

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' RESILIENCY TO REMAIN IN THE FIELD OF  
SPECIAL EDUCATION

By  
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of the Requirements for  
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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to family. First, to my grandparents, Calvin and Catherine Bruton, who both taught me so many things about how to live life. I would not be the person I am today without their love and influence.

And to my sweet family, Regan, Hannah and Campbell, for standing by me through the entire process of writing the dissertation. I know that this process was not easy for each of you, but you all hung in there with me. You helped encourage me when I thought I might not make it. I love you, forever!

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## ABSTRACT

The field of education has endured a significant shortage of qualified teachers for several decades (Prather-Jones, 2011). Over the past 20 years, across the U.S, a shortage in special education teachers has existed (Major, 2012; Prather-Jones, 2011). Special education teachers left the field of education at a greater rate than regular education teachers (Major, 2012). In order to ensure students with disabilities received appropriate educational instruction, it was important to retain special education teachers who were knowledgeable educators in the field of special education. This research focused on gaining a better understanding of special education teacher resiliency of special education teachers who stayed in the field of special education for seven years or longer. To answer the research questions, the researcher utilized a qualitative study using a narrative inquiry grounded theory approach. Participants were from one public school district in West Georgia. The participants were required to meet a set of criteria in order to participate. Having identified the participants and gained consent (see Appendix G), the researcher distributed demographic questionnaires (see Appendix B), conducted a focus group, and individual interviews with participants. The resulting data were analyzed using a constant comparative process utilizing codes of themes that emerged from the participants' narrative responses. The findings resulted in all teachers having perceptions of resiliency which contributed to their long term commitment to continue in the teaching profession as a special educator. The teachers also provided explanations for remaining in special education as their commitment to their students, positive administrator interaction and their own resiliency.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the objective of public education was to provide all students, including students with disabilities, educational opportunities which led to a quality education and academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In order to provide a quality education to all students, sufficient numbers of qualified teachers must have been available to teach. Unfortunately, in the U.S., many school districts have been incapable of amassing prepared teachers necessary to teach in all fields of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The field of education has endured a significant shortage of qualified teachers for several decades (Prather-Jones, 2011). Specifically over the past 20 years, across the nation, a shortage in special education teachers has existed (Major, 2012; Prather-Jones, 2011). Special education teachers left the field of education at a greater rate than regular education teachers (Major, 2012). Because of an increase in students with disabilities enrolled in school, increased numbers of identified students with disabilities, and higher rates of teacher attrition, the need for special education teachers continued to be exacerbated (Prather-Jones, 2011). The shortage of teachers in the special education field were higher than any other area of certification with special education teachers leaving the field of education at a greater rate than any other field (Major, 2012; Prather-Jones, 2011).

### Statement of the Problem

Because of the significant shortage of highly qualified special education teachers, school districts across the United States experienced greater difficulty in employing special education teachers who were considered qualified to teach students with

disabilities. High rates of attrition and shortages within the field of special education accounted for a gap in research in the area of teacher retention. In order to ensure students with disabilities received appropriate educational instruction, it was important to retain special education teachers who were knowledgeable educators in the field of special education. Special education teachers left the field of special education within three years of becoming a teacher, either for a different content area within education or for other employment outside of the field of education. Variables causing special education teachers to leave the field included teacher characteristics related to demographics, such as age, gender and race, personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environments and affective responses to work. Special education teachers who reported the desire to leave the field, reported causes for leaving were related to working conditions, unsupportive administration, and a lack of training as well as a reported overabundance of paperwork. Likewise, teachers who remained in the field of education for the duration of their teaching careers voiced reasons for remaining in the field such as the desire to help others, job satisfaction and the sense of accomplishment experienced by assisting a child with a disability to learn.

While numerous studies have been conducted related to the reasons for leaving the field of education from both regular and special education teachers, few researchers have conducted qualitative research related to the personal lived experiences and personal perceptions of special education teachers' resiliency to remain committed to teaching children with disabilities for long term. The researcher became interested in investigating the experiences of individual special education teachers and how these special education teachers remained resilient and continued to teach in an area of education which had a

greater attrition rate than any other field of education because of several reasons. The first was because, as a special education teacher having taught in the field of special education for nine years, and having also previously taught regular education classes, the researcher received such personal satisfaction from teaching children with disabilities, that very little consideration towards leaving the field of special education was ever given, despite the challenges which it presented daily. For this researcher, the rewards of being a special educator far outweighed the difficulties. Although the researcher's personal experience as a special education teacher has been typical of that described in the current literature; lacking administrative support, having a heavy student caseload and limited resources, personal satisfaction was greater in the possible positive impact likely made in the life of a child, so much so that leaving the field was not a viable option.

Often this researcher was asked about the teaching profession and told, "Oh, you must be a special person", or "I could never do that. You must have a lot of patience." On one occasion as an educator, this researcher received the response of, "You are a real angel for working with children like that." While the literature provided numerous reasons for special education teachers leaving the field of education, it did not provide a deep, undiluted understanding of the personal experiences and perceptions of teachers who remained resilient and committed to teaching children with disability for a long duration. Personally this researcher hoped to gain a better understanding of special education teacher resiliency by conducting a narrative inquiry of special education teachers who stayed in the field of special education for seven years or longer.

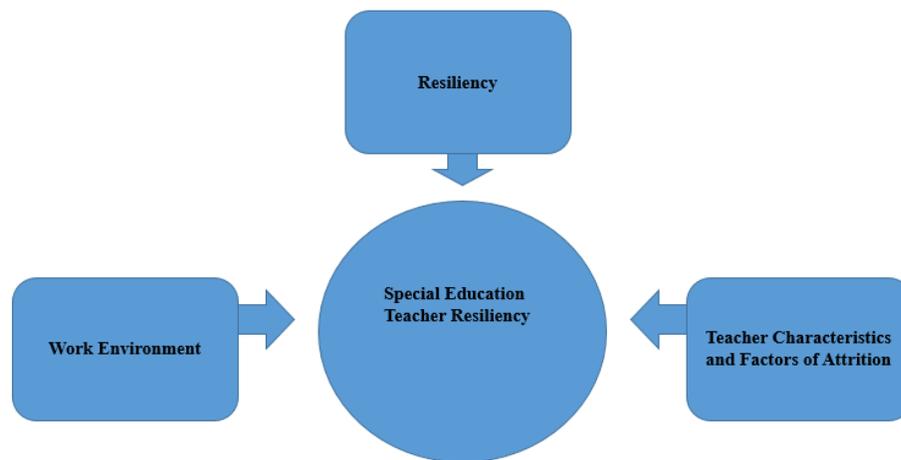
## Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice?
2. What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education?
3. How did special education teachers describe their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term?

## Conceptual Framework

In Figure 1 (below) this researcher has illustrated the major themes for the research study. For the purpose of this study, the outlined figure suggested the individual teacher's resiliency, characteristics and factors of attrition and work factors likely impacted special education teachers' resilience to remain in the field of special education for seven years or longer. Therefore, the researcher sought to answer what explanations special education teachers provided for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice? What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education? And how did special education teachers who have remained in the field long term describe their personal experiences about being a special educator?



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework

For the purpose of this study, the researcher examined the teacher resiliency of special education teachers who stayed in the field of special education for seven years or longer through the lens of theories of resiliency. The researcher chose to examine teachers who had worked as special educator for seven years or longer because of research stating teachers were likely to leave the profession three to five years after becoming a teacher (Major, 2012; Prather-Jones, 2011). Additionally, the researcher found most available research defined a long-term teaching career as 10 years. The researcher believed by looking at teachers who had taught for seven years versus 10, better defined long term since seven years was almost twice the national average for remaining in the field. Because of crucial changes which took place in the structure of the American workplace during the 1980- 90's, conventional means of developing one's career needed to advance. Professional career advisors discussed new ideas and terms; new terms such as career self-reliance and career resilience, which were derived directly

from London's Career Motivation Theory (CMT) (Collard, Epperheimer, and Saign, 1996).

Initially developed in the 1970's in response to research which looked to find possible motivators of managers seeking leadership positions, London's Career Motivation Theory sought to examine the different variables that constructed the career motivations of individuals (London & Noe, 1997). London suggested the motivations of individuals were also related to individuals' behaviors as well as influenced by various conditions which occurred in different situations (London & Noe, 1997). By studying the relationships which occurred throughout the various situations and career motivating variables, London was instrumental in formulating the standard which endorsed and aided in career motivation (London & Noe, 1997).

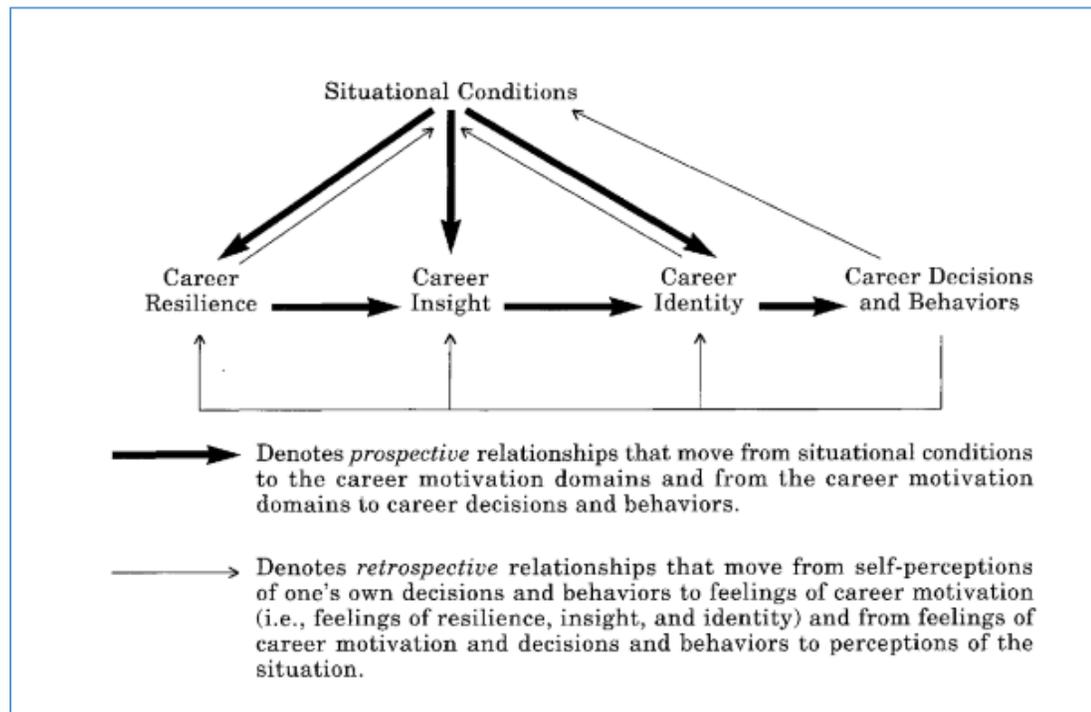


Figure 2: London's model of career motivation

The Career Motivation Theory suggested by London, was constructed with three major domains: 1.) Career insight 2.) Career identity and 3.) Career resilience (London & Noe, 1997). According to London, career insight was defined as the ability to establish realistic, clear career goals and having identified one's personal strengths and weaknesses (London & Noe, 1997). Career identity was defined as to what degree an individual was defined by their work as well as the individual's needs to advance within their career, be recognized within their field and hold a leadership role (London & Noe, 1997). Finally, career resilience was defined as having the skill to conform to situations which are ever-changing, despite the situation being challenging or demanding (London & Noe, 1997).

Of the three themes which evolved from London's Career Motivation Theory, the researcher of this study aimed to investigate the theme of career resilience as it associated to the long term career choice of special education teachers who remain in the field for seven years or longer. Similar to flexibility as described in the Theory of Work Adjustment, resilience was based on the conformity among an individual's competence and the demands of the job along with the conformity between one's needs and available reinforcers within the environment (London & Noe, 1997). Career resilient workers were defined as employees who were driven to continually learn, but also, in order to keep up with the ever-changing demands of their jobs, attempted to reinvent themselves, take ownership in their own careers all while having a desire to see the organization they work for succeed (London & Noe, 1997). Career resiliency was defined as having the ability to develop in one's self the lifelong process of career development despite a continually changing and tumultuous career world (Collard, Epperheimer, and Saign, 1996). In its 1996 report, *Career Resilience in a Changing Workplace*, conducted by the Office of

Education Research and Improvement Career Action Center, authors Collard, Epperheimer and Saign, compared career resilience to London and Moore's Theory of Career Motivation developed in 1987, which was defined as, "the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, even when the circumstances are discouraging or disruptive" (p.36). Resiliency was defined as "patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk" as well as "capacity to rebound, to 'bounce back' from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure, or even positive change, progress, and increased responsibility" (Agnihotri, Krush, Trainor, & Krishnakumar, 2014, p.59).

In the mid 1960's, Fredrick Herzberg examined occupational factors which motivated employees within the workplace, specifically related to the business force, establishing the Theory of Motivation (ToM) similar to London's and Moore's Career Theory of Motivation. Herzberg suggested motivational factors like salary, working conditions and leadership support were hygiene factors, sometimes described as basic or maintenance needs and not motivators, similar to Deci and Ryan's basic psychological needs (Gawel, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Similarly to Herzberg's ToM, situational traits that impact career resilience involved both positive reinforcements as well as constructive criticism, assistance for self-determination, a chance to demonstrate achievement, encouragement for being creative, insistence on quality, and guidance for future learning and professional development (London & Noe, 1997). When hygiene factors or basic needs were absent, occupational dissatisfaction occurred. Merely having hygiene factors or basic needs present did not in any way imply job satisfaction existed (Gawel, 1997). Gawel (1997) stated motivators which needed to be present in order to determine the satisfaction one may experience in his or her professional career was established by

examining the degree to which the individual experiences motivators including achievement, recognition, the actual work, responsibility and advancement.

