more children who have behavior problems. They range from AU type of behaviors to full-blown meltdowns where physical aggression is seen. I also do not feel we were prepared to teach students with Autism. In my 20 years of teaching, it [disruptive behavior] has definitely increased. Nowadays, EC teachers need to be trained in how to deal with all sorts of behaviors. We did not get that much training in pre-service . . . but boy do we

need it now! It is ridiculous! Therefore, the lower numbers of these types of behaviors in my room, totally has an effect on how well I can do my job. I have been taught about visuals and it helps . . . student teachers need this training also.

Callie went on to state,

Back when I started teaching, students behaved for the most part. Nowadays, every single student has a behavior issues at some point or another. So I do not think I was prepared to handle that. You also have to learn that . . . behavior piece . . . through experience and other teachers. I have had a great opportunity to do inclusion work with teachers who are excellent with behaviors . . . through modeling I have learned how to manage classrooms efficiently.

Deanna described one group of students who were extremely verbal during instruction time. She stated,

I had a group of 10 and all were chatty. I remember thinking I am the teacher and they are the kids. They cannot get under my skin. I started making one student more responsible for helping other students in the room. All of a sudden he was the best student in the classroom. I had to remind myself that he is a child and he doesn't understand.

The same participant shared another example:

Our 3rd grade student this year is the same. I just know I have to figure out a way to get him to stop the behavior. I find when I sit down next to him then pick up his hand and make him track. By doing this then he settles down. I know I need to fix me and how I look at the situation and how I do things because the kid is going to be the kid. I wish there was a magic wand to fix all of them. But I can't. It is a puzzle sometimes. These behaviors are nothing as what we see with another

student. It is more something that irritates me as a person. I have to get over that because I can't let a child irritate me and I have to figure out what makes it better. Deanna shared she just recently attended a training specific to classroom behavior management and reported it was empowering. She continued by saying,

We learned to use a timer as a visual so students know when to stop or when to transition . . . I have been using this more and it is working! It is so empowering to have strategies to use. Also, during the same training session, I was able to see how other teachers address behavior difficulties. When I went to the workshop I heard other teachers talk about what they were doing . . . I left with ideas . . . like the notebook . . . I had something to give my students and felt like I could really do this!

Elizabeth remembered a specific time when her district-level administrator provided support:

I appreciate her coming by my classroom and sitting with me . . . provided hands-on experience. I had a caseload full of boys and she would sit with me and explain step-by-step what the IEP meant. This was obviously impacting and very helpful! Having that training is important to teachers. I got it.

Fran mentioned, "I have learned a lot about disabilities . . . they do not teach you this stuff in school." Fran shared,

This year has been difficult . . . it has been . . . with change . . . more students fully included. The push our county did as far as away from separate classrooms means students have a lot of need. Not only academically but socially . . . and emotionally. It has been difficult because we were not prepared for that . . . also, general education teachers . . . were not ready.

After attending a workshop aimed at improving behavior, the same participant went on to say,

When I think about one student in particular who last year showed a lot of behaviors and then in one year completely turned it around . . . that makes you feel good and successful . . . like you are serving a purpose.

Fran mentioned how helpful it is now that she has support staff, like a behavior specialist or coordinator, whom she could ask for help. She went on to say, “When I have strategies to use and knowing we have made a change . . . it might not be 100% perfect, but knowing I made a difference . . . then that makes you feel good.”

Gloria recalls having one student in particular who did not really care or agree with rules. She remembered,

I tried to connect with him . . . he loved Harry Potter . . . which I did not like but I would read a little bit of the book so I could redirect his attention by talking about Harry Potter. I learned and was able to understand that I needed to connect with him. Turns out I was able to use this trick and get him to comply about 80% of the time.

She continued,

A lot of times, everything has been exhausted . . . First-Then strategy, When-When strategy, timers . . . you have exhausted everything. It is tough to understand what we need to use next. When you figure it out then you feel you did good for that student.

Haven stated, “Students who have significant behavior difficulties tend to take more time to collaborate, plan, and execute different behavior strategies.” Both Gloria and Haven mentioned, during one-on-one interviews, that they relied on administrators,

parents, and previous teachers to help. They used anyone from the team who might have suggestions or ideas from specific trainings.

Ian, who had extensive behavior training, discussed the need for a schoolwide plan to address behavior:

The context of students with behavior difficulties is more significant than the sheer number of students. It only takes one student with significant acting-out behavior to shut-down a classroom in any setting. This is devastating if a student's acting-out behavior is consistently interrupting or ending instruction for student groups.

Continuing, Ian stated, "I had people who gave me support by directly coming in [my classroom] and helping me out." The same participant reflected, "I had folks give me stuff and was supportive of me."

Finding 3: Encouragement. Special education teachers indicated "encouragement" is beneficial with improving self-efficacy. Participants described encouragement from different sources which ranged from the principal, their own personal families, and their mentors. Participants shared specific stories and events that demonstrated how encouragement was beneficial in improving self-efficacy.

Principal support. Overall, participants mentioned they had a good working relationship with their administrator. All nine teachers used words or phrases that fit into this category such as "encouraging," "has my back," "positive," and "supportive." Ava felt supported and encouraged by her principals because they worked as a team and she knew she could call her even during the weekend if needed. "She is receptive to suggestions and concerns I bring to her. She is supportive with programs we have asked to purchase," said Ava.

In the same vein, Brittany and Fran shared similar stories. Brittany reported, "My principal is incredibly encouraging and makes me feel like I was a good quality teacher. She makes me feel like I am doing a good job and I have felt supported. I know she has my back and values my opinions. For example, my principal has asked questions such as, "What do you think we should do for this?" or "What do you think about this?"

