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BEGINNING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPACTFUL SELF-RESILIENCY SKILLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Kjersten Skatvold
MSUM, kaskatvold@gmail.com

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BEGINNING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPACTFUL
SELF-RESILIENCY SKILLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Kjersten Skatvold
M.S. Ed.D. Moorhead State University Moorhead

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Dissertation Committee:

Andrew Burklund, Ed.D., Committee Chair
Keri DeSutter, Ph.D., Committee Member
Patricia Cummings, Ed.D., Committee Member
Molly McKinnon, M.S., Committee Member

Minnesota State University Moorhead

Moorhead, MN

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By Kjersten Skatvold

Kjersten Skatvold

has been approved

May 12, 2023

APPROVED:

Andrew Burklund, Ed.D., Chair

Keri DeSutter, Ph.D., Committee Member

Patricia Cummings, Ed.D., Committee Member

Molly McKinnon, M.S., Committee Member

ACCEPTED AND SIGNED:

ANDREW BURKLUND, Ed.D.

Ok-Hee Lee, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Education and Human Services

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the beginning special educators that are working day in and day out to support our most vulnerable learners in our public schools. Your work is paramount to the success not only of our students but also to our communities. May this dissertation serve as a guide to your districts to support you, assist in meeting your professional needs and guide you into one of the most fulfilling professional roles in education. I was once a struggling beginning special educator that felt alone and confused about my professional choices. Please know that you are supported and championed by many as you navigate your early years as a special educator, even on your toughest days. You are seen every day tirelessly working with the students that others struggle to build relationships with and navigate their complex needs. Keep on going, you've got this!

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ACRONYMS AND NOMENCLATURE

SPED	Special Education
EBD	Emotional Behavior Disorder
SLD	Specific Learning Disability
DCD	Developmental Cognitive Disability
COR	Conservation of Resource Theory
IEP	Individual Education Plan

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ABSTRACT

Special educators are in high demand and greatly needed to meet the growing population of special education in public schools today. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of how beginning special educator's lived experiences utilized their self-resilience skills which impacted their retention in the field of special education. With an increasing rate of attrition in the field of special education, exploring self-resilience factors that impact the retention of beginning special educators was imperative to understanding how to best support these early career educators. The increasing demands and pressures that beginning special educators are required to navigate need to be examined and addressed to ensure support and guidance are in place within the district and building levels in public schools. In order to understand how the phenomenon was experienced by beginning special educators, the researchers conducted focus groups. Participants in the focus groups reflected on and defined their experiences as beginning special educators. The essence of the impact of self-resilience in the study was found through the beginning special educator's ability to recognize student needs and their ability to affect change through supported internal and external environments.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Special education teachers face mounting pressures to provide social-emotional support, individualized learning support and support for accessing the general education curriculum. Clearly, the demands on special education teachers are high. It is no surprise that, nationwide, schools face continued struggles to retain special education teachers (Albrecht et. al, 2009; Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Benjamin & Black, 2012; Cancio et. al, 2018; Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Kutsyuruba et. al, 2019; Lee et. al, 2011; Lesh et al., 2017; Mrstik et. al, 2019; Nichols, 2008). Special educators are feeling the pressures as illustrated by this quote from the 2021 Minnesota Teacher of the Year, “My days and nights are spent in educational triage...most of my time is spent less on helping instruction happen and more on just making sure that our students are feeling safe” (Wurzer & Rosas, 2021, p. 1).

The mounting job-related stresses compounded with challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic have only accelerated the concerns fellow educators, administrators, and community members have about the retention of special educators. Understanding the lived experience of the beginning special education teacher may enable individuals working with beginning special educators to gain a deeper understanding of their unique needs. Greater understanding may provide information on how to best support beginning special education teachers during the early stages of their careers.

The specific use of phenomenological qualitative methodology was used in this study to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of special educators. The study focused on how individuals described their experiences as beginning special

educators in relation to self-resiliency skills utilized during their first years of teaching. The researcher chose this phenomenon of focus due to the historical shortage in the field of Special Education which public education is currently experiencing with attrition of special educators at a higher rate than any other domain in education (Carninus et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2011). Yet, high-quality educators are needed to ensure the growth and sustained viability of programming for students that receive Special Education services. In order to fully realize the depth of support for beginning special education teachers, there is a need to understand the barriers to the success beginning special education teachers are encountering and prepare them with skills related to resilience which is needed to be successful in the special education setting. This study intended to recognize the barriers to success for beginning special education teachers and how to best support them through professional skill development and much-needed reinforcement of skills to navigate their early years in the field of special education.

Background of the Study

With mounting academic and behavioral needs within the educational system as a whole, K-12 special education programs are facing challenges that are far outpacing the training and support given to educators in the field of special education. The Editorial Board of the Star Tribune (2013) reported that the “special education student population has grown by 10 percent in five years...it includes kids with more-serious behavioral and emotional problems...the number of educators with the necessary qualifications to teach them has dropped by nearly the same percentage” (p.1). As the needs of students served within special education continue to grow, Minnesota school

districts are at a pivotal point to commit to promoting the interest in teacher retention and preserving well-qualified staff to work with their most vulnerable students.

Brief Literature Review

With the increasing concern regarding retention of special education teachers, a ripple effect has been felt throughout school districts. Benjamin and Black (2012) shared that with the attrition of special educators, there is an increase in caseloads for remaining special education teachers, a reduction in the quality of services provided, and a decrease in teacher satisfaction. These factors negatively impact the main purpose of teaching, the success of the students. Minnesota lawmakers have heard the same concern and are looking to respond. For example, Minnesota journalist, Golden (2019), reported “A group of Minnesota state senators said...that mounting paperwork requirements are pushing special education teachers out of the profession...Mountains of paperwork are hurting both teachers and the students they serve” (p. 1). An assertion was compiled after months of Minnesota senators consulting with special education teachers and school administrators across Minnesota. Golden’s (2019) article shared the viewpoint of a Minnesota senator, stating “All the policies with special education were done with the best of intentions...But the process has become so complex that we’re taking away valuable teacher time from that student” (p.1). A larger student caseload for beginning special educators leads to increased paperwork and student related concerns which may ultimately lead to an increase in burnout and eventually attrition.

Academic scholarship on retention specific to the field of special educators has produced a fair number of studies in recent years. According to Lesh et al. (2017), Special Educators have a 30% greater chance than any other education discipline to leave the field of education within their first five years of teaching. The field of Special Education is suffering as a whole due to the frequent shortage of staff. Benjamin and Black (2012) shared, "Retention of special education teachers in public schools is an issue that requires the attention of all who are concerned with the quality of education for students with special needs" (p. 5).

The field of special education has been researched and studied since the mid-1980s to pinpoint the possible barriers surrounding special education teacher attrition. In a recent study, Olson and Roberts (2020) found four main barriers in the preparation of special education teachers including the lack of inclusive experiences, misalignment between coursework and fieldwork, educational stakeholders' knowledge and beliefs, and teacher preparation programs. The authors followed up with four key strategies Higher Education teacher educators can employ to help pre-service teachers navigate these barriers including building relationships, self-advocacy, increasing pedagogy knowledge, and being resilient. Bringing these potential barriers to the forefront of educational leadership and teacher educators' minds will assist in preparing and supporting beginning special educators as they become active in the field of teaching.

In a contrasting view from work in Higher Education, researchers Lee et al. (2011) revealed special educators perspectives included a lack of support from school districts, lack of resources, and heavy workload present many barriers for beginning teachers to create positive self-efficacy and resiliency skills. Major issues were

revealed through the results of Lee et al. (2011) study regarding beginning special educators' perceptions and sense of control they have when assessing their perceived self-efficacy. Lee et al. (2011) found that given appropriate resources, beginning teachers will get a sense of freedom and control over the classroom and case management workload, thereby increasing their self-efficacy and resiliency.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by two theories: Self-Resilience Theory (Holling, 1973) and Conservation of Resources Theory (Bettini et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2018). Multiple studies informing the research linked teachers' need for self-resiliency skills with the teaching professional (Afifi et al., 2016; Benjamin & Black, 2012; Carver, 2010; Danilidou & Platsidou, 2018; Mansfield, 2021).

Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) is a motivational theory that allows educators to draw on resources to fulfill job demands. COR focuses includes the following areas of support: social support, material support, and internal support for educators; educators utilize these supports to successfully complete their job-related tasks (Bettini et al., 2019). COR promotes understanding of new teacher expectations as Cancio et al. (2018) connected job commitment and stress by stating, "...workload manageability influenced the teachers' career intentions and predicted emotional exhaustion, indicating a relationship between job commitment and stress (p. 459). Cancio et al. (2018) suggested by using the conservation of resources theoretical framework, that overwhelming workloads may reduce the energy level of new teachers, reduce engagement in responsibilities, and leave teachers burnt out and less committed

to the profession. Through the utilization of these two frameworks, the researcher of this study was able to provide an understanding of the monumental task of being a beginning special education teacher and the skills necessary for the retention of special educators.

Statement of Need

This study hypothesized that beginning special education teachers need to rely on self-resiliency skills to navigate their first years of teaching. Secondly, the study seeks to understand the impact that self-resiliency skills have on the retention of beginning special educators. A majority of the studies on the self-resilience skills of beginning special educators and impacting factors that lead to retention have been completed in major cities in the United States or in foreign countries (Cancio et al, 2018; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Mansfield, 2021; Mrstik et al, 2019; Vasquez & Marino, 2019). Within this researcher's experience, the researcher was unable to source additional research on the impact of self-resiliency skills necessary for the retention of beginning special education teachers in the state of Minnesota.

Given the lack of research on Minnesota beginning special education teachers, the researcher collaborated with a Minnesota school district to determine if the phenomenon of self-resilience had an impact on teacher retention. A pre-focus group recruitment-focused interest survey was shared with beginning special education staff members of a Minnesota school district in the fall of 2022 to gauge the interest level in participating in the focus groups. The data that was collected confirmed the presence of the phenomenon of self-resilience among the beginning special educators within the Minnesota school district.

What researchers know is that there are multiple barriers preventing beginning special education teachers' success. Bettini et al. (2019) reported, "...teachers intend to leave when they experience higher demands, including more instructional responsibilities and more student problems" (p. 312). Another major area in which beginning special educators struggle is in establishing positive collaborative relationships with teachers, families, and paraprofessionals. As beginning special educators inevitably face a range of barriers which may influence long term success. These barriers found in the research include increased demands to provide inclusivity for students with disabilities, establishing expectations with paraprofessionals, working with parents from diverse backgrounds, and establishing positive working relationships with parents (Billingsley et al., 2011). What researchers do not know is which self-resiliency skills are needed to be fostered in beginning special education teachers to have the greatest impact on retention (Albrecht et al., 2009; Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Benjamin & Black, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to examine the impact of self-resiliency skills which support the retention of beginning special education K-12 teachers in a Minnesota public school district in 2022. The study is designed to identify the self-resilience skills that lead beginning special education teachers to continue practicing in the field despite the high attrition rate noted throughout the literature. The phenomenological qualitative research includes focus groups with a concentrated basis on identifying common themes shared between beginning special educators in a Minnesota public school.

The problem of special education teacher retention goes beyond aging out through retirement, as nearly a third of all new teachers leave the profession after just three years due to dissatisfaction, acceptance of better jobs, or career diversion (Albrecht, 2009). When attrition is at a rate of one-third of teachers leaving in a short window of time school districts often are resigned to hiring teachers that are non-licensed and/or inexperienced, which may have a negative effect on students. Billingsley et al. (2004), noted that roughly 30% of beginning teachers with three or fewer years of experience lacked certification for their main assignments. The same study from Billingsley et al. (2004) found that the hiring of unqualified special educators is especially costly for students with disabilities as these students need the most assistance and are the most vulnerable. These students lose critical learning opportunities as these new teachers struggle to figure out what to do (Benjamin & Black, 2012).

Yet, the existing literature does suggest some beginning special education teachers remain teaching in the field of special education regardless of the barriers research has presented. The researcher found that those who indicated the desire to continue in the field said they were more likely to stay if they felt supported by their administration, their workload was manageable, and paperwork did not interfere with their teaching (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Benjamin & Black, 2012; Billingsley et al., 2004; Collins et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2004). Providing a responsive support system during the beginning years for special educators may not only reduce teacher attrition but may also help improve the quality of services that students receive (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Billingsley et al., 2004). A common theme among a majority of the

research evaluated for this study revealed the need for understanding the factors that impact special educators' retention rates (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Benjamin & Black, 2012; Billingsley et al., 2004; Collins et al., 2017). This study may add to the body of research on beginning special education teachers' experiences beyond Minnesota and may be deemed valuable by the special education community both in Higher Education and P-12 public education.

Significance of the Study

Special education teacher attrition is costly to school districts and impacts the learning of the students the teacher serves. Bettini et al. (2019) reported that teacher attrition is academically and financially costly. Studies have consistently found that attrition negatively predicts student achievement and money invested in preparing, hiring, and inducting teachers is lost when they leave. Benjamin and Black (2012) shared critical concern for the high attrition rate in special education and "the potential for inadequate services to children and youth with disabilities by beginning teachers who struggle in adverse situations" (p. 5).

The researcher's first-hand experiences with special education teacher attrition have contributed to the understanding of district-related needs, classroom-related needs, and teacher-related needs. The impact on the school district due to shortages of special education teachers leads to increased caseloads for existing teachers, which in turn leads to reduced quality of services, decreased teacher satisfaction, and increased teacher attrition (Benjamin & Black, 2012; Mansfield, 2021). A similar plight occurs for the students of disengaged or exhausted special education teachers as students frequently display disruptive behaviors, struggle socially and emotionally, and attain

their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals less frequently; all of which impact the academic development of this vulnerable population of students (Brunsting et al., 2014).

The retention of beginning special education teachers is vital to the continuation of services and supportive programs in public schools for all learners. Both rural and urban Minnesota school districts are experiencing similar rates of attrition of special education staff (Alexander, 2021). Leaders in school districts and teacher educators in Higher Education will benefit from this research project as the knowledge obtained from this study can be applied to both the preparation of undergraduate special education teachers and the support of beginning special education teachers across Minnesota. In the future, this dissertation may lead to additional research on beginning special educators' reasons for retention within the field of education. The insight gained from this study can be shared with the professional education community to promote further attention and research to this critical area of need as well as create an understanding of the lived experiences of special educators to increase the needed support for the retention of special educators.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to conduct a phenomenological study. The research involved three components: to examine the factors that lead to success for beginning special education teachers in Minnesota, to research the impacts that self-resiliency skills have on beginning special education teachers in relation to the phenomenon, and to provide suggestions on how teacher preparation programs and school districts can provide support to beginning special educators. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What self-resiliency factors lead to the retention of beginning special educators in Minnesota?
2. What self-resiliency skills impact the success of special educators?
3. How do beginning special education teachers feel that they could be better supported by their school districts?

Research Design

There is a need for qualitative studies of beginning special education teachers to study the impact self-resiliency skills have on retention within the body of knowledge. Although there are numerous quantitative studies about special education teachers attrition and retention (Albrecht et al., 2009; Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Benjamin & Black, 2012; Billingsley et al., 2004; Cancio et al, 2018; Collins et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2004; Mansfield, 2021) these studies do not convey the thick, rich descriptions of the lived experiences regarding self-resiliency skills beginning special educators perceive as their reason for retention. Lesh et al. (2017) shared that rich accounts of lived experiences cannot be elicited primarily through quantitative work but discovered through the essence of qualitative research specifically through phenomenological studying of self-resiliency skills among beginning special educators.

Defining the retention factors for beginning special educators when studying their lived experiences through the social constructivist lens connects to a gap within research that has not been sought after. The researcher was unable to locate previous qualitative studies that focused solely on describing the phenomenon of the impact self-resiliency skills had on beginning special educators using in-depth, focus groups. The

results of this study are intended to respond to the noted lack of studies exploring the self-resilience factors which impact the retention of beginning special educators.

Assumptions

Several assumptions are situated throughout this phenomenological study. From the ontological perspective, the study examines the reality of self-resilience skills impacting beginning special education teachers. The assumption of the researcher was that all participants in the study shared their honest lived experiences without providing false or biased statements. From an epistemological perspective, the study assumes that the researcher and the study's participants influenced each other equally throughout the focus group dialogue. Although the researcher made extensive attempts to fully understand the lived experiences of the study's participants, the researcher's personal knowledge and lived experience shape the interpretation of the participant's lived realities. As with any research investigation, this study posed several limitations, included in the three sections below.

Researcher Bias. A noted assumption of this study includes the bias of the researcher undergoing the lived experience of a beginning special educator. The researcher began in the field of special education in a self-contained EBD classroom. The experiences the researcher had as a beginning special educator were challenging, eye-opening and frequently overwhelming as a recent college graduate. With time, reflection and an increase in the researcher's teaching strategies and perspectives the fears and concerns turned to strengths and resolve to be of assistance and support to the educational systems serving the most emotionally and behaviorally unstable students.

Participant Bias. An assumption of this study includes the risk of participant bias and volunteer bias. The participating risk included in the study involves only individuals who have been in the field of special education for five years or less. The volunteer risk included participants that responded to an initial pre-focus group interest survey and then were willing to further engage in a focus group. These biased behaviors suggest that these participants may not be representative of the entire special educator population in Minnesota. However, these behaviors of the participants to volunteer for this study do suggest an enhanced commitment to the field of special education and advancing knowledge within the field by engaging in the study.

Limited Generalizability of Results. The use of phenomenology within this study presents a specific experience unique to beginning special educators who have been in the field for zero to five years utilizing self-resilient skills that impact their retention or attrition within the field of special education. Consequently, the results of this study are not able to be generalized to general educators. However, this study could be replicated with the following population of educators with ease: undergraduate special education teachers, general education teachers, paraeducators, and/or related service providers in special education (i.e., Occupational Therapists, Speech-Language Pathologists, etc). Due to the research involving a small number of special educators in a mid-urban setting, the findings from the research may not be generalizable to special educators across the state of Minnesota or across school districts within the United States.

Definition of Terms

Help-Seeking Behaviors: Help-seeking is defined as the act of asking others for assistance, information, advice, or support (van der Rijt, 2013).

Beginning Special Education Teacher: According to Mansfield (2021), a beginning special education teacher is a teacher with one to three years of teaching experience in the professional field of education

Relational Load: Relational load is the wear and tear that chronic stress and conflict have on emotional, relational, and cognitive resources in close relationships (Alfifi et al., 2016).

Self-Resiliency: According to Alfifi et al. (2016), human resilience is the ability to adapt positively when confronted with adversity or stress. Mansfield (2021) described teacher resilience as a predictor of job satisfaction and well-being among teachers which can act as a protective factor against the negative costs of the teaching profession.

Special Educator: Special educators are teachers who hold licensure at the state level to manage the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and instructional programming for students who meet state criteria for specialized instruction due to qualifying factors within specific disability categories under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This guarantees that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

Teacher Attrition: The act of special education teachers leaving their job in the field of education. Special Education teacher attrition has a direct bearing on the preparation and retention of special education intern teachers, negative fiscal realities, limited

resources, inadequate programs for students, and increased workloads for remaining special education teachers (Lee et al, 2011).

Teacher Retention: Billingsley (2004) provides a two-category definition of teacher retention. “Category one pertains to teachers who remain in the same teaching assignment and school from year to year; category two refers to transfers to another special education teaching assignment” (p. 40).

Limitations

This study contained certain limiting conditions, one of which is related to the generalizability of the study and one of which is inherent to the study’s selected research design. The first limitation included the transferability of the lived experiences the beginning special educators shared to aid in the understanding of the phenomenon of self-resilience skills necessary for success for the specific group of teachers.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described the process of transferability as the ability to apply findings in similar contexts or settings. The experiences of the beginning special educators, although similar, being from the same school district and teaching a population of students within the same community, may pose a limitation when transferring the participant’s applied practice of self-resilient skills necessary for success within their particular special education domain.

The second noted limitation included that the interviewee may have had a difficult time adjusting to the role of being interviewed by the interviewer, even though they stated their hesitations and/or comfort level for participating in the study before engaging as a participant. Due to the participants knowing the researcher prior to the

study, their responses may have been influenced or affected by this previous relationship. Alternately, due to the familiar relationship with the interviewer, the participants in the study may have been more guarded in their responses and less forthcoming with their lived experiences.