Touted as the most significant theory developed to aid in the understanding of the motivations of individuals, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan as a means for proving experimental inquires related to one's self (ten Cate, Kusurkar & Williams, 2011, Deci & Ryan, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000), stated individuals were motivated intrinsically, attempting to satisfy basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (ten Cate, Kusurkar & Williams, 2011). Relatedness was defined by Deci and Ryan (2000) as, "the desire to feel connected to others-to love and care and to be loved and cared" (p. 231). Similar to Deci and Ryan (2000), Henderson and Milstein (2003) described a theme related to resiliency as "caring and personalization" (p.17), in which the teacher was characterized as developing an active concern with their students. An attitude of resiliency, full of caring and relatedness from the teacher, was fundamentally essential to learning, suggested Henderson and Milstein (2003). Autonomy was described as the ambition to organize one's experiences and behaviors while understanding one's own sense of self. Lastly, described as proficiency and capability, competency was the need responsible for reinforcing one's own activity, requiring gratification in order to maintain (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

According to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), critical to the pursuit and attainment of personal goals was the extent to which one was able to satisfy psychological needs, while pursuing and attaining the valued outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The SDT postulated humans who continued on a path of living a healthy, strong,

and vital life with targeted goals would have goals realized, given the fundamental and pertinent supports were accessible; however, if not, psychological outcomes would become less than optimal due to deprivation of basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) further suggested no individual basic psychological needs related to autonomy, competence, or relatedness could be neglected without detrimental consequences toward the individual. Having psychological needs met in only one or two areas, either autonomy, competence, or relatedness, did not sustain adequate psychological health for individuals (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

According to the SDT, in general, people focused their attention to long-term goals, when completing activities or tasks, which were divided into two categories: 1.) intrinsic aspirations and 2.) extrinsic aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to the early work of Deci (1975), behaviors which were intrinsically motivated, were founded in one's need for competency and self-determination, which alone did not provide adequate motivation for continuing a certain behavior. Behaviors which were intrinsically motivated were behaviors which occurred because of interest without the need for special consequences and maintained by the basic needs of autonomy and competence being met. Generally, intrinsic aspirations included such life goals as establishing alliances, productivity, and development of self; whereas extrinsic endeavors included affluence, celebrity, and allure (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Like Herzberg, Deci and Ryan, Billingsley, who was an expert in the field of special education, also suggested special education teachers' motivation for remaining a special education teacher was affected by three broad categories which included external

factors, employment factors, and personal factors. According to Billingsley's schematic representation, factors which were considered to be external were thought to be so because these factors happened externally to the teacher and included such factors as economic, societal, and institutional. Factors which were external typically had an indirect effect on a special education teachers' overall professional decisions (Billingsley, 2004). Billingsley's model examines motivational factors related to employment such as teachers' professional qualifications, work conditions, various rewards, and the teachers' level of commitment to the teaching profession and the field of special education (2004).

### Importance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the resiliency of special education teachers who made decisions to remain in the field of special education for a long period, seven years or more, in one school district in West Georgia. Because most previous research was aimed at suggesting approaches to entice teachers to enter into the field of special education and also examined the rationale for special education teachers leaving the field of special education, and very little research was focused on the possible variables which impacted a special education teachers' decision to stay in the field of special education, the researcher was inclined to consider the personal experiences of special education teachers who stayed committed to the field of special education for a period of seven years or longer and resiliency related to staying committed to the field of special education. The researcher investigated the variables, factors, and personal experiences reported by special educators who remained in the field for seven years or longer on the grounds of current research studies that indicated special educators were

likely to leave the field prior to seven years, with most special education teachers leaving within three years of entering the teaching field. The researcher intended to gain a better understanding of variables and factors related to their personal resiliency which impacted the special education teachers' decision to remain committed to the field of special education by investigating the commonly reported variables related to teacher characteristics, such as age, race, and gender, personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environment and affective responses to work in order to focus attention to the retention of highly qualified special education teachers. Awareness of influencing factors, variables and lived experiences which contributed to retaining special education teachers was important to understand for all administrators, teacher preparation program, and policy makers as well as for special education teachers themselves. Findings obtained in this study were used to suggest reported variables special education teachers provide for remaining committed long-term to the field of special education in hopes of increasing the retention of special education teachers at the local school district level.

### Procedures

In order to explore the resiliency of special education teachers who remain in the field of special education for a period of seven years or longer, the researcher conducted a qualitative research study as a narrative inquiry to best collect data related to the resiliency of special education teachers remaining in the field of education. The researcher distributed a questionnaire (see Appendix B) to special education teachers inquiring about demographic information such as age, gender, race, and classification of student disability which has been taught over the teachers' tenures. The researcher also inquired through a focus group and individual interviews about professional experiences,

variables and factors which impacted teachers' personal decisions to remain in special education as well as the teachers' personal understanding of their own resiliency.

All participants were special education teachers who were currently teaching within the field of special education in a West Georgia school district who have taught students with disabilities for a minimum of seven years.

### Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, it was assumed each special education teacher who participated in the study had the ability to understand each question as the question was solicited and would provide honest, reliable answers which best describes his or her own personal experiences as a special education teacher.

### Limitations

The scope of this study included special education teachers who taught students with disabilities in any grade level, P-12, in a local school district in West Georgia. Special education teachers who have remained in special education for seven years or longer participated in a questionnaire (see Appendix B), a focus group and interview in order to best collect information related to their personal experiences. The following limitations were determined during this study:

The demographics of the special education teachers who responded to the questionnaires (see Appendix B), focus group, and interviews were a limitation of the study. The sample consisted of special education teachers from only one mid-west public school district within the state of Georgia, therefore the sample of participants was limited. The results of the study were limited to this population.

In addition to the demographics, the population of special education teachers who participated in the study was also a limitation. The researcher assumed participants provided honest and reliable information related to their own personal experiences towards their resiliency in the field of special education as a teacher as his or her experiences relate to them alone and where not influenced by the attitudes of other educators or by the researcher.

## Definitions of Terms

*Affective responses to work* was considered to be work related issues that cause increased stress, lowered job satisfaction and a reduction in commitment to the organization and profession (Billingsley, 2003).

*Attrition* was a reduction in the numbers of people within a particular field of employment. Traditionally in the United States, attrition rates among special education teachers, was high, estimated at approximately 13% annually who leave the field of special education (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

*Calling* was described as how a person makes a difference in the life of others by providing a service, and then in turn, develops meaning and purpose in his or her own life (Gong, Zimmerli & Hoffer, 2013).

*Career Resilience* was an internal ability to undergo change in challenging situations, usually exhibited by people who are able to face difficulties specifically related to their chosen career (Arora & Rangnekar, 2014).

*Career Self-reliance* was “the ability to actively manage one’s work life in a rapidly changing environment; the attitude of being self-employed, whether inside or outside of an organization” (Collard, Epperheimer, & Saign, 1996).

*Child Find* was an on-going process developed to ensure children with disabilities were found and evaluated for special education services if deemed appropriate for the child (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

*The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142)*, reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), required all children with disability be provided educational opportunities within the public educational system (Thornton, Peltier & Medina, 2007).

*Free and Public Education (FAPE)*, specified specialized and related services provided, at no charge to families of students with disabilities and had the expectation to provide meaningful educational benefit to students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

*Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC)* is responsible for setting and applying the guidelines for preparing, certification and continued licensing of public educators (2017).

*Individuals with Disabilities Act 2004, (IDEA)*, was federal law requiring all public schools to serve the educational needs of students with disabilities. IDEA required evaluation be conducted for any student with a suspected disability and recognized not all children with difficulties learning or attention qualified for special education services (IDEA, 2004).

*Highly Qualified Teachers*, according to NCLB (2001), was teachers who held at least a bachelor's degree, had full state certification or licensure, and demonstrated competence in particular subject areas (Alter & Naiditch, 2012).

*Local Education Agency (LEA) representative*, according to IDEA, was a person who represented the local educational agency and was responsible for and qualified to provide special education services while also demonstrating knowledge about all content areas in the general education (2004).

*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB)*, was the federal law requiring states to focus attention on closing academic achievement gaps by providing all children with a fair and equal opportunity to a high-quality education (NCLB, 2001).

*Resilience* was “successful adaptation” to stressful challenging life events (Belknap & Taymans, 2015); “patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or

risk” as well as “capacity to rebound, to ‘bounce back’ from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure, or even positive change, progress, and increased responsibility”

(Agnihotri, Krush, Trainor, & Krishnakumar, 2014).

*Retention* was the plan to reduce the number of special education teachers who leave the field of special education through effective strategies which reduced the national special education teacher shortage (Berry, 2012).

*Teacher efficacy* was the confidence that a teacher has in his or her own abilities to encourage student learning (Protheroe, 2008).

*Special Education* was specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (IDEA, 2004).

*Special Education Teachers* provided educational instruction to students with wide ranges of learning, mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. Special education teachers adapted general education lessons and taught various subjects, such as reading, writing, and math, to students with mild to moderate disabilities. They also taught basic skills, such as literacy, communication techniques, to students with severe to profound disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

*Students with Disabilities* were any school-aged child who was of an age at which it was mandatory to provide elementary and secondary educational services to student with disabilities; or a student to whom the state was required to provide a free appropriate public education under IDEA (2004).

*Teacher characteristics* were considered as age, gender and race (Billingsley, 2003).

*Teacher qualifications* were related to the training which a special education teacher

had, such as being uncertified or certified, degrees earned and the quality of teacher preparation program which the teacher attended (Billingsley, 2003).

*Work environments* described the various factors contributing to the attrition behavior of special education teachers. These factors were variables such as salary, overall school climate, administrative support, paper work, students, and issues with their caseload (Billingsley, 2003).

## Summary

Across the United States, school districts experienced great difficulty in hiring special education teachers who were highly qualified to teach students with disabilities. The field of special education had the highest rate of attrition in the entire field of education. Within three years of entering the field of special education, over two-thirds of the qualified special educators left the field, some entered a different area of teaching, and some left the profession all together. To ensure students with disabilities received appropriate educational instruction, it was vital to retain special education teachers who were knowledgeable about the field. Known variables which caused special educators to leave teaching included characteristics such as age, gender, race, personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environments, and affective responses to work. However, very little was known about special education teachers' resiliency characteristics which caused a special educator to remain in the field of special education for seven years or longer. The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of resiliency possessed by those special education teachers who remained in the field of special education for seven years or longer.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

While nationally the demand for highly qualified special education teachers had been on a slight decline, the ability to provide appropriate education services to students with disabilities in ways which are considered appropriate to meet student need, still existed (Mason-Williams, 2015). Research conducted (Williams & Dike, 2015) by the National Center for Education Statistics, showed that in the United States, 6.5 million students with disabilities received educational services and support within the public school systems that were funded through federal budgets. Within the U.S., the shortage of special education teachers existed in essentially all categories of disability eligibility, forcing many teachers to have to teach outside of their area of expertise (Berry, Pertin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2012). Once thought to be significantly impacted by teacher retirement and increased student population, the teacher shortage problem experienced in the U.S. was caused by teachers leaving the profession entirely, with approximately 50% of newly hired teachers leaving within five years (Swanson, 2011; Watlington, Schockly, Guglielmino & Felsher, 2010). Alter and Naiditch (2012) found 20% of all new teachers would leave the field of education in the first three years of teaching.

According to information gathered by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC), 44% of all public school teachers left the profession within their first five years of teaching (Owens, 2015). Owens (2015), stated the GaPSC surveyed teachers about the school districts they worked in, grade level taught, and years of experience, and also focused on whether a currently employed teacher would recommend teaching as a profession. Two-thirds of the teachers stated they would not recommend

teaching as a profession. Additionally, the survey looked to examine reasons teachers left the field at such alarming rates and found teachers in Georgia, like their counterparts across the Nation, left teaching because of the pressures and stressors related to teaching, poor work conditions and a feeling of being devalued (Owens, 2015).

Chronic shortages in the field of special education continue to pose challenges for public schools across the United States (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Brownell, Hirsch, Seo, 2004). Because of such limited amounts of teachers entering the teaching field and making decisions to remain in the field of special education, many school districts continue to be unable to hire and fill all positions. Special educators decided to leave because of a lack of preparation for the position as a teacher (Major, 2012). Because of teacher shortages and retention issues, schools were impacted negatively; specifically impacted were low-performing schools with a high population of at-risk students (Watlington, Shockly, Guglielmino & Felsher, 2010). These significant shortages of qualified special education teachers have been linked to the demands related to recruiting and retaining teachers in general, but specifically affected are qualified special educators (Stephens & Fish, 2010).

While most researchers focused their attention on revealing reasons special education teachers provided for leaving the field of special education, a perspective which focuses on the negative aspects of the field of special education, this researcher sought to examine the resilience of special education teachers who remain committed to the field of special education for seven years or longer.

## Background

Decided in 1954, and considered the most impacting court case related to American education, *Brown v. Board of Education* has often been declared as the legitimate beginning of special education (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). *Brown* (1954) found segregation due to a person's unchangeable human traits, such as gender, race, or disability, was unconstitutional. By doing so, the Supreme Court established a standard, stating separate systems for educating students with disabilities was also unconstitutional (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Although focused on racial inequality, because the case determined equal educational opportunities should be provided for all students, including students with disabilities, the case has been of significance in the development of special education (LaNear & Frattura, 2007).

The field of special education was further impacted by the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, which established a continuum of special education services from the most restrictive environment, such as a specialized school, to the least restrictive environment (LRE), which included educating students with disabilities alongside typically developing peers (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). The passing of the EAHCA allowed students with disabilities to receive services based upon the individual needs according to the severity of the disability (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), students with disabilities were much more likely to receive educational services than ever before (Samuels, 2015).

In addition to the formation of LRE, IDEA also laid the foundation for FAPE, "free and appropriate education", which meant, under the law, public educational agencies were responsible for providing services for children with disabilities including

access to the general education curriculum, ultimately resulting in more inclusive educations for students with disability (IDEA, 2004). IDEA specified a free education be provided to all children with disabilities, in the setting most appropriate for each student, to experience purposeful growth towards their individual education program (Zirkel, 2013). One significant element to the “free and appropriate education” piece of IDEA, was the issue of FAPE being required to be “a benefit” to a student with a disability (IDEA, 2004). According to IDEA, all children with disability had the legal right to an education which was meaningful to the child, but also caused the child to participate in educational interactions which are purposeful and intentional (Zirkel, 2013). Despite the fact IDEA established a directive that all students with disabilities received a free and public education, it did not, however, require the most premium instruction or methodology available. Each local educational agency only had to provide instruction to students with disabilities which met the individual student’s needs (Zirkel, 2013).

Under IDEA (2004), each State was required to establish a process to locate, identify, refer and evaluate all children to determine if a disability existed and whether the child required special education services. Child Find was an on-going process that gave the public awareness about activities, screenings and evaluations developed to ensure children with disabilities were evaluated for special education services if deemed appropriate. Using Child Find, all children, regardless of the degree of disability, whether the child attended private or public school, or was homeless, had the potential of being located, identified, and referred for evaluation in order to qualify for special education services and ultimately had the right to a free and appropriate education with instruction provided by a certified special education teacher (IDEA, 2004).