Fran reported similar experiences with her principal:

I am held accountable to things but it is the type of relationship where I can go to her and say I have done X, Y, and Z and we still need something else and then she will help. She is very supportive and I know she has my back.

Callie indicated she has a wonderful relationship with her principal and stated, "She and I can go to each other and ask advice of one another. It is important to have a growing relationship with your principal." For example, Callie shared, "I am looking out for the EC aspect of things, including being an advocate for my students, and a principal is looking out for the overall well-being of the school in general." Callie continued,

My principal wants to do what is right by our kids. She is very patient and has built a great relationship with some of our kiddos. She has lunch dates with students and includes all students . . . I know she supports us when we realize a student is not in the least restrictive placement. She strives to help us get it right.

Deanna described her relationship with her principal as being a good relationship where she is supported: "I feel I can go and say [to my principal], 'This is happening and please pay attention to this' and I have confidence that my principal will." She went on to say, "I do not bug him with every little thing so when I do say something to him then I know he realizes it is important." I feel respected and I feel he views my abilities as

being high because I get really good evaluations. Deanna was asked to describe how her principal handles curriculum in the special education department and noted,

With me, I feel I have a lot of leeway with curriculum. He likes to know I am using updated, research based programs. He has given me money to buy materials. I feel supported because he helps me link research based programs to the curriculum. I am appreciative of his support.

Elizabeth was asked to describe the relationship with the building-level principal. The teacher discussed she has a good relationship with the building principal. She went on to describe this person as “someone who wants to do what is right by students with disabilities” and someone who is “patient and has built a great relationship with students in the special education department.” The teacher went on: “The principal’s door is always open and is there if ‘you need advice’ or ‘need to talk about a difficult case.’” When the researcher asked the participant to describe how her principal handles situations in the special education department, Elizabeth stated, “My principal tends to ask the special education teachers about curriculum needs and what is best for students. She includes us in discussions which lets me know she values my opinion.”

Elizabeth was asked to describe a time where someone has helped her succeed. The teacher immediately stated,

Gosh so many! I would say...I feel that when . . . my principal . . . when she came to this school and she gave me the confidence to be the person and the teacher I am because she was accepting of the special education program and students with disabilities at this school.

This participant continued by sharing a story:

One time when I went to my principal and said, this, this, and this is happening

and there are things not being done in the classroom, my principal comforted me by verifying that I was not tattling, but I was holding my co-workers accountable. And it kind-of made me feel like a professional, not a tattler. In the past, I have not always felt this supported by other principals.

Gloria feels fortunate to work under a great administrator and stated, I can have crucial conversations with her about best practices . . . I can go to her and I think she feels comfortable coming to me. My principal looks at me to help certain teachers and will ask, “Can you work with her,” “Can you show that teacher a good strategy for that,” or “Can you work with that teacher on her daily schedule?”

She continued, “I am glad to work with my principal and I do feel she likes me . . . [she] respects what I bring to the school.”

Haven had a similar experience and shared, I have open communication with my principal and can communicate with my principal on a daily basis about concerns or my caseload. My principal is really careful when looking over students’ IEPs and using that to handle situations that happen at school. My principal has a positive, open communication with parents and teachers in the building, which impacts my job and our collaborative team.

The same participant shared a story where she felt supported by her principal:

One time in particular during my evaluation, my principal was able to provide me with positive constructive criticism on a lesson that I taught. We also look into different strategies and professional developments that I could enroll in to help me improve in a certain area of my teaching. I believe there is always room for improvement in all areas and I appreciate her encouragement with helping me

find opportunities through professional development.

Ian saw his principal as a positive influence and a leader currently directing the school in the right direction. When asked to elaborate, the teacher explained,

I have a very positive relationship with my principal at this point. I have been able to maintain positive relationships with all five principals I have worked for so far. That is not to say that I have always believed in the vision of the principals . . . or lack thereof. The most challenging thing for me in these relationships has been when I do not feel the school is headed in the right direction and when I do not see much hope in things improving. Thankfully, I feel that there is a positive trend under the current leadership.

Ian shared the school where he currently teaches is his neighborhood school. The teacher went on to say, “I look at that as I should be able to have my children come here and I should be happy . . . satisfied with their education. That does not always happen but I do get more promise every day.” The teacher was probed to explain what he meant by “promise.” He went on to say,

It is strongly tied to the administrator that is in place now. That is something that was somewhat . . . came as a surprise . . . as exactly how much a different that made . . . who was in that role and how much that person can promote progress in the building. I feel we do have potential.

Personal families. During individual interviews, participants shared how they consider the support from their personal family to be beneficial in improving self-efficacy.

Ava was asked, “has your family impacted your beliefs in yourself and your ability to be a teacher?” Ava did not hesitate to answer and shared that her husband is a

teacher. She said,

He will say every now and then how cool it is that I help these children . . . that I care about them . . . that I text their parents. He will tell me that he is really proud of me. I do not like to talk about it because being a special education teacher is not a big deal.

Brittany noted she felt her upbringing influenced her ability to connect with students. She stated, “I respond to children because of my upbringing and because I went to six different elementary schools.” The teacher continued,

I had some really good teachers and I had some really bad teachers. A lot of our students are transient and I am sensitive to our students. I had gaps in my education from moving around. I lived in different places all over the United States and it made me sensitive to children who are struggling and allows me to have a tender heart and some compassion for them because I experienced it also. I didn’t learn to read until I was 10 years old but I did it!