Sensitive to these limitations, the researcher took the following precautions. First, the research acknowledged what Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to as structural corroboration in which the researcher used multiple types of data to support or contradict the interpretation of results which breeds credibility to feel confident about the researcher's observations, interpretations, and conclusions. In addition, the researcher made a deliberate attempt to create a space within the focus groups that were conducive to honest and open dialogue between participants.

Summary

The immediacy of retaining beginning special education teachers in our K-12 public school systems is a systemic dilemma that cannot be ignored. An article reported that more than 800 of the state of Minnesota's 8,900 licensed special education teachers quit during the 2012 school year while the state only issued 417 new licenses within the 2013 school year (Star Tribune, 2013). As reported by the U.S. Department of Education, roughly 8.4% of the nation's special education teachers are leaving the profession within their first five years of entering the field, it is crucial that Higher Education and public school officials identify strategies to retain beginning special educators (Cancio et al., 2018).

Utilizing a qualitative approach, the researcher's goal was to discover how the lived experiences of beginning special education teachers within a Minnesota school district employ self-resiliency skills towards their success in the classroom. Highlighting the voices of beginning special educators to identify the skills needed to navigate their first few years in their professional role may help to best support their chances of retention within the field of education. Multiple researchers speak to the role of resiliency within an educator (Benjamin & Black, 2012; Daniilidou & Platsidou, 2018; Lee et al., 2011; Mansfield, 2021; Mrstik et al., 2018), the role Higher Education plays in preparing special educators (Mansfield, 2021; Paptraianou & Le Cornu, 2014), and the role school districts play in supporting beginning special educators as they maneuver their foundational years of teaching which are examined in chapter two including details of the methodology utilized for this study outlined in chapter three (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley et al., 2004; Billingsley et al., 2011; Brunsting et al., 2014; Cancio et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2017; Paquette & Rieg, 2016).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher conducted a literature review to gain an understanding of the different ways self-resiliency skills and retention impact the field of special education. The history of self-resilience research in education, including current approaches to fostering self-resilience in beginning special educators is presented. The discussion of historical relevance of special education both nationwide and more specifically to Minnesota schools provides further concerns regarding special educator attrition in the United States, including the current approaches toward the retention of beginning special educators.

Methods of Searching

There were numerous studies reviewed that included teacher retention as their main focus. To better understand recent studies relating to self-resilience and retention, it was essential that the initial search method employed by the researcher focused on the history of special education in the United States and more specifically, Minnesota, to understand the evolution of retention concerns and how the phenomenon of self-resilience is prevalent within that evolution. Several methods of searching were utilized during the research process. The Minnesota State University Moorhead Livingston Lord Library databases were utilized to source the majority of literature related to this specific study. The groundwork for much of the history of special education in the United States was published in texts between the 1960s and 1990s. Research literature often focused on the skills beginning special educators need to lean on when confronted with

factors that may lead to retention-based issues in education (Billingsely et al., 2004; Bursting et al., 2014; Cancio et al., 2018; Lombardo-Graves, 2017).

When searching for journal articles to assist in supporting the literature review, the researcher utilized the following databases: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Research Gate, Education Research Complete (Ebsco), JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Articles that were used in this study reinforced the perceived experiences of the participants within the study. The researcher uncovered after multiple semesters of synthesizing peer-reviewed journal articles, United States educational policy briefs, books, and scholarly wanderings through the phenomena of self-resilience, multiple authors and researchers began appearing across various studies including T.D. Afifi, B. Billingsley, Y. Lee, and C. Mansfield. These pivotal findings indicated to the researcher that saturation points were being reached within the literature for this study.

Theoretical Orientation for the Study

This study was grounded in the theoretical paradigms of Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism. This qualitative research study integrated this theoretical framework throughout the research process. The use of the theoretical framework was the driving force for the researcher's understanding of the complexity of self-resiliency factors impacting the retention of beginning special education teachers.

Social Constructivism

The paradigm that aligned with this study's research topic followed the interpretivist viewpoint to best understand how beginning special educators view their early career experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated the social constructivist worldview is found in phenomenological studies where individuals describe their experiences and the goal of the research is to rely on the participant's point of view for the study. With this viewpoint, there is no single reality, but rather multiple realities that will surface throughout the research process.

The phenomenological design aligns to meet the qualitative research needs of this study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological design aids the researcher in reflecting upon the explicit structure of the participants' meaning of the lived experience. With the implementation of the constructivist point of view, the researcher was able to interpret the multiple realities that constitute the lived experiences among the study's participants through open-ended questioning and the ability to analyze the data for themes through phenomenological reflection. Bloomberg and Volpe (2015) expanded the definition to include that the purpose of phenomenological research is to investigate the meaning of the lived experience as well as to identify the essence of the human experience known as the phenomena. The authors went on to expand on the idea of essence that phenomenologists assume that "there is some commonality in human experience and seek to understand this commonality, or essence" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015, p. 54). Using focus groups for this study, the researcher sought to understand the essence of the lived experience of the beginning special education teacher in the K-12 setting. The use of the phenomenological design provided the structured approach necessary for deep

understanding of the phenomenon of self-resilience skills experienced by several beginning special education teachers.

Review of Literature

Teacher retention in the field of special education has attracted attention nationwide over the past several decades due to the evolution of policy, legislation, and increasingly challenging student behaviors (Conderman et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2008). Declining teacher retention has led to difficulties establishing and maintaining high-quality services and programming for students with disabilities (Lesh et al., 2017). Scholars have alluded to the reasons for the attrition of special education staff, often citing concerns with workload volume, workload complexity, and lack of administrative support (Albrecht et al., 2009, Benjamin and Black, 2012; Cancio et al., 2018). Beginning special education teachers often do not demonstrate the skills necessary to navigate the experiences with higher job-related demands, instructional responsibilities, and increased student problems (Bettini et al., 2020) which ultimately leads to low retention rates. Understanding how self-resilience skills can impact the retention of beginning special educators, researchers have moved to examine the internal and external factors that can be conceptualized as a process to be fostered amongst teachers to sustain their professional well-being and commitment to the teaching profession (Greene et al., 2014; Mansfield, 2021).

Characteristics of Self-Resilience

The word resilience originates from the Latin verb “resilire” and is defined as being able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions, challenges, and/or

adversity (Fletcher & Sarker, 2013; Lee et al., 2013; Mansfield, 2021). The term self-resilience has been used in various contexts throughout research, notably in social science, to describe the adaptive capacities of individuals, communities, and societies (Daniildou & Platsidou, 2018; Duckworth et al, 2007; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Self-resiliency recognizes that one's resilience may change over time as a function of development and one's interaction with the environment adapts when confronted with adversity or stress (Afifi et al, 2016, Mansfield, 2021; Southwick et al, 2014).

Historically, resiliency was regarded as a fixed trait in a human which began with developmental studies of children living in disadvantaged or dangerous circumstances, researchers were able to document that people have the ability (resilience) to overcome various types of risk factors (Greene et al, 2004; Lee et al, 2013; Mansfield, 2021; Soutwick et al., 2014).

Scholars have studied the numerous definitions of resilience in relation to humans. Most definitions of psychological resilience fall within two categories, adversity, or positive adaptations (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). While Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) found psychological resilience as a personality trait indicator of why some individuals can withstand, or even thrive, on adversity in their lives, Tugade and Fredrickson (2014) found psychological resilience to be an effective coping adaptation when facing adversity. The concept of coping was illuminated often within the literature, however, there were very few defining factors linking coping to long-term resilience. Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) did associate that the adversity one experiences at one point in his or her life does not mean that the person will react in the same way to the stressor at a different point in their lives. Resilience is dynamic in nature through protective

processes learned through experiences over time through multi systematic phenomena that can occur across the span of a human's life (Benjamin & Black, 2012; Greene et al, 2004).

Many researchers linked the fostering of self-resilience skills to two broad psychological factors associated with resilience: a) risk factors and b) protective factors (Greene et al, 2004; Lee et al. 2013; Southwick et al, 2014). Risk factors may pose various physical or psychological downturns which will affect a person's likelihood of maladaptation through succumbing to and/or survival with impairment when adversity occurs (Carver, 2010; Lee et al, 2013). Conversely, protective factors include conditions that buffer, interrupt, or prevent problems from occurring. Utilizing protective factors enables a positive consequence to occur including a return to pre adversity levels of functioning or to have the ability to surpass previous levels of functioning, thus leading to thriving (Carver, 2010). Multiple researchers employed strategies to enhance protective factors to increase self-resiliency factors including faith, spirituality, belief in something larger than one's self, providing human connection, openness to new experiences, personal attitude, having a sense of humor, problem-solving skills, community action, making sense of moral aspects of one's life, and social support (Green et al., 2004; Lee et al, 2013; Southwick et al, 2014; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Zhang et al., 2020). Interventions to enhance resilience can be administered before, during, or after stressful/traumatic situations. Southwick et al. (2014) noted that some interventions may be more effective at one point than the other. Ideally, training will occur preceding a stressful event, so the individual is better prepared to deal with the adversity.

Impact of Self-Resiliency on Teachers

Resilience in teaching has been defined as the ability to adjust to situations that require adaptation and to view the situation as an opportunity to continue teaching and learning under the most adverse of conditions (Kutsyruruba et al, 2019). On the other hand, Mansfield (2021) found that resilience can be fostered amongst teachers to sustain their well-being and commitment to the profession of teaching. The difference between the ability of resilience the educator possesses and the need to foster the skills of resilience in educators was studied by Daniilidou and Platsidou (2018) through the use of resilience scales noting the self-resilience skills educators possess as well as which self-resilience skills need to continue to be fostered. Danilidou and Platsidou (2018) findings led to the understanding that the self-resiliency skills one possesses and which self-resiliency skills one continues to need to grow can greatly be supported through the professional development process.

Teaching is a multidimensional profession that tests the limits of many educators throughout their careers. Research on teacher resilience has focused on what sustains teachers and enables them to thrive, rather than just to survive in the profession (Kutsyruruba et al, 2019; Mansfield, 2021). Through research by Mansfield (2021), sustaining practices that teachers identified as supportive included both contextual and ecological factors including school support, family support, behavioral management policies, professional learning, socio-emotional competence, and socioeconomic factors of student demographics. A resilient teacher can use personal characteristics and contextual elements to support their school-based challenges, to develop and achieve professional success while associating personal well-being in the process.

Daniilidou and Platsidou (2018) identified four dimensions of teacher resilience 1) professional, 2) emotional, 3) social, and 4) motivational. The professional and social dimensions refer to the interpersonal skills that help the teacher overcome the adversities and challenges that arise within the school environment through the utilization of social networks as a source of support. The emotional and motivational dimensions include teacher attributes such as altruism, persistence, emotional intelligence, willingness to take risks, trust in one's own strengths, and a sense of humor. Benjamin and Black (2012) utilized the four dimensions of teacher resilience adjacent to self-resilience protective factors as a way for first year special educators to navigate the often high-risk settings which include extraordinary stress and in some cases trauma.

Kutsyruba et al. (2019) found that the attrition issue should be addressed by ensuring continual professional development, renewal practices, and reinvigoration of the profession for early career teachers. Highlighting the motivation and commitment of teachers who can meet challenges encountered and thrive professionally is essential for producing effective, committed, and enthusiastic teachers that will grow and thrive throughout their careers (Kutsyruba et al, 2019; Mansfield, 2021; Pendergast et al., 2011).

Attrition Related to Special Education

Between the mid-1960s and early 1980s, endeavors in education focused on the identification and training of the “right skills” and most influential teaching behaviors to support the learning of students through special education (Caires et al., 2012).

Researchers during this time strived to achieve effective teaching and improved student performance. In 1983, the first documented shortage of special educators was reported in *A Nation at Risk* highlighting legislative changes that were made in response to stagnant student performance, which exacerbated the shortage of special educators (Nicholas et al., 2008). The focus in education was gradually shifting to the process of learning to teach, impacting student's cognitive processes and interactions within the classrooms.

In the mid to late 1990s, emotional and social intelligence training gradually emerged as key values in teacher education (Nichols et al., 2008) which ramped up the teaching shortages in the United States as many believed that openness, emotional management, and new experiences were not assumed to be relevant variables in the teaching profession. Two key pieces of legislation, the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the 2002 implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), combined to make the shortages even worse. The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 both increased the number of individuals eligible to receive special services and extended the range of services available. Both the NCLB and 2004 IDEA put into place new guidelines, governing accountability for students and teachers as well as new definitions of highly qualified teachers to be licensed in their area of instruction. (Nichols et al., 2008). These mandates were especially challenging for secondary special educators because they often lacked content-area literacy skills and were not trained as highly qualified teachers for secondary subjects (Conderman et al., 2013).

A report by the U.S. Department of Education found that roughly 8.4% of the nation's teachers left the field of special education during the year 2003 to 2004 (Cancio

et al., 2018). In 2009, Albrecht et al. found that 98% of the school districts in the United States reported special education shortages compounded by the lack of teachers with appropriate certifications due to NCLB legislation. During the 2012-2013 school year, the U.S. Department of Education reported that almost 12% of the entire special education workforce either moved within the field of education or completely left the field of education (Lesh et al., 2017). Teacher attrition is an annual costly endeavor assumed by school districts. Researchers found that the cost of teacher turnover ranges from \$4,000 to \$15,000 per teacher for the costs of recruiting, hiring, and training the replacement teacher (Bettini et al., 2020; Lesh et al., 2017; Mrsktik et al., 2019). The ever-growing supply and demand gap for special education teachers and an immediate response needed from the field of education, put school districts in a precarious position to ensure qualified teachers for special needs students are present and accounted for per state and federal guidelines.

The Center on Personnel Studies in Education (COPSSE) expressed a critical concern for the high attrition rate of special education teachers and linked it to the potential for inadequate services to children (Benjamin & Black, 2012). Multiple researchers found the turnover of special educators has a devastating effect on establishing high-quality programs for students with disabilities compounded by the fact that attrition levels for special educators often exceed those of their general education colleagues (Albrecht et al., 2009; Bettini et al., 2020; Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Lesh et al., 2017; Mrstik et al., 2019). A 2016 study by Arens and Morin, showed that emotionally exhausted teachers tend to withdraw from positive student-teacher relations and teachers suffering from high levels of emotional exhaustion may lack the resources for

high-quality instruction. Bursting et al. (2014) went further to include the lack of attained individualized education plan goals for special education students are often less frequently achieved when students are being taught by disengaged or exhausted teachers, greatly impacting their academic development.

Special educators may encounter multiple risk factors when facing the realities of attrition or retention choices. Often the first few years on the job are influenced by stressful and demanding job requirements, such as needing to create Individualized Education Plans (IEP), behavioral management systems, establishing working relationships with paraprofessionals, workload volume, teaching in a variety of settings, collaborating with a variety of individuals on behalf of a student, undergoing evaluation, experiencing a lack of resources and working with students with multi-categorical needs (Albrecht et al., 2009; Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Benjamin & Black, 2012; Billingsley et al., 2004; Billingsley et al., 2009; Cancio et al., 2018; Gehrke & Murri, 2006; Lee et al., 2011; Mrstik et al., 2018). Overall, if special education teachers experience more risk than resilience and lack intrinsic rewards of teaching than they were expecting in their early experiences in the field, they are less likely to thrive and stay (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Billingsley et al., 2004).

Conservation of Resources Theory (COR)

The model of Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) predicted that when an investment of one's time and energy does not provide a good return, people will experience this event as a loss of an expected vision or gain (Hobfoll, 1989). Research from Cancio et al. (2018) found that the COR Theory assumes that individuals are faced

with limited resources of time and energy in response to prolonged periods of high demands and low resources, reduction of energy, and the inability to complete job-related tasks at the same rate previously experienced. A strong correlation between the experiences facing beginning special educators in the first few years in the field and the guiding principles behind COR, motivated this researcher to explore this theory through the lens of special education teacher attrition and retention. This model proposed an important shift to focus attention to conserving resources as well as reevaluating the resource itself from an alternative lens.

To explore what specific resources are in question Hobfoll (1989) and Bettini et al. (2019) defined resources as objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by an individual. For example, mastery of a subject, self-esteem, learned resourcefulness, and/or employment. Predictors of emotional exhaustion, workload manageability, job commitment, and job-related stress are all influencers of teachers' career intentions. Researchers used the COR Theory framework in their studies to suggest that overwhelming workloads may reduce the energy levels of new teachers, reduce engagement in responsibilities, and leave new teachers burnt out and less committed to the profession of teaching (Afifi et al., 2016; Bettini et al., 2019; Cancio et al., 2018). These losses are important to recognize for two reasons, first, they have instrumental value to people and second, they have symbolic value in that they help to define who people are (Hobfoll, 1989).

To combat the overwhelming factors that beginning special educators face, researchers Bettini et al. (2019) suggest including collegial support, administrative support, and curriculum support to increase pedagogical content knowledge.

Researchers Gijsselaers et al. (2013) and van der Rijt et al. (2013) took a different approach to teachers that are faced with mounting demands and suggested the use of employees utilizing help-seeking behaviors. Help-seeking is typically problem-focused intentional action that requires interpersonal interactions to seek assistance for information, advice, or support (van der Rijt et al., 2013). Help-seeking for a beginning special educator is defined through a sequence of decisions and actions that recognize there is a lack of understanding, target an area of need, request help, and process the help with the possibility of success (Gijsselaers et al., 2013; van der Rijt et al., 2013). When the demands and resources are in balance and leaders have created a climate for help-seeking advice, special educators will be able to feel more motivated by their job and thus likely increase their possibility of success and intention to stay.

Current Approaches in Retention of Special Educators

In July of 2019, a group of Minnesota state senators made a public declaration that special education policies were put into place with the best of intentions for Minnesota special education students. However, the aforementioned group of Minnesota state senators found that mounting paperwork requirements for special educators have become so complex that the work is taking away valuable teacher time from students and eventually pushing special educators out of the profession (Golden, 2019). Consequently, researchers have directed their attention to teacher preparation programs that are largely preparing students to teach in one category of disability and may be lacking in pre-service resiliency training which new teachers will need to employ in the field (Albrecht et al., 2009; Billingsley et al., 2004; Gehrke & Murri, 2006).

Informal Support.

Cancio et al. (2018) shared that preparing beginning special educators with various coping strategies to view potential stressors as challenges will show a long-term preference for active coping, not avoidant coping which can lead to attrition. Utilizing this concept, teachers can problem solve, access social-emotional support, and enhance their enjoyment of work. Multiple studies found that the formal support of mentors, colleagues, and networking through professional organizations were associated with increased commitment among beginning special educators (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Cancio et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2017). Informal and active support of beginning special educators included exercise, meditation, dancing, counseling, listening to music, and feeling supported by family and friends (Cancio et al., 2018). Overall interventions targeting to increase beginning special educator's emotional regulation have positive effects on their overall well-being and the quality of their classroom interactions (Katz et al., 2017).

Relationships.

Relationships in the early careers of special educators are a key factor in establishing positive collaborations with teachers, families, and paraprofessionals. Van der Rijt et al. (2013) found that a majority of what people learn is learned informally on the job from the people with whom they work. Van der Rijt et al. (2013) went on to discuss that relationships are vital for help-seeking and experts should be aware of the strengths of positive relationships in the workplace being a major source for beginning special educator retention. Mrstick et al. (2019) took the concept of help-seeking one

step further and encouraged quality mentoring programs for beginning special education teachers which have been shown to enhance job satisfaction, which has been positively correlated with overall retention rates. Afifi et al. (2016) cited that informal prosocial, daily verbal, and nonverbal behaviors are likely to foster resilience and possible growth, minimize perceived and psychological stress, and promote health. The researchers expanded that idea to include that the body continually compares its psychological capabilities to environmental challenges and calibrates itself accordingly as people need to consistently be calibrating their relationships in accordance with their emotional and relational resources. Benjamin and Black (2012) turned to resiliency theory when examining protective factors for beginning special educators and found, if present, “the belief in the ability of every person to overcome adversity if important protective factors are present in the person’s life” (p. 6). Professional relationships often allow the space for beginning special educators to reflect, process, and grow from new experiences, and these relationships are often found vital for creating feelings of acceptance in the professional setting.

Administrative Support.