Under the federal law, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed in 2001, accountability standards were established to guarantee all children, including those children with disabilities, access to adequate educational programs, provided by certified educators, in order to promote achievement in core academic areas (Kossar, Mitchem, & Ludlow, 2005). NCLB provided a definition of a highly qualified teacher common to all public educational systems in the United States. Being considered as “highly qualified” meant the educator must hold, at the minimum, a four-year degree, meet the requirements for state licensure or certification, as well as being adequately versed in the core subjects the educator teaches. These standards also held true for defining highly qualified special education teachers (NCLB, 2001). Because of increased pressure to declare all students as proficient on state content tests, hiring teachers who were considered highly qualified was emphasized as necessary to promote better student achievement (Kossar, Mitchem & Ludlow, 2005). Although mandated by NCLB, providing schools with special educators who are highly qualified has proven to be problematic across the nation because of the number of ill-equipped teaching candidates graduating from teacher certification programs (Kossar, Mitchem & Ludlow, 2005). Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) seconded NCLB’s sanctions stating teachers who taught core subjects to children with disabilities, assessed according to alternative assessments, must adhere to identical requirements related to becoming a highly qualified teacher equal to that of any regular education teacher (Hardman, Rosenberg, & Sindelar, 2005). In recent years, because of the significant teacher shortage, compliance in terms of having a certified special education has been difficult because of the high rates of teacher attrition experienced in schools across the U.S.

The aim of the federal regulations was to safeguard the education of students with disabilities by providing equal access to educational services provided by highly qualified special educators. Long-term data related to the performance of children with disabilities demonstrated poor educational outcomes which may have been ameliorated if students with disabilities had highly qualified teachers (Cortiella, 2006; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely & Danielson, 2010). While NCLB and IDEA attempted to resolve the definitions related to the qualifications of what constitutes a highly qualified special education teacher, which were unclear prior to the implementation of both, have compounded the shortage of special education teachers throughout the United States by requiring higher standards for all teachers (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiley & Danielson, 2010). According to Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, and Felsher (2010):

Special education is a discipline that has been plagued by a significant and persistent shortage of appropriately trained teachers since its inception.... Since the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (the forerunner to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] in 1975), there have not been enough fully certified special educators to fill the positions in the nation's public schools" ( p.16)

While federal regulations such as NCLB and IDEA outlined written definitions of what is meant by "highly qualified", historically, the role of a quality special education teacher were not clearly defined and continued to remain unclear as to whether quality was decided by teacher competencies or overall student outcomes (Mason-Williams, 2015; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely & Danielson, 2010). Brownell, Sindelar, Kiley and Danielson (2010) contended an effective special education teacher led instruction by providing numerous chances to provide evidence of obtained skills. Skilled special education teachers focused on keeping students engaged in the curriculum by providing

clear instruction and feedback (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely & Danielson, 2010). While having a quality teacher, who demonstrated effective teaching skills and subject matter knowledge has been linked to student achievement, special education teachers prepared to teach a standards based curriculum remained unavailable to students with disabilities throughout schools, particularly in schools with higher rates of minority children who were poor or within rural areas (Mason-Williams, 2015; Berry, Pertin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2012; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely & Danielson, 2010). Many school districts were unable to provide adequate numbers of special education teachers for the number of special education classes (DeMik, 2008). Acquiring enough trained teachers to work with students with disabilities was exceptionally difficult to many states across the nation, and while the shortage of certified special educators has been a nationwide problem for more than 20 years, only recently have policy makers focused attention on the severe shortage of special education teachers (Prather-Jones, 2011).

### Teacher Characteristics and Personal Factors of Attrition

In 2010, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics cited reasons for attrition as the number of stressors special education teachers faced each day including heavy supervisory loads, student demands, and extensive caseloads. Special education teachers reported other causes, both internal and external, for departing the field of special education. Additional factors which contributed to attrition were work conditions, environment, and teacher characteristics as well as personal issues, often related to their own family (Major, 2012). Major (2012) cited further reasons for abandoning the field of special education as work factors such as feeling isolated, lack of support from school administration, and unclear identification of special educator roles. Newer teachers left

the field of special education at a faster rate than older because of possible threats of litigation, an overabundance of paperwork, and stress (Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010; Major, 2012). Additional reasons for leaving the field of education, other than retirement, were long work hours, time away from family, scarce training related to dealing with cultural differences of students, and insufficient classroom management skills (Swanson, 2011). DeMik (2008) cited reasons for departing the field of special education as shortage of materials and needed resources, little measurable student progress, and discord with administration about special education practices and policy.

Overall, dissatisfaction in areas such as working conditions, preparation in professional field, conflicting roles, and lack of administrative support was reported to have influenced attrition rates as well in special education (DeMik, 2008). Critical to the decision to leave the field of special education, according to Prather-Jones (2011), was a lack of collegial and administrative support. Special education teachers who shared a personal perspective of inadequate administrative support were more inclined to leave the profession than those special education teachers who had a strong, supportive administration (Prather-Jones, 2011).

Stephens and Fish (2010) found special education teachers who remained committed to teaching students with disabilities typically had a greater sense of competence in the classroom than did those who chose to leave the field. Special educators who remained in the field also reported a higher sense of compassion for children with a diagnosed disability, had family members with a disability, or anticipated multiple job possibilities which impacted their choice of seeking occupation as a special education teacher (Stephens & Fish, 2010). The bulk of the participants in Stephens' and

Fish's (2010) study reported being satisfied in their occupation as special education teachers because the position afforded them the possibility of changing the lives of students with special needs for the better by providing strategies to make academic progress. When working conditions were less favorable, teachers' sense of being valued and rewarded was lower typically resulting in a lower commitment to the field of education as well as affective responses such as stress and burnout (Stephens & Fish, 2010; Billingsley, 2004).

According to Billingsley (2004), substantial evidence does not exist to support the idea that teacher retention is affected by teacher quality. Additionally, limited information has been collected related to teachers' educational backgrounds, participation in preparation programs or differences individual teaching practices had on special education teachers' ability to endure long term in the field of special education (Billingsley, 2004). Berry, Pertin, Gravelle, and Farmer (2012) found attrition was impacted by insufficient training which resulted in the special education teacher being less effective at delivering instruction and less committed to the field of education. Feng and Sass (2010), however, found teachers who were uncertified were not as likely to remain in the field of education and teachers who had less formal training opportunities were twice as likely to leave the field of education. In order to discourage attrition, school districts gave strong consideration to forming working relationships with local university teacher preparation programs to best identify teacher candidates who were highly-qualified (Stephens & Fish, 2010). Billingsley (2004) explained there was evidence which suggested teachers, in general, who had students who scored higher on standardized tests were more likely to leave the field of special education. An additional

personal factor which influenced special education teachers to leave the field was to teach in a higher performing school (Stephens & Fish, 2010).

### **Work Environment**

Stephens and Fish (2010) suggested special education teachers were often influenced to leave the field because of factors related to the work environment which included class sizes, which were too large according to governmental regulations, an overabundance of paperwork, and an absence of support from the administrators and leaders. The factors which most contributed to job dissatisfaction was the exorbitant amount of paperwork related to completing IEPs, the inadequate amount of support from administrators, which was often considered as weak, and ineffective leadership which left special education teachers unprepared to meet the significant needs of their students with disabilities (Taylor, 2013; Stephens & Fish, 2010; Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010). Often provided as a reason for leaving the field of special education was the high number of students on teacher's caseloads (Stephens & Fish, 2010).

In addition to poor work environment, in general, teachers in all fields, including special education, departed the teaching profession because of low salary and poor benefits (Taylor, 2013; Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010). Stephens and Fish (2010), reported many school districts provided special education teachers with increased monetary incentives to include sign-on bonuses, yearly stipends, and raises for those who demonstrated significant student growth, specifically with the intention of hopefully retaining these successful special education teachers. Special education teachers also

considered the potential earnings that were likely when considering whether to teach, as well as where to teach. Additionally, they also gave consideration to possible monetary gains and benefits of teaching to other potential employment opportunities which were available (Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, & Felsher, 2010). Teachers also suggested policy and a school's socioeconomic condition and environment had impact on their professional lives (Gu & Day, 2013).

### Resiliency

Resiliency, rooted in the Latin term 'resiliendum', which means "to spring back or rebound and show the ability to gather up strength and resources to overcome adversity" to go through difficulties by adapting to have significant quality of life (Arias, 2016, p.13). By being resilient, one avoided anxiety, depression, physical symptoms and unsatisfactory achievement (Arias, 2016). People who exhibited resiliency all shared common traits despite having experienced traumatic stressful events in their own lives, usually resulting in a positive outcome. The ability to develop resilience was related to how the individual interpreted or processed the experience itself. The three traits of resiliency were a significantly strong positive attitude, an increased sense of enthusiasm, and a heightened sense of encouragement. After people demonstrated characteristics of being highly resilient experienced a seriously stressful situation, they generally sought a fresh meaning or purpose, making it unlikely for the person to continue in the negative stressful experience. By persisting to remain upbeat during stressful life events, the individual recovered making a quicker comeback towards confident thinking. Individuals who had traits of resilience tended to view stressful situations as isolated events, which

resulted in substantially fewer feelings of hopelessness or despair (Arias, 2016). Little evidence has been reported concerning teachers' capacity to be resilient, much less special education teachers' ability to be resilient. However, according to Gu and Day (2013), the art of teaching, specifically at one's best over long periods of time, required resilience. Gu and Day (2013), found adults' resilience is not only related to personal attributes, but also concentrated on personal values and included the role of significant others within the school such as administrators.

Many teachers were influenced to stay in education because of personal beliefs that, as teachers, they impacted the lives of students by remaining 'vocationally and professionally committed' (Gu & Day, 2013). As a consequence, teacher resilience has also been linked to the level of conviction a teacher has towards the profession of teaching (Gu & Day, 2013). The role of 'significant others', such as educational leaders and administrators, has been suggested by Gu and Day (2013) to have also contributed to a teacher's overall sense of resilience.

In additional research conducted by Polidore, resilience in the field of education was further advanced by examining the practices of three female African American teachers who had long term careers in teaching before, during, and after desegregation in the South. They were participants in a qualitative research study and subjected to great difficulty during their personal teaching journeys (Taylor, 2013). The three participants in Polidore's study suggested eight themes or attributes constitute the resilience theory. The eight characteristics which were considered essential to resilience were: plasticity in the locus of control, religion, the ability to see adverse circumstances optimistically, self-determination, responsibility, adaptability, relationships, and education (Taylor, 2013).

Additionally, Taylor explained that the characteristic of efficacy was a possible emergent theme found to be related to resiliency. According to Taylor (2013), each of the teachers represented reported the eight attributes had impacted their individual decisions remain in education and had influenced their personal teaching experiences.

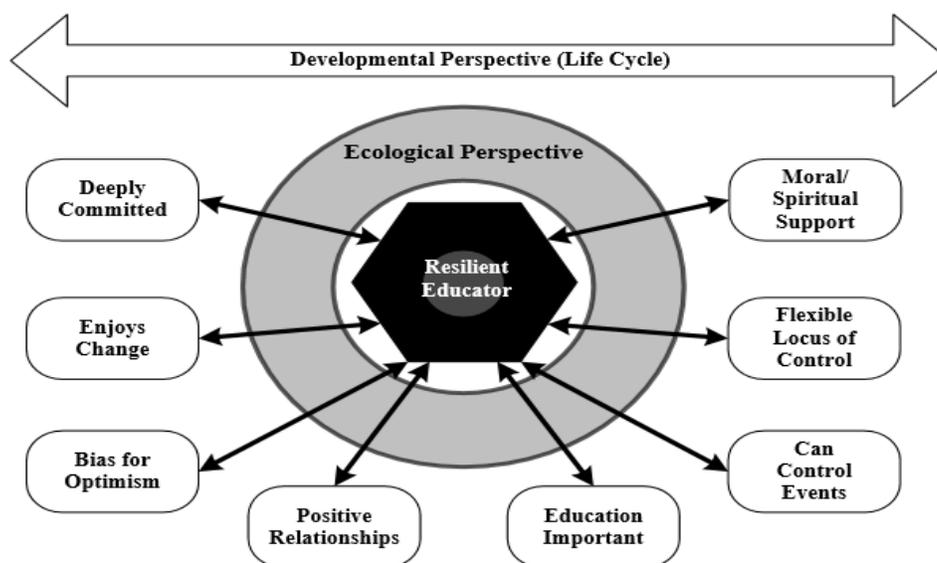


Figure 3. Graphic conceptualization of resilience in education theoretical framework.

Taylor (2013) further expounded that the teachers described a feeling of a strong belief in their own abilities to teach, as well as a connectedness to their religious background.

Further research conducted by Muller, Dodd and Fiala (2014), examined six protective factors of resiliency. As suggested by Henderson and Milstein (1996) in their work pertaining to resiliency, most individuals who exhibit resiliency hold six protective factors. These factors were: purpose & expectations (PE), nurture & support (NS), positive connections (PC), meaningful participation (MP), life guiding skills (LGS), and clear & consistent boundaries (CCB) (Henderson & Milstein, 1996). According to the

research conducted by Henderson and Milstein (1996) about the six protective factors, each factor existed equally in individuals who were resilient. Muller, Dodd, and Fiala (2014) sought to examine the protective factors described by Henderson and Milstein in educators across various teaching roles as well as at different educational settings. In one study 589 pre-service public school teachers were interviewed, examining the impact of the six protective factors described by Henderson and Milstein. Less experienced teachers reported differences between nurturing characteristics and perceived amounts of support needed from family and friends rather than colleagues (Muller, Dodd, & Fiala, 2014). Presence of the six protective factors in teachers seemed to promote resiliency among teachers who were of varying ages and years of experience (Muller, Dodd, Fiala, 2014).

In another study, Doney (2012) examined the resiliency of novice science teachers over a two year period, hoping to establish a connection between resiliency and teacher retention. In the study, the researcher investigated the responses to six science teachers' interviews, conducted classroom observations, shadowed the teachers for one day and had each participant develop relational maps for each year in order to better understand the stressors and protective factors of each teacher (Doney, 2012). After scrutinizing the interviews, the primary source of data, the research found the idea of resiliency as an innate personality trait was not necessarily true (Doney, 2012). Doney (2012) also found this research suggested that interaction between challenging situations or stressors and protective factors happened in each of the participant's personal and professional lives and was the catalyst for building resilience. Like Henderson and Milstein (2003), Doney's (2012) research also found an individual's resilience towards difficult situations, whether occurring in the person's personal or professional life, was

strengthened or constrained by the settings the person works in, the people he or she works with and the degree to which the person believes he or she could aspire. Stressful situations afforded the teacher the opportunity to build resilience through the use of protective factors (Doney, 2012). Resilience helped to retain new teachers because teachers who demonstrated resiliency developed the needed coping skills to handle adverse negative situations, built problem solving strategies, and developed a strong sense of self-efficacy, all while maintaining a sense of humor (Doney, 2012).