Without hesitation, Brittany continued by describing her mother and father as being wonderful people,

They have always believed in me and always encouraged me. I know I can always talk to my husband about my day but I prefer to talk to my momma. They encouraged me to go back and get my master’s degree . . . they love me no matter what.

Callie noted, “Education is in my blood. My mom always knew I would be a teacher.” The researcher probed by asking, “Why did your mom think that?” Callie shared a story:

When I was little I would sit on the toilet with the seat down and I would put all

my stuffed animals out in front of me on the floor. I would teach them, I would discipline them, but I would pretend. She knew that I would always be in education. I was bossy so she knew that was part of it also (laugh).

Callie, who indicated she was brought up in a Southern Baptist church, mentioned she was taught to be mannerly and respectful. She said, “My parents, especially my dad, were very strict and instilled a work ethic in me. I didn’t appreciate it then but now I do!” She mentioned persistence and flexibility were important to her parents. She continued,

My parents taught me to do anything to build someone up . . . each and every day . . . it is your job on this Earth to build people up and not tear them down. That has gone into what I do every day. I know we are not supposed to talk about God in school but there have been many times that I have gone over to my desk and said a prayer . . . then I move on. There is more demand on teachers now and you have to find a way to cope . . . I am thankful for my parents.

Deanna shared that both her parents valued education. Her mother retired after 35 years of teaching at a high school. Deanna looked off in the distance and shared,

Both my parents have instilled in me a high work ethic and the ability to take care of myself. I was nurtured and loved . . . I was very lucky. My parents always told me I could do anything I wanted to do. It was never a question if I would go to college . . . never an option. I appreciate what I have and I want to try to help my students have good lives.

Elizabeth had a similar experience and viewed herself as being one of the lucky ones. She went on to say,

The way I was brought up . . . to care for people . . . to respect everyone no matter

what . . . thank goodness for my parents. My mom and dad always said I could do anything in this world. When I called my mom and dad to tell them I passed the National Boards . . . I was so excited . . . they said, “Why are you so surprised? We knew you could do it.” They raised me to believe I was just as good as anyone else . . . that is what they told me.

Gloria shared she came from a single parent household. Her mother was a hard worker and very dedicated. The teacher shared,

My mother is a very determined woman and I have seen how hard she worked and I have seen she has never given up. I am an intrinsic learner so the majority of my success has not been influenced by anyone in particular. Going to college was never a question. I didn’t need much rewarding but I did see my mother’s hard work and how she never gave up.

Haven shared that her family has always been supportive. She went on to elaborate, “My family instilled in me to always follow my dreams and be persistent. They encouraged me to attend college and to make a positive impact on myself and most importantly to others.”

Mentors. Five participants indicated they had a mentor, and four indicated they did not have a mentor. While the majority of those participants who had mentors indicated it was a positive relationship, Ava, who had no classroom experience prior to her first year, explained she learned what not to do from her mentor. The participant continued by explaining, “My mentor did not stick to the 90-day rule when determining eligibility. I learned a lot by what she didn’t do correctly. She was not encouraging she wasn’t mean, just was not encouraging.”

Brittany felt the teaching part was not hard but felt that meetings and paperwork,

even with assistance from her mentor, was the hardest part of her job. The teacher said, “My mentor was extremely helpful and I would not have survived without her. I had no clue what I was doing.” She viewed her mentor as someone to make sure she was compliant and working within the law.

Callie had a great experience with her mentor. The teacher mentioned her mentor was always available and would offer words of encouragement. She noted she did not know what she was doing during her first year of teaching; but her mentor would say encouraging statements like, “you are a natural” and “you are doing great.”

Fran shared, “I was lucky to have two great mentors!” She continued and said her first mentor had close to 18 years of experience: “We would meet a couple times per week . . . we would talk about paperwork and students with difficult behaviors.” The same participant was asked, “Based on feedback given after your mentor observed you, what was helpful?” She reminisced,

Basically, well . . . most of my observations and feedback was positive. My mentor would remind me of what I did well . . . this motivated me to do better.

She would give me suggestions to try to help students. These suggestions really helped guide me to help students have a good year . . . I still use those suggestions now.

Research Question 2

One main finding was discovered in answer to Research Question 2: What factors influence elementary general curriculum special education teacher decisions to remain teaching special education for at least 5 years? Perceptions and lived experiences gathered through three rounds of one-on-one interviews assisted to answer this research question. The researcher used data to determine one main finding and supported this

finding with qualitative evidence.

The researcher used data to determine three main findings and supported each finding with qualitative evidence. A finding to support the second research question was relationships.

Finding 4: Relationships. Special education teachers indicated relationships, in several forms, influenced their decisions to continue teaching past the 5-year mark. Special education teachers indicated it was positive colleague support that was most important when influencing their decisions to continue teaching. Colleague support during IEP meetings was rated high among participants. Participants also indicated relationships with previous students and knowing they had an impact on students influenced their decisions to remain in the teaching profession.

Colleague support. The topic of support came up multiple times during one-on-one interviews with participants. Teacher self-efficacy was strongly tied to colleague support and feeling like a family. Fran shared, “It is important when you work together.” Gloria noted, “The number of students in special education who passed the End of Grade assessment my first year teaching was 78% in the area of reading. I am not a team by myself . . . we all did it together.”

Ava explained,

We have become more like a family. We text over break and check on each other’s [personal] kids. For example, my son got the flu and developed a rash on his arm. I immediately texted people from school . . . they are kind-of like your own family. I didn’t even send it to my own family . . . I sent it to them [co-workers]. They become the people you trust. So it never seems like work . . . it seems . . . it almost seems fun.”