Multiple studies encouraged the need for administrators to support induction programs, early career mentorship, and cross-school collaboration for special educators to thrive and develop professionally (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Billingsley et al., 2004; Brusting et al., 2014; Collins et al., 2017; Mrstik et al. 2018; Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Paquette & Rieg, 2016). Taking that one step further, Collins et al. (2017) recommended two practices to promote personal and professional development for beginning special educators including conducting a self-assessment to develop a

professional growth plan and using performance feedback to build fidelity and fluency in their teaching repertoire. Developing a broader range of skills and strategies along with curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, enables teachers to feel better equipped to meet their challenges at work. Mansfield (2021) shared, “Teacher wellbeing is not just an individual’s responsibility, but it is a shared organisational [*sic*] community and worldwide concern” (p. 176).

Historical View of Special Education in Public Schools

Public policy promoting the education of students with exceptional needs can be observed through a long history of federal, state, and local activity. In 1823, the state of Kentucky established the first state school for the deaf (Ballard, 1982). State and local public support continued towards the education of students with exceptional needs. Rhode Island was the first state to formally pass Compulsory Education into law in 1840, followed by Massachusetts in 1852 (Yell et al., 1998). Although debate raged over public versus private support for education, by 1918, the Compulsory Education law was in place throughout the United States (Ballard, 1982; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000; Yell et al., 1998) leading to conflict between the democratic ideal and maintenance of order and high standards in public schools.

The early 1900s brought efforts by French psychologists, Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon, to develop reliable and valid measurements of intellectual functioning to show if exceptional students’ low achievement was due to lack of effort or lack of ability, which were largely unsuccessful (Reschly, 2020). Specialized programs for students having significant difficulty with the general education curriculum were

developed in Paris in 1905 and utilized in many major U.S. cities, creating differentiated learning. At the White House Conference in 1910, the goal of the conference was to discuss segregated classrooms to determine if they were beneficial for increased individualized instruction, homogeneous grouping, and a less competitive nature of the classroom, which would increase students' self-esteem. Thus, the number of special segregated classes and support services increased significantly from 1910 to 1930 (Reschley, 2020; Yell et al., 1998).

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s provided greater constitutional protections for not only minorities but also people with disabilities. Multiple researchers cited *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) as having a tremendous impact on multiple aspects of education law and procedures which resulted in sweeping changes to school policies and approaches to working with students with disabilities, fundamentally changing the federal system (Ballard, 1982; Reschly, 2020; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000; Yell et al., 1998). The 1960s brought change to the rapidly growing field of Specific Learning Disabilities for better individually administered achievement tests and classification methods to be objective and replicable across settings (Reschly, 2020). This advancement of greater classification accuracy was a significant influence on the course of special education practices that are still in effect today.

In 1970, significant federal involvement through the Education for Handicapped Act (EHA) was put into law. This became the basic framework for much of the legislation that was to follow, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 to protect persons with disabilities against discrimination. Amendments in 1974 provided funding for teachers to be trained to work with students with disabilities, however, few

funds were allocated to universities to support research on behalf of students with disabilities (Ballard, 1982; Reschly, 2020; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000; Yell et al., 1998). The last major federal effort on behalf of special needs students in the 1970s, came in through The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) which mandated that qualified students with disabilities had the right to: a) nondiscriminatory testing, evaluation, and placements; b) educated in the least restrictive environment; c) procedural due process; d) free education; e) an appropriate education (Yell et al., 1998). This regulation continued throughout the 1980s.

In 1990, amendments to EAHCA were brought before U.S. Congress and retitled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) with major changes including first-person language, including students with autism and traumatic brain injuries, and transition plans being required by every student by age 16 (Ballard, 1982; Reschly, 2020; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000; Yell et al., 1998). With an amendment in 1997 to IDEA, a critical issue to improve the performance and educational achievement of students with disabilities through state and local assessments, behavioral interventions and support for students were implemented and mandated nationwide (Ballard, 1982; Reschly, 2020; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000; Yell et al., 1998). The concepts of high-incidence disabilities (mild mental retardation, emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, and speech-language disabilities) were introduced which in total served 85% of special education students (Reschly, 2020). This accurate classification increased and the legal requirements of IDEA drove the development of assessment tools and differing approaches in the classroom to support these learners (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000).

In 2002, the national mandate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) went into law, requiring all teachers to be “highly qualified” to teach. Billingsley and McLeskey (2004) commented that even though NCLB did not directly mandate that special education teachers need to be highly qualified; the imminent reauthorization of IDEA mirrored the intent of NCLB for special education teachers. The reauthorization of IDEA was looked at as a positive step for students with disabilities by many but as Billingsley and McLeskey (2004) reflected, “...it has the potential for increasing the number of certified special education teachers, it also has the potential for exacerbating the teacher shortage” (p. 2).

Current View of Special Education in Public Schools

With the advent of additional disabilities being classified, new assessment tools and approaches for students with disabilities being federally mandated, funding for E-12 education continues to dominate most state's General Fund expenditures. In Minnesota, spending on E-12 education was just under \$20 billion and accounted for 41.1% of the General Fund expenditures in 2020-2021 (Alexander, 2021). Persistent educational issues including opportunity gaps among students, school safety, special education funding, and teacher shortages in math and special education prioritize the P-12 budget to address financial pressures on school districts across Minnesota (Alexander, 2021). Researcher Reschly (2020) presented that current trends in special education include: emphasis on interventions, rigorous problem-solving procedures from which effective special education programs can be developed, and early intervention and prevention to be emphasized rather than waiting until failure occurs to meet state eligibility criteria for special education services.

Understanding the factors of self-resiliency that are necessary for the retention of beginning special educators can assist educational leaders in retaining and supporting special educators and potentially lessen special educator burnout and reduce teacher attrition (Mrstik et al., 2019). The key indicator is to ensure that beginning special education teachers have access to develop resilience skills by understanding the complexities of their profession, working with experts to listen carefully to each other, and supporting gaps in understanding or in practice (Southwick et al, 2014). By enhancing beginning special education teachers' strategies for resilience, there may be a greater potential for this vulnerable group of educators to adapt to change, weather adversity, and foster overall resilience to promote healthy schools, healthy families, and community environments for students with disabilities.

Synthesis of the Research Findings

The research overwhelmingly maintains that the retention of special educators is problematic nationwide and often hinders achievement for school districts, special education students, and the communities at large. Mansfield (2021) found resilience skills as the conceptualized process that can be fostered among teachers in order to sustain well-being and the commitment to the teaching professional and sustained quality in educational settings. The ever-changing, ever-mounting pressures on special education teachers have been felt for the past 200 years in education and now more than ever self-resilience skills are needed to foster teachers' desire to remain in the classroom to ensure quality education for our most at-risk students.

Mandated federal policies have been enacted since the 1800s to support the learning and growth of students with disabilities. The policymakers, while in good faith, were enacting policies and procedures that supported students' unique needs. With the incorporation of NCLB, special educators faced increased challenges related to effectively navigating the new guidelines, governing accountability, and new definitions of highly qualified teachers.

The mandated federal policies are not going to dissipate in the near future according to Reschly (2020). Over the years, the self-resiliency skills of special educators have adapted and evolved as the world of special education has grown and changed. Mansfield (2021) recognized that resilience is a predictor of job satisfaction and can act as a protective factor against the negative costs of stress, burnout, and the possibility of attrition while teaching in special education. Daniiliou and Plastidou (2018) expanded on that idea by describing teacher resilience as a quality that allows teachers to maintain their commitment to teaching through a series of specific strategies that they can employ when experiencing aversive situations and to successfully overcome personal vulnerabilities and environmental stressors.

Dolbier et al. (2010) described self-resilience interventions as enhancements of personal and social resources to identify protective external and internal factors and decrease adjustment problems to promote positive change when coping with stressful situations. As Mansfield (2021) found educational leaders have the opportunities to develop teacher resilience by providing professional development in the personal areas of emotional competence, empathy, and self-belief. Educational leaders can take the learning one step further and include what Mansfield (2021) referred to as the ecological

or contextual influences for a special educator including positive school culture, teacher involvement in decision making, positive relationships with administration, and mentoring relationships with colleagues.

Critique of Previous Research Methods

As previously mentioned, there is a wide scholarship of academic writing dedicated to the retention of special education teachers. Retention of teachers has been studied extensively worldwide and is considered a global phenomenon throughout academic communities. The researcher focused through a narrower lens and utilized the phenomena of self-resilience correlating as a factor for the retention of beginning special educators in the United States. Narrowing the scope of the research, lent the researcher a more realistic and feasible scope for this research study.

The quality of the research and frequency of cross-referencing of familiar authors throughout the fields of retention and self-resiliency research led the researcher to the belief that this topic was entrenched in familiarity within the academic community. The methodological limitations of the works the researcher reviewed included a small number of studies that included first-hand accounts of teachers' experiences in the field of special education with the focus on impacting internal and external self-resilience factors. The lack of academic writing surrounding the impact of self-resiliency skills necessary for the retention of special educators prompted the researcher to take a greater interest in this particular subject.

Summary

Many researchers are interested in understanding strategies designed to assist special education teachers to cope with stress. The researcher of this study was interested in understanding the support needed for success early in special educators' careers. The literature review uncovered the interest that researchers in the field of special education have invested in studying the work conditions which are needed to sustain special educators' commitment to the field of education. Several researchers are interested to learn about how support for special education programs and teachers in Minnesota is affecting retention rates. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to examine the impact of self-resiliency skills necessary for the retention of beginning special education K-12 teachers in a Minnesota public school district in 2022.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Mounting pressures on special educators to provide access for students to high-quality general education materials, mental health/emotional support, and individualized support for learning, have accelerated the concerns that fellow educators, administrators, and community members have about the retention of special educators. The escalating needs within special education programs are facing historical challenges that are far outpacing the training and support given to educators in the field of special education. With a rise in concerns, there is an opportunity to further explore ways for beginning special educators to be successfully supported to work with the most vulnerable students in the early experiences of their careers.

Chapter three outlines this study's purpose and the methodological approach employed by the researcher to study the self-resilience factors that impact the retention of beginning special education teachers in public schools. The following is a detailed description of the researcher's chosen research design, research participant selection, and data collection methods within this chapter. Data analysis for this study follows the analytic framework. Also, the focus group questions will be reviewed and ethical considerations will be communicated.

Purpose of the Study

As described in Chapter One, the purpose of the study was to examine the factors that impact the self-resilience of beginning special education teachers that lead to retention within the field of education in Minnesota. The turnover of special educators has a devastating effect on student progress while bringing multiple challenges to the

education sector as a whole (Mrstik et al., 2019). These challenges are reflected in rising costs of teacher turnover, increases in the likelihood of students with disabilities working with non-certified staff, lack of progress on standardized achievement tests, and increased caseloads for existing staff (Afifi et al., 2016; Benjamin & Black, 2012; Lombardo-Graves, 2017; Mrstik et al., 2019). The retention of special education staff is a well-researched topic with a depth of research currently existing. However, within the literature review for this study, the researcher struggled to find studies that related beginning special educator self-resiliency factors to retention in Minnesota.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to conduct a phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of beginning special education teachers. The research involved three components: to examine the factors that lead to success for beginning special education teachers in Minnesota, to research the impacts that self-resiliency skills have on beginning special education teachers in relation to the phenomenon, and to provide suggestions for how school districts can provide support to beginning special educators. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What self-resiliency factors lead to the retention of beginning special educators in Minnesota?
2. What self-resiliency skills impact the success of special educators?
3. How do beginning special education teachers feel that they could be better supported by their school districts?

Research Design

There are many studies that address the concerns of self-resilience for special educators. There are many studies that address the concerns of retention in special education. Currently, there is a need for qualitative studies including beginning special education teachers which explore the impact self-resilience skills have on retention. There are numerous quantitative studies that have been completed studying special education teachers' attrition and retention. However, few of these studies convey the thick, rich descriptions of the lived experiences in regards to self-resiliency skills beginning special educators perceive as their reason for retention. Lesh et al. (2017) shared that rich accounts of lived experiences cannot be elicited primarily through quantitative work, but discovered through the essence of qualitative research, specifically through phenomenological studying of self-resiliency skills among beginning special educators.

Defining the retention factors for beginning special educators when studying their lived experiences through the social constructivist lens connects to a need within research that has not been sought after. The researcher was unable to locate previous qualitative studies that focused solely on describing the phenomenon of the impact self-resiliency skills had on beginning special educators using in-depth, focus groups. The results of this study were intended to respond to the noted lack of research focused on self-resilience impacting factors for beginning special educators noted in the literature.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2015) found that utilizing the research design of phenomenology, researchers have used from one to three hundred twenty-five participants in some studies. However, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), the recommended number of participants for one phenomenology study is between three to

ten participants. For this particular study, three elementary and three secondary beginning special educators were recruited to supply needed data for the study.

For this study, the researcher employed the use of focus groups to explore the phenomenology of self-resilience. Krueger and Casey (2015) shared that focus groups are typically composed of five to eight participants with the group being small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide a diversity of perceptions among the members. One downside to using a group of more than eight members is that there is not an adequate amount of time for all members in a focus group to share their viewpoints (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Therefore, for this research, a focus group of six total participants can afford more opportunities to share ideas and lessen the possibility of fragmentation within the focus group. According to Krueger and Casey (2015) focus group interviews typically have five characteristics including a small group of people, possessing certain characteristics, providing qualitative data, engaging in focused discussion, and helping to understand a topic of interest. The authors went on to share that “Focus groups work particularly well to explore perceptions, feelings, and thinking about issues, products, services, or opportunities” (Krueger & Casey, p.7, 2019). Therefore, the use of focus groups for this study was utilized by selecting individuals that had life experiences needed to respond to the researcher’s questions for the study.

The researcher specifically utilized the focus group multiple category design. Authors Krueger and Casey (2019) revealed that this design allows a researcher to make comparisons between several types of participants either sequentially or simultaneously. The author of the study facilitated two separate focus groups including

beginning special education teachers in the elementary setting (Grades K-4) and secondary setting (Grades 5-12). The facilitation of the two focus groups allowed the researcher to feasibly meet with the beginning special education teachers, keep the size of the focus group to three to four members, and allow for the configuration of likened experiences more similar for beginning special educators at similar grade levels.

Sampling Method of Participants

The overall outcome of this study sought a phenomenological understanding of the impact self-resiliency factors have on special educators toward retention within the field of education. To assist in meeting this goal, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) posed that a purposeful selection of research participants is a key decision within qualitative research. Within the study of phenomenology, multiple researchers suggest the employment of criterion-based sampling. The use of criterion-based sampling works well when all of the individuals studied represent people who have experienced the same phenomenon, which is useful for quality assurances (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, all of the individuals chosen for this study have experienced the phenomenon addressed in the research questions suitably.

Participants for the focus groups were composed utilizing homogeneity that was determined by the researcher to study the phenomenon of self-resilience. The similarities of the participants as the basis for recruitment for the study were shared with the participants prior to the focus groups. To provide homogeneity for the study, individuals must be licensed K-12 Minnesota Special Education teachers employed in the same Minnesota school district, with zero to five years of field experience in the fall

of 2022. Teachers who had transferred into the district within a total of zero to five years of experience were accepted for this study. Gender, marital status, sexual orientation, age, race, grade level taught, disability license held, or content taught were all variables that were not important factors for individuals being included or not included to participate in the study.

Procedures

The ultimate goal of this study was to identify and describe factors that impact the self-resiliency and the essence of the phenomenon by translating the study participants' lived experiences as beginning special educators through their responses through self-reflective journaling and the use of focus groups discussions. Identifying these impacting factors were reflective of recommendations for both higher education and K-12 school administrators to consider the implementation of support to enhance special educators' knowledge of self-resilience strategies towards retention in the field of education. To this end, the researcher decided to interpret the lived experiences of beginning special educators currently in the field to discern which self-resiliency factors impacted their chances for retention.

Participant Selection

Through the utilization of the study approved Minnesota school district, the researcher sought approximately eighteen initial study participants to gauge interest with involvement in the study as well as to ensure they met the pre-qualification of participating in the study through the school district's Human Resources Department. With an annual average of nine new special educators each year, the participating

district had a total number of two hundred twenty-three educators in the 2021-2022 school year. The average number of eight special educators is lost due to attrition annually. The participating Human Resources Department provided a list of eighteen email contacts employed by the school district that met the pre-qualifying factors for this study including holding a current K-12 Minnesota Special Education teacher license, being employed in the same Minnesota school district, and experiencing zero to five years of field experience in the fall of 2022.

In preparation for contacting the potential participants, the researcher created a recruitment email (see Appendix A) to solicit the participation of the candidates. The researcher sent the candidates the participant qualification protocol to gauge their level of interest in participating in the research study via emails provided by the participating Minnesota school district. If the researcher did not receive a reply back from the candidate in one week's time, the researcher sent a follow-up email to the potential candidate. As a whole, active participation in the journaling and focus group process was at the will of the individual participants who completed the qualification protocol. A total of six participants volunteered to engage in the study.

To ensure purposeful sampling, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested the use of criterion sampling which works well when all participants have experienced the same phenomenon represented in the study. The researcher did take into consideration that the study was conducted within the organization the researcher was employed. Multiple researchers acknowledge that focus groups with researchers from the organization bring the possibility of power dynamics, groupthink concerns, and the overall management of facilitating conversations as possible areas of concern (Bloomberg &

Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participants in the study were informed that the researcher was an employee of the same district. Despite their numerous relationships and connections within the school district, their primary role in this research study was to collect data and analyze the results. The summary of the researcher's findings is available to the members of the focus group participants upon request as well as through member checking.

Data Collection

Data collection is often viewed by many researchers as a multi-processed interrelated series of engagement activities with study participants in their social world to better understand their subjective meanings, rather than the researcher's own perceptions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2019). Prior to data collection, IRB approval was granted by Minnesota State University Moorhead to commence with the study (see Appendix A). Participants were notified, via email, about the study and sent a subsequent Google Form to complete (see Appendix B). Upon the return of the Google Form of participant qualification protocol, the researcher sent the participants an interview consent form using digisigner.com to digitally sign for their consent (see Appendix C).

Upon receipt of the participant's signed consent form, the researcher entered contextual information, demographic information (including pseudonym), focus group availability, grade level taught and disability category currently working with. If the researcher did not receive the participant's signed consent, the researcher sent a follow-up email seeking consent (see Appendix D). If the researcher did not receive a

response within two weeks, no further communication or solicitation was attempted and the person was considered a nonparticipant. If the researcher did receive a response, the response was kept in an encrypted Google Drive folder accessible only to the researcher for three years past the final publication of the study.

Study participants were sent an email (see Appendix E) with the time of the focus groups with information regarding the setting for each of the focus group to take place. After the focus groups concluded, the Google Form self-reflected journal was provided to participants with directions for use and a desired due date for completion. The self-reflective journal contained guided questions to participants, providing explicit direction regarding the current frame of mind of the beginning special educator. The researcher chose the use of the self-reflected journal to provide the method of credibility validation strategy for the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The researcher utilized triangulation to help validate evidence of the phenomenon of self-resilience utilizing both the self-reflected journaling and focus group transcripts. Multiple researchers endorsed the use of triangulation as it strengthens studies by combining methods from multiple sources, with the intention that the practice should provide an in-depth understanding of the entirety and complexity of the phenomenon being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2019). Hayman and Jackson (2012) found that self-reflective journaling during a phenomenological study as a method of data collection has long been accepted as a valid method of accessing rich qualitative data. The authors found that by acknowledging the common challenges associated with the process of journaling that is experienced by the participants, researchers employing this data

collection method can promote constructive and valuable participation within the phenomenological research process.

The researcher requested the return of the self-reflective journal after meeting with the focus groups. On the day of the focus groups, the researcher provided light refreshments, set up the recording equipment, organized tables/chairs conducive to conversation, and provided name tents to participants. Krueger and Casey (2015) suggest that facilitators of focus groups be mentally alert and free from distractions, anxieties, or pressures that limit their ability to think quickly and listen carefully. Moustakas (1993) suggested that phenomenological interviews often begin with social conversation, a brief meditative activity aimed at creating a relaxing and trusting environment. Moustakas (1993) advocated for the use of a broad line of questioning to obtain rich, vital descriptions of the participant's experiences with the phenomenon of self-resilience.

During each of the focus group sessions, the researcher welcomed the participants to the focus group, gave an overview of the topic of the focus group, laid the ground rules outlined in the interview protocol (Appendix G) for the focus group, and sought consent from participants for use of an audio recording of the focus group session. The researcher informed the participants that the focus group would take approximately 50 minutes to complete with ten minutes of questions/clarifications to conclude their time. In addition to the recording of the focus groups, general observations were taken while engaged in the data collection process to reflect what the researcher heard, saw, and experienced during the interview. Casey and Krueger (2015) encouraged researchers to capture details with rich, descriptive information that

is reflective of the non-verbal behaviors of the participants present in the focus groups that the audio recording will not be able to capture.