### Calling

Described as the external pull experienced to enter into a particular career, a calling was one component described by some for influencing career choices (Duffy, & Sedlacek, 2007). According to Duffy and Sedlacek (2007), multiple definitions related to 'calling' existed, ranging from a calling to serve God by performing tasks related to a particular profession, to simply a career choice that serves the greater good. Early research conducted in the 1960's described calling as, "divine inspiration to do morally responsible work". Today, however, a calling did not necessarily have a religious connotation as in early research, but was redefined as an individual completing work due to a strong internal sense of direction to make the world a better place (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schartz, 1997); Hall & Chandler, 2004). According to Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2012), a calling or sense of vocation, was the response one gave to a summoning from a source usually thought to be divine. Hall and Chandler (2004) suggested calling could be a secular viewpoint developed within the individual from internal motivation and self-assessment of personal and professional purpose. Research by Hall and Chandler (2004), suggested people who felt a calling on their professional

lives had the highest sense of job satisfaction, lower rates of absenteeism and were also more self-confident, goal oriented and more likely to take risks within their profession.

Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz (1997), explained most people had one of three relationships with how work was seen, either as a job, career or calling. For those who viewed work as a job, only expressed interest in the work for the material reward received from it in order to obtain resources needed to have personal needs met. Those who saw work as a career had personal investment in work, sought to have personal achievement within the professional organization and often worked to obtain more power and higher social status (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz, 1997). For people who felt a calling on the work performed, separating work from life was difficult. One who was called to a profession did so not for financial gain, but for the personal fulfillment the work brought the person (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz, 1997). As explained by Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz (1997), the idea of job, career or calling was not dependent on a person holding a particular occupation, but that it was possible for anyone who performs work to relate to work in one of the three manners.

In one study related to callings and career variables, Catholics and Protestants were surveyed about their perceptions related to their career choice (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). In this study, the definition of a calling was to have been summoned by a higher power. Each participant was asked to describe their work as either a job, a career or a calling. Those people who defined work as a calling reported to have had a higher sense of job security, job satisfaction, as well as a greater likelihood of reporting social injustices. This study also resulted in findings that indicated those individuals who

worked with people rather than objects, where twice as likely to see their work as a calling (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). Duffy and Sedlacek (2007), also reported a person who obtained advanced degrees was more likely to report a sense of calling over his or her professional life. Eckert (2012) suggested for people of faith, it is virtually impossible to separate one's vocation from calling because the person's religious beliefs typically impact daily decision making to include vocation choice.

Another study about callings was conducted by surveying 196 workers who were held professional administrative assistant roles and examined their professional perceptions about the work they performed (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). The participants were asked to define their approach to how they saw their work as either as a job, career or calling. In this particular study the definition of a calling was to perform a service to society instead of a summons by God to perform a certain task. Those participants who reported a sense of a calling reported a much greater sense of well-being than those who reported to see their work as a career or job. Those people who suggested their work was a career or job stated their most important factor about work was related to being promoted and making a greater income (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007).

Research about a calling on the professional life of a teacher, suggested teachers who felt called into education reported a greater sense of career commitment and job involvement, typically resulting in remaining in the field longer, indicating a more significant feeling of appreciation towards the positive impact on society (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). Further research suggested teachers who reported a strong sense of a calling over their professional life were not as likely to report feel emotionally exhausted or depersonalized (Gong, Zimmerli, & Hoffer, 2013). One significant finding of this

study was those teachers who reported feeling called to the profession, also reported fewer traits related to feeling of burnout (Gong, Zimmerli, & Hoffer, 2013). In this study, it was also stated, those teachers who reported a sense of calling had a positive relationship with personal accomplishment.

Author and teacher, Jonathan Eckert (2012), explained teaching as a profession relies on the teacher having intellectual knowledge and morals. Eckert (2012) suggested teachers were defined by integrity demonstrated in their daily teaching practices, developed more from their personal values, and religious beliefs than professional development. Himself a teacher, Eckert explained, it was his personal religious beliefs and feeling called to be an educator, that impacted his decision to remain in education. Eckert went on to explain teachers who felt called to teach, likely did so because of a religious summoning by a higher power, and also held higher expectations for their students, believing each had value and was uniquely created (2012).

### Self-Efficacy

The idea of self-efficacy was first introduced by Albert Bandura through his Social Cognitive Theory. According to Bandura, the theory provided explanation for human behavior making a definite distinction between competence and contingency that served as a guide to predict actions one may perform in the future (Fernandez, Ramos, Silvia, Nina & Pontes, 2016). Bandura (1977) proposed that individuals with self-efficacy had their own way of guiding themselves through the inner use of self-regulation and reflection. Ultimately, individuals who felt a sense of self-efficacy controlled their behaviors by forming their own motivation, emotions, and actions based on personal beliefs about their efficacy. Self-efficacy allowed individuals to have influence over how

they will conduct their own lives and was a significant indicator of competency (Fernandez, Ramos, Silvia, Nina & Pontes, 2016). People who had a higher level of self-efficacy typically chose to complete tasks or work that was seemingly more difficult and challenging (Fernandez, Ramos, Silvia, Nina & Pontes, 2016). Self-efficacy was described as an important influence on achievement in various areas such as education, health, and business, but was a particularly important aspect in the areas of teaching and learning (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Fernandez, Ramos, Silvia, Nina & Pontes, 2016).

Over the past 25 years, teacher self-efficacy has been recognized as an important factor as it related to a teacher's personal beliefs in his or her ability to carry out needed actions within an educational setting required to affect student learning (Fernandez, Ramos, Silvia, Nina & Pontes, 2016). Teacher efficacy, also related to teacher competency, was defined as a teacher's confidence in his or her own abilities as an educator to encourage learning (Protheroe, 2008). Researchers have found teachers' self-efficacy impacted their teaching behaviors and then their students' ability to be motivated achieving learners (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Self-efficacy stated a teacher's efficacy was directly related to the number of performance accomplishments a teacher experienced during student teaching and the induction years (Bandura, 1977). Performance accomplishments were those instances when a teacher influenced a student to perform at the mastery level (Bandura, 1977).

According to Protheroe (2008), a teacher's belief in his or her own ability to impact learning in a positive way was crucial to the teacher's success or failure. Teachers who experienced lower levels of self-efficacy often reported having more difficult experiences related to their perceptions of their own teaching, higher levels of stress

related to their teaching position and much lower levels of job satisfaction (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Teachers who held a strong understanding of their own efficacy exhibit traits such as being effective planners and organizers, were persistent and resilient when faced with challenges and less critical of students who made errors (Protheroe, 2008). Teachers who presented with strong perceptions of self-efficacy, typically were able to remain persistent in difficult situations, took greater risks when considering new teaching approaches, experienced greater job satisfaction, were more committed to the field of teaching and were reported to be absent from work less. When such behaviors were demonstrated by a teacher, students under the teacher's instruction were more likely to improve academic performance and be motivated to continue to learn (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Overall, the way a teacher viewed his or her personal teaching abilities toward teaching impacted the academic outcomes of the students.

### Summary

Nationally, within the last 20 years, teacher attrition was reported as a significantly impacting issue on the public education workforce. It had been reported that almost 50% of all teachers who enter the field of education, left the profession within five years (Watlington, Schockly, Guglielmino & Felsher, 2010). In Georgia, research stated approximately two-thirds of all new teachers left the teaching profession within five years of entering it (Owens, 2015). Special education was also greatly impacted by teachers' decision to leave the field, often leaving classrooms with children with disabilities, without a certified teacher (Major, 2012).

Because of specific court cases, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and legal mandates like, the EAHCA(1975), IDEA(2004) and NCLB(2001), students with

disabilities were afforded the same educational rights as their non-disabled peers. Each of these federal laws mandated children with disabilities have access to educational programs that met their needs, and that the instruction be provided by a certified, “highly qualified” educator (Kossar, Mitchem, & Ludlow, 2005). However, like their general education counterparts, special educators have also left the field of education at alarming rates for various reasons. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reported reasons for leaving the field were related to the heavy caseload, working conditions and lack of administrator support (Major, 2012). Other reasons stated for leaving special education were concerns over litigation, long work hours and an overabundance of paperwork (Major, 2012; Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010).

Research about resiliency revealed people who demonstrated characteristics of resiliency typically were more likely to overcome stressful situations (Arias, 2016). Persistence towards remaining upbeat during challenging life events (Arias, 2016). While little research was available specifically related to the resiliency of special educators, some research did suggest resiliency was a required trait in order to remain in education due to the demands of the job (Gu & Day, 2013).

In addition to resiliency, other teachers who remained in education reported feeling a calling on their lives to work as an educator (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). People who were influenced by a calling over their career choice reported feeling a greater sense of job satisfaction, were more goal oriented and expressed a greater level of self-confidence (Hall & Chandler, 2004). Teachers who felt called to the field of education stated feeling more committed to the career, and a sense that they had made an impact on the lives of children. Conversely, teachers who said they felt called to teach, were not as

likely to feel burnout or emotional exhaustion (Gong, Zimmerli, & Hoffer, 2013). As suggested by Eckert (2012), teachers who felt called to the profession likely did so because of personal characteristics developed through their own personal religious beliefs rather than any professional development.

In addition to resiliency, and a calling, self-efficacy also impacted teachers' decision to remain in the field of education. Bandura (1977) theorized people who had a sense of self-efficacy were more likely to be able to use self-regulation skills and personal reflection in order to guide themselves through the challenges presented in life. People who have a sense of efficacy tended to select tasks or professions that were challenging or difficult, such as health, business or education (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Fernandez, Ramos, Silvia, Nina & Pontes, 2016). Within the past 20 years, self-efficacy has been recognized as an impacting factor towards a teacher's personal beliefs about teaching (Fernandez, Ramos, Silvia, Nina & Pontes, 2016). Teachers who reported a greater sense of self-efficacy were more suited to handling stress, reported higher levels of job satisfaction and ultimately, remained in education as a long-term career choice (Klassen & Chui, 2010).

If left unaddressed, the effects of the high attrition rates of public school teachers, particularly special education teachers, could be detrimental to the educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Because research already clearly exists about the reasons special educators leave the teaching profession, this researcher sought to gain a better understanding about characteristics of resiliency which impacted teachers to remain in the field long-term.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

In the field of education, special education teachers leave the profession at a faster rate than any other category of educators, which has caused a massive shortage of qualified special education teachers to teach children with disabilities (Karge & McCabe, 2014). However, some special education teachers have committed their careers to the field of special education despite the various stressors such as large student caseloads, unsupportive administrators, low salaries, and little support of colleagues. The high rates of attrition among special education teachers could potentially be better understood by examining the resilience of long-term special education teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore the resiliency of special education teachers through shared lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of long-term (seven or more years) special education teachers in one West Georgia public school district. Within this chapter, the researcher presents the methodology utilized in this study.

### Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice?
2. What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education?

3. How did special education teachers describe their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term?

### Research Design

In an attempt to explore the explanations special education teachers provided for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice and gain a better understanding of their perceptions about resiliency, the researcher used a qualitative approach to conduct the inquiry. During qualitative research, the researcher is submerged in the situation to take into account the individual testimonies of the studied phenomenon and interact with the participants in order to have a rich, deep understanding of the participants' perspectives, the phenomenon, or both. Qualitative research also lends itself in purpose more towards the construction of knowledge through a process of examining the joint effort of the social structure and the individuals within it (Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher chose to conduct a qualitative narrative analysis because it allowed the researcher to examine lived experiences of a group or individual by using "people's stories as data that can stand on their own as a pure description of experience, worthy as narrative documentary of experience" while interacting with the environment flexibly, acknowledging cultural differences, and establishing trusting relationships, all while considering the points of view of other individuals to form understanding and meaning (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2002, p.116).

In order to better understand the narrative data, the researcher utilized a sequential, grounded theory approach. Grounded theory, commonly used by qualitative researchers, suggests a theory evolves from constant interaction with the data that were

collected during a study rather than beginning with a preconceived theory (Hays & Singh, 2012; Maxwell, 2002). Glaser and Strauss, originators of the grounded theory approach, proposed that, “different forms of data on the same subject, which, when compared, will each generate theory” (1967, p.18). In grounded theory, the interviewer is required to regulate the data that are collected as well as the analysis of the data, which in turn allows the researcher better analytic management of the data collected (Charmaz, 2006). The grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to examine the data all while considering certain possibilities in the data (Charmaz, 2006). When conducting interviews, the researcher was allowed the potential of “evaluating the fit between their initial research interests and their emerging data” (Charmaz, 2006, p.17). This very reason, as described by Charmaz (2006), allowed the researcher to use sensitizing concepts during the interview process and gain a better understanding of how teachers perceive their long term career choices and their personal resiliency. The researcher considered the approach to be sequential in that research data were collected sequentially over three phases: 1) demographic questionnaires (see Appendix B) 2) a focus group and 3.) individual interviews. Each phase informed the next phase. For example, in Phase 1, the information collected from the questionnaires was used to select members of the focus group and the individual interviewees. Then, in Phase 2, responses provided by the focus group members were utilized to construct the questions asked to the individual interviewees in phase three.

For this study, the researcher gave consideration to the credibility of using a qualitative research approach. Credibility, described as determining whether the outcomes of the research were reasonable or believable, was a necessary criteria which

included “truth value” or believability which could be established through triangulation of data sources (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2002, p.93). For the purpose of this study, triangulation of data sources was utilized through “fair dealing”, where the participants shared similar perspectives about remaining in the field of special education for long term, but each teacher’s experiences were understood in a way which was unique for him or her. The subjects had shared, related characteristics but represented their individual perspectives through different data collection methods including questionnaires, individual interviews, and a focus group (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Besides credibility, transferability, a crucial part of qualitative research was referred to as the degree to which results of a study can be generalized or transferred to other contexts (Hays & Singh, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). According to Hays and Singh (2012), the more times the findings of a particular research study are replicated over varying groups, the more likely the findings of the study may be generalized to others outside of the initial research. For this study, transferability was limited because of the demographic responses of the participants. Because all the participants were middle-aged, Caucasian women, transferability would only be assumed for a group of teachers with a similar demographic make-up.