Ava elaborated,

If we are at the same meeting then we try to do each other's paperwork. This is really helpful for me because then I just have to worry about the meeting and not doing the IEP minutes. I can just focus on the meeting. We take turns helping . . . we can lean on each other . . . it is easy to help each other.

Callie described her school team as a good group with a wide variety of strengths within the Special Education Department. She went on to describe each special education teacher and the certain strength they bring to the team:

One of us has good knowledge of curriculum and assessment, one has served as a good resource for progress monitoring, one person has more experience with Autism. We can lean on each other and point each other in the right direction. Everyone is learning and growing . . . if you can't learn and grow every year that you are a teacher then you need to get out because nobody is perfect. Every year is a new challenge that we need to overcome . . . we have a good group.

Deanna and Elizabeth both explained during one-on-one interview that they have close relationships with many teachers at their own school. Deanna went on to say, "I am comfortable working with my team members and we have great discussion on how to meet the needs of students. General education and special education teachers support each other . . . we are a like a family." Elizabeth stated, "I co-teach with some great teachers and am able to give suggestions to some that I do not teach with." The same participant also suggested having a close relationship with colleagues does have an impact on her motivation to continue teaching. She said, "It is nice to come to work and know everyone gets along and is working hard."

Fran noted that this past year has been difficult. She said, "It has been . . . with

the change . . . more students fully included.” She went on to say,

We have students we all three [special education teachers] serve so we have to work together . . . we are good at collaborating. We have to coordinate who is completing the progress reports and who is responsible for certain portions of the IEP.

Gloria shared similar experiences with her team members at her school. She noted she is a grade-level representative. She went on to explain this means she attends meetings and brings back information to other special education teachers at her school. She stated, “Since we share a lot of the same students, I collaborate mostly with the speech pathologist. We meet to discuss goals and how to progress monitor.”

Haven shared their team is very open and shares everything. She stated, “We share reading kits and collaborate all the time. We try to eat lunch together every day.” She went on, “I do get tired of commuting to work every day but I just love working with everyone at my school.” She continued, “I feel I have grown from my first year here to now. I just love this school and all the people here.”

Student impact. All participants mentioned positive relationships with current and former students influenced their decision to remain teaching. Several participants indicated that small growth is more impacting than meeting state expectations for passing end-of-grade tests. When asked during the initial interview session, “Why have you stayed in the special education teaching profession,” Haven stated, “I have always pulled for the underdogs”; Elizabeth reported, “Because I care for my students”; Fran noted, “I worry who would fill my spot and if they would do a good job”; and Gloria shared, “I want them to be a success story.”

Participants in this study repeatedly discussed the impact of knowing they made a

difference for students and how that impacted their decisions to continue teaching. When Ava was asked to describe how students impact her as a teacher, she reported, “The biggest thing is not feeling you have reached them [students] and you have wasted the day.”

Brittany revealed that special education chose her. After teaching as a regular education teacher for 17 years, she left the classroom to work as a math curriculum facilitator. Brittany continued by saying,

It lasted one summer! I called my principal and asked if I could come back. The only position available was to teach general curriculum special education. So I took the position and it was the change I was looking for. The position allowed me to continue working with students. Working with students was the part of the job that I really liked.

During the second interview, Brittany was teary-eyed as she shared a story about a former student:

I had a former student who struggled to read and could barely write his name. I did a teacher-directed reading program with him and I helped him read. I did that! He was retained at one time and then in high school he was bumped back up to his original class. He just graduated from high school. Those are the things that make it worthwhile. That is why I stick with it.

Callie mentioned she has a great relationship with former students and stays in education because it is rewarding. Callie continued,

To teach is to touch a life forever. I truly believe that! Past students do seek me out, through Facebook . . . just to say “you made a difference in my life.” That is what it is all about. Knowing I made a difference. I do not see myself being

anywhere else than in education.

Deanna shared she has satisfaction in her teaching career when she finds that “one thing” that can help a student. She stated, “I might try 4,000 things but then I try one more. Then it works.” The researcher probed by asking, “Why do you continue to try to find that ‘one more thing’ that will work?” Deanna replied,

Because I see the value in that child. That child has got skills and I want him or her to be a productive member of society. I want them to be able to go out and pay bills and be a productive member. And it is going to be hard. I look at my children . . . typically developing . . . and it is going to be hard for them . . . it is going to be super hard for my students. Anything I can do to help them really function in society one day. I really do want that for them. It is sad for me when I know these kids have skills but they cannot unlock them.

Deanna elaborated,

Knowing that I see my kids move on. Kids have graduated. That feels good. I have lost track of some but most have graduated. I have had kids come up to me at football games and talk to me. Have adult conversations with some . . . to see students all grown up and for me to know I had a hand in that. That they actually want to come up to me and talk to me.

When the researcher asked Elizabeth, “Why did you choose special education as your teaching profession,” Elizabeth stated,

I love kids! I have always loved kids. I felt I had a horrible . . . did not like a lot of my teachers. I felt I was not taught the right way and my teachers did not get me . . . I did not want that to happen to other kids.

The researcher probed Elizabeth by asking, “Why have you stayed in the special

education teaching profession?” Elizabeth reminisced,

I guess . . . it comes down to . . . I just love it. It is certainly not for the money. I thrive off these kids and that is the only reason you should be teaching. You have to like what you do to be up at that hour of the morning . . . to work all day and all night . . . to dream about these kids. You have to like what you are doing. I love to see my students succeed and love to see the people they become.