Prior to the interview beginning, Moustakas (1993) urged the primary investigator to engage in the process of “epoché”, a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, so biases are set aside and do not direct the interview. Stewart and Mickunas (1974) stated that the process of bracketing, the phenomenological reduction of placing natural attitudes toward the world in brackets, assists in placing an idea out of the question for the present, while the larger context of the phenomenon is investigated. Multiple researchers noted that the phenomenological terms “epoché” and bracketing are synonymous with each other, with the seminal researcher, Husserl using them interchangeably (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2019; Moustakas, 1993; Stewart & Mickunas, 1974). The process of epoche/bracketing was done multiple times throughout the focus groups to ensure a fresh perspective on the phenomenon was taken by the researcher.

The researcher guided the focus groups through the research questions (Appendix G). The researcher was prepared by anticipating the flow of the discussion, utilizing Casey and Krueger’s (2015) pause and probe method, use of non-biased response to participant's comments, and preparing oneself for the unexpected circumstances that may occur during the execution of the focus group. Through prior research within the literature, there was an awareness of the possibility of two issues frequently related to disadvantages of using focus groups in research: power dynamics and groupthink (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015).

As previously mentioned, throughout the focus groups, the researcher utilized a focus group field note protocol, similar to Creswell and Poth (2019), which enabled the researcher to take notes on nonverbal activity, sketch the seating arrangement, and record any questions about the responses from the focus groups. The focus group field note protocol was an invaluable tool when analyzing the data to tie non-verbal activity that the recording device did not pick up when the focus groups were in session. When the focus groups had answered the research questions, the researcher alerted the focus groups to conclude their discussion. Upon the completion of the focus groups conversation, the researcher employed Casey and Krueger's (2015) method of oral summary by providing a brief summary of the responses to the important questions posed throughout the focus groups. The researcher then invited participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary at that time. This style of closure may uncover some previous areas of thought that were not anticipated. Multiple researchers encouraged this type of member checking to ensure richer data collected and deeper insights that have represented the participants and their ideas accurately (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2019). The researcher turned off all recording devices and thanked the participants for their time.

Upon the focus groups leaving, the researcher reviewed the field notes to ensure thick and rich narrative descriptions from the observational point of view were taken into consideration. The researcher downloaded the recorded focus groups onto a single flash drive kept under lock and key and the multi-authenticated hard drive of the researcher's personal computer. Creswell and Poth (2019) suggested that developing backup copies of files, using high-quality recording devices, and developing data matrix

collection as a visual means of identifying information for a study were especially well suited for the phenomenological research the author pursued for this study.

Data Analysis

Within the sphere of phenomenological research, as previously noted, the researcher must utilize the practice of “epoché” or bracketing everything else aside so the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and the question (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2019) shared that bracketing one’s personal experiences may be difficult for the researcher due to interpretations of data which often has a transformative effect on the researcher him/herself. Moustakas (1994) took the concept of bracketing one step further, introducing the concept of epoche to phenomenological studies. The author, Moustakas, described the need for a researcher’s contrasting view as “Epoché...a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn *to see* what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and describe” (Moustakas, p. 33, 2019).

When conducting a phenomenological analysis of the data collected, Creswell and Poth (2019) stress that appropriate questioning and data are the two leading conditions on which a researcher should focus their primary attention. The authors, Creswell and Poth, chose the concept of phenomenological reflection as the basic idea to grasp the essential meaning of something. In association with this study, the researcher reflected upon the phenomenon of self-resiliency factors that impact beginning special educators in the field. Creswell and Poth (2019) found that if the questions asked lack a heuristic point, then the analysis will fail for lack of phenomenological reflection. The authors, Creswell and Poth, also included a strong

statement summing up what phenomenological analysis should tell the researcher, “...analyzing the data for themes, using different approaches to examine the information, and considering the guides for reflection should yield an explicit structure of the meaning of the lived experience” (Creswell & Poth, p. 202, 2019). Moustakas (1994) encouraged researchers to incorporate the use of textural and structural descriptions in the “essence” of the experience which will translate to telling the “what” the participants experienced in relation to the phenomenon and “how” they experienced it.

Before deep work into the phenomenological viewpoints of the study could be employed, the researcher had to ensure that ethical considerations and the trustworthiness of the data collected were attended to during the data analysis process. Multiple authors encouraged the use of participant protection by masking participant's names using pseudonyms, protection of the site by the use of pseudonyms, and use of member checking from harm and disclosure of comprehensive findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher took great lengths at protecting the participants' names, locations of the focus group, and the age group the beginning special educators taught to ensure anonymity.

As previously noted, the researcher wielded triangulation as a method of validation for this study to corroborate evidence collected from multiple data sources. Creswell and Poth (2019) encouraged the use of at least two validation strategies to confirm that the research is valid and reliable. Bloomberg and Vople (2018) confirmed that the use of validity in research clearly reflects the world being described and the use of reliability confirms that the same phenomenon will come up with comparable observations in similar studies. For the analysis of the data for this study, the

researcher utilized the research strategies of self-reflective journaling, use of thick description, and focus groups to assure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study as laid out by Bloomberg and Volpe (2018).

According to Anninik (2016) little has been written about the role of research journaling in education. Multiple researchers have noted that comparative qualitative research methods have long been used in studies to bring validity to a study as well as to identify, analyze, and explain similarities and differences among members of a study. These methods serve as a means of gaining a better understanding of different structures and meanings derived from an experience (Anninik, 2016; Hayman et al., 2012; O'Breirne & Woodbridge, 2017). Anninik (2016) expands on this idea to include the concept of reflexivity utilized during the journaling process to emphasize an awareness of the participant's own presence in the research process, with the aim for the researcher to improve the quality of the research. Frechette et al. (2020) found journaling in qualitative studies represents an effort to extend beyond focus groups or interviews in order to express meanings that otherwise would be inexpressible. For this study, the researcher posed six questions to participants via a Google Form (see Appendix F) to capture the mind frame of the beginning special educator's viewpoint as he/she engages in the research process.

Casey and Krueger (2015) found there are four critical qualities of focus group analysis including that the analysis is systematic, verifiable, sequential, and consequential (p. 139). For this study, the researcher focused on systematic and verifiable qualities of focus group analysis. The researcher employed systematic analysis of the focus groups by preparing an abridged transcript of each focus group's

session, utilizing pseudonyms of both the participants and grade level taught typed manually by the researcher. Casey and Krueger (2015) described an abridged transcript as an abbreviated transcript with only relevant conversations included. The researcher listened to the recording and transcribed only those comments that were useful in the analysis, with the introduction and excessive directions not transcribed. The researcher employed the use of member checking upon completion of the full transcript to confirm verifiability. Creswell and Poth (2019) found that this exercise of bringing analyzed data back to the participants plays a critical role to ensure accuracy is reflected in the conversations that occurred during the focus group.

Upon completion of the member checking, the researcher began the process of memoing the transcripts multiple times. Creswell and Poth (2019) shared for researchers' to "Immerse yourselves in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts" (p. 187). The researcher continued the process of memoing, an idea from Creswell and Poth (2019), which helps the researcher identify initial codes captured from the focus group transcripts. Casey and Krueger (2015) did warn researchers of potential implications that may impede their analysis of focus group data including spontaneous comments, people changing their minds, using words differently, repeated comments, conversations that wander, and presenting a view with intensity or emotion. The authors noted that using the thick, rich description of the premise as to why there is a potential implication will have a subtle influence on the analysis of the data so as not to have a skewing effect on the data collected.

The researcher's intent in data analysis is to find what Casey and Krueger (2015) refer to as the key concepts in the analytic framework with the objective being to identify

the personal, lived experiences that are of central importance to the essence of the phenomenon of self-resilience. Using the analytic framework of key concepts, the researcher was able to discover the core ideas which illuminated the study. Multiple authors identified this process as a data spiral (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth (2019). Creswell and Poth (2019) discuss the spiral in-depth with particular attention to the forming of codes or categories, which the authors refer to as the “heart of qualitative data analysis” (p. 185). A researcher creates codes by aggregating text or visual data into small categories. This process is described as “winnowing” in which not all data is used, but only that which is relevant is called “lean coding.” Creswell and Poth (2019) found that throughout the coding process, researchers are encouraged to look for themes and broad units of code that share a common idea. The researcher then completed winnowing data from the transcripts which were transferred into a final code list. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) referred to a coding scheme/legend by assigning codes to search by category and sub-category.

A codebook was used to ensure maximum efficiency and tracking as outlined by several reputable researchers (see Appendix I) with a shortened label and a description of each code defining the boundaries of both inclusionary and exclusionary criteria to meet that code (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2019). The codebook was created using a Google Sheet matrix with codebook entries by theme prioritizing the analytic themes according to Casey and Krueger’s (2015) cluster of data collection concepts including data frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity, internal consistency, and participant perception of importance. The researcher used a technique called the constant comparative method to sort through

and code the data based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The constant comparative method is a classic analysis that is both visual and concrete utilizing the previously mentioned clustered data concepts from Casey and Krueger (2018). The authors found that a key task of using the constant comparative is to compare one segment of data with another to identify similarities and differences by grouping data together in a similar dimension, giving it a name (a category), and then arranged in a relationship to other categories.

Various authors endorsed the use of visually representing the findings of analyzed data through the use of flow charts to represent relationships among codes and emerging concepts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2019). The researcher created a flow chart visual reflexive of the relationships and recurring data patterns among identified codes and themes found present in the transcriptions. At the suggestion of multiple authors, the researcher also underwent a narrative analysis of the research investigation using both textural and structural descriptions to provide phenomenological analysis and representation of the data collected and analyzed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2019; Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher completed a summary statement of reflective and recurring data patterns with five sections curated by Creswell and Poth (2019) and Moustakas (1994). First, within this summary statement, the researcher described her personal experiences with the phenomenon of self-resilience as a beginning special education teacher. Second, the researcher included a list of significant statements from participants about their lived experiences with the phenomenon of self-resilience. Third,

the researcher narrowed down the textural description of the participant's experiences with self-resiliency as their experience as beginning special educators in the field. Fourth, the researcher reflected upon the structural description of the setting and context of which the context of the self-resiliency phenomenon was experienced by beginning special educators. Lastly, the researcher wrote a composite description of the phenomenon, melding both the textual and structural descriptions into the “essence” of the experience beginning special educators encountered with the phenomenon of self-resilience while teaching in the field. By analyzing the data for themes, using multiple approaches to examine the information, and reflecting upon the phenomena of self-resilience, the researcher was confident the emerged data yielded explicit structure and meaning to the essence of the lived experiences of beginning special educators.

Instruments

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) stated, “Researcher as an instrument raises important ethical, accountability, and social justice issues including intersubjectivity, power, authorship, and voice” (p. 47). The instruments utilized in this study primarily included the use of the qualitative researcher for both the data collection and analysis of interviews. A secondary research instrument included the use of a Sony ICD-UX570 Digital Voice Recorder to record the focus group sessions. The researcher's password-protected I-Phone was on hand for a possible backup to utilize the recording application if the Sony ICD-UX570 Digital Voice Recorder failed to record during the session. An additional research instrument included the use of Google Forms to send out to prospective participants as well as for one reflective journal entry from the study’s

participants. The researcher also utilized the use of a Google Sheet to track data including field notes and participant responses.

Role of the Researcher

As previously stated, the qualitative researcher of this study was the primary research instrument for both data collection and analysis of focus groups. Casey and Krueger (2015) and Creswell and Poth (2018) both stated that the qualitative researcher should be the primary research instrument for phenomenological research utilizing focus groups. Creswell and Poth (2018) expanded that idea by including that qualitative researchers are observers of the world studying things in their natural environments and attempting to make sense of the phenomena of lived experiences of others. Within this study, the role of the researcher was a moderator of focus group interviews and focus group participant observations through the use of field notes. The researcher also gathered single entry journal reflections from the participants.

Casey and Krueger (2015) stated what is needed when moderating a focus group includes respect for the participants, understanding of the purpose of the topic, ability to communicate clearly, being open and not defensive, and someone who is able to get useful information from participants. The researcher for this study inhabits and was able to exhibit all of the qualities of a successful moderator the authors stated were needed to successfully run a focus group. The researcher possessed the skills to transcribe, analyze and interpret data collected from focus as evident through approved qualitative methodology coursework through Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM). With gained knowledge through doctoral coursework and personal lived

experiences with the phenomena studied, the researcher was well prepared to conduct this extensive study.

Previous Knowledge and Bias

Creswell and Poth (2018) encouraged qualitative researchers to position themselves through reflexivity within their writing by self-identifying bias, values, and experiences he/she brings to the study. The researcher's experience and viewpoint as working as a special education teacher, as well as an administrator navigating consistent retention issues surrounding special education teachers, prompted an in-depth investigation of the impacting factors of self-resilience for beginning special educators currently in the field. For this study, the researcher's positionality reasons that an understanding of the lived experiences shared in relation to factors that impact the self-resilience skills of beginning special education teachers will further the understanding of support focused on this specific niche of teachers to promote retention within the field of special education.

The researcher studied Mostaska's (1994) interpretation of intersubjectivity recognizing that the researcher's knowledge of the participants' lived experiences are based on the knowledge of her own experiences simultaneously interpreting the participant's experiences. Taking it one step further, it was through the intentionality of the study that the researcher found both the noema and noesis factors that Moustakas (1994) referred to. The noema of the researcher's study is that there are factors that impact the self-resilience of beginning special educators. The noesis of the researcher's study is that the focus groups will uncover the impact of the experiences of

the beginning special educator. It was the ability of the researcher to endorse the use of epoché to set aside previous judgments and knowledge and fully embrace the phenomena with fresh, open senses free to see what stands before us instead of what we believe to be true (Moustakas, 1994). An example of the researcher utilizing epoché during the focus groups included her experiences in working with colleagues during her beginning years as a special educator. If the researcher had reflected upon her experiences with colleagues as a beginning special educator, her outlook would have factored into the analysis of collected experiences shared, affecting the overall outcome of the research.

Previous knowledge and work experience in the district allowed for easy accessibility to the study participants. Multiple authors allude to the fact that it is a challenge to create an environment where participants are willingly open and honestly share their concerns, anxieties, and suggestions when the moderator of the focus group is an employee of the organization (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Authors Casey and Krueger (2015) expand on that idea to include moderators, avoid power differentials, avoid pre-established small groups, and be aware of an environmental or recent history when forming focus groups.

Ethical Considerations

This study utilized Creswell and Poth's (2018) framework for considering ethical considerations along with each point in the research process from prior to conducting the study, beginning the study, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting data, and

publishing the study (p. 55). Prior to conducting the study, IRB approval was obtained for this study from the Minnesota State University, Moorhead, IRB board.

Protection of Participants

Krueger and Casey (2015) shared, “The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants” (p. 4). Individuals in a focus group decide to reveal their experiences based on perceptions of the people they are with and if those people resemble them in various ways through similar experiences. Recognizing their position of influence within the process of the focus groups, the researcher was careful not to make judgments about responses and to control body language. While within the active focus group, the researcher assumed the role of the moderator of the group, asking questions, listening, keeping the conversation on track, and making sure that everyone had a chance to share.

The protection of the participants in this study was reassured through multiple avenues of safeguarding. The names of the participants and the participating school district were non-identifiable, as well as any personal pronouns that may have emerged during the data collection process remained confidential. The use of pseudonyms was always utilized. All participants were informed prior to the study being conducted that the research was associated with the researchers’ pursuit of a doctoral degree. All participants were notified both in writing with their signed consent and in person verbally at the beginning of each recorded focus group that they had the choice to participate or withdraw at any time from the study. The raw data was kept in safe storage and all computer files were password protected. All data remained solely in the researcher’s

possession throughout the research process and will be destroyed in two years from publication.

Transcribing and Member Checking

To ensure validity, reliability, and accuracy, the focus group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the study's author. The transcribed focus group interview recordings were first uploaded to Google Drive, then downloaded to their personal computer. They then transcribed the focus group interview and emailed the participants a copy of the transcription and they were asked to member check (see Appendix H) the transcription and description of the lived experience they shared in the focus group.

If a focus group participant wanted to alter any of the transcribed content, the participant was asked to email the researcher the line item and desired edit to the transcription. Participants were provided detailed instructions on how to proceed with this process and a timeline for returning the transcript with or without edits to the researcher via email (see Appendix H). If a participant desired any further assistance in completing the member check, they were encouraged to email or call the researcher to get the member check process started and completed. No participants reached out for guidance or help in the member checking process. Four of the six participants confirmed that the transcription was valid and accurate.

Summary

The goal of this study was to identify and describe factors that impact the self-resiliency and the essence of the phenomenon by translating the study participants' lived experiences as beginning special educators through their responses through self-reflective journaling and the use of focus groups discussions. These impacting factors will be reflective of recommendations for both higher education and K-12 school administrators which can serve to support or enhance special educators' knowledge of self-resilience strategies. The hope is that an increase in self-resilience strategies will lead towards increasing retention of special education teachers. To this end, the researcher decided to interpret the lived experiences of beginning special educators currently in the field to discern which self-resiliency factors impacted their chances for retention.

The study employed the use of self-reflective journaling following the focus group session. When engaging with the focus group process, the researcher followed Moustakas (1993) urging the primary investigator to engage in the process of epoché, Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, so biases are set aside and do not direct the interview. The process of epoché/bracketing was done by the researcher multiple times throughout the focus groups to ensure a fresh perspective on the phenomenon was taken by the study's author. An example of the researcher utilizing epoché during the focus groups included her experiences in working with colleagues during her beginning years as a special educator. If the researcher had reflected upon her experiences with colleagues as a beginning special educator, her outlook would have factored into the analysis of collected experiences shared, affecting the overall outcome of the research.

The researcher utilized a focus group field note protocol which enabled them to take notes on nonverbal activity, sketch the seating arrangement, and record any questions about the responses from the focus group. The focus group field note protocol was an invaluable tool when analyzing the data to tie non-verbal activity that the recording device did not pick up when the focus group was in session. The researcher reviewed the field notes to ensure thick and rich narrative descriptions from the observational point of view were taken into consideration.

The author of the study utilized triangulation as a method of validation for this study to corroborate evidence collected from multiple data sources. The analysis of the data for this study utilized the research strategies of journaling, use of thick description, and focus groups to assure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study. The researcher focused on the systematic and verifiable qualities of focus group analysis. Using systematic analysis of the focus groups by preparing an abridged transcript of each focus group's session and utilizing pseudonyms of both the participants and grade level taught, the author of the study employed the use of member checking upon completion of the full transcript to confirm verifiability. Upon completion of the member checking, began the process of memoing the transcripts multiple times and identifying the initial codes of the research. Using the analytic framework of key concepts, the author of the study was able to discover the core ideas which illuminated the study through the winnowing process placing the data into leaning codes with an expansion of codes as the researcher re-read the transcripts of the data collected. Then the process of winnowing data from the transcripts was completed and

were transferred into a final code list, assigning codes to search by category and sub-category.

The codebook with a shortened label and a description of each code defining the boundaries of both inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. Using a Google Sheet matrix, the researcher prioritized the analytic themes of cluster data concepts including data frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity, internal consistency, and participant perception of importance. The use of a constant comparative method was then employed to sort through and code the data. The concepts were arranged on a password protected Google Sheet in descending order based on the analytic factors derived from the data collected. A visual matrix (see Appendix G) reflexive of the relationships and recurring data patterns among identified codes and themes found present in the transcriptions was created. The self-reflective journal entries from the participants were utilized to re-enforce the findings of the thematic clusters. The completed data analysis process and a narrative analysis of the research investigation using both textural and structural descriptions to provide phenomenological analysis and representation of the data collected and analyzed. The findings and analysis of the study's data follow in chapter four.

CHAPTER 4: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Introduction

After collecting qualitative data through two focus groups, the basis for understanding the examined lived experiences of beginning special educators in Minnesota became comprehended on a deeper level by the researcher. The study focused on how individuals described their experiences as early career special educators in relation to self-resiliency skills utilized during their experiences during their first years of teaching. Through chapters one, two, and three the foundation was set to explore the experiences of beginning special educators. Within chapter four, a description of the study's participants will be revealed and provide an essence of the phenomenon of the self-resiliency skills necessary for retention within the field of special education.