## Setting

The researcher collected data for this study from teachers in one public school district in West Georgia. The school district was a large urban district serving 32,128 students in its 60 schools and alternative centers. The school district serves approximately 6,500 students with disabilities, pre-k through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Data were sequentially

collected in three phases: 1) demographic questionnaires (see Appendix B), 2) a focus group, and 3) individual interviews. The demographic questionnaires were distributed electronically, with all interaction occurring in the online environment. The focus group discussion took place in a discreet, private meeting room at a local college. This private location provided protection from distraction and the opportunity for the interviewees to respond in ways they felt comfortable. It also allowed for a sense of rapport between the researcher and interviewees to be established. Finally, individual interviews were held over the telephone.

### Participants

A convenience sample of participants was utilized for this research study as the potential participants were chosen because, as a convenience sample suggests, they were likely to participate and easily accessible (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Because the researcher wanted to gain a better understanding of the individual experiences and perspectives unique to special education teachers, the population of special education teachers in the researcher's school district were invited to participate.

In order to secure an adequate number of potential participants, the researcher utilized public information listed in the local newspaper archives to establish a list of all special education teachers employed with the school district. The list resulted in a total of 232 email contacts. The researcher then sent a mass email to the 232 contacts to ascertain interest in participation in the study. The email contained a letter explaining the purpose of the research study that contained a separate page asking the contact to indicate 'yes' or 'no' to their desire to participate. If the potential participant indicated 'yes', he/she was asked to provide the researcher with contact information. This letter was returned to the

researcher by email. Once received by the researcher, a follow-up email (see Appendix F) was sent to the potential participant containing consent (see Appendix G) to participate in the study along with a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). In phase one of the research, potential participants returned consent and the questionnaire by email to the researcher. The potential participants for this study were required to meet specific criteria prior to being selected for participation. The four criteria required were as follows: 1) be a highly qualified educator in the field of special education, 2) hold a current professional teaching certificate in the field of special education, 3) be employed in a teaching position working directly with children with documented disabilities qualifying them as eligible for special education services, and 4) have a minimum of seven years teaching experience in the field of special education. Questions to determine if possible candidates met the four criteria were asked in the initial questionnaire (see Appendix B) along with demographic information.

The participants for Phase 2, the focus group, were the first five respondents, one through five, to complete the demographic questionnaire and satisfy the criteria of the study. Table 1 illustrates their responses to the questionnaire (see Appendix B).

Table 1

*Responses to Demographic Questionnaire: Focus Group*

	FG 1	FG 2	FG 3	FG 4	FG 5	Total
<b>Age Range</b>						
25-34 years old					x	1
45-54 years old	x	x		x		3
55-64 years old			x			1
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	x	x	x	x	x	5
<b>Race</b>						
Caucasian	x	x	x	x	x	5
<b>Highest Degree</b>						
Masters	x	x	x		x	4
Specialist				x		1
<b>Yrs. in Education</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>29.5</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>18.9 avg</b>
<b>Yrs. Teaching SWD</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>14.5</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12.7 avg</b>
<b>Grade</b>						
Early Childhood		x		x	x	3
Elementary	x	x	x	x		4
Middle School		x				1
High School		x				1
<b>Additional Certs</b>						
Early Childhood	x		x	x		3
Elem Childhood					x	1
Other	x			x		2
<b>Setting</b>						
Self-Contained				x	x	2
Inclusion	x	x	x			3
Pull-out		x	x		x	3
Itinerant		x				1

The next five respondents, six through 10, who completed the demographic questionnaire and satisfied the criteria of the study comprised participated in Phase 3, the individual interviews. Table 2 illustrates their responses to the questionnaire (see Appendix B).

Table 2

*Responses to Demographic Questionnaire: Individual Interviews*

	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	Total
<b>Age Range</b>						
35-44 years old				x		1
45-54 years old	x	x	x			3
55-64 years old					x	1
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	x	x	x	x	x	5
<b>Race</b>						
Caucasian	x	x	x	x	x	5
<b>Highest Degree</b>						
Masters		x		x		2
Specialist	x		x		x	3
Yrs. in Education	28	25	19	10	12	18.8 avg
Yrs. Teaching SWD	28	25	19	7	12	18.2 avg
<b>Grade</b>						
Early Childhood	x	x				2
Elementary			x			1
Middle School				x		1
High School					x	1
<b>Additional Certs</b>						
Elem Childhood			x			1
Mid Grades Content				x		1
Sec Ed Content					x	1
Other	x	x		x		3
<b>Setting</b>						
Self-Contained	x	x				2
Inclusion			x	x	x	3
Pull-out	x	x			x	3

The participants ranged in age from twenty-five to sixty-four years old, with the youngest participant being 34 years old and the oldest was 56 years old. All of the participants were Caucasian females. Six of the participants held a master's degree as their highest level of education and four held specialist degrees as their highest level of education earned. Collectively the teachers had 188.5 years of experience in education, with the fewest years in education reported as 10 and the most years in education reported as 29.5 years. The average number of years in education was 18.85 years. Together the

teachers reported having 154.5 years of experience teaching children with disability, with the fewest years reported as seven years and the most years reported as 25 years. The average number of years spent teaching children with disabilities was 15.45 years. Of the 10 participants, seven taught elementary aged children exclusively throughout the school day. One teacher taught only middle school aged children and one taught only high school aged students. One teacher served students with disability throughout the week itinerantly across all grade levels pre-k through 12th grades. One-hundred percent of the participants held additional certifications allowing the teacher to teach outside of the field of special education. Eight of the participants taught co-taught or pull-out classes throughout the school day. Three teachers taught inclusion classes only and two taught in both an inclusion class or pulled students out throughout the day. Four teachers reported teaching only in a self-contained or pull-out setting. One teacher reported teaching across all settings because she served children itinerantly and went different schools during the day to serve the students.

### Data Collection

To answer the research questions for this study, the researcher collected data over three phases: 1) A questionnaire to obtain demographic information and select participants for the subsequent phases, 2) A focus group to obtain initial data related to the research questions and inform additional questions for individual interviews, and 3) individual interviews to follow up and provide additional data related to the research questions. The researcher will address data collection for each phase below.

### Phase 1: Demographic Questionnaires

First, the researcher contacted 232 potential participants through email to inquire if they were interested in participating in the research study. In total, 36 responses were returned to the researcher, for a response rate of 15.5 %. They were asked to complete a response letter by checking 'yes' or 'no' to indicate desire to participate. Of the 36 responses, 22 people expressed interest in participation. If the potential participant checked 'yes', he or she was asked to provide contact information. Those potential participant who expressed interest in participating, were emailed consent (see Appendix G) by the researcher. Once completed, the potential participant returned consent to the researcher by email. After consent was received by the researcher, a questionnaire (see Appendix B) inquiring about demographic data and criteria to participate in the research study was emailed to the potential participant. The participant was asked to return the completed questionnaire within a week. The demographic questionnaires sent to participants included twelve questions about demographic information including age, gender, race, number of years teaching, highest degree held, number of years teaching children with disabilities, grade level taught, professional certifications held and current setting of teaching. As the questionnaires were returned via email, the researcher verified which respondents met the established criteria and notified the first five qualifying participants of selection to participate in Phase 2 of the research, the focus group.

### Phase 2: Focus Group

During Phase 2, the five selected members of the focus group were contacted by phone to establish a meeting location, time, and date. The focus group members were made up of the first five teachers to respond to the questionnaire and meet the required criteria of the study. Demographic information about the participants and their responses

to the questionnaire are presented in Table 1. The focus group interview was conducted at a local university's library in a private meeting room. Having chosen their own seat at the table, the five members of the focus group were seated at a rectangular table. The researcher waited until the focus group members were seated, taking the last available chair at the table. Some of the members brought a drink to enjoy during the focus group. One member casually introduced herself to the other members by stating her name, school that she taught at as well as position held, which in turn, led to the other members introducing themselves in the same way. The researcher introduced herself, explained the purpose of the study. Each member were assigned numerical identifiers with "FG" for "Focus Group" and a numeral (FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4 and FG5) to protect the participants' identities. All participants' responses were recorded using these identifiers. There were five semi-structured, open-ended questions (see Appendix C) asked of all focus group members related to their personal experiences as special education teachers and their perceptions about resiliency. The focus group members were asked to be candid and honest about their experiences and perceptions. Members were reminded that all responses collected during the focus group would remain confidential.

Each participant was asked each question and allowed to respond individually. The researcher began questioning with FG1, awaited the participant's response before moving on to the next participant, and so on for each question. Each member of the focus group had the flexibility to interject into the response of another participant. Typically, the participants did not inject to other responses other than the occasional head nod and allowed each other to complete their responses without interruption. However, while responding to a question about the students she had taught over the years, FG3 became

visibly emotional and began to cry. At this point, the other members interjected with comments such as, “It’s ok.”, and “Aww, don’t cry!” Also, because the researcher was uncertain if all members of the focus group had the same understanding of the definition of “resiliency”, the researcher provided the definition as the “capacity to rebound, to ‘bounce back’ from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure, or even positive change, progress, and increased responsibility” (Agnihotri, Krush, Trainor, & Krishnakumar, 2014, p. 59). The focus group took approximately one hour to conduct. All focus group responses were recorded using a small, handheld audio recorder and electronically stored on a computer personally owned by the researcher. The recordings were protected by a password known only to the researcher. The researcher used the responses provided by the participants during the focus group to develop questions that would later guide the researcher during Phase 3: the individual interviews. After participating in the focus group, the five participants’ involvement in the research was complete and the researcher made no further contact with the focus group members.

### Phase 3: Individual Interviews

During Phase 3, the researcher prepared to conduct semi-structured individual interviews of five special education teachers. The five teachers were chosen to be interviewees because they were the next five participants who returned the informed consent form (see Appendix G) and the questionnaire (see Appendix B) in Phase 1. Their responses to the demographic questionnaire were included in Table 2. The participants were contacted by the researcher by phone and notified of selection to participate in an interview. All Phase 3 participants were asked if they preferred to be interviewed in person or by telephone, and all indicated that a phone interview would be more

convenient. The researcher assigned numerical identifiers according to their interview order. The first interview participant was identified as I1, the second I2, the third I3, and so on. Each individual was reminded of the purpose of the study and of her rights related to consenting to participate in the study. The researcher also reminded the participant of her right to withdraw from the study at any time. For each interview, the researcher asked questions that emerged from the responses provided during the focus group. The researcher also informed the participants that the interview was being recorded. In order to record the interview, the researcher used her personal cell phone, turned on the speakerphone and recorded the interview with a handheld recorder personally owned by the researcher. These recordings were also electronically stored on the researcher's password protected computer.

During the interview, the researcher provided each participant with the same definition of the term 'resiliency' as was provided to the focus group members. Each interview participant was asked 25 open-ended questions (see Appendix D). The researcher asked a question and provided the participant with time to respond until all questions were answered. Conversation during the interview was limited to the topic of research. The researcher asked each question and only conversed with the interviewee if clarity in the question was needed. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to conduct. After each interview was concluded, the researcher loaded the interview as an audio file to her personal computer and protected the file with a password known only by the researcher. The original voice recordings of the five interviews remained stored on the handheld recorder and was kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home. The researcher then transcribed all of the interviews in typed word documents using the

researcher's personally owned computer. The transcribed interviews were formatted as scripts including the interviewer's questions and then the interviewee's responses.

Because the researcher could not physically see or interact with the interviewees, limiting what would be possible to note, notations were not collected as data.

## Data Analysis

Consistent with the grounded theory approach, the qualitative data were initially analyzed during each individual phase of the study and then across all phases. The researcher first analyzed each individual teacher participant's narrative and then across all participants. Data were analyzed looking for themes to emerge from participants' responses. Data were coded based on the emerging themes, and data reduction occurred as the coding continued. A constant comparative method was utilized as emerging codes in each phase were kept in mind during the analysis of the subsequent phase. As analysis continued, theory grounded in the data from the participants began to emerge. Each phase of the analysis is presented below.

### Phase 1: Demographic Questionnaires

During the data analysis portion of the research study, the researcher compiled all information collected from the returned questionnaires into a chart. These data included demographic information including age, gender, race, number of years in education, highest degree held, number of years teaching children with disabilities, grade level taught, professional certifications held, and current setting of teaching. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed by comparing the responses of the potential participants to

the criteria of the study to ascertain if the potential participant could be included in Phase 2 or Phase 3.

### Phase 2: Focus Group

After conducting the focus group, the researcher transcribed the participants' responses into typed word documents. The transcriptions were printed and mounted on poster board sized paper so that the researcher could hand code the transcripts. The researcher read through the responses provided from the first focus group member and looked to identify key terms which emerged from each response to the questions. The researcher utilized deductive coding during analysis of the focus group interview by formulating codes based on key terms that emerged from responses to the focus group questions. The researcher looked for similar terms in each participant's response. For the focus group, the researcher used open codes to categorize data into broad topics that emerged. Then, as a theme emerged from the data, the researcher assigned each theme a color code. The researcher then looked across the five focus group members' responses for shared experiences or themes. The researcher read through the transcripts in their entirety, color coding all related responses for the particular theme. The researcher then compiled a list of shared experiences or themes that were reported by the focus group members and used these overarching themes to develop questions that would be asked of the participants who completed the individual interviews during Phase 2 of the study.

### Phase 3: Individual Interviews

After transcribing each individual interview, the researcher printed each transcript and mounted it on poster board sized paper. The researcher first read through each individual interview transcript looking for the key themes that had been previously identified during the focus group data analysis. As similar themes emerged in the individual interviews, the researcher applied the same color code to the theme that was applied during the focus group. Then the researcher posted each interview side-by-side and read through the five interviews twice as though the five transcribed interviews were one continuous document or story. The researcher noticed common terms that occurred across the interviews and marked the reoccurring similar themes with the appropriate color code. All related responses were coded with the same color code. The researcher sorted through the data for relevant statements and established “meaning or meaning units” which were “clustered into common categories or themes” to further develop the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p.118). Coding processes were developed which utilized open coding, or a system for coding which allowed the researcher to analyze each line of the transcript (Hays & Singh, 2012). Inductive coding developed during Phase two were utilized during the individual interviews to better uncover the perceptions of teachers’ long term commitment to the field of special education. The data were analyzed across all of the participants’ responses as well as across all of the phases which lead to uncovering the final themes.