Gloria stated, “I stay in the teaching profession for the kids.” She went into detail by saying,

I have a desire for them to learn. I want them to be a success story . . . For them [students] here I am in elementary school and couldn’t read . . . and then . . . here I am in post-secondary school and I am an author or a teacher myself. I want that for them.

Ian described his reason to stay in the profession as, “I love working with these kids! My granddad told me, ‘You either get in the business and make a lot of money and you help the folks with the money you make or you get in there and help people.’” Ian expanded this thought by stating, “We do not make a lot of money so that is not the reason I am staying.”

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine general curriculum special education teachers’ lived experiences with teaching special education for at least 5 years. The study was guided by two research questions which focused on the types of experiences considered to be most beneficial in implementing self-efficacy with special educators and factors influencing special education teacher decisions to continue teaching special education for the past 5 years. The researcher collected qualitative data through

the use of one-on-one interviews over the course of three rounds of interviews.

Qualitative data were analyzed through the use of highlighting significant themes and providing specific statements and quotes to provide rich lived experiences. Final themes were created using key words through codes and aligned to research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Study Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine and understand nine elementary general curriculum special education teachers' lived experiences in teaching special education for at least 5 years. Lived experiences in this study presented emerging themes that describe how special education teachers perceive self-efficacy and persistence in special education teaching. The data collected supported findings of Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory, revealing that efficacy beliefs are constructed in mastery experience, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological state.

The researcher interviewed nine elementary general curriculum special education teachers from nine different elementary schools. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher who used initial codes to develop final themes. The following research questions were addressed during data collection.

1. According to elementary general curriculum special education teachers, what types of experiences are considered to be most beneficial for improving self-efficacy?
2. What factors influence elementary general curriculum special education teacher decisions to remain teaching special education for at least 5 years?

This chapter provides a summary of the data collection process, data analysis process, and summary of the findings' implications. Limitations of the study will be discussed in this chapter, followed by recommendations for future research and final conclusions.

Data collected. Three separate one-on-one interviews were conducted with nine special education general curriculum teachers who had more than 5 years teaching experience. Participants were chosen based on availability and proximity to the researcher and were from nine different elementary schools.

Participants were contacted prior to the initial interview so the researcher could explain the purpose of the study, answer any questions related to the research topic, and give participants time to sign a consent form to allow data collection. All one-on-one interviews were scheduled at a mutually agreed upon location and were scheduled after instructional hours.

The researcher audio recorded and transcribed each interview and completed initial data analysis. After each interview, the researcher used member-checking with each participant, and each teacher was asked to describe and validate responses to the initial findings presented. After initial member checking, the researcher created the second round of interview questions and scheduled the second interview session with each participant. After the second round of member checking, the researcher developed the third round of interview questions. After the third interview session, the researcher completed the final round of data analysis.

Data analysis. The researcher completed three cycles of data analysis and validated data through the use of rich, thick descriptions and member checking. After the initial interviews, the researcher used the interview transcriptions to code the data. The researcher read through the interviews several times to identify common meanings.

Overall Findings

The research study revealed four findings from one-on-one teacher interviews that addressed the two research questions. Through individual interviews, the researcher was

able to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants.

Overview of findings. Based on reported experiences by participants, three findings were stated to be beneficial in improving self-efficacy: collaboration and planning, understanding and training, and encouragement. One finding was reported to be influential in special education teacher decisions to remain in teaching. This finding was relationships.

Research Question 1. Specific findings related to the first research question, “According to elementary general curriculum special education teachers, what types of experiences are considered to be most beneficial for improving self-efficacy,” are indicated below.

Finding one. Special education teachers indicated collaboration and planning with other special education teachers and other school personnel is beneficial in improving self-efficacy.

Finding two. Special education teachers indicated self-efficacy improves as understanding and training related to disability-specific experience increases.

Finding three. Special education teachers indicated “encouragement” is beneficial in improving self-efficacy.

Research Question 2. One specific finding was related to the second research question, “What factors influence elementary general curriculum special education teacher decisions to remain teaching special education for at least 5 years?” This finding is noted below.

Finding four. Relationships influenced special education teacher decisions to continue teaching past 5 years.

Interpretation

Theoretical framework. Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory guided the methodology and provided a framework for this study. Bandura (1986) noted self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situations. Bandura's (1977) framework theory of self-efficacy highlighted four sources from which efficacy beliefs are constructed: mastery experience, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological state. The following section explains the framework theory of self-efficacy's four sources and provides a correlation to the study findings.

Mastery experiences and finding one. As noted in Bandura's (1977, 1986) social cognitive theory, the strongest source of self-efficacy typically comes from one's interpretations of one's own performance or mastery experience. Finding one is associated with mastery experiences. Finding one indicated that special education teacher self-efficacy is improved when collaboration and planning with other special education teachers and other school personnel happens. Not only did collaboration create a positive community around students, it also allowed time to discuss difficulties with scheduling, allowed teachers to work together for instructional purposes, and created time to discuss and complete paperwork.

In this study, special education teachers who stayed in the profession more than 5 years indicated success in teaching students with disabilities and success with completing paperwork. Goddard et al. (2004) noted, "Mastery experience is the most powerful source of efficacy information" (p. 5). Mastery experiences or performing a task successfully strengthens one's sense of self-efficacy. During the second interview session, one participant shared, "It has taken 16 years but I have a better sense of how things work, and my comfort level is high" (Deanna, personal communication, March 14,

2017). Mastery experiences provide the most authentic evidence of one's potential to succeed (Bernadowski et al., 2013). Success teaches people they can succeed, and repeated early successes provide a cushion against occasional later failures (Tuckman & Monetti, 2011).