Researcher's Role

The researcher's role in this study took two paths benefiting both as a current practicing administrator and as a researcher. First, the researcher is employed by a school district as an administrator, leading them to a front-seat experience supporting beginning special education teachers. Second, the researcher's current role as an administrator in special education prompted them to question the identification of self-resiliency skills special educators possess that lead to retention within the field of special education. Educational scholars (Albrecht et al., 2009, Benjamin and Black, 2012; Cancio et al., 2018) have noted the increasing concern about the retention of special education teachers. Benjamin and Black (2012) shared that with the attrition of special educators, there is an increase in caseloads for remaining special education

teachers, a reduction in the quality of services provided, and a decrease in teacher satisfaction. These factors negatively impact the main purpose of teaching and the overall success of the students. Rather than focus on the factors that lead to teacher attrition, the researcher, through this study, brought attention to the self-resiliency skills beginning special educators possess for retention.

The researcher served as the key instrument for collecting data through participants' self-reflective journals and a focus group guided by open-ended questions. The study was guided by the philosophical perspectives of Creswell and Poth (2018) and Moustakas (1994). Having personally experienced the lived experience of a beginning special educator and supporting beginning special educators, the researcher had to "...suspend all judgments about what is real until they are founded on a more certain basis" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pg. 76). The action of setting aside all preconceived ideas and biases is a practice that Moutaskas (1994) refers to as "epoché". The study required a skilled researcher to moderate the focus groups for this study. Casey and Krueger (2015) stated what is needed when moderating a focus group includes respect for the participants, understanding of the purpose of the topic, ability to communicate clearly, being open and not defensive, and someone who is able to get useful information from participants. The researcher for this study inhabits and was able to exhibit all of the qualities of a successful moderator the authors stated were needed to successfully run a focus group. The researcher possessed the skills to transcribe, analyze and interpret data collected from focus as evident through approved qualitative methodology coursework through Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM). With gained knowledge through doctoral coursework and personal lived

experiences with the phenomena studied, the researcher was well prepared to conduct this extensive study.

The study's intent was to gather beginning special educators' perceptions of their self-resiliency skills needed for retention. Ultimately, the study's findings and recommendations may assist members of the school district the focus groups were conducted within by providing district administration an opportunity to understand the lived experiences of beginning special educators in implementing supporting professional development and strategies aimed at increasing special education teacher retention in Minnesota.

Description of the Sample

The researcher of this study initially emailed eighteen beginning special educators within a Minnesota school district. Both the initial and the follow up email did not generate any potential participants. This process began in late August, which was not an ideal time for the participants as they were just beginning their school year. A pivot in methodology was required when the researcher encountered variables beyond her control. To continue to maintain the integrity of the study, the researcher utilized Creswell and Poth's (2018) purposeful sampling. The use of purposeful sampling means that the researcher selects "...individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 326). The researcher contacted fellow education administrators to seek participants within their settings. This method of sampling produced a pool of six participants, all of which met the requirements for the study. Krueger and Casey (2015) shared that focus groups are typically composed of

five to eight participants with the group being small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide a diversity of perceptions among the members. Therefore, for this research, two groups of three participants each were able to afford more opportunities to share ideas and lessen the possibility of fragmentation within the focus group. Briggs et al. (2012) discussed that choosing a group that is too homogeneous may not reflect the diversity of the population and functional job diversity. The author of this study was the sole researcher working with the participants. Briggs et al. (2012) warned that the larger the number of people in a focus group, the more difficult it becomes for one individual to manage the experience and suggested between three to five participants as a manageable number if the researcher is solo.

The researcher did professionally know each of the participants from previously working with them as colleagues, previously supervising them in summer school, or currently working with them as a special education supervisor within their setting. The researcher worked with participants one, four and six as a special education supervisor. The researcher worked with participant two previously supervising them in summer school. Lastly, the research worked with participants three, and five as a former colleague.

Table 1: Study Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Elementary/ Secondary	Average Caseload Size	Submitted Self-Reflective Journal
Participant 1 (P1)	1	Secondary	19	X
Participant 2 (P2)	2 months	Elementary	12	

Participant 3 (P3)	4	Elementary	13	X
Participant 4 (P4)	2	Secondary	21	X
Participant 5 (P5)	5	Secondary	14	
Participant 6 (P6)	2	Secondary	17	X

Note: This table provides information regarding the participants of the study including their years of experience as a special educator, their current grade level teaching assignment, their average special education student caseload size, and the indication if they submitted self-reflective journal entries.

The researcher and participants arranged two separate dates for the two focus groups of October 24, 2022 and October 25, 2022. The researcher then sent out the informed consent via email to the participants and received six of the six responses in return by October 1, 2022 via email. After the focus groups met, the researcher sent out via Google Form, a self-reflective journal for the participants to fill out. Four of the six participants responded to and completed the self-reflective journal.

Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that a narrower range of sampling is needed for a phenomenological study as “all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (p.157). The researcher used purposeful sampling for the study and was interested in finding participants that met the 0-5 years of experience in special education (Table 1). All participants were contacted through email to elicit interest in participating in the study, participated in the focus group, member-checked the collected data, and four of the six participants participated in the self-reflected journal. The self-

reflection journals were conducted through Google Forms. The focus group was conducted in person and was recorded through the use of a Sony ICD-UX570 Digital Voice Recorder. In addition to the focus group, the researcher took field notes to capture nonverbal activity, sketch the seating arrangement, and record any questions about the responses from the focus group.

Focus Group

The focus group session yielded two hours and sixteen minutes of data, equating to an average of 12.6 minutes per participant response. Upon the completion of the focus group, the researcher employed Casey and Krueger's (2015) method of oral summary by providing a brief summary of the responses to the important questions posed throughout the focus group. The researcher then invited participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary at that time. The participants did not offer any additional corrections or additions to the summary. Multiple researchers encouraged this type of member checking to ensure richer data collected and deeper insights that have represented the participants and their ideas accurately (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2019). The researcher reviewed the field notes to ensure thick and rich narrative descriptions from the observational point of view were taken into consideration. The researcher downloaded the recorded focus group from the Sony ICD-UX570 onto a single flash drive kept under lock and key, and the multi-authenticated hard drive of the researcher's personal computer.

To begin the analysis process of the data collected, the researcher utilized the process of "epoché", or bracketing, to remove her bias from the study. The researcher employed "epoché" by focusing only on the participants' responses and setting aside

personal thoughts or reactions to the responses. Creswell and Poth (2018) refer to this phenomenological reflection as bracketing the researcher's personal experience within the phenomenon. In addition to the recorded audio file, the researcher took field notes to capture any non-verbal cues expressed by the participants. While in the process of reviewing the data collected from the focus group, the researcher was able to apply open coding and significant statements were highlighted and categorized for each focus group question. Upon completion of the first round of coding, the researcher reviewed field notes to ensure the transcribed focus group data included field notes to further enrich the data. The edited transcripts were e-mailed to the participants for member checking in order to assure the validity, credibility, and accuracy of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were asked to review the transcripts and provide the researcher additional corrections or additions via email or by phone call that they recalled differently through their participation in the focus group. The participants did not offer any corrections or additions to the summary for the researcher to take into consideration.

With the significant statements of the study identified, the researcher then began the process of axial coding, which was conducted to create meaning, or links, between participants and topics within the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The clustered statements were obtained from either a collective group response or an observation made regarding the general group consensus. The researcher continued with the analysis of the data and selective codes were created to summarize the theme of the phenomenological experience and lived reality of the beginning special education teachers.

Self-Reflective Journal

The self-reflective journal was sent out to participants after the focus groups had met. The purpose of the self-reflective journal was to provide a deeper level of constructive and valuable participation within the phenomenological researcher process. Woodbridge and O'Beirne (2017) shared "...a reflection is the tool that allows learners to make meaning of past experiences and sets the stage for the development of new ideas and approaches" (p. 286). The researcher strategically sent the self-reflective journals to the study's participants after the focus groups had met to reflect upon their previous conversations in the focus groups as well as expand at a deeper level their personal practices as a beginning special educator. Woodbridge and O'Beirne (2017) identified three forms of reflection including content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. The researcher chose process reflection in which, "...the learner reflects on how she carried out the process of perceiving, thinking, feeling, or acting, and assessing her effectiveness" (Woodbridge & O'Beirne, 2017, p. 286). The process reflection encapsulated the level of reflection that the researcher was seeking to assist with triangulation and validation of the evidence of the phenomenon of self-resilience in the study.

Presentation of Data and Results of the Analysis

The researcher engaged in the coding process as previously described. By engaging in multiple rounds of coding, contextual themes emerged from the collected data from the focus groups. The researcher was then able to apply textural description per research question through the categorization of the data including the structural description which was in the form of narrative quotes.

Research Question One - What self-resiliency factors lead to the retention of beginning special educators in Minnesota?

The first research question was utilized to seek the essence of the study. The researcher found that educators stay in the field for a variety of reasons. Two overall themes were presented through the coding process: retention factors, and reflective practices. These two main themes of the leading retention factors for beginning special education teachers identified sub-categories as well listed below in Table 2. The sub-categories identified the prominent recurring themes related to positive retention factors for the retention of special education teachers.

Table 2: Participant's Identified Self-Resiliency Factors

Theme 1: Retention Factors		
Meaning Units	Textural Description	Structural Description
Identified Factors Towards Beginning Special Education Teacher Retention	Student Advocation	<p><i>"It's getting better, so those days are little victories, they make me smile, they make me happy." (P2)</i></p> <p><i>"It makes me proud to be the one at bat for those students...to watch that success there and be that person that advocates for them. To stand in their corner with them." (P5)</i></p>
	Supported Environment	<p><i>"As long as our admins show me that they are trying and they are helping and actively trying to help, then I will give you the same." (P3)</i></p> <p><i>"Sure, I look to my admin team for support, but I look to my</i></p>

		<i>colleagues more. They are the ones that are in the trenches with me each day. If I do not have a supportive team at school, I will move on. Actually, I have moved on to a different school in the past because of a lack of support from my team.” (P6)</i>
Theme 2: Reflective Practices		
Identified Factor Towards Beginning Special Education Teacher Retention	Self-Care	<p><i>“I do journaling, or read a book. Something that is high interest, something other than school work. Because some days it is like, “Holy buckets, what just happened!” sometimes.” (P4)</i></p> <p><i>“I go to the movies. It forces me to forget about the world and relax for a while. Even if you watch a movie at home, you still will want to check your work email or lesson plan. You can’t do that at a movie theater.” (P2)</i></p>
Identified Factor Towards Beginning Special Education Teacher Retention	Decompress	<p><i>“Giving myself that time and finding someone that I can unload on and then taking a big breath and saying what do I need to do next.” (P3)</i></p> <p><i>“I try to get my venting done on the way home before I leave work so when I get home I am leaving my day in the car or leaving it at the door.” (P1)</i></p>

Note: This table represents the identified self-resiliency factors as beginning special educators. The letter P followed by a number, indicates which participant was quoted from the study’s focus groups.

Theme 1: Retention Factors

Student Advocation.

Five of the participants in the study expressed their ability to advocate for their students as a key driver to their need for retention. All participants advocated for the students in various methods including personal conversations, working with families, working with General Education colleagues, working with Special Education colleagues, and/or continuing to search for the “best fit” programming for their students.

Participants one and five indicated that student advocacy differs from helping the students day-to-day as it places a need for the student to have non-verbal or verbally expressed support for their needs and for the teacher to be called to action to support the student. This call to action is an important connection that beginning special education teachers have to their professional worth as well as their drive to stay in the field of special education.

Through self-reflective journaling, participant three shared, “I can best meet my students' needs and advocate for them by continuing in my education classes in my field to help me grow to take back my understanding to my classroom and students.” Participant four mentioned, “Listening to my students needs and building healthy relationships best helps me to meet student needs. Also, being extremely flexible and creative in my approaches I use.” In reflection on the focus group and journals, the researcher found that the study's participants identified with personal growth through education and being responsive to student needs assisted them in advocating for their students. The teachers in the focus group were observed to use more reflective

statements and utilized a more caring and nurturing tone when discussing advocating for their students.

Supported Environment.

A majority of participants indicated that to continue within the field of education, they need an environment that supports them. The concept of support may come in the form of administration/support staff, however the researcher found that participants one, two, three, four and five shared that a supportive environment typically comes in the form of support from colleagues. Colleagues are non-evaluative and the pressure of looking for support from an administrator does not always apply to the day to day needs a beginning special education teacher navigates. Colleagues provide a level of support that is able to be observed and re-created by beginning special education teachers that typically seek self-identified mentors to mirror their positive strengths after in the classroom, with students and/or with families.

Participants one, two and six did reflect upon the needed level of support that was required from their administration to be present and active in their beginning years as a special education teacher. Support from administrators was viewed by participants three, four, five and six as “actively trying” to solve a problem or deal with a situation versus passively acknowledging a situation. Support from administrators also was viewed by participants two, three and five as being physically present within the hallways, at meetings and assisting the beginning special education teachers through difficult conversations/events with students, General Education staff and families.

Theme 2: Reflective Practices

Self-Care.

The first reflective practice that beginning special educators identified as a key towards retention included self-care practice. Several self-care practices were included by participants one, two, three, four and six as actions they have utilized, however a few key self-care practices were expressed as frequent habits. Beginning special educators who were interviewed shared that journaling, reading, giving themselves “time” and going to movies/events outside of their typical routine assisted in positive self-care routines that they were able to sustain for healthy reflective practices. Participants three, four and six expressed that special education teaching is difficult to navigate and fully process what occurs in school on a particular day and what action steps to support student needs should be considered to act upon. The noted participants shared that the above shared actions assist them in processing their emotions, fatigue and frequent self-doubt to relax, recharge and be ready to be an effective educator the following day.

Through the self-reflective journal, participant three shared, “When I ‘fill my own cup’ and take care of myself by setting a healthy lifestyle, work/home boundaries and taking time to do what I enjoy, I can come to work rested and ready to take whatever comes my way.” An additional comment from participant six included, “I am cautious to not overextend myself any more. I used to volunteer for everything at school and I ended up resenting my time at school. I am searching for a better balance.” The term and concept of balance cropped up in various ways both within conversations in the focus groups and through the self-reflections. The actionable items shared were practiced by teachers that were in the field for two years or more. It was noted that teachers with less than two years of experience did not share about their self-care

routines. The researcher deducted that the non-responsive participants had yet to establish self-care routines at the very early stage of their career.

Decompress.

The reflective practice of decompression was a key element in the ability towards retention of beginning special educators. The six participants expressed the need to engage in an activity promoting decompression at the end of their work day before transitioning to their home life. Decompression tactics were very similar between the participants and five of the participants expressed that their colleagues were the recipient of their conversations of decompression. Participant one was passionate about their practices for decompression and the need to leave their day at school before going home. Participant one shared that bringing home their work life has affected their home life and they are working diligently to change that. Participant six shared that they are unable to divide out their work life and home life at different stages of the school year and they have a supportive homelife that dialogues through problems with them. Participants one, three, four and six shared that the action of verbally processing their day with fellow colleagues led to feelings of decompression and alleviated their stress levels through this frequent routine. The action of decompression also was a pivotal point for many participants as an action step towards problem solving a concern or situation he/she was experiencing with a fellow colleague who may or may not have gone through a similar situation.

Research Question Two - What self-resiliency skills impact the success of special educators?

The second research question aimed to identify the specific, actionable skills that can be both observed and measured as terms of success for beginning special education teachers. With this secondary research question, the researcher found that educators identify skills that impact their success in a variety of methods. Three overall themes were presented through the coding process which included student abilities, student behaviors and teacher vulnerabilities. These three themes of the leading self-resiliency skills impacting success for beginning special education teachers were identified in sub-categories as well listed below in Table 3. The sub-categories identified the prominent recurring themes related to self-resiliency skills impacting the success for beginning special education teachers.

Table 3: Participant's Identified Impacting Self-Resiliency Skills

Theme 1: Student Behaviors		
Meaning Units	Textural Description	Structural Description
Identified Factor Impact of Success of Beginning Special Education Teacher	Undergraduate Preparation for Student Behaviors	<p><i>"Nothing can prepare you for what it is actually like. You got a small glimpse in undergrad but nothing can really ever prepare you until you are in it." (P3)</i></p> <p><i>"I just don't think you can teach an accredited class that can really fully prepare you for what you do as a Special Education teacher dealing with a student's behavior." (P6)</i></p> <p><i>"Student behaviors and some of the politics, parents and some of those things, are things that you can not teach someone or</i></p>

		<i>tell them how it is going to be. It is different every year and with every family.” (P2)</i>
Identified Factor Impact of Success of Beginning Special Education Teacher	Support of Student’s Behaviors	<p><i>“In my experience with student behaviors, I have really liked the trauma training. That has helped, it is the best PD I have gotten.” (P5)</i></p> <p><i>“I knew there would be plenty of student behaviors, but I didn’t have all of the answers in the world of how to respond to the behaviors. Knowing that I had support through my colleagues, student support staff and admins helped me.” (P6)</i></p>
Theme 2: Student Abilities		
Identified Factor Impact of Success of Beginning Special Education Teacher	Supporting in a Multi- Abilities Classroom	<p><i>“It is a challenge for me to be individualizing things when you have to schedule six kids together for math when only one is truly ready for Algebra and the others are at varying levels. It is very challenging for me.” (P5)</i></p> <p><i>“I have a group of students that can read some words and a girl that cannot read or write her own name. She can not tell a “t” from a “b”, she doesn’t know her letters. I am trying to help her, and she doesn’t have a parent to help out after school. I am trying to help her with the most basic things but I can’t get to everyone to continue to be challenged and bring the group forward together. It is tough.” (P2)</i></p> <p><i>“You have to meet them where</i></p>

		<i>they are at, but there is no flow of how to complete random skills the IEP guides us with to match them to the student's grade level with the hopes that these random skills lead them towards graduation." (P1)</i>
Identified Factor Impact of Success of Beginning Special Education Teacher	Concerns About Student's Self Perceptions Being in Special Education	<p><i>"To hear some things my students say about being SPED students is very hard. Those are things that I don't know how, but we can do better to support them." (P5)</i></p> <p><i>"Co-teaching is a great way for the students to feel more "a part" of the school. They are getting the support they need plus they are feeling like they are a part of the general population instead of pulling them out of class all of the time." (P6)</i></p>
Theme 3: Teacher Vulnerability		
Identified Factor Impact of Success of Beginning Special Education Teacher	Self-awareness	<p><i>"I did a lot of research on my own because I didn't want to go into my new classroom thinking I knew it all." (P1)</i></p> <p><i>"My beginning year of teaching was very overwhelming at first, and I was learning a lot everyday. I couldn't figure out what was important and what was not important." (P6)</i></p> <p><i>"I had many classes before I began teaching but after that first month of teaching I had no idea what I was doing. I was learning every day I guess, way more than I had ever learned in my undergrad classes. Yeah.</i></p>

		<p><i>It was a lot.” (P4)</i></p> <p><i>“I felt like I was being judged on every turn for what I did or didn’t do.” (P5)</i></p> <p><i>“You are getting questioned as a new teacher at every single turn. Everyone is asking you if you are doing something and judging you on doing something right or wrong. If I didn’t reach out to someone for advice or help, I would have just closed my door and self-doubt would have creeped in.” (P6)</i></p> <p><i>“I felt very judged by my colleagues, families, kids and paras when I first began teaching. I didn’t want to ask any questions because I didn’t want anyone to think I didn’t know everything there is to know in teaching.” (P3)</i></p>
<p>Identified Factor Impact of Success of Beginning Special Education Teacher</p>	<p>Self-Advocacy</p>	<p><i>“I knew if I didn’t speak up and let someone know that I was struggling and what I was struggling with, I would become a statistic of another SPED teacher leaving Special Ed way earlier than Gen Ed teachers.” (P6)</i></p> <p><i>“I couldn’t figure out what I could ask of my administrators or what would be taboo. I also was struggling with what to tell my colleagues that I didn’t know. I kept on coming back to who can I tell this to so I can get some help. I knew I needed the help, I just couldn’t figure out who was going to be the right person to go to. It was super</i></p>

		<p><i>stressful.” (P4)</i></p> <p><i>“Once I started to tell my SPED Director that I didn’t know what to do in certain situations, it got a lot better. She was able to guide me and let me know that it wasn’t evaluative and she was glad that I reached out. I felt so much better because I was pretty freaked out that she was going to let me go if I didn’t know what I was doing.” (P5)</i></p>
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Note: This table represents the identified impacting self-resiliency factors as beginning special educators. The letter P followed by a number, indicates which participant was quoted from the study’s focus groups.