### Summary

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher conducted a qualitative study. A qualitative narrative research design utilizing a grounded theory approach was

used. All participants in the research study were from one public school district in West Georgia. The participants met a set of criteria established by the researcher. Having identified the participants and gained their consent to participate in the research study, the researcher began the research process by distributing demographic questionnaires, conducting a focus group with five participants, and conducting five individual interviews with an additional five participants. The resulting data were analyzed using a constant comparative process utilizing codes of themes that emerged from the participants' narrative responses. The findings are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND RESULTS

### Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents the findings and results that emerged from the data related to special education teachers' perceptions about their personal lived experiences and resiliency towards remaining in the field of special education for seven or more years. The findings were derived from descriptive narratives collected from five focus group members and five different individual interview participants. The researcher presents the research findings and results from the research questions and provides a summary of all relevant information for the participants. This chapter is organized by research question and includes findings from data from all participants, whether focus group members or individual interviewees. The following were the over-arching research questions:

1. What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice?
2. What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education?
3. How did special education teachers describe their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term?

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate special education teachers' personal experiences as special educators and their own perceptions of resiliency towards remaining in special education. After being a special educator for half of her 19 year

teaching career, the researcher noticed the difficulty schools were having employing special education teachers. The researcher gave consideration to why some special educators remained in the field for long term, when most leave within three to five years of entering the field.

### Participant Descriptions

The participants of the narrative study included 10 special education teachers, five participants in a focus group and five different individuals, who participated in individual interviews. All met the established set of criteria to participate in the study. The established criteria included being a highly qualified educator in the field of special education, holding a current professional teaching certificate in the field of special education, being employed in a teaching position where the special educator worked directly with children with a documented disability which qualified the student as eligible for special education services, and having a minimum of seven years of teaching experience in the field of special education.

Two hundred and-thirty-two email invitations were sent to special education teachers in one West Georgia school district to invite them to participate in the study. If the teacher replied by expressing interest in participation, an email was sent asking for informed consent (see Appendix G). Then the teachers were asked to respond with contact information if they desired to participate in the study. Once contact information was received from the respondent, a questionnaire (see Appendix B) was emailed which inquired about demographic information such as age, race, and years of teaching experience. Within the questionnaire, four questions were asked which were related to the research questions. The first five respondents who returned the questionnaire and met the

criteria of the study were selected as participants for the focus group. These five initial participants were contacted by the researcher to establish a time to conduct the focus group. Meanwhile, respondents continued to express interest in participating in the study. As interest was expressed by a respondent returning personal contact information, a questionnaire was emailed by the researcher. If the respondent met the criteria of the study, the respondent was added as a participant who would possibly complete a personal interview. The five participants chosen to complete phone interviews were the next five respondents who met the established criteria and returned the completed questionnaire. Collectively, there were five participants in the focus group and five different participants who completed individual interviews. In order to protect the identities of the participants, alphanumeric identifiers were used to distinguish each participant. All participants in the study, whether members of the focus group or individual interviewees, completed the questionnaire and provided information on their teaching experiences, education, and certification status.

All participants self-identified as being a highly qualified special educator who held professional teaching certificates in special education. Of the 10 participants, nine held additional certifications; three were certified in Early Childhood Education, two were certified in Elementary Education, one in Middle Grades Content (English, Social Studies, Science and Math), and one was certified in Secondary Content (English, Social Studies and Math). Half of the participants also held additional certifications to include the areas of Art, Audiology, and Deaf Education. The participants were all full-time educators who taught children with disabilities and had taught for a minimum of seven years. Teachers reported the number of years they had taught children with disabilities in

either their responses in the focus group or in the individual interviews. Four teachers reported teaching children with disabilities for between seven and nine years, two teachers reported teaching between 12 and 14.5 years and, finally, four teachers reported teaching 19 to 25 years. All participants held advanced degrees with six having obtained master's in education degrees and four with specialist's in education degrees.

Respondents were all Caucasian females who reported being between 26 to 64 years of age. The participants reported teaching across various educational settings. Three participants were teachers in a co-taught setting only, one taught in a self-contained classroom only, three taught in a combination of self-contained and pull out classrooms, two taught inclusion and pull out segments, and one taught in an inclusive classroom, pull-out segments, and itinerantly.

## Findings

Research Question 1: What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice?

During the focus group and individual interviews, the researcher asked specific questions related to what explanations these teachers provided for staying in special education as a long-term career choice. Three major themes, one which had three sub-categories, emerged:

### 1) The Students

- a.) Wanting to Help, Make a Change or Difference in the Lives of Children with Disabilities
- b.) A Connectedness with Children with Disabilities
- c.) Advocacy

- 2) A “Calling”
- 3) A Financial Need

### The students.

According to 100% of the participants, whether a member of the focus group or an individual interviewee, “the students”, children with disabilities, was the factor which contributed the greatest towards remaining in special education as a long term career choice. The participants expressed a perception of connectedness to the students, wanting to help children with disabilities, or assist in advocacy for students with disabilities as being a major reason why they remained in the field of special education long term. This is similar to research by Deci and Ryan (2000), which examines the desire to feel connected to others by loving and caring for them. One focus group member, FG1, who remained in special education for 19 years, stated that it is, “Just, the children.” Focus group member FG2 also stated the reason for staying in special education despite the challenges the position poses was because of “... the kids. I just keep doing this for them. I feel like they need me. I need them.” Similarly, a veteran teacher of 23 years, FG3, reported, “I absolutely get a rush when children finally get it.... but, those children need somebody who cares about them. Sorry. They’re sort of forgotten... like I said before, I feel like these kids need us.” Participant FG5 stated her reason for remaining in the field of special education simply when she stated, “I stay, I think, for the kids.” Unanimously, the teachers reported their students were a significant factor that compelled them to remain in special education. These responses, which related to the students as a factor for remaining in special education long term, was similar to research conducted by Henderson and Milstein (2003), who like Deci and Ryan (2000), described a

characteristic of caring and personalization towards the students, which is also associated to an individual's resiliency.

#### Wanting to help or make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities.

While all of the participants stated that the students with disabilities were the primary reason for remaining in special education, three of the 10 participants mentioned they had a specific need to help people, not necessarily people with disabilities, but people in general. Each of these three teachers explained that they believed they had a personality trait that provided them the ability to be a helper to others, especially those people who were marginalized or seen as needing help. Having a characteristic or personality which is more in tuned to helping people and being a care provider is consistent with the research of Henderson and Milstein. Teachers who had less experience reported significant differences in nurturing characteristics and the amount of support they need from administrators, colleagues and family (Muller, Dodd & Fiala, 2014). One focus group member, FG1, explained that, when working with children with disabilities, she was able to help by manipulating the instruction a "little bit so that they do 'get it'" in order to move the student towards progress. FG1 stated that this act of "helping" a student to perform a task that others may not have expected the student to perform was considered a success for the student, which in turn, made the teacher perceive herself to be successful. Interviewee I2 comparatively spoke of the "opportunity to serve children who were seen as less likely to succeed academically or socially" when she explained her reasoning for remaining in special education was because she "liked the opportunity to be creative with curriculum to meet students' individual needs" as a way to help children with disabilities to learn. By reporting they liked the opportunity to teach

children who were perceived as more academically or socially challenged, these teachers responses were similar to the findings of research conducted by Polidore, which suggests people who are resilient are often more likely to see adverse, challenging circumstances in an optimistic way, like the teachers in this research did (Taylor, 2013). Of the 10 teachers asked, 30 percent reported a reason for remaining in education long term was because of a sense of wanting to help or impact the life of a child with disabilities.

#### [A connectedness with children with disabilities.](#)

Twenty percent of the teachers explained that they felt a “connectedness” to children with disability as a reason for remaining in special education. Interviewee I1 explained the reason for remaining in special education for 22 years was due to a “level of empathy or something that connected in me that wanted to connect with those who were a little disenfranchised, or on the edge, maybe needed a little more help, or weren’t included.” These responses are related to the research conducted by Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory which states while people seek to attain personal goals and stratify psychological needs, without relatedness to others detrimental consequences will occur for the person (Deci & Ryan, 2000). By stating they felt a sense of connectedness to their students, the teachers describe the element of relatedness described by Deci and Ryan (2000).

Similarly, I4 described a personal awareness of connectedness to the students when she described having to understand each child’s specific needs and connecting to the child as an individual. Interviewee I4 has only been in special education for seven years, fewer than any other participant in the study, but voiced a perception of remaining in special education because of a relationship or “connectedness” with the students where

she combines all of the information she knows about a student, “from the psychological, to observations, to reports, and I pull all of that together to look past the disability and then see the student in order to help them to make progress.” After examining the responses of both the focus group and individual interviewees, only two teachers reported “connectedness” with a child with a disability as an impacting factor for remaining in special education. Additionally, the responses of I1 and I4 support the work of Stephens and Fish (2010), who state teachers, in general, satisfied in their occupation as special education teachers because they are allowed the opportunity of changing the lives of students with special needs in positive ways by providing strategies towards academic progress.

While only 20% of the teachers reported connectedness as a reason for remaining in education, and that percentage may seem insignificant, it was significant enough to include in the research because both teachers used the specific term “connected to” when describing their relationships with their students.

### Advocacy.

In relationship to “the student” being the reason for remaining in special education long term, 50% of the teachers stated a reason was because they believed they were providing advocacy, or support, to the child with disability. Focus group member FG4 explained that she had a love for the children and felt as though it was her job to advocate or fight for the children when she said:

The students. I love working with them. ... no matter what the student needs are, they need someone to speak for them, someone to advocate for them, and for someone to absolutely love them and want to do anything to succeed. I absolutely love the student.

Interviewee I3 resounded this sentiment by stating:

I just feel like, and not that I am the Lone Ranger in all of this, but I feel like they need someone to stand up for them, especially in the gen. ed. classroom, we have teachers sometimes who will say, “Well, he could do better if he really just tried”, well, no, really he couldn’t that’s why he is disabled. They don’t really understand the disability. Really someone to give them a chance to succeed.

During the interview with I2, she stated she felt as though she advocated for the student’s rights, “for their, for their rights, their human rights”, by explaining that a child with disability should never be excluded because of the degree or severity of his or her disability but that *all* children should be given opportunities to learn. Interviewee I2 recognized that all children may not have equal access to educational opportunities, but stated that she believed, as a special education teacher, it was her “responsibility” to afford children opportunities to participate in everyday life events, not just school. I2 described a situation that occurred outside of the school environment where she had an interaction with a child who used a wheelchair and was non-verbal. The participant, I2, repositioned the child in the wheelchair so “she could enjoy the activity like everyone else, but for herself.” Interviewees I4 and I5 both expounded on how they believed they advocated for children with disabilities by stating that they attempted to teach the students better life skills, how to access their own communities and the resources that are available to them, and to speak up for themselves. Each of the responses provided by FG4, I2, I3, I4 and I5, correlate to research conducted by Stephens and Fish (2010) which states teachers of children with disability tend to have higher sense of compassion towards children diagnosed with disability, which is one of the reasons provided for these teachers going into the field. Fish’s research also states teachers who choose to work with children with disabilities typically do so in order to advocate, support or make a positive impact to the child’s life.

### A calling.

Of the participants, 60% stated they felt a calling or a sense of knowing they were always meant to be special education teachers. This relates to the research conducted by Taylor (2013) which says that resilient people typically have a personal trait that allows the individual to do a certain work because of a moral or religious reason. Similarly, Polidore found being able to call on their own religious faith during particularly challenging times within their careers, allows teachers be more resilient and continue teaching despite the difficulties (Taylor, 2013). Several of the teachers related their teaching positions to doing the work of God. During the interview, Interviewee I1 stated that she “definitely”, “absolutely felt like it is a calling. It has... I almost, and this will sound funny, but I almost feel like I get paid to do missionary work.” Interviewee I1 expounded on her perception of being called to special education by later stating in the interview that she celebrated a faith that says, “ ‘Do unto the least of these’, I feel like in God’s economy, I am doing good work.” These sentiments, expressed by I1, speak directly to the research of Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) that explains individuals often feel called to do the work of God, performing tasks they believe serve society and provide benefits to the greater good. Interviewee I3 shared these sentiments by explaining that she would “definitely say that that is it. As corny as it may sound, I totally believe that God has led me to be here and that is why I am there.” Likewise, when asked if she believed there was a calling on her life to teach children with disability, she stated:

It’s not a profession. You feel led to do it. Yes, it’s a calling. Yeah, you know, I had prayed for a long time for God to show me what I was supposed to do, and one day the principal asked me to sub. Then BAM! I

have a teaching position! That doesn't just happen by chance. I feel like I am doing what the Lord wants me to be.

These comments provided by both I1 and I3 not only speak to the research of Duffy and Sedlacek (2007), but also to the research of Bullough and Hall-Kenyon, who explain certain individuals enter into particular professions solely based on a summoning from a divine being. The work of Eckert (2012) also suggest that people are often led into a specific profession because of their religious affiliation or spiritual beliefs.

Resounding similar comments to I1 and I3 was Interviewee I2, who stated:

This is going to sound funny, but I truly believe God placed me in this position and it was His plan not mine, because I never planned on being a teacher. I give Him all the glory. He gives me whatever I need in order to sustain each day; it is not about me so much. For me, God really has played a big role, the biggest role in my being a special education teacher.

Of the ten participants, six stated they felt a calling on their lives to become a teacher, as well as to remain in the field. Of these six, all descriptive language related to a religious affiliation and a personal belief in a higher power, which influence their decisions about their personal and professional lives. Comments made by I2 relate specifically to the research conducted by Eckert (2012), who states while research exists that discusses calling from a spiritual power to a certain vocation, research also shows teachers who have a religious faith also find strength to continue to do work, despite its challenges, through the relationship with a higher power.

#### An economic reason.

Forty percent of the participants provided the reason for remaining in special education as an economic reason. Focus group member FG5 made reference to her reason for staying in special education as being impacted by the financial necessity of

having a job when she stated that, “I have too long in to go back now. As frustrating as it gets at times, I don’t want to start over.” This comment implied that starting over in a different career, at this point, would not be financially wise, as she had already completed twelve years of a teaching career after beginning the profession later in life as a second career choice. This is unlike Herzberg’s ToM, which states merely having basic needs met, suggests job satisfaction (London & Noe, 1997). For focus group member FG5, having her basic need of an income met is a reason for her choosing to remain in special education.