Implications. Providing teachers with the opportunity to collaborate and plan together with other special education teachers and other school personnel is necessary to create a collaborative community around students. Providing opportunities for special education teachers to work together will contribute to increase instructional planning. Collins (2005) stated, "Success breeds support and commitment, which breeds even greater success, which breeds more support and commitment" (p. 24). Increased time for collaborative, instructional planning has several implications for special education teachers with less than 5 years of experience. It allows special education teachers a necessary venue to discuss lesson plans and to share ideas. In addition, it allows more time to learn from colleagues in order to increase their own self-efficacy. In this study, the special education teachers who believed they were successful continued teaching after the 5-year mark. More experienced teachers may affect the quality of instruction for students with disabilities. According to Kini and Podolsky (2016), experienced teachers support greater learning for their colleagues, the school, and for students.

Vicarious experiences and finding two. Finding two revealed that special education teacher self-efficacy improved as understanding and training related to disability-specific experience increased. Vicarious experiences, defined as observing someone else performing a task or handling a situation successfully through social modeling, directly impacts self-efficacy. People learn from their own experiences and by observing the behaviors of others (Pajares, 2002). Without undergoing the trial and error

process of performing a task, vicarious learning can help one perform the same task by imitation.

Teachers felt that increased training opportunities directly impacted their ability to handle situations related to difficult behavior. Many of the participants in this study shared that confidence in implementing strategies to combat negative behavior or knowledge about instructional materials made them feel like they could handle students with behavior difficulties.

Not only did understanding and training on specific disabilities improve self-efficacy with special educators, but they were described as integral in the decision to remain in the teaching profession. One participant shared, “When I went to a workshop and saw teachers implementing the behavior notebook . . . that was empowering. Watching other teachers use this [notebook] makes me feel I can do it too” (Deanna, personal communication, March 14, 2017).

During the second interview, one participant noted, “I had a wonderful program coordinator who sat beside me and walked me through navigating the computer system for writing IEP’s” (Elizabeth, personal communication, February 2, 2017). The same participant elaborated, “Having her show me in a one-on-one setting was impacting and made me feel I could do it also” (Elizabeth, personal communication, February 2, 2017).

Implications. When special education teachers feel confident in handling situations related to their roles, retention in the education field is more likely. Special education teachers identified training as a solution to challenges with hard to handle student behavior and with completing paperwork. Providing special education teachers with hands-on, disability-specific training is important to increase teacher knowledge and confidence. Special educators need opportunities to attend professional development,

opportunities for hands-on training in their classrooms, and to receive training specific to their content areas.

It would be beneficial for central office personnel to ensure that special educators are provided assistance in locating professional development opportunities and are provided disability-specific coaching sessions. In addition, the researcher recommends that special education central office support personnel be assigned to three or less schools in order to provide ample time for coaching opportunities, instructional modeling, and assistance during meetings. Teachers need specialized skills and training in their specific content area to feel highly effective in teaching (Swackhamer, Koellner, Basile, Kimbrough, 2009). Providing adequate levels of instructional and compliance support so that job demands do not become overwhelming would allow another layer of defense to keep special education teachers in the profession after 5 years.

Verbal persuasion and finding three. Finding three suggested that special education teacher self-efficacy improved when they were provided encouragement from principals, personal families, and mentors. Verbal persuasion encompasses the act of being led, through persuasive suggestions, into believing that one can cope successfully in what has been overwhelming in the past (Bandura, 1977). Special education teachers in this study expressed a desire to feel appreciated by their principal and mentioned that words of affirmation from their administrator were appreciated. One participant shared, “My principal is encouraging and makes me feel like I am a good quality teacher. By asking my opinion and valuing what I had to say then I felt she supported me” (Brittany, personal communication, February 6, 2017). Administrators, mentors, and personal families were factors that teachers brought up during interviews with regard to verbal encouragement. Many teachers felt that administrators positively influenced their feeling

of success and feeling like part of a team.

Special education teachers in this study repeatedly indicated that support from administration, personal families, and mentors influenced their self-efficacy and provided encouragement. Encouragement influences teachers to put forth more effort, and that effort ultimately leads to increasing self-efficacy beliefs. Cenkseven-Onder and Sari (2009) noted that when an administrator is a good leader, teachers have a greater sense of satisfaction and will continue in the teaching field. Jones et al. (2013) echoed this finding, noting that a quality relationship with the school principal is a key consideration when teachers are deciding to remain in the education field.

Implications. In this study, teachers reported that administrators, personal families, and mentors had a great impact on their satisfaction and belief of success. Support from principals was reported as having a direct influence on teachers. Great leaders provide authentic praise and work effortlessly to implement, maintain, and sustain positive morale (Connors, 2000). Administrators should encourage teachers through verbal praise and positive feedback. When special education teachers have the support of colleagues and the principal, a positive work environment is more likely to be established. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) stated, “Administrators who clearly understand the needs of students with disabilities, IDEA, and the instructional challenges that educators who work with students with disabilities face are better prepared to provide appropriate support” (p. 9).

Physiological state and finding four. Finding four highlighted that special education teacher decisions to continue teaching past the 5-year mark are influenced by relationships with colleagues and students. Physiological state, defined as how people respond and emotional connection to situations, plays an important role in self-efficacy.