Theme 1: Student Behaviors

Undergraduate Preparation for Student Behaviors.

All six participants had varying experiences in their undergraduate preparation for the field of special education. The physical posturing of the participants in one of the focus groups changed when the group began talking about undergraduate preparation and student behaviors. Participants one, three, four, five and six shared that their undergraduate experiences both in the field through observation and student teaching experiences did not adequately prepare them for the realities of the classroom. The same participants also expressed that their undergraduate classes did not address strategies that were useful to work with students with challenging behaviors in the classroom. Participants three and five were noted to show a wider range of emotions about their lack of preparation through undergraduate experiences, which they both noted were similar experiences. Participant three shared, “Teaching reading and math

is such a fraction of the things that in reality a SPED teacher does. I can sit down and teach a lesson, but it is adjusting within the lesson when you've got a kid in the corner freaking out while you are trying to teach a sight word. Those are the things that a professor can not tell you how to teach a kid while ignoring the behaviors of another until you experience it."

Through the self-reflected journals, participant three shared, "I am teaching in the field I went to college for with the same mission that I started with, to help make a difference in the lives of little minds." Participant one shared in their reflective journal, "I am currently teaching because I was trained in the field and I enjoy working with and serving underprivileged and underrepresented youth." Three of the participants, three, four and five, did convey during the focus group session that their undergraduate experiences were useful, but they felt that they needed to have the experiences in the field, on their own, to fully be able to respond and problem solve their unique experience that their university preparation could not have anticipated would have occurred. The comments from the self-reflected journals confirmed that regardless of the undergraduate preparation, the "why" a teacher chose the field of special education outweighed the preparation they received for the field of special education.

Support of Student's Behaviors.

All six of the participants expressed that they link their success in the classroom to their abilities towards classroom management and knowledge of student behaviors, regardless of the years of experiences they held. Participants three, four and five expressed that they recognized early in their experience as a special education teacher that they did not have the skills and resources that would be able to respond to the

variety of student behaviors, both verbal and non-verbal. Between the two focus groups, actionable items including seeking assistance through the support and guidance of colleagues, administrators, student support personnel and outside resources to assist in understanding strategies to best support students were the key items the participant teachers identified as bringing them success and confidence when confronted with difficult student behaviors.

When prompted through their self-reflected journal, participant three shared, "I want to help students to learn, grow, and develop coping skills to use during dysregulated times. I want to show students that they can do anything they are capable of and they can make a difference in their own lives." This sentiment was not shared by any of the group members during the focus groups. As a whole, the two focus groups were much more aligned in thought about the intensity of student's behaviors and how they were ill prepared to handle behaviors. The conversation in the focus groups did not include mention of how students or families were supported during periods of dysregulation, more about how they impacted the teacher's ability to teach and support the student overall.

Theme 2: Student Abilities

Supporting in a Multi-Abilities Classroom.

All six participants in the study spoke to the struggle they have experienced and are continuing to experience in regards to supporting multiple abilities in a small group setting. In one focus group, participant five led much of the conversations surrounding supporting multi-abilities with the same setting. Participant five does have the most years of experience and has had experiences in elementary, middle school and high

school settings. The viewpoints of participant five surrounding supporting in a multi-abilities classroom was not followed by the other participants, however due to the varied experiences of participant five, other participants were able to tie in their experiences as well. A common theme between both focus groups included the participants expressing their need for further support to understand student groupings, student varying abilities and how to bring all members of an academic based small group forward in their skills with such varying needs. Two participants, five and six, were concerned about the support of the IEP goals as well. They questioned the process and success rate they have implemented to track and successfully teach to individualized needs of students with their large caseloads and small group sizes that are comparable to Tier 2 interventions. Participant two has only a few months of experience as a beginning special educator and did not participate much in this part of the conversation for lack of experience. Participants one, three and six shared that students' needs in a multi-abilities classroom has also been impacted by the lack of adequate curriculum to meet the varied students' needs. Participant one shared, "They [the school] have stuff for you to use, but it is not what you want, what you are used to or what the student needs to be successful." It was apparent to the researcher that this was a multi-layered issue that was not exclusive to elementary or secondary teachers, but prevalent in all settings according to the participants' comments.

Concerns About Student's Self-Perception Being in Special Education.

Participants one, four, five and six spoke to their lack of ability to serve and support students that struggle with being labeled as special education students. The four noted participants are all currently teaching at the secondary level. As students

progress through the education system, rigor and social responsiveness increases for a student to be successful in our current educational system. Participant five, with the most experience in both focus groups, shared their concern with how to support students' needs in the least restrictive environment to find both success for the student and for the teacher to reach his/her learners. Participant five shared, "Right now I am co-teaching chemistry...they [the students] are getting the support they need plus they are feeling like they are a part of the general population instead of pulling out for support. We just dismissed a student from special ed. because they refused to go to the special ed. classroom. Wouldn't that student have been better served if he had access to a co-taught class? Then maybe he would have accepted the help better." Participants one, five and six spoke in great detail about their successes with co-teaching in the General Education environment. Participant six shared, "The students weren't ducking into SPED doorways or lingering in the hallways so their Gen. Ed. peers wouldn't see them go into the SPED classrooms when the bell rang. It was a huge self-esteem boost for students when they had access to a co-taught class." The participants that had not experienced co-teaching did ask questions about the abilities to meet students' needs related to their IEP goals and support through the General Education setting, which sparked numerous questions and comments of interest from the focus group participants.

Through the self-reflective journals, the participants were asked how they can encourage more involvement and learning for their students struggling with the special education label. Participant six responded to the prompt, "By showing up to work everyday, showing them that I am a real person with real emotions, giving them a fresh

start every day and setting up an environment where they know they can come to at any time for support.” Through introspection of both responses from the focus groups and reflective journals, the beginning special educators want to see their students succeed overall. Finding a way to support both the students and the beginning special education teachers to find success for the students’ to ensure their self-esteem about their learning styles and needs will lead to greater retention of information and likelihood of student graduation.

Theme 3: Teacher Vulnerability

Self-Awareness.

All six of the beginning special education teachers that participated in the focus groups strongly expressed that the self-awareness of the skills or lack of skills contributed to their overall interpretation of their success as a teacher. Out of all of the questions and discussions, this conversation within the focus group garnered the most visceral reactions of defeat and vulnerability. Participants one and six shared that when they realized they did not have the skills to be successful in the classroom, they became resourceful and sought out information and resources to assist in them finding success. Participant five shared that when they realized they did not have the skills to be successful in the classroom, they physically distanced themselves from colleagues, from conversations about school and disengaged with families they worked with. This teacher expressed that they have since recognized that they are not comfortable with the “not knowing” of teaching and identifying their skill deficits and abilities.

Through the self-reflective journaling process, participant four shared, “We all have personal experiences and values coming into our jobs...I need to ensure that I am

not thinking my way is the best, but I am working to put the family's values first and foremost." Additionally, participant six commented through their journaling, "My goal is to treat everyone with dignity and respect regardless of our differences. I have a lot to learn, I need to remember that sometimes." The researcher found that through the focus group conversations, self-reflective journaling and subsequent coding process, participants in this study often connected their success with being "right" or having "knowledge" as an indicator of their perceived success or perceived lack of success.

Self-Advocacy.

The participants in the study shared that the ability to self-advocate for themselves in a non-judgmental, non-evaluative environment was a critical step towards realized success in their experiences as a beginning special educator. In creating an environment of learning for the beginning special educator, it was shared by participants one and three that they began to identify their areas of need for further education and assistance. This self-awareness of what they needed was then able to be turned into actionable items that they were able to self-advocate for their needs. Participants one, three and six attributed their abilities for self-advocating to have their professional needs met as deep sources of success for themselves as they have seen their fellow beginning special educators fail to self-advocate for themselves which leads to a decrease in teacher success and subsequently student success. Participant one, through self-reflective journaling, shared, "I am committed to bettering myself so I can support my students. I will continue to educate myself with the best practices in my field."

Research Question Three - How do beginning special education teachers feel that they could be better supported by their school districts?

The third research question aimed to identify the specific, actionable steps that a school district can take to support beginning special education teachers. With this last research question, the researcher found that educators viewed needed support from their school districts in a variety of ways. Four overall themes were presented through the coding process which included colleagues, workload, IEP process, and curriculum. These four themes of support districts can provide for beginning special education teachers were identified in sub-categories as well as listed below in Table 4. The sub-categories identified the prominent recurring themes related to support of beginning special education teachers.

Table 4: Participant's Identified Modes of Support from School Districts

Theme 1: Colleagues		
Meaning Units	Textural Description	Structural Description
Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Self-Identified Mentors	<p><i>"She was right across the hall from me. It was really nice to have someone familiar with the district not only for Special Ed. but also for where are the supplies, where is the printer..." (P5)</i></p> <p><i>"Asking questions to your colleagues or having them come to me with questions that I should be asking. I don't always know what to ask. Then that sparks an</i></p>

		<p><i>idea and another SPED teacher will pick up that idea and help me out. So, having something that worked for other Special Ed. teachers is very helpful.” (P6)</i></p>
<p>Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers</p>	<p>Feeling Apart of the School Community</p>	<p><i>“The work we do as SPED teachers goes unnoticed. It is hard to feel a part of the whole, big school community sometimes when kids and other teachers truly don’t understand what you do.” (P5)</i></p> <p><i>“Sometimes I don’t feel like the real teacher.” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“It is hard to feel a part of the school community at times. I mean in my eyes they are Gen Ed kids first with SPED supports, but that seems to change when they are with a teacher for 4 out of 8 periods per day.” (P6)</i></p>
<p>Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers</p>	<p>Strategies to Navigate SPED Related Situations</p>	<p><i>“I like to talk through concerns with a team that I trust. Or regrouping and slowing down to really dissect what my concerns are because I can then become more proficient.” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“Getting another perspective on the student really helps. If I can get another mind working with my mind I realize that I am</i></p>

		<p><i>not the only one this is happening to. It kinds of gives me the feeling that it is not just me, which is nice.” (P4)</i></p> <p><i>“I read a lot and depend on the resources that my district has for me as well as resources that I find on my own or from a colleague that has dealt with a similar situation in the past.” (P6)</i></p>
Theme 2: Workload		
Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Paperwork	<p><i>“I’ve got my SPED duties with paperwork and then my General Ed duties with curriculum maps always competing for my time.” (P1)</i></p> <p><i>“Yeah, I knew that the paperwork was going to be a lot. But how to gauge it and understand how long it takes to do well with paperwork has taken me a long time to figure out. I still feel after a few years that I am learning something new every day.” (P5)</i></p>
Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Balance	<p><i>“A challenge for me has been balance. It has always been balanced between paperwork, lesson planning and trying to leave it at work. My husband leaves his work and it is there until tomorrow. I need to figure out how to do that.” (P3)</i></p>

		<p><i>"I don't think that anyone ever told me, 'Ok, you are going to spend two hours at night, sitting on your couch, writing an eval.' It was never mentioned, the reality of just how much you take home with you."</i> (P4)</p>
Identified Supports for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Action of Being a Special Education Teacher	<p><i>"You are presented with kids that are all over the place and then all of a sudden now I have four adults that I am in charge of! I mean, that was just overwhelming."</i> (P5)</p> <p><i>"Special ed. Can be different in so many ways. You can be teaching, you can have your own classroom, you can be teaching a whole class by yourself, you can be co-teaching. Many people think that SPED teachers are the ones that take 4 kids into their little SPED room with them for a 30 minute session, that is not the case."</i> (P1)</p>
Theme 3: IEP Process		
Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Application of Knowledge of IEP Process	<p><i>"They [undergraduate professors] talked about IEPs, evals and knowing SPED law and stuff like that. We did mock IEP meetings, which was really helpful. I feel like most of my practicums were good."</i> (P4)</p>

		<p><i>"It is different for me to assist someone with the IEP process. At this point, it is easier for me to type it up on my own than me slowing down to show someone what to do because I have like six other things that need my time right now." (P3)</i></p>
Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Perceptions of the Power of the IEP Process	<p><i>"I just started an initial evaluation on a junior. Like we [SPED staff] are the big saving grace by that evaluation due date when she only has a year and a half left." (P5)</i></p> <p><i>"SPED is not the solution to all problems and I am surely not qualified enough in my short time as a SPED teacher to solve all of these problems through giving a student an IEP." (P6)</i></p>
Theme 4: Curriculum		
Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Responses to Student Needs	<p><i>"I taught in General Ed. for a few years. I had a pretty set curriculum that I was doing and I would go right through that. Now, [as a SPED teacher] I am kind of making it up as I go and sometimes I make it up in the morning and then change it an hour later by the afternoon. I am totally flexible." (P2)</i></p> <p><i>"I can be doing a small group in reading and have three to four totally</i></p>

		<i>different things happening at once due to how broad their needs are. Prepping for that many needs in one small group keeps me up at night with planning.” (P6)</i>
Identified Area of Needed Support for Beginning Special Education Teachers	Lack of Curriculum	<p><i>“I have so many students with social skill goals and I have so many social skills groups with no curriculum. So, I went to the counselor at my school and got some old curriculum that they are no longer using that I could have.” (P2)</i></p> <p><i>“In the classroom, you are given old curriculum and past teachers “stuff”. There is typically never what you need or what you want to help you meet the students' needs.” (P1)</i></p>

Note: This table represents the identified modes of support from school districts experienced as beginning special educators. The letter P followed by a number, indicates which participant was quoted from the study’s focus groups.

Theme 1: Colleagues

Self-Identified Mentors.

As previously mentioned, colleagues were a frequently identified source of support for the participants in the study. Participants one, two, three, four, and five had experiences with a district appointed mentor with mixed results of success. All six of the participants reported a strong success rate with a self-identified mentor, including fellow Special Education teachers, School Social Worker, School Counselor and General

Education teachers, that worked with the beginning special education teacher to assist them in navigating their early years in the classroom and as a part of the school community. Participants four and five who have two or more years of experience stated that they continue to have a strong relationship with their previous self-identified mentors due to the strong bond they established at a vulnerable point in their early experiences as a teacher.

Feeling Apart of the School Community.

Participants two, three and five in the study directed their need for support towards feeling like a real teacher for students as a beginning special educator. The ability for a beginning special educator to negotiate his/her way through understanding a school's culture and how he/she fits into the culture is an indicator of success the teacher will have with the school building they are assigned to. Participant five shared, "Strong working relationships between special education and general education teachers has assisted me in easing the feeling of "I am the real teacher" for students that is shared." Participants two, three and five shared that their experiences endorsed special education teachers as being a valuable part of their professional learning communities. In their experiences, input was valued and often sought after. The remaining three participants did not have similar experiences, which led to endorsed feelings of being siloed or not seen by their colleagues.

Through self-reflective journaling, participant six shared, "I need to make the conscious choice to be collaborative with my SPED student's Gen. Ed. teachers. It will help to provide them with the best support every day." Participants in both the focus groups and through self-reflective journaling shared action can be taken by building

level administrators by providing common preparation times, before/after school contact times between General Education and Special Education staff and assisting in facilitating relationships between colleagues. Participant six shared that their common preparation time in their building helped to form relationships that sustained the educators through challenging circumstances in their early teaching years.

Strategies to Navigate SPED Related Situations.

Multiple accounts of SPED specific experiences were shared by the focus group participants in this study. Special education experiences vary from general education experiences in that a student(s) disability needs to be supported and respected as a teacher navigates resources and next steps to support a student. Participants one, three, four, five and six discussed the need to have time with colleagues to review problematic behaviors, concerning academic needs and navigating their school's resources (or lack of resources) to best assist their student to find success.

Collaborative time to dissect student related concerns was a driver for teacher supported success at the building level shared by participants three and five of this study. Examples of collaborative time discussed through the focus groups included time in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), professional development, and common teacher preparation time. Participant three expanded through the self-reflected journal, to include the building level special education team, building academic coaches, and Special Education district department leads.

Theme 2: Workload

Paperwork.

The participants in the study unanimously agreed that paperwork was a large portion of the job as a special education teacher. Participants three, four and five shared that they were aware of the high amount of paperwork associated with the position coming in as a beginning special education teacher. However, all five of the teachers also had variations of responses about how important they felt the paperwork was in comparison to their time spent on lesson planning, responding to general education needs and/or responding to family requests on behalf of the students they work with. Participants four, five and six shared that they have struggled to understand how to gauge the time and attention needed to put into special education paperwork to meet compliance deadlines as well as appropriately support the student.

Balance.

As previously explored, paperwork is a large portion of a special educator's role. Knowing how to balance paperwork, lesson planning, and student support was a concern for participants one, three, four and five. Their concerns surrounded the workload and not being able to meet the high demands within the workday. If their work was not able to be completed, the participants shared that they frequently stayed for multiple hours after school, brought their work home, and/or were overwhelmed and frequently would shut down. Two participants, one and six, shared that when they did bring their work home, they began to miss family events, had a lack of time to decompress and time to recharge to be ready for the next school day. This impact varied as participant six shared that when their workload (specifically paperwork) became unmanageable they quit doing the work entirely until their supervisor intervened and assisted them in a better management system. Participants five and six indicated

that school districts need to create environments and caseloads for special education teachers that are manageable for beginning special educators to find success within, so they are motivated to continue within the field of special education.

Action of Being a Special Education Teacher.

Special education teachers are tasked with various roles within their one position. Participants three, five and six shared that they were unsure of how to navigate supporting and managing paraprofessionals as it was never discussed in their undergraduate work or classes. All three of the participants shared that they observed practices of working with paraprofessionals in their undergraduate fieldwork, but they were never given explicit instruction by their building level administrators of how to navigate working with paraprofessionals. Participants one and five were actively engaged in co-teaching situations as a beginning special education teacher with little to no preparation in co-teaching strategies or methodology prior to being placed in a classroom. As previously mentioned, the participants endorsed co-teaching as a strong practice to assist in supporting special education students. However, with little to no training in the co-teaching process, participants one and five shared struggles with the concepts and action of teaching with a paired general education counterpart.

Theme 3: IEP Process

Application of Knowledge of IEP Process.

Participants three, five and six were confident in their skills and application of knowledge to the IEP process coming out of their undergraduate work. However, when they went to apply their working knowledge, the speed and accuracy of the needed paperwork and responses to student IEP related needs were noted by all three

participants to be frustrating and shocking. Participants one and four noted that they were not sure of their skills and application of knowledge to the IEP process and they really struggled their first few years as a beginning special education teacher.

Participants one and four shared that with support and guidance from their building level special education supervisors and student support team, they were able to navigate and learn new skills to effectively plan for, write and execute an IEP.

Perceptions of the Power of the IEP Process.

Participants one, four and six shared their experiences about the confusion and murkiness of the weight of the IEP process at the beginning of their experiences as special education teachers. Variations of experiences from the teachers touched upon the idea that special education is a Tier 3 intervention that will “solve all of the students' problems was overwhelming as they were the person to solve student's learning-related problems. The secondary (grades 9-12) participants were all in agreement that as beginning special educators they felt immense pressure to have the skill set to get a student to graduate and meet standards that the student does not have the skill set to navigate and find success in. Participant five humbly shared, “I felt like a fraud, going into an IEP meeting and telling the parent that I was going to be able to solve all of the student's learning related needs and close the gap.” Participant five further shared that they felt in one year of experience they were not confident in their ability to assess the skills needed to guide a student to meet high school graduation standards.

Theme 4: Curriculum

Responses to Student Needs.

As previously stated, the students in one specialized small group typically vary in skills and abilities. With those variations in mind, special education teachers need a vast amount of curriculum available to them to find appropriate materials to meet their student's needs. All six participants shared experiences of attempting various curriculums with little or no success with students. Participants one, three and five shared strategies they employed that were helpful when working in small groups with students and how to facilitate their learning to both the whole group and the individual student to progress towards mastery of a concept. Participants two and six struggled to meet students' needs consistently within the small group setting. They shared that they were only able to use worksheet packets to meet student's needs due to a lack of curriculum or guidance in how to meet multiple abilities at once in a small group setting. Participant four shared through their self-reflective journal, "I am trying to make learning engaging and stimulating as well as tie connections in for real life skills. Sometimes students are months away from graduation, they need real skills, life based skills. Not more curriculum that meets Minnesota academic standards."