Similarly, respondent I5 implied that age and job security were two influences when discussing reasons for staying in special education when she stated, “Ok, well number 1, is my age. I am 57 and I got in this later in life and I don’t want to change now. Number two is job security.” During the individual interview with I1, she reported a love for teaching children who were preschool aged and who did not necessarily have a disability specifically because of the personal belief that early learning opportunities for all children are foundational to all future learning. However, because of a state mandate which does not allow regular education preschool teachers to be paid on the standard state pay scale for teachers, respondent I1 would have to take an ‘enormous pay cut, like I think, like \$25,000 pay cut’ if she were to leave the field of special education. Participant I1 replied, “I never even considered doing that” indicating she cannot financially afford to leave the field of special education because, while this respondent does currently teach preschoolers with disability, she is paid as a special educator. Interviewee I2 also provided a response related to financial need as a reason for remaining in special education when she explained that she never intended to become a special education

teacher, but instead had pursued a teaching position as an art teacher. However, because of, as she stated, “those situations that happens in a life where you find yourself in situation where you say ‘hmmm, maybe I’ll keep doing this’ and I just kept doing this and it kept rolling and, year after year before I realized, I was vested as a teacher in special education.” Interviewee I2 also stated, “As long as I have a financial need to educate my own personal children, to continue to pay for my own home, to continue to live life at a certain level, special education has been a blessing to me and my family” and continued to motivate her to return to the field of special education. While not the most reported reason for remaining in education, a financial need was reported as a factor in deciding to stay in education by 40% of the teachers. The responses of FG5, I1, I5 and I2, related to a financial need as a reason for staying in special education, are all in opposition of research findings of Deci and Ryan (2008), Herzberg and Billingsley (2004), who each explain having basic needs met is not a compelling enough of a reason to continue a task. However, these findings counter what researchers say about why teachers leave special education related to work environment. Researchers Taylor (2013), Castro, Kelly and Shih (2010), all report one of the main reasons for leaving the profession is because of poor pay rates. Further research, by Stephens and Fish (2010), reports teachers leave teaching even when provided monetary rewards and yearly stipends. Billingsley (2004) also cites economic factors as a reason teacher typically leave the field rather than stay.

### Supports Which Impacted the Teachers to Stay

Further related to the research question one, “What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term

career choice?” was the responses that the participants provided as various influences which impacted their decisions to remain in special education. The teachers also provided factors that provided additional support that they reported enabled them to continue to teach despite everyday challenges that presented themselves. Four categories of external supports emerged from the data that influenced the teachers to remain in special education and were as follows:

- 1) Positive Administrative Support
- 2) Positive Colleague Support
- 3) Family Support
- 4) Appreciation or Feeling of Value

#### Positive administrative support.

The special education teachers stated one of the most significant factors which provided support to continue to meet the daily challenges of being a special education teacher was having a school administrator who was supportive and believed in the work of a special educator. Fifty percent of the participants specifically mentioned feeling valued and supported by their school administrator contributed to their continuing in the field of special education long term. These sentiments align with what researchers Castro, Kelly and Shih, (2010) and Major (2012) all state about potential reasons for teachers leaving the profession, one of which is having an understanding administrator. Similarly, DeMik (2008) and Prather-Jones (2011), states teachers who have a supportive administrator tend to remain in the field, but those who feel unsupported eventually leave.

Interviewee I2 stated both the principal and assistant principal provided her with support during situations that could have ended in potential litigation, but with the

support of her principal, the situation was resolved, relieving stress. Interviewee I4 stated she felt the support of her administrator and believed that her principal, “trusts me to understand my area and he knows that I am going to try to do the right thing. He feels confident in me.” Because I4 felt as though her principal had confidence in her and I4 backed her decisions she made daily as a special education teacher, she described a feeling of being supported to continue to do her job. Likewise, I5 explained that having the support of her LEA (Local Educational Agency), who has been a special education teacher before, meant that she could continue to accomplish the daily tasks required as a special education teacher. I5 stated that the LEA supported her by advocating for her as special education teacher to both the school principal and at the school district level, particularly when she stated, “She (the LEA) is the only one that the district, if they will listen, who they will do anything for.” Administrator support at the building level was reported by half of the teachers as an impacting factor for deciding to remain in special education.

#### Positive colleague support.

In addition to the support of their administration, 60 % of the participants reported that having positive colleague interactions and relationships also provided the support needed to continue in the field of special education long term. Focus group member FG1 stated that knowing that her colleagues were going through, or had experienced, similar situations and that they demonstrated a level of understanding led her to feel supported at work. She stated that, “having someone to lean on” provided her with the strength to get through most situations. Interactions such as the one described by FG1 is supported by the research of Prather-Jones (2011), who explains collegial support

as a reason teachers give for remaining in the teaching profession. A lack of support from their peers makes teachers feel isolated, explains Prather-Jones (2011), and impacts teachers' to decisions to leave education. Like FG1, FG5 explained that, at one time in her career, she was the only special education teacher on her school's campus and that that was a lonely feeling. She stated having other special education personnel, to include relationships with a paraprofessional who was supportive of decisions she made for the students, was "huge" for her, as well. Interviewee I2 stated it best when she responded:

A special ed teacher needs a group of colleagues who understand where they are, where they have been, to sound things off of, but no one needs to be left alone to work on their own. Not only do they become stagnate if they don't have the opportunity to have someone to bounce things off of, but I certainly would never want to be the only special ed teacher in a school. I don't want that.

In addition to a supportive administrator, six of the 10 teachers reported that they also had relationships with colleagues that were supportive. These relationships with other colleagues assisted the teachers in deciding to remain in special education.

### Family support.

Fifty percent of the participants described their relationship with their families as a support that helped them to address the stress of being a special education teacher allowing them to continue in the field long term. For focus group member FG3, the relationship with her husband provided her an outlet to talk about the stresses of the day, and despite the fact that he does not experience the same stresses as he is not a special educator, he listened and acted as a sounding board. Having a supportive family, specifically a daughter who also worked in the field of education, was a support to I1. She described the benefit of having a daughter in education was to share the stories of the

day with each other where they share a connectedness through the shared experiences. While FG3 and I1 report relationships with family members are a supporting factor for remaining in teaching, research by Major (2012) and Swanson (2011), actually contradicts these sentiments and states that, in fact, the stress of being a special education teacher negatively affects a teacher's relationships with family members because of the long work hours, time away from family and stress. Fifty percent of teachers reported that they found that having the support of their family provided them with enough of a support to work through the stress of being a special education teacher, which allowed them to remain committed to the field.

#### Appreciation or feeling of value.

During the study, 40% of the participants provided a reason for remaining a special education teacher was due to the feeling that they had been valued or appreciated because of the services they provided to a child with disabilities. The findings in this research related to being valued or appreciated speaks directly to the research of London and Noe's (1997), Career Motivation Theory that identifies the need to be recognized as an characteristic of resiliency. Similar to London and Noe, Deci and Ryan (2000), as well as Henderson and Milstein (2003), all suggest feeling valued for work done, is a trait of one's resiliency. These participants explained that they perceived that, although the child might not have been able to voice appreciation because of the impact of the disability, they felt someone, a parent or family member, the child, or an administrator, saw their actions and appreciated their efforts. Interviewee I1, who taught preschool special education classes, stated that she realized that the students would not likely remember her role in their lives and that typically:

...these students don't get up at their graduation from high school and recognize you, they don't remember your name but some of the parents will. Parents have said that the relationship that was formed was meaningful and that as a parent of a child with a disability they have been encouraged.

Similarly, I2 and I3 explained that personal relationships with, "specific parents who appreciated what I did" continued to be the encouragement that they both needed to continue to do the work of a special education teacher. Interview I4 tells of one student who:

...was marked as the severest kind of EBD (Emotional Behavioral Disorder), he was on probation, in middle school, wore an ankle bracelet, most people thought he wouldn't make it. I advocated for him. I monitored his progress very closely, and he finally left middle school with the highest scores on the CRCT, and he was in an accelerated program to earn his GED, and finally ended up in the Army. His mom brought me his picture and told me thank you! This has motivated me to stay in special ed.

By returning to share the progress that the student had made in life, this parent provided proof to I4 that her efforts as a teacher had not gone unnoticed. I1 explained that appreciation such as this continues to motivate her to return to special education year after year.

Research Question 2: What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education?

### Resiliency.

During the focus group and individual interviews, participants were asked about their perceptions of resiliency. After scrutinizing the responses of the 10 participants, the researcher ascertained 100% of the teachers identified characteristics of resiliency for contributing to their longevity as a special education teacher, in spite of the fact, six participants did not use the term 'resiliency' itself. Each teacher, whether a focus group

member or individual interviewee, was provided with the definition of resiliency as the “successful adaptation to stressful, challenging life events in the face of significant adversity or the ability to ‘bounce back’ from adversity, uncertainty, or conflict” (Agnihotri, Krush, Trainor, & Krishnakumar, 2014). When asked if they considered themselves to be resilient, four of the 10 participants replied, “yes”, and then went on further to describe characteristics of resiliency they perceived related to their self. This is evident in I1’s response when she stated:

I do think I consider myself a resilient person. I have when I set my mind to do something I see it through, in all areas of my life. I mean, I have been married for 34 years. I do think I have a stick-to-it-iveness. I think what I am doing is important, but it makes me sad to say it, I no longer think the people who are in charge see what I am doing as important, but I see it as important and I just don’t quit. I am not gonna quit.

In this response, provided by I1, she speaks directly to traits of resiliency by stating she has a mindset where she follows through on her actions, a “stick-to-it-iveness, not a quitter”. Further in the interview with I1, she provided personality traits she believed made her a resilient person. Traits she described herself as having were, “Stick-to-it-iveness, not a quitter, and then optimism”, all of which are traits of someone who is resilient. I1’s response aligns to the findings in research conducted by London and Noe (1997) and Deci and Ryan (2000) that states resilient people want to be seen as doing work perceived as important and are people who typically demonstrate competence, but do so while remaining optimistic. By teaching children with disabilities, I1 stated she felt as though she:

...made a difference in the lives of children. I feel like I change and have the power to help regular ed. teachers feel like they are supported to deal with kids and help them to develop a sense of humor and to not get overwhelmed by special needs. I feel like

having people skills and a positive outlook and working for and supporting a cooperative work environment.

Additional characteristics of resiliency described by I1 in this particular response, where perceptions of being an agent of change, feeling empowered to make a difference, having a sense of humor, and an overall positive outlook. These characteristics described by I1 are all consistent with Deci and Ryan (2000) and Arais' (2013) findings related to resiliency that says people who are resilient tend to remain upbeat and positive, even in challenging situations and to the work of Doney (2012) who suggests teachers who are resilient also have a good sense of humor.

Similar to I1, I3 also directly referred to herself as a resilient person and described traits of resiliency she has as not taking challenging situations personally, being a reflective thinker and generally, "tough" or thick skinned. Comments like these relate to Deci and Ryan's (2000) research findings that state people who are resilient are less likely to be negatively affected by adversity. Interviewee I5, like I1 and I3, also described herself as resilient. She described characteristics of resiliency she had as being able to persevere through different situations, flexible, loyal to the work she completed, tough, but compassionate and as not taking situations too personally. Research by Deci and Ryan (2000) and Stephens and Fish (2010) suggest educators who remained in the field also reported a higher sense of compassion for children with a diagnosed disability. When asked specifically how she developed resiliency, I5 explained that her personal resiliency had "developed over experience" throughout her career. Finally, FG5, exclaimed, "Yes, resilient, or crazy!" and described her personal resiliency as the reason she continues in special education, and because she is "just down right stubborn".

Three other participants used similar terms related to describing resiliency when asked about their perceptions of resiliency. These teachers did not provide definitive responses of “yes” or “no” to the question of, “Do you consider yourself to be resilient?”, but in each of their replies, did provide responses that very clearly associated with the definition of resiliency or characteristics of resiliency. Focus group member FG4 said, when referring to her own personal resiliency, that while she never considered herself to be resilient, she thought more about being stubborn. FG4 stated, “I am not leaving this child until we reach this certain goal. And I am determined to be the voice for this child. Cause, I mean, it’s almost like, “No! We *are* going to do this ‘cause I love this kid.” Comments such as these, relates to the research of Deci and Ryan (2000) stating resilient people tend to feel more connected with others and seek opportunities to connect and care for others. When asked about resiliency, I2 stated that she felt as though teachers who left the field of special education because:

They don’t have any grit if they cannot stick it out. They need it to be a little bit easier, the children need to be a little bit cleaner, the situation needs to be a little bit less stressful, and that they just don’t have grit. I have grit. Some of this is I have learned to have grit, I pretty much feel confident that I now know what to do in most every situation. It is a certain amount of confidence that I have now that has developed, there is probably a certain amount of intuitiveness that you develop over a certain period of time that also gives you confidence and then ultimately makes you say, “No, I am not giving up. I’m not going to give up.” I feel like, going into special education, the grit makes you confident and that makes me stay and weather through.

While I2 never specifically named her own resiliency as such, she described attributes and characteristics of one who demonstrates resiliency when she stated she had “grit”, and a confidence to “not give up” and continued to weather through. When asked what made her continue in special education, I2 explained after 25 years of performing a

particular task, in her case, teaching, she perceived she had become more knowledgeable and that her “instincts became more fine-tuned. I think I have learned over time an innate sense of knowing what a child needs. But it has all evolved.” This idea of having “an innate sense of knowing what a child needs”, which as I2 stated, developed over time as a teacher, speaks to her having a degree of self-competence or efficacy as a teacher.

Competency and efficacy have both been terms that undeniably relate to resiliency. The responses related to competency are supported through the research of Stephens and Fish (2010) that found special education teachers who remained committed to teaching students with disabilities typically had a greater sense of competence in the classroom than did those who chose to leave the field.

I4 responded to questions about personal resiliency like FG4 and I2, did, by not directly stating she was resilient, but described characteristics of resiliency specifically when she said she saw herself as one who reflected on her teaching practices in an effort to “see what may go wrong” and then can adjust her own practices. I4 also described herself as an “overcomer” and as one who reflected on feedback provided to her about her teaching practices and made adjustments in her teaching. This practice was descriptive of resiliency as it related to competency. I4 further described characteristics of resiliency and competency she possesses when she stated she sees herself as, “confident in knowing what I am doing is right.” During the interview, I4 described a situation in which she did not know how to complete a particular task related to completing progress reports, but once she realized she did not understand the process, she immediately sought the assistance of another teacher who could help her with the task. Such behaviors are related to resiliency in that people who seek out assistance are practicing self-reflection of

their own skills, and like I4, sought help to be better. This act of seeking out help to solve a problem relates to research conducted by Doney (2012) who states teacher with characteristics of resiliency will demonstrate problem solving skills needed to complete tasks related to teaching.