When people feel connected to an organization, people become connected to something deeper (Lewin & Regine, 2000). One participant, in talking about colleagues, expressed her feelings: “It sounds really cheesy but we fit together like a puzzle” (Ava, personal communication, February 13, 2017). Participants also noted the importance of working together as a team. A different participant noted, “Together we swim, individually we sink” (Brittany, personal communication, February 6, 2017).

In this study, teachers reported they arrived to work before school started and left late in the evening. Teachers also reported completing paperwork over the weekends, which impacted time with their personal families. The researcher recommends providing more opportunities for special education teachers to complete required paperwork during the school day. If special education teachers had designated planning time, it would decrease the amount of time spent at school in the morning, afternoons, and during personal family time. Imhoff (2012) indicated one of the main reasons for leaving the special education profession is due to the stress and burden of paperwork. Working long hours coupled with insufficient time to complete paperwork during work hours can have a direct influence on teacher burnout rates and their decisions to remain teaching.

Special education teachers also indicated knowing they made a difference in student lives influenced their decision to continue teaching past the 5-year threshold. One participant mentioned, “Feeling you have reached your students and knowing you haven’t wasted your day is the best feeling” (Ava, personal communication, March 13, 2017). These experiences and interactions with former students can have a direct impact on special educators and their decisions to remain in the teaching profession.

Implications. Many teachers reported relationships between colleagues impacted decisions to remain in the teaching profession. Teachers need to be provided more

opportunity for colleague support but also more opportunity for positive social interaction with colleagues to increase a sense of community and family. Team building activities should be provided to increase fellowship among colleagues. In this study, teachers reported feelings of accomplishment when hearing success stories about former students. The researcher acknowledges this task would be challenging, but teachers should be encouraged to stay connected with former students or parents. Providing success stories and maintaining relationships promotes higher levels of confidence. Inviting students back to a school for an Alumni Day may be one way to accomplish this task. Providing opportunities for special education teachers to hear success stories could affirm their hard work, empower them, and perhaps encourage them to remain in the teaching field.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine lived experiences of general curriculum special education teachers who have continued to teach past 5 years. Understanding lived experiences explained through heartfelt stories were crucial to the overall purpose of this study. The researcher was able to relate all four findings to Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Concept of Self-Efficacy Theory. The findings from this study may help inform principals, central office support personnel, and higher education personnel on special education teacher self-efficacy. In addition, the findings might influence practices that could lead special education teachers to remain in the field for longer than 5 years. Some of the factors include increased planning time during school hours, increased one-on-one training opportunities, and increased time to collaborate with colleagues.

Limitations

The overall purpose of this phenomenology study was to gather rich data through

semi-structured interviews in order to examine reasons elementary general curriculum special education teachers from a North Carolina school district have remained in special education for more than 5 years.

One limitation of this study was that the researcher, as program coordinator, coached and supported a total of seven of the nine participants. Participants shared heartfelt stories which often included describing difficult moments and stories of regret. The researcher acknowledged that participant responses could have been inflated due to the researcher's position; however, participants sometimes shed tears of happiness and tears of sadness as they shared lived experiences of being a special education teacher. Some of the participants utilized a long pause before answering questions or sharing experiences. The researcher recognized that access to the questions before the day of the interview might have resulted in more detailed stories or responses.

Another limitation of the study was the small study sample of elementary special education teachers, all from one urban district in North Carolina. The researcher acknowledged this limitation could place restrictions on the study's conclusions. Generalization to other special education teachers should be approached with caution.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the data collected for this study, the researcher suggests recommendations for future research. First, a recommendation for further research is a study regarding increased training opportunities and their impact on teacher self-efficacy. Teachers indicated the need for one-on-one training and support opportunities. Teachers in this study stated self-efficacy increased when training and support were hands-on and specific to their area of difficulty. Although the effectiveness of training and support opportunities was briefly explored in this study, additional research is needed in order to

make changes to professional development that might impact the retention of special education teachers.

Research suggests that teachers are more likely to leave teaching or indicate intent to leave due to lack of adequate support from administrators and colleagues (Billingsley, 2004). This study indicated administrator and colleague support is an essential component for increasing self-efficacy beliefs. Leaders need to be well-prepared individuals who know how to create a vision, share responsibility, and work collaboratively in a team (Jasper, 2015). Future research might focus on the specific leadership skills administrators need in order to improve the retention rates of special education teachers past the 5-year mark.

Additional research might continue to examine the relationship and support given by special education central office support personnel. Since roles and responsibilities differ in each county and state, future research should focus on how special education central office personnel provide instructional support and how those strategies impact special education teacher self-efficacy beliefs and their decisions to remain teaching.

Since this study took place in one school district and in one state, one recommendation is to conduct this study methodology in a different district or state to determine if themes found in this study transfer to other locations. Perceptions identified by special education teachers in this North Carolina district could be different from perceptions reported in other districts or states due to general funding, teacher salaries, and understanding about special education policy and procedures.

This research, while gathering perceptions and lived experiences from elementary level general curriculum special education teachers, could also prompt a study regarding perceptions and lived experiences gathered from middle school or high school general

curriculum special education teachers. Studying perceptions from secondary teachers might provide further information in helping retain special educators in this profession.

Summary

This purpose of this qualitative, phenomenology study was to examine the perceptions of self-efficacy in general curriculum special education teachers who have taught for more than 5 years. The research indicated collaboration, understanding and training on specific disability topics, and encouragement to be most beneficial in improving self-efficacy. The research indicated relationships to be one factor that influenced special education teacher decisions to continue teaching past the 5-year timeline. Semi-structured interviews with participants provided immense insight on what types of experiences were considered to be beneficial in improving teacher self-efficacy and what factors influenced their decisions to remain in the special education field longer than 5 years. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will provide insight for principals, central office personnel, and higher education personnel in order to shape a landscape that promotes high self-efficacy beliefs for special education teachers.