Lack of Curriculum.

All six participants shared extensively about the lack of curriculum available to them at the elementary and secondary levels for students they support through special education. Variations of responses in focus groups included that the teachers were aware that they needed curriculum but they did not have access to it or specific training on the curriculum prior to using it with students. Participants one and six noted that the lack of direct training from their district on how to utilize the special education curriculum derailed their lesson plans and brought their assessments of student's ability into

question, which led to feelings of inadequacy as an educator. Participant six shared, “We had curriculum, I had no training on how to use it. I was supposed to use the curriculum, set the intervention line and chart the success of the intervention. When I brought that information to the IEP meeting, my data was inaccurate, because I didn’t collect it correctly.”

Summary

This chapter examined the findings of the research on how self-resiliency impacts beginning special education teachers. The six participants of the study provided insight into their experiences as beginning special educators through conversations in focus groups. Four of the six participants provided insight through self-reflective journaling. The participants were able to offer the factors that lead to retention, the skills needed and the support districts can give to have success within the careers of beginning special educators. The essence of the culmination of this study presented itself as the ability of a beginning special educator to recognize student-based needs and their ability to affect change for the student through supportive internal and external environments.

Each participant that was a part of this study expressed concern about the state of special education and their exhaustion with certain aspects of this specific branch of education. However, in reviewing the transcripts and self-reflective journals, this research also found that each participant expressed pride as a special educator to “go to bat” and “be the one in their corner” when supporting special education students and their families. This study uncovered the impacts that a specific set of skills surrounding the ability to advocate for special education students paired with a supportive

environment to be reflective in practice and skill set is an imperative combination for a beginning special educator to find long term success within the field of special education.

The following chapter five discussion is related to the self-resiliency factors that impact beginning special education teachers. Additionally, the researcher's interpretation of the findings, implications for recognizing the factors of self-resilience needed for beginning special educators, recommendations for school districts to support beginning special educators and further research on the topic of retention of beginning special education teachers.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Since the early 1980s, the retention of special educators in the beginning years of their careers has been studied within the United States as well as worldwide in developing countries. The researcher's interpretation of the findings, implications for recognizing the factors of self-resilience needed for beginning special educators, recommendations for school districts to support beginning special educators and further research on the topic of retention of beginning special education teachers will conclude this study.

The present study fill gaps in the literature on self-resilience skills that impact the retention of beginning special education teachers within Minnesota and to provide suggestions on how districts are able to support special education teacher retention. The concept and overall phenomenon of self-resiliency needed for retention of special educators is not a new concept to scholarship as the first documented shortage of special educators was reported in 1983 (*A Nation at Risk*). After an extensive review of academic literature, it is evident that the problem has only grown, as the field of special education has, and little has been done nationwide to further support special education teachers in their early careers. The present study aimed to shed light on the topic of self-resilience skills, which impacts retention for beginning special educators. Now that the study is completed, there are some recommendations that can be derived from this data specific to the school studied in Minnesota. Additionally, it offers the basis for future research. The study's limitations and implications will be addressed as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Results

The researcher employed a qualitative phenomenological study framework to explore the phenomenon of self-resiliency skills and how it impacts the retention rates of beginning special education teachers. This framework was chosen as there is a displayed need for qualitative studies of beginning special education teachers to study the impact self-resiliency skills have on retention within the body of knowledge.

The phenomenological design aligns to meet the qualitative research needs of this study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological design aids the researcher in reflecting upon the explicit structure of the participants' meaning of the lived experience. With the implementation of the constructivist point of view, the researcher was able to interpret the multiple realities that constitute the lived experiences among the study's participants through open-ended questioning and the ability to analyze the data for themes through phenomenological reflection. Bloomberg and Volpe (2015) expanded the definition to include that the purpose of phenomenological research is to investigate the meaning of the lived experience as well as to identify the essence of the human experience known as the phenomena. The authors went on to expand on the idea of essence that phenomenologists assume that "there is some commonality in human experience and seek to understand this commonality, or essence" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015, p. 54). Using focus groups and self-reflective journaling for this study, the researcher sought to understand the essence of the lived experience of the beginning special education teacher in the K-12 setting. The use of the phenomenological design provided the structured approach necessary

for deep understanding of the phenomenon of self-resilience skills experienced by several beginning special education teachers.

Teaching is a multidimensional profession that tests the limits of many educators throughout their careers. Research on teacher resilience has focused on what sustains teachers and enables them to thrive, rather than just to survive in the profession (Kutsyruruba et al, 2019; Mansfield, 2021). Through research by Mansfield (2021), sustaining practices that teachers identified as supportive included both contextual and ecological factors including school support, family support, behavioral management policies, professional learning, socio-emotional competence, and socioeconomic factors of student demographics. A resilient teacher can use personal characteristics and contextual elements to support their school-based challenges, to develop and achieve professional success while associating personal well-being in the process.

The researcher specifically utilized the focus group multiple category design. Authors Krueger and Casey (2019) revealed that this design allows a researcher to make comparisons between several types of participants either sequentially or simultaneously. Within the study of phenomenology, multiple researchers suggest the employment of criterion-based sampling. The use of criterion-based sampling works well when all of the individuals studied represent people who have experienced the same phenomenon, which is useful for quality assurances (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, all of the individuals chosen for this study have experienced the phenomenon addressed in the research questions suitably. Participants for the focus groups were composed utilizing homogeneity that was determined by the researcher to study the phenomenon of self-resilience.

Six participants met through two different focus groups in-person, with three participants in each session. Upon the completion of the focus group's conversations being transcribed, the researcher sent off the transcript for member checking. The researcher also sent out via Google Forms a self-reflective journal to each of the participants in the study. Upon confirmation from the participants of the accuracy of the transcripts, the focus group transcriptions were then coded for themes within the focus group responses to the research questions and sub-questions. Within the sphere of phenomenological research, as previously noted, the researcher must utilize the practice of epoche or bracketing everything else aside so the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and the question (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher employed the action of bracketing and continued with the data analysis.

The researcher continued the process of memoing, an idea from Creswell and Poth (2019), which helps the researcher identify initial codes captured from the focus group transcripts. The researcher's intent in data analysis was to find what Casey and Krueger (2015) refer to as the key concepts in the analytic framework with the objective being to identify the personal, lived experiences that are of central importance to the essence of the phenomenon of self-resilience. Using the analytic framework of key concepts, the researcher was able to discover the core ideas which illuminated the study. Multiple authors identified this process as a data spiral (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell & Poth (2019). Creswell and Poth (2019) discussed the spiral in-depth with particular attention to the forming of codes or categories, which the authors refer to as the "heart of qualitative data analysis" (p. 185). The researcher then created codes by aggregating text or visual data into small categories. This process was described as

“winnowing” in which not all data is used, but only that which is relevant is called “lean coding.” Creswell and Poth (2019) found that throughout the coding process, researchers are encouraged to look for themes and broad units of code that share a common idea. The researcher then completed winnowing data from the transcripts which were transferred into a final code list. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) referred to a coding scheme/legend by assigning codes to search by category and sub-category. Utilizing the advice of multiple authors, the researcher then created a codebook (see Appendix I) with a shortened label and a description of each code defining the boundaries of both inclusionary and exclusionary criteria to meet that code (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Casey & Krueger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2019).

The researcher completed a summary statement of reflective and recurring data patterns with five sections curated by Creswell and Poth (2019) and Moustakas (1994). First, within this summary statement, the researcher described her personal experiences with the phenomenon of self-resilience as a beginning special education teacher. Second, the researcher included a list of significant statements from participants about their lived experiences with the phenomenon of self-resilience. Third, the researcher narrowed down the textual description of the participant's experiences with self-resiliency as their experience as beginning special educators in the field. Fourth, the researcher reflected upon the structural description of the setting and context of which the context of the self-resiliency phenomenon was experienced by beginning special educators. Lastly, the researcher wrote a composite description of the phenomenon, melding both the textual and structural descriptions into the “essence”

of the experience beginning special educators encountered with the phenomenon of self-resilience while teaching in the field.

By analyzing the data for themes, using multiple approaches to examine the information, and reflecting upon the phenomena of self-resilience, the researcher was confident the emerging data yielded explicit structure and meaning to the essence of the lived experiences of beginning special educators.

Interpretation of Findings

Theoretical Frameworks

This study was shaped by three research questions:

1. What self-resiliency factors lead to the retention of beginning special educators in Minnesota?
2. What self-resiliency skills impact the success of special educators?
3. How do beginning special education teachers feel that they could be better supported by their school districts?

Through the line of questioning within the focus group, participants answered the questions for the researcher to gain insight on the lived experience of a beginning special educator and issues surrounding retention within the field of special education. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the researcher must rely on the participant's views to make sense of the findings. As each participant's viewpoint that participated in this study is unique to their personal experiences, the researcher followed Vygotsky's (1987) social constructivism paradigm. Utilizing these two frameworks, this study blends

the two concepts previously mentioned in identifying the self-resilience factors that impact retention rates for beginning special education teachers.

Resilience in teaching has been defined as the ability to adjust to situations that require adaptation and to view the situation as an opportunity to continue teaching and learning under the most adverse of conditions (Kutsyuruba et al, 2019). On the other hand, Mansfield (2021) found that resilience can be fostered amongst teachers to sustain their well-being and commitment to the profession of teaching. The difference between the ability of resilience the educator possesses and the need to foster the skills of resilience in educators was studied by Danilidou and Platsidou (2018) through the use of resilience scales noting the self-resilience skills educators possess as well as which self-resilience skills need to continue to be fostered. Danilidou and Platsidou (2018) findings led to the understanding that the self-resiliency skills one possesses and which self-resiliency skills one continues to need to grow can greatly be supported through the professional development process.

Comparison to Previous Literature & Recommendation for Action

An extensive and thorough literature review served as the foundation of this research while exploring the phenomenon of self-resilience in beginning special education teachers. Teacher retention in the field of special education has attracted attention nationwide over the past several decades due to the evolution of policy, legislation, and increasingly challenging student behaviors (Conderman et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2008). Declining teacher retention has led to difficulties establishing and maintaining high-quality services and programming for students with disabilities (Lesh et

al., 2017). Scholars have suggested the reasons for the attrition of special education staff, often citing concerns with workload volume, workload complexity, and lack of administrative support (Albrecht et al., 2009, Benjamin and Black, 2012; Cancio et al., 2018). Beginning special education teachers often do not demonstrate the skills necessary to navigate the experiences with higher job-related demands, instructional responsibilities, and increased student problems (Bettini et al., 2020) which ultimately leads to low retention rates. Understanding how self-resilience skills can impact the retention of beginning special educators, researchers have moved to examine the internal and external factors that can be conceptualized as a process to be fostered amongst teachers to sustain their professional well-being and commitment to the teaching profession (Greene et al., 2014; Mansfield, 2021). A comparison between this study and literature explored for this study, exposed several similarities and a few noted differences in both the external and internal supported environments for beginning special educators as discussed further below.

External Supported Environments

A majority of participants indicated that to continue within the field of education, they need an external environment that supports them. The concept of support may come in the form of administration/support staff, however the researcher found that the participants shared that a supportive environment typically comes in the form of support from colleagues. Colleagues are non-evaluative and the pressure of looking for support from an administrator does not always apply to the day-to-day needs a beginning special education teacher navigates. To combat the overwhelming factors that beginning special educators face, Bettini et al. (2019) suggest including collegial

support, administrative support, and curriculum support to increase pedagogical content knowledge. Colleagues provide a level of support that is able to be observed and re-created by beginning special education teachers that typically seek self-identified mentors to mirror their positive strengths after in the classroom, with students and/or with families. Van der Rijt et al. (2013) found that a majority of what people learn is learned informally on the job from the people with whom they work. The participants reported a strong success rate with a self-identified mentor through a fellow colleague that worked with the beginning special education teacher to assist them in navigating their early years in the classroom and as a part of the school community. These relationships were frequently referred to as a “lifeline” for beginning special educators. Support through district appointed mentors was discussed with little impact towards overall teacher success.

An additional external support for beginning special educators was identified as the need for appropriate curriculum available to them at the elementary and secondary levels for students they support through special education. Variations of responses included that the teachers were aware that they needed curriculum but they did not have access to it or specific training on the curriculum prior to using it with students. Respondents noted that the lack of direct training from their district on how to utilize the special education curriculum derailed their lesson plans and brought their assessments of student’s ability into question, which led to feelings of inadequacy as an educator. School districts need to not only provide teachers with varying curriculum to assist in meeting student’s unique needs, but also direct training to support teachers’ understanding and execution of the curriculum.

Study participants shared that they were confident in their skills and application of knowledge to the IEP process coming out of their undergraduate work. However, when they went to apply their working knowledge, the speed and accuracy of the needed paperwork and responses to student IEP related needs were noted by all four participants to be frustrating and shocking. With support and guidance from their building level special education supervisors and student support team, they were able to navigate and learn new skills to effectively plan for, write and execute an IEP. School districts need to be mindful that beginning special educators will need specialized instruction and attention to the IEP process to ensure they are meeting state guidelines and timeframes.

Paperwork was noted as a large portion of the job as a special education teacher. The participants shared that they were aware of the high amount of paperwork associated with the position coming in as a beginning special education teacher. Multiple participants shared that they have struggled to understand how to gauge the time and attention needed to put into special education paperwork to meet compliance deadlines as well as appropriately support the student. Being aware of the type of support beginning special education teachers require surrounding the vast amount of paperwork required of their position is advantageous for school districts to explore. Assisting with organization, support of due process and compliance factors will further the beginning special educator's understanding and supportive environment of learning in their early career.

Internal Supported Environments

Participants in the study expressed the need for strong internal supported environments to engage in reflective practices that they were experiencing as a beginning special education teacher. The first reflective practice that beginning special educators identified as a key towards retention included self-care practice. Several self-care practices were included by participants as actions they have utilized, however a few key self-care practices were expressed as frequent habits. Beginning special educators who were interviewed shared that journaling, reading, giving themselves “time” and going to movies/events outside of their typical routine assisted in positive self-care routines that they were able to sustain for healthy reflective practices. Several participants spoke to the truth that special education teaching is difficult to navigate and fully process what occurs in school on a particular day and what to do next as a teacher. Schools need to assist with offering self-care strategies for beginning special educators to process their emotions, express fatigue and frequent self-doubt to relax, recharge and be ready to be an effective educator.

The reflective practice of decompression was a key element identified in the ability towards retention of beginning special educators. Decompression tactics were very similar between the participants and five of the participants expressed that they relied on their colleagues to engage in conversations to help them decompress. Participants shared that the action of verbally processing their day with fellow colleagues led to feelings of decompression and alleviated their stress levels through this frequent routine. The action of decompression also was a pivotal point for many participants as an action step towards problem solving a concern or situation he/she was experiencing with a fellow colleague who may or may not have gone through a

similar situation. Schools can support opportunities for a beginning special educator to decompress either daily or multiple times per week which are imperative step towards reflecting on his/her practice as a teacher and processing his/her next steps needed to find success as an educator and for his/her students.

Study participants shared that the ability to self-advocate for themselves in a non-judgmental, non-evaluative environment was a critical step towards realized success in their experiences as a beginning special educator. The self-awareness of what the beginning special educator needed was then able to be turned into actionable items that they were able to self-advocate for their needs. Researchers Gijsselaers et al. (2013) and van der Rijt et al. (2013) took a different approach to teachers that are faced with mounting demands and suggested the use of employees utilizing help-seeking behaviors. Help-seeking for a beginning special educator is defined through a sequence of decisions and actions that recognize there is a lack of understanding, target an area of need, request help, and process the help with the possibility of success (Gijsselaers et al., 2013; van der Rijt et al., 2013). When the demands and resources are in balance and leaders have created a climate for help-seeking advice, special educators will be able to feel more motivated by their job and thus likely increase their possibility of success and intention to stay.

Multiple beginning special educators attributed their abilities for self-advocating to have their professional needs met as deep sources of success for themselves. School districts need to create spaces or platforms beginning special educators who are able to self-advocate for themselves which leads to teacher success and subsequently student success.

The study's participants did consider upon the needed reflection of support that was required from their administration to be present and active in their beginning years as a special education teacher. Support from administrators was viewed by several participants as "actively trying" to solve a problem or deal with a situation versus passively acknowledging a situation. Support from administrators also was viewed as being physically present within the hallways, at meetings and assisting the beginning special education teachers through difficult conversations/events with students, General Education staff and families.

Implications for Theory and Practice

A better understanding of what self-resiliency factors implemented through practice and experiences towards the retention of beginning special education teachers is crucial to maintain a healthy workforce as well as a system for academic delivery for public school's most vulnerable students. Currently, the researcher is working in a public school with beginning special educators in a mid-sized Minnesota school district daily. Understanding the lived experiences of beginning special educators through the lens of what self-resilience skills are needed towards retention has been a personal catapult for change and implementation of programming for the researcher. Coupled with the researcher's district of employment, the researcher has examined the current practices the special education department has in place for mentorship and support of beginning special educators. The researcher has embedded themselves in a statewide movement through the CEEDAR Project to bring common practices of mentorship and support to beginning special educators throughout Minnesota. This study has had an immense impact on the researcher through embedded practices with beginning special

educators that could be generalized into procedural systems benefiting the special education department as a whole for years to come. The mission of the CEEDAR Project is to create aligned professional learning systems that provide teachers and leaders effective opportunities to learn how to improve and support core and specialized instruction in inclusive settings that enable students with disabilities to achieve college and career readiness standards early within beginning special educators careers. The researcher strongly believes that coupled with the knowledge of existing literature, the findings of this study can offer insight into actionable practices that would complement the mission of the CEEDAR Project within school districts throughout Minnesota.

This study offers a small insight into factors of retention for beginning special education teachers, the study did uncover multiple strong and significant parallelisms among the themes uncovered during data analysis. This researcher believes that the overload of work and new professional encounters are overwhelming experiences for beginning special education teachers which leads to exhaustion and eventually attrition. In Table One, Table Two, Table Three, and Table Four, themes were related to the overall topics of factors that impacted the self-resiliency of beginning special education teachers confirmed through supporting statements. In Table Five below, the researcher isolated individual collective comments on the causes, cures, and susceptibility of the phenomenon studied.

Table 5: Participant Belief of Cause, Susceptibility, and Cure of Retention of Beginning Special Education Teachers

Participant	Cause(s)	Susceptibility	Cure(s)
1	Lack of feeling connected to program	New teachers, frequent change in programming,	Building level mentor programs, common

	or supported by colleagues	physically “siloed” from other SPED teachers	teacher prep, common SPED teaching areas Administration support to lessen change
2	Overwhelm of workload	Not sure how to gauge where to start and what to do	Building level mentor program, minimize case load, academic support
3	Unrealistic expectations	Taking on large projects, feeling frequently overwhelmed, decrease self-doubt and self-esteem	Administration frequent check-ins, building level mentor
4	Poor Administration and School Culture Environment	Concern about actions affecting job performance, concerns about the level of support for professional decisions	District level Admin check-in, district level mentor program
5	Lack of Support and Demands of Position	Overwhelmed, frequently self-doubting, unsure of who to turn to for support or counsel	Building level mentor program, frequent check-in from Admin
6	Failure of Balance between life and work	Relationships suffering, taking on multiple projects, struggling to “leave work” at Work	Building level mentor program, specific PD on balance between school and work for new teachers

In reflecting upon the impacting factors of retention of beginning special education teachers in Chapter Two, the reviewed literature found that identifying both external and internal factors are two key indicators of retention assistance. While the causes of the concerns regarding retention of beginning special educators varies, the cures are similar between many of the causes.

Frequent communication from administrators and check-ins with building level mentors were cited as the most effective sources towards retention of beginning special educators. Mansfield (2021) shared, “Teacher wellbeing is not just an individual’s responsibility, but it is a shared organisational (*sic*) community and worldwide concern” (p. 176). When beginning special educators are overwhelmed with the multiple facets

of need that their beginning experiences bring them, high levels of stress and unease will follow. The participants of this study shared multiple examples of stressful situations, times of uncertainty and experiences that helped guide them.