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Appendix A

Permission to Conduct Research

Permission to Conduct Research

Dear _____,

I am currently enrolled in the Education Doctoral Curriculum and Instruction program at Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, NC, and I am requesting permission to conduct a research study in this school district. The working title of my research project is *Passion for Teaching: Self-Efficacy of Elementary Special Education Teachers Who Have Persisted in the Special Education Teaching Field for at Least Five Years*

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore perceptions of elementary general curriculum special education teachers who have remained in the special education teaching profession for at least five years. Data collection will be in the form of three phases of one on one interviews with nine elementary general curriculum special education teachers. Each interview should take approximately one hour.

Participants will be provided a consent form to be signed and returned prior to the beginning of research. Participants will be given the opportunity to review the researcher's transcripts and notes to ensure perceptions of the transcribed interviews are accurate. Copies of the interview questions and consent forms are attached.

Your approval to conduct the study would be greatly appreciated, and I am happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have. You may contact me at XXXXXXXXXX or by email at XXXXXXXX.

Sincerely,

Lisa Stewart
Doctoral Candidate, Gardner-Webb University

Appendix B
Consent for Research

Consent Form for Research

Research Consent Form: To be completed by non-student participant or student participant aged 18 years and above.

Project Name: Passion for Teaching: Self-Efficacy of Elementary Special Education Teachers Who Have Persisted in the Special Education Teaching Field for at Least Five Years.

Sponsoring Organization: Gardner-Webb University

Principal Researcher: Lisa Stewart

Telephone XXXXXXXXXXXX

Project Location (s) _____

Participant's Name _____ Position _____

Home Address _____ Telephone _____

Participants Rights and Assurances

I have received a copy of the approved Research Application Form for the aforementioned research project. Having thoroughly read and reviewed the application I am familiar with the purpose, methods, scope and intent of the research project.

_____ I am willing to participant in this research project.

_____ I am not willing to participate in this research project.

If I am willing to participate in this research, I understand that during the course of this project my responses will be kept strictly confidential and that none of the data released in this study will identify me by name or any other identifiable data, descriptions or characterizations. Furthermore I understand that I may discontinue my participation in this project at any time or refuse to respond to any questions I choose not to answer. I am a voluntary participant and have no liability or responsibility for the implementation, methodology, claims, substance or outcomes resulting from this research project. I am also aware that my decision not to participate will not result in any adverse consequences or disparate treatment due to that decision.

I fully understand that this research is being conducted for constructive educational purposes and that I voluntarily participate in this project.

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C
Member Checking

Member Checking

Date: _____

Dear _____ ,

Thank you for being a participant in the study titled, *Passion for Teaching: Self-Efficacy of Elementary Special Education Teachers Who Have Persisted in the Special Education Teaching Field for at Least Five Years*. In order to strengthen the reliability and validity of the study, I would like to give you the opportunity to review my transcripts and notes to ensure that my perceptions of the transcribed interviews are accurate.

If you would like to make any changes, suggestions, or have any questions or concerns, please return the attachment with notations or contact me via email at lstewart2@gardner-webb.edu. I would like to discuss any incorrect conclusions to ensure the transcripts are accurate representations of the interviews. I will make contact within five days for your acknowledgment of the status of the transcripts.

Thank you for your participation and cooperation with this study.

Sincerely,

Lisa Stewart
Doctoral Candidate, Gardner-Webb University

Appendix D
Researcher's Perspective

Before being hired as Special Education Program Coordinator, I was employed full time as an elementary general curriculum special education teacher for seven years. During those seven years, I worked five years at one elementary school. While employed at this location I completed a Master's Degree in Special Education and became a National Board Certified Exceptional Needs Specialist in Early Childhood through Young Adulthood. Before my sixth year of teaching, I transferred to a new elementary school and completed two years as a general curriculum special education teacher. It was during those two years that the topic of self-efficacy became personal.

During my last year teaching, I was hired as an adjunct professor at a local college. While teaching a course in Educational Psychology, I noticed extremely low levels of self-efficacy in regards to student teachers. I empathized with pre-service teachers due to my experience being hired as a lateral entry teacher. I was given two weeks of lateral entry training, a copy of Harry Wong's book titled *The First Days of School: How to be an Effective Teacher* and was given a caseload of fifteen students classified in the special education department. I had no experience with the computer system being used for student's individual plan, I had never held a parent meeting, and more importantly, I had no idea what I was going to do with my students. During my first year, I developed a passion for students with exceptional needs. I had an amazing principal, a supportive mentor who attended every IEP meeting and a special education program coordinator who took the time to explain the paperwork. I vowed that one day I would provide the same support to other special education teachers.

I often wonder why I have stayed in special education for more than five years. As a special education program coordinator, coaching and supporting teachers can be

challenging as the threat of a lawsuit constantly seems to linger in the air. Teaching is a tough profession, and if someone tells you differently then they have never had the honor of being a teacher. I have stayed in school buildings until the custodian kicks me out at night, I have filled my summer vacation with professional development classes, and I have spent my weekends cutting out laminated objects. I worry for my 'school children' and pray for their safety. Teaching is one of the toughest, but most fulfilling jobs! I do it for the students because I honestly believe I am making a difference!