Providing early career, explicit training and mentoring to special educators will provide them with the tools and feedback needed in their early career to navigate difficult situations that arise out of a lack of experience. History has shown us (Belknap & Taymans, 2015; Billingsley et al., 2004), that if beginning special educators do not have effective interventions, exhaustion and feelings of being overwhelmed leads to attrition. The key indicator is to ensure that beginning special education teachers have access to develop resilience skills by understanding the complexities of their profession, working with experts to listen carefully to each other, and supporting gaps in understanding or in practice (Southwick et al, 2014). By enhancing beginning special education teachers' strategies for resilience, there may be a greater potential for this vulnerable group of educators to adapt to change, weather adversity, and foster overall resilience to promote healthy schools, healthy families, and community environments for students with disabilities.

Identifying specific professional development needs for beginning special educators will slightly vary with each annual hiring cycle. Administrators will find success when they focus on the basics of what Dolbier et al. (2010) described as self-resilience interventions as enhancements of personal and social resources to identify protective external and internal factors and decrease adjustment problems to promote positive change when coping with stressful situations. In addition, Mansfield (2021) found educational leaders have the opportunities to develop teacher resilience by

providing professional development in the personal areas of emotional competence, empathy, and self-belief. Educational leaders can take the learning one step further and include what Mansfield (2021) referred to as the ecological or contextual influences for a special educator including positive school culture, teacher involvement in decision making, positive relationships with administration, and mentoring relationships with colleagues. Focusing on these strategies and skill building activities will greatly improve teacher's self-resilience and likelihood of retention in the field of special education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Understanding the factors of self-resiliency that are necessary for the retention of beginning special educators can assist educational leaders in retaining and supporting special educators and potentially lessen special educator burnout and reduce teacher attrition (Mrstik et al., 2019). The key indicator is to ensure that beginning special education teachers have access to develop resilience skills by understanding the complexities of their profession, working with experts to listen carefully to each other, and supporting gaps in understanding or in practice (Southwick et al, 2014). This study strived to enhance knowledge of the strategies that beginning special education teachers may utilize to adapt to change, weather adversity, and foster overall resilience to promote healthy schools, healthy families, and community environments for students with disabilities.

Uncovering further self-resiliency factors leading to retention for beginning special educators is a phenomenon that will only continue to impact the education community positively. If further research were to be conducted, this researcher would

recommend that the research would include a larger group of participants from various school districts. This study was limited to the sample population taken from the same school district with similar experiences from the staff. Widening the lens of experience to include various school districts and methods of supporting beginning special educators would lead to a deeper understanding of strategies that are useful for school administrators.

This study could also be replicated with a similar population of other educational professionals, paraprofessionals, student support specialists in education (psychologists, speech language pathologists, school social workers) using a similar construct and conceptual framework to this study. Within schools, administrators have an opportunity to review their practices of onboarding new teachers. Scholarly intrigue may continue in this area of study including adjusting the methodology to examine the perceptions and experiences of individuals who do not identify as highly resilient and determine additional barriers to facilitate retention and job satisfaction.

Limitations

This study contained certain limiting conditions, one of which is related to the generalizability of the study and one of which is inherent to the study's selected research design. The first limitation included the transferability of the lived experiences the beginning special educators shared to aid in the understanding of the phenomenon of self-resilience skills necessary for success for the specific group of teachers. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described the process of transferability as the ability to apply findings in similar contexts or settings. The experiences of the beginning special

educators, although similar, being from the same school district and teaching a population of students within the same community, may pose a limitation when transferring the participant's applied practice of self-resilient skills necessary for success within their particular special education domain.

The second noted limitation included that the interviewee may have had a difficult time adjusting to the role of being interviewed by the interviewer, even though they stated their hesitations and/or comfort level for participating in the study before engaging as a participant. Due to most participants knowing the researcher prior to the study, their responses may have been influenced or affected by this previous relationship. Alternately, due to the familiar relationship with the interviewer, the participants in the study may have been more guarded in their responses and less forthcoming with their lived experiences.

Sensitive to these limitations, the researcher took the following precautions. First, the research acknowledged what Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to as structural corroboration in which the researcher used multiple types of data to support or contradict the interpretation of results which breeds credibility to feel confident about the researcher's observations, interpretations, and conclusions. In addition, the researcher made a deliberate attempt to create a space within the focus groups that were conducive to honest and open dialogue between participants.

The use of phenomenology within this study presents a specific experience unique to beginning special educators who have been in the field for zero to five years utilizing self-resilient skills that impact their retention or attrition within the field of special

education. Consequently, the results of this study are not able to be generalized to general educators. However, this study could be replicated with the following population of educators with ease: undergraduate special education teachers, general education teachers, paraeducators, and/or related service providers in special education (i.e., Occupational Therapists, Speech-Language Pathologists, etc). Due to the research involving a small number of special educators in a mid-urban setting, the findings from the research may not be generalizable to special educators across the state of Minnesota or across school districts within the United States.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the factors that impact beginning special educator's self-resiliency factors towards retention. This study attempted to answer three research questions regarding beginning special education teacher self-resiliency by collecting data through focus groups with six participants through open ended questioning and self-reflected journals from the participants. The open-ended questioning and self-reflected journals supported the research questions findings through two comprehensive themes, supported internal and external environments. These themes emerged as reasons that beginning special educators have chosen to stay in the field of special education in Minnesota.

Focus groups and self-reflective journaling offered an opportunity to collect data on self-resilience factors that impact retention, the data analysis resulted in two overall themes reflective of the three guiding research questions. The first theme included the external environmental support which reflected through: student advocacy, supported environment, undergraduate preparation for students, support of student's behaviors,

supporting multi-abilities classrooms, concerns about student's self-perception being in special education, strategies to navigate SPED related situations, paperwork, action of being a special education teacher, application of knowledge of the IEP process, perceptions of the power of the IEP process, responses to student needs, and lack of curriculum. The second theme included the internal support which reflect through: self-care, decompression, self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-identified mentors, feeling a part of the school community, and balance between school life and home life. To work towards retention, the essence of this study found that the beginning special educators must have the ability to recognize student based needs and recognize their ability as an educator to affect change through supported internal and external environments.

The attrition of special educators should be of paramount concern to those within education. These above conclusions are critical areas of support and should be recognized as a call to action within Higher Education and district/building level administration. Through intentional and explicit support, beginning special educator retention could be controlled for and cured.

The researcher encourages building and district level administrators to notice and comment on the impact that beginning special educators make on student, building, district and community levels of academic and social progress. The researcher urges those working with beginning special educators to take notice and encourage the positive connections workplace environments offer to beginning special educators as they will need them to traverse through their ever challenging, ever changing experiences as an educator. Remember to all who support beginning special educators to give emotional, reflective, and guided support needed to navigate the complex roles

for the demanding job as a special education teacher. Beginning special educators are worthy of celebration, gratefulness and rich support as they are the foundation for our most vulnerable learners in education.

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Appendix A. IRB Approval Letter

Institutional Review Board



DATE: August 26, 2022

TO: Andrew Burklund, EdD, Principal Investigator

FROM: Dr. Robert Nava, Chair
Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB

ACTION: APPROVED PROJECT TITLE: [1793629-2] Self Resiliency Skills of
Beginning Special Education Teachers

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

APPROVAL DATE: August 23, 2022

EXPIRATION DATE:

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB.

This project has been determined to be a project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of .

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the Minnesota State University Moorhead IRB. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Minnesota State University Moorhead's records.

Appendix B. Recruitment Email

Subject Line: Special Education Teacher Focus Group

Body Copy:

Good afternoon,

My name is Kjersten Skatvold and I am conducting a doctoral study focusing on the impact that self-resilience skills have on beginning special education teachers. My goal of this study is to explore the lived experiences of beginning special educators in their first three years of teaching to identify areas of needed support towards retention to potentially reduce the risk of special educators leaving the field of education. .

Would you like to help? To see if you are eligible, please read the requirements below.

Why You Should Participate:

You may experience an improvement in the understanding of the field of special education.

You will be provided a detailed transcript of the focus group conversation that could be helpful in analyzing your self-resilience skills of yourself and ideas from others.

You will be helping to advance educational research in the field of special education.

Who Can Participate?

Men and women with a valid Minnesota Special Education Teaching license

Men and women who have been teaching Special Education with 0-3 years of experience

Men and women that teach in the K-12 public school system

If you fit these requirements and are interested in helping, sign up for the study by clicking the link here. Please let me know if you have any questions I could answer. Thank you for helping to improve the understanding of the lived experience of a special education teacher in 2022.

Best,

Kjersten Skatvold

MSUM Doctoral Student

Appendix C. Interview Consent Form



Institutional Review Board

Please read this consent agreement carefully before agreeing to participate in this study.

Title of Study: Self-Resiliency Factors of Beginning Special Education K-12 Teachers

Purpose of the study: To study the phenomenon of self-resiliency of Special Educators in the beginning/early stages of their professional careers.

What you will do in this study: I am formally requesting to solicit a range of beginning Special Education teachers with 0-5 years of experience, employed by Moorhead Area Public Schools (MAPS) for 1-hour focus groups held in the Fall of 2022. My intentions are to line up participants that are eligible to meet the criteria (Special Educators with 0-5 years of classroom experience) for the study by inquiring about interest in participation through a Google Form questionnaire/email with participant names gathered from MAPS Special Education 2022-2023 Staff Roster. Upon gathering expressed interest in participating in the study, the researcher will arrange participants into small focus groups (between 3-5 members per group). The groups will meet once between October and November 2022 for one hour of time outside of the contracted school day. The focus groups will meet on school grounds. The non-standardized questions are attached.

Time required: Per Participant:
1 hour to participate in the fall semester 2022 focus group

Risks: There are limited risks to this study. The only inherent risk may be public disclosure of personal opinions and/or experiences.

Benefits: The practical implications for participants include a stronger understanding of beginning Special Educators needs to be supported in the classroom with teachers, working alongside General Education staff with students, supervising paraprofessionals,

and/or support with case management of Special Education students. A greater sense of understanding will be brought to light for beginning Special Educators in working with challenges or realized strengths that may be specific to a grade level/building level in regards to Special Educators serving students within that grade level/building. This understanding will assist in growing capacity in that specific area and/or celebrating the achievements of beginning Special Educators.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality will be maintained by assigning a number to participants in the study. The participant list and all data will be stored in a locked file cabinet that only the researcher has access to. The data from the research will be destroyed three years post-study.

Risks: There are no known risks by participating in this study.

If you have questions or wish to withdraw from this study, please contact one of the following:

Principal Investigator: Dr. Andrew Burklund, 320.224.7174,
andrew.burklund@mnstate.edu Department of Leadership & Learning
 Co-Investigator: Kjersten Skatvold, 701.261.3641,
kjersten.skatvold@mnstate.edu

Whom to contact about your rights in this study:

Dr. Andrew Burklund andrew.burklund@mnstate.edu, 320.224.7174, Department of Leadership & Learning, or else you may contact Dr. Yamaya Sosa Machado, Chair of MSUM Institutional Research Board, at irb@mnstate.edu, or 218-477-2699.

Agreement:

The purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time and my withdrawal will not affect any future relationship with Kjersten Skatvold.

In signing this agreement, I also affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name (print):

Appendix D. Follow-Up Recruitment Email

Subject Line: Special Education Teacher Focus Group

Body Copy:

Good afternoon,

My name is Kjersten Skatvold and I am conducting a doctoral study focusing on the impact that self-resilience skills have on beginning special education teachers. My goal of this study is to explore the lived experiences of beginning special educators in their first five years of teaching to identify areas of needed support towards retention to potentially reduce the risk of special educators leaving the field of education. .

Would you like to help? To see if you are eligible, please read the requirements below.

Why You Should Participate:

You may experience an improvement in the understanding of the field of special education.

You will be provided a detailed transcript of the focus group conversation that could be helpful in analyzing your self-resilience skills of yourself and ideas from others.

You will be helping to advance educational research in the field of special education.

Who Can Participate?

Men and women with a valid Minnesota Special Education Teaching license

Men and women who have been teaching Special Education with 0-5 years of experience

Men and women that teach in the K-12 public school system

If you fit these requirements and are interested in helping, sign up for the study by clicking the link here. Please let me know if you have any questions I could answer. Thank you for helping to improve the understanding of the lived experience of a special education teacher in 2022.

Best,

Kjersten Skatvold

MSUM Doctoral Student

Appendix E. Study Participant Email

[DATE]

[Name of Participant],

Thank you for agreeing to join me for a conversation through a focus group format about the lived experiences of beginning special education teachers. The outcome of the focus group is to gain a better understanding of the self-resilience skills special educators rely on in their daily practices. The group will be held:

Monday, October 24, 2022
From 4:30pm to 5:30pm
Moorhead Senior High School

The group that you will be meeting with is a small group with three other participants. We will have light snacks and beverages. It should be a nice time to get together with other beginning special educators and learn from each other's lived experiences in the field of special education.

If for some reason you are not able to join us, please call as soon as possible so I can invite another special educator. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 218-284-2457.

I am looking forward to meeting you next Monday after school at Moorhead Senior High School. See you then.

Sincerely,

Kjersten Skatvold
MSUM Doctoral Student

Appendix F. Self-Reflective Journal
[DATE]

[Name of Participant],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study regarding self-resilience skills that impact beginning special educators. Your viewpoints and sharing of your lived experience through participating in self-reflective journaling will assist the researcher of the study with a more well-rounded picture of your personal viewpoint.

To complete the Google Form self-reflected journal, please set aside approximately thirty minutes of time. After you have completed the self-reflective journal, please submit the journal via Google Forms. Your self-reflective journal will be shared only with the researcher of this study through a password-protected Google-based program. The information that you share will be used for data analysis with a participant number assigned to you so your identity will be kept confidential.

Please review the following questions below that are included in the self-reflective journal. For this exercise, the researcher is requesting that each question is answered with a minimum of four sentences to gain an understanding of your lived experiences as a beginning special educator in 2022.

- What am I doing and why?
- How can I better meet my students' needs?
- What options are available?
- How can I encourage more involvement or learning on the part of the students?
- Have I considered my own values as a professional and my comfort level in acting on those values?
- What conscious choice can I make to make a difference?

Please complete this self-reflective journal and submit it via Google Forms by Sunday, November 13, 2022 or at your earliest convenience. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 218-284-2457.

I appreciate your insight and participation in this self-reflective journal for research on self-resilience skills that impact special education teachers.

Sincerely,
Kjersten Skatvold
MSUM Doctoral Student

Appendix G. Interview Protocol

Opening	1. Tell us your name, and how long you have been working as a special education teacher.
Introduction	2. What experiences led you to choose to become a special education teacher?
Transition	3. Think back to when you first were hired as a special education teacher. What were your first impressions after being in the field of special education?
Key	4. What makes you most proud to be a special education teacher? 5. What challenges you most about being a special education teacher? 6. What are some strategies you use when you are feeling challenged or overwhelmed? 7. What supports are useful to you, within the school, that you access when you are feeling challenged or overwhelmed?
Ending	8. Thinking long-term, what is it that will keep you committed to the field of Special Education?

Appendix H. Member Checking Email

Subject Line: Focus Group Transcript Check

Body Copy:

Thank you for participating in the beginning special educators focus group on October 24, 2022. Your insight and feedback to the researcher's line of questioning were much appreciated and have greatly assisted in meeting the study's goal of understanding the lived experience of a special education teacher in 2022.

Attached you will find the transcribed conversation from our focus group session on October 24, 2022. At your convenience, will you please review the transcript for accuracy? If you have any questions, concerns, or areas of conflict with what was transcribed by the researcher, please notify her at 218-284-2457 by November 13, 2022. If you approve of this transcription of the conversation on October 24, 2022, please email or call the researcher at 218-284-2457 by November 13, 2022, with your approval.

Sincerely,

Kjersten Skatvold
MSUM Doctoral Student

Appendix I. Codebook

Code Name	Shortened Label/Frequency	Description of the code with defining boundaries	Inclusionary Criteria	Exclusionary Criteria
Colleagues	CL (13)	Fellow people one works with at their place of employment	General Ed. Teachers, SPED Teachers, Paraprofessionals	Administrators, Undergraduate Peers, Undergraduate Professors
Administration	AD (7)	District and building level leadership team	Principal, Assistant Principal, Director of SPED, Assistant Director of SPED	Teachers, Paraprofessionals, Counselors, School Psychologists, Social Workers
Self-Care	SC (9)	Processes that one takes action on to de-stress and re-regulate one's stress level to become manageable to complete his/her desired tasks	activities one engages in for pleasure, practices one engages on a typical/regular basis in response to stress	one time action
Curriculum	CM (15)	scope and sequenced lessons that teachers present to students to learn a new concept/reinforce learning of a topic	Math Curriculum, Reading Curriculum, Science, Social Studies, Social/Emotional Learning,	one time activities

			Functional Curriculum	
Undergraduate Work	UGW (10)	work or experiences completed by a college student during his/her enrolled college experience	field work experiences, student teaching, undergraduate field observations, methodology coursework, pedagogical coursework	work accomplished as an employee of a school district while on a teaching contract
IEP Process	IEP (19)	writing or executing the actions of the Individual Education Plan created specifically for the student's needs	IEP, Evaluations, Child Study Meetings	504 Plan
Personal Experiences	PE (39)	situations one has either passive or direct involvement in	within the school setting, within his/her field experiences as an undergraduate teacher, within his/her time as an active teacher	an experience of another teacher/colleague the participant knows, an experience that does not have a direct link/tie to his/her job as a SPED teacher

Friends/Family	FF (5)	people/persons that a beginning SPED teacher identifies as his/her support network in their beginning years of teaching	supportive persons, reliable persons	colleagues, Administrators
District Mentor	MT (6)	identified person the school district has paired with a beginning SPED teacher with in his/her early years of their career	District Mentor	Mentor Teacher
Support Staff	SS (4)	staff located at the building level that support students and staff with various social/emotional needs	Counselors, Social Workers, School Psychologists	Administrators, Teachers, Paraprofessionals
Self-Identified Mentor	SIM (2)	identified person by a beginning SPED teacher that was found to be helpful and inspirational to the beginning SPED teacher	Teacher, Co-Teacher, Mentor Teacher	District Mentor, Administrator, Paraprofessional, Support Staff

Professional Development	PD (4)	action taken either by a teacher or by a district to further one's education/understanding of a concept/topic through professional development training	Professional Training by a professional in the field	Reading a Book, Social Media
Graduate Work	GW (3)	work completed in a post-college program towards a Master's Degree	Master's level courses	Professional Development
Co-Teaching	CO (5)	action of teaching a class with two instructors--SPED and Gen. Ed--supporting SPED students learning outside of the SPED classroom	Co-Teaching classes General Education courses	Co-teaching SPED courses
School Culture	SCU (7)	ability for reciprocal conversations, desire to assist others, degree of "openness" in your school culture to new ideas and persons	availability for questions, willingness to help out, willingness to have a conversation, willingness to accept a new teacher that is learning	meetings

Student Behaviors	SB (14)	both external and internal behaviors students exhibit at school	physical behaviors, verbal behaviors, observational behaviors either tied or not tied to their disability	adult led conversations or presumptions of students behavior stemming from student's disability category
Family/Guardian of Students	PS (5)	people/persons responsible for the student outside of their school day	parent(s), guardians, aunt, uncles, GAL	favorite teachers, social workers, parole officers, counselors
Work Load	WL (21)	work of a SPED teacher	paperwork, student grading, check in with General Education teachers, check in with other SPED providers, modifications, observations, check in with outside agencies, lesson planning	same for every teacher, given same weight by each teacher or district or building level administrator
Student Relationships	SR (12)	relationship a teacher has with a student, either positive or negative	verbal conversations, built over time, built to support	transactional

Vulnerability	VL (20)	ability for a teacher to share his or her experiences (either positive or negative) with another person	conversations, sharing negative events, sharing positive events, share what was learned by another	calling someone out on an event that happened to them
Professional Strategies	PR (13)	strategies used by teachers to gain professional experiences or to navigate a professional experience	conversations, strategies to utilize resources, plan of action a SPED teacher uses in their daily life at work	a non-actionable move
Reflective Practices	RP (27)	time a SPED teacher takes to ponder his/her next actionable step	through conversation with others, through an actionable plan/to do item	meditation, yoga
Student Ability	SA (15)	skill base of a SPED student	reading, math, or writing ability of student; cognitive ability; social/emotional capacity of a student; physical ability capacity of a student	same for any student; given boundaries by his/her disability category