Finally, the remaining three teachers explicitly stated, “No” when asked if they perceived themselves to be resilient. Although these teachers clearly stated they did not consider themselves to be resilient, and while their responses did not strongly suggest characteristics of resiliency, they did, however, relate to characteristics of resiliency. FG1 stated she continued to teach in special education because she, “just keeps doing it”, expressing she continues to come back to teaching, which she recognizes as a challenging task, day after day. She explained she continues to teach because of the support of a strong support system of fellow special education teachers, who understand what she goes through day to day. Gu and Day (2013) specifically identify a characteristics of resiliency as having working relationships with ‘significant others’ such as peers and administrators as FG1 described. FG2 said while she does not consider herself resilient, she continues to teach because of the impact she makes on the lives of children with disability. According to Stephens and Fish (2010), teachers who feel as though they make a difference in the lives of their students, typically report a higher sense of job satisfaction and therefore, continue in the profession long term. And finally, FG3, claimed she had never given her own resiliency any thought, but had reflected on teaching children with disability and perceived the profession to be “hard”, but then stated despite its challenges or being “hard” she “just keeps coming back”. While subtle, concepts or ideas depicted by these teachers, such as continuing to complete a task known

to be challenging or “hard”, despite its challenges, to produce a positive outcome, is the very core the definition of resiliency identified in research by Henderson and Milstein (1996), Doney (2012) and Muller, Dodd and Fiala (2014).

Research Question 3: How did special education teachers describe their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term?

For the final research question, the researcher examined the responses of the five individual interviewees interviewed during Phase 3. The question about personal experiences related to remaining in the field of special education were developed as a result of the responses provided by the focus group during Phase 2. In this section, the researcher reports the responses of each individual interviewee as separate narratives in order to best provide rich descriptions of each of the teacher’s personal experiences in special education. When reporting the responses of each interviewee, the researcher realized some of the responses were redundant and repetitive in nature. However, the researcher feels reporting the interviews in whole, as each interviewee responded to the questions asked, is important and speaks to the lived experiences of each interviewee, and therefore contributes details significant to better understanding their resiliency towards remaining in special education.

#### Interviewee 1 (I1).

I1, a 54 year old, veteran educator, has worked in the public education system for 28 years, all of which were in special education, teaching pre-school aged children with disabilities in a school located in an area of high poverty. She explained she held a specialist’s degree in special education and was also certified to teach elementary education, P-5<sup>th</sup> grade. Most of her experience was related to teaching children with

disabilities, but prior to obtaining a master's degree to teach, she was a clinical audiologist. Interviewee I1 described the reason for becoming a special education teacher was because she had simply always wanted to be a teacher and always felt connected to people who needed help. When she entered college in 1978, I1 declared her major as special education, specifically deaf education, because, at the time, a degree in special education meant working with children who were significantly intellectually disabled and, for the most part, institutionalized in state schools, which did not interest her. However, people who were deaf, may not have had the intellectual deficits of someone with an intellectual disability, so deaf education was a good fit. Even though teaching children with intellectual disabilities such as Down Syndrome, developmental disabilities, and autism was not the intention of I1, she reported she really "enjoys special education" now.

When asked about what influenced her to enter into the field of special education, I1 explained, "I cannot tell you an external force or outside influence which caused me to pick special education. I literally was drawn to it", stating she felt a 'calling' over her life to enter into the field of special education equating her work as a special education teacher as getting, "paid to do missionary work." These comments speak to the research conducted by Hall and Chandler (2004) that suggest a calling, while historically reported to be affiliated to a religious faith, can be from a secular viewpoint as well. Each interviewee was asked to describe a personal experience that led her to stay in special education. As explained by Prather-Jones (2011), a lack of collegial support was a reason for teachers to leave special education. Interviewee I1 provided collegial support as a reason for staying in special ed by stating that it was not one particular experience, but

that it was likely more related to being fortunate enough to have forged “meaningful connections and friendships with peers” which, in turn, made her feel as though she was understood professionally. Further supporting I1’s response to forging friendships with other teachers as a characteristic of resiliency is the research conducted by Taylor (2013) that says one of the traits of individuals who are resiliency is the ability to establish meaningful relationships with their peers. She also explained that most school years there would be a particular family or student who she developed a relationship with; a “really personal and intimate relationship”, usually with the parents. I1 explained that the relationships made with the parents of the students she taught, were so important because the parents have come back after years and thanked her for the influence she had in their child’s life and for, “bridging the gap for them, helping them into the next stage.” These relationships have provided affirmation to I1 that she has done a good job, although not always recognized. Like Taylor (2013), Henderson and Milstein (1996) explain two characteristics of resiliency are positive connection and meaningful participation, which is apparent in the comments of I1 who stated she sought to form meaningful relationships that influenced change in the life of a child.

During the interview, I1 was asked if she had ever considered leaving special education. I1 answered, “No. No, and I am embarrassed to tell you that, I really haven’t.” She went on further to explain that, after obtaining a specialist’s degree in special education, she researched other avenues in the education profession. She even taught older elementary aged students without disabilities during an after-school and summer school program, and while she enjoyed it, it was not such an enjoyable experience that

she would consider leaving special education. She further stated, “I enjoy doing special ed. No, I’m not leaving special ed. I still love it.”

I1 was also asked if she could repeat her entire teaching career over again, would she, to which she stated, “Hmmm, now that I don’t know. I think I would, but I am not a 100% sure.” I1 stated she did not know that she would have entered into the field of education, but again, spoke about a ‘calling’ stating, “the truth is when you are doing it, when it is a calling to you, it is what it is.” I1 went on to explain she might have given consideration to going into regular education instead of special education, which would, she suggested, likely have had its own challenges. Responses made about being called into special education relate to the research of Polidore and Taylor (2013), both stating people who have tendencies to be resilient are often called into a particular vocation. Finally, I1 admitted she was “not as romanticized” about the field of education now as she was when she entered the field 28 years ago, but eventually stated that she would likely have entered into special education if she had it to do over again.

The researcher further inquired what aspects might I1 have changed about her teaching career to which she replied, “I could have been more assertive about things I thought would have been a better way of doing things; maybe addressed things a different way” but, I1 stated she felt as though she had learned from all of the situations she had gone through in her career and would not want to change anything because it was the experience of each situation that made her who she was today. When asked whether she considered leaving special education, I1 ultimately responded that she had learned from the totality of the experiences she had, which is also a concept related to resiliency.

Henderson and Milstein (1996) described protective factors of individuals who are resilient and stated being able to learn from life experiences is a characteristic of resiliency.

Each interviewee was asked about supports available to them which allowed her to feel as though she may be able to continue in the field of special education. In I1's case, she described one support as a supportive family, specifically a daughter who was also in the field of education. I1 also described professional relationships with other teachers that have developed into close friendships. I1 explained that the relationships she had developed with other educators allowed her to feel as though someone else understood what she was going through as a teacher. Faith and a relationship with God was also described as a support by I1. During the interview, I1 stated that she has a faith that says, "Do unto the least of these", and by teaching children with disabilities she feels like she is doing good work. The final support described by I1 was a supportive school administration.

When asked about the support that she felt was most important to remaining in special education, I1 stated she perceived having a "good administration" who "thinks what I am doing is important" and also perceived the feedback that was given by the administrator as a valuable tool to continue as a special educator. I1 commented that having someone in a position above her providing her with comments of appreciation was "most important" and created within her a sense of validation. Comments provided by I1 about having a supportive administrator as a factor to remaining in special education are consistent with the research of Prather- Jones (2011) and Gu and Day (2013) who claim having an supportive administrator added to the teacher's overall sense of resilience.

During the interview, each interviewee was asked about her perceptions about her own personal resiliency to remain in special education. I1 stated she perceived herself to be a very resilient person and that when she set her mind to completing a task, she would see the task through, in all areas of her life, not solely related to her profession as a special educator. I1 explained that she had, “a stick-to-it-iveness”. She also described herself as not being a quitter, as optimistic, and humorous. I1 further stated she did not become easily overwhelmed in stressful situations and consistently sought to have a positive outlook, all of which, she considered traits of a resilient person. Personality traits described by I1 about herself, such as continuing through tasks that are difficult, being optimistic and having a sense of humor are all traits of resiliency described in the research of Taylor (2013).

Another area inquired about was advocacy for children with disabilities. I1 explained she believed that as a special educator and the lead special education teacher at her school, it was part of her job to advocate for children with disabilities as well as those who have not yet been identified as disabled. She said she has to continually remind other teachers, regular education teachers, of the process for special education. By explaining the process to the other teachers, I1 advocated for the rights of all children.

When asked if she felt a sense of obligation to the field of special education, I1 explained her obligation was to the students she taught each year, not to the school or the district. She also stated if she were to leave the school district, she would likely continue to seek employment in the field of special education in some manner. I1 concluded by stating, “I completely believe in the field and I completely believe in special education. And in the field and the children.”

### Interviewee 2 (I2).

As an experienced special educator, 46-year-old I2 has spent most of her 25 year career teaching preschoolers with disability in schools in impoverished areas, although she has taught in a class for children with moderate intellectual disabilities. Initially, I2 went to school to obtain a bachelor's in psychology and later went on to complete a master's in art because she envisioned herself becoming an artist. But because she was in need of employment, and at the time the district was suffering from a shortage of special education teachers, I2 applied to teach special education. Without even knowing what the type of class was (a class for children with moderate intellectual disabilities), she accepted her first teaching position. I2 described the first year of her career as, "the hardest and most dramatic year" of her career. After the first year, I2 stated she had a feeling of being "invested" and "wanted to do this again".

I2, like the other interviewees, was asked about what influenced her to become a special educator. She replied what influenced her most was the need for a job as way to earn an income. Early on in her career, I2 stated teaching was never a profession she considered, but continued to teach year after year because, as she explained, "I found myself in the position of being a special ed. teacher and realized I really liked a lot of things about it." I2 described the reason for staying in special education was because she eventually "felt very confident in my practice" in order "to be creative with curriculum to meet students' individual needs". Her personal confidence was evident when she stated even though, "I never intended to be a Special Ed teacher but I have found that after 25 years that it was something that I was good at." The confidence I2 discussed during the interviews was related to the research of Bandura (1977) who stated self- efficacy aids

individuals who feel competent in their profession to continue on in challenging positions.

Having been asked to describe a personal experience that may have impacted her decision to stay in special education long term, I2 expounded by stating that there was no one single experience that convinced her to remain in special education, rather it was many events that helped her to return to teaching yearly. One such experience was related to building relationships with specific children and their families who voiced appreciation for her. She also spoke about being able to witness first hand, the progress each student made, and while some skills developed may seem menial to some, or go unnoticed by others, the progress of the student was a significant motivator when considering returning to special education each year. She reiterated this by saying, "Looking back some of it is even more profound than when you are actually doing it."

After having been questioned if she had considered leaving special education, I2 stated that while she enjoys teaching children with disabilities and did not plan to leave the field, she continues to have a personal need to earn an income. I2 said that at some point she worried about her abilities to physically keep up with preschoolers and said she would consider leaving special education if she were not able to perform the job as well because of personal physical limitations. However, I2 declared that she likely would not leave the field of special education, she just would not teach such a young student.

Interviewee I2 was asked if she could repeat her special education career over again, would she, she said, "Let's just say there are a lot of things in my life I would do differently. Yeah, I would do it again. I would do what I have done." I2 stated if she could change some aspect about special education, she would create a more supportive

district level administration. I2 explained that there had been times in her career where she felt as though she did not feel appreciated as a teacher.

I2 spoke about supports that were available that allowed her to continue as a special education teacher. She named her professional colleagues, teachers and paraprofessionals, as providing support. These professionals supported her in her daily teaching role by being available “to bounce ideas off of” and to be a “sounding board”. She also described her school principal and assistant principal as being supportive. In one instance where I2 was dealing with a challenging situation related to a student, she sought the advice of her principal. Her principal spoke words of kindness and support explaining to I2 that no situation was too difficult to come through. This supportive attitude exhibited by the principal reportedly made I2 feel as though she was not alone. Other than colleagues and supportive administrators, I2 said being with her family, prayer and going to church were ways she dealt with the personal stresses of being a special educator. The religious affiliation that I2 described as helping her to address personal stresses through prayer and attending church is directly related to the research of Gong, Zimmerli and Hoffer (2013) who explained teachers who reported a strong sense of a calling to education typically did not associate with feelings of exhaustion or depersonalization. I2 further spoke about her personal relationship with God as being a motivator to remain in special education by stating:

This is going to sound funny, but I truly believe God placed me in this position and it was His plan not mine, because I never planned on being a teacher. I give Him all the glory. He gives me whatever I need in order to sustain each day it is not about me so much. For me God really has played a big role, the biggest role in my being a special education teacher. So prayer, my church, my family.

Each interviewee was asked to speak about their personal understanding about their resiliency to remain in special education. I2 explained her personal resiliency as “having grit”. She expounded on this idea by explaining that “grit” allows a teacher to “stick it out” when the situation is stressful. She described herself as being resilient by stating:

I have grit. Some of this, is I have learned to have grit, I pretty much feel confident that I now know what to do in most every situation. It is a certain amount of confidence that I have now that has developed, there is probably a certain amount of intuitiveness that you develop over a certain period of time that also gives you confidence and then ultimately makes you say, no, I am not giving up. I'm not going to give up. I feel like, going into special education, the grit makes you confidence and that makes me stay and weather through.

When asked about whether she perceived herself as an advocate for children with disabilities, I2 mentioned she was an advocate because she attempted to give her students opportunities which include the student despite having a disability. She stated she believed that children with disabilities had the right to be involved and their rights were just as important as anyone else's. I2 further described advocacy as looking for ways to include all children in life events no matter how insignificant the event may seem and not making assumptions about children with disabilities.

Asked if she felt a sense of obligation to special education, I2 stated she did feel as sense of obligation to teach special education, but that the obligation was not to the field, but to the students and their parents. I2 explained she worked to build supportive relationships with her students' parents. She expounded on this by saying, “We have a collaboration with each other. It's global. I feel like we have a relationship.

### Interviewee 3 (I3).

I3, a 54 year old, long-term educator, has taught now for 19 years in the public school system teaching children with various disabilities in the regular education class, kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grades. I3's teaching experiences have all taken place at the same school, which over the past 19 years, has been a Title 1 school several times. I3 obtained a specialist's degree in early childhood education and was certified to teach both special education and elementary education, P-5<sup>th</sup> grade. Even though she held dual certifications, all 19 years of I3's teaching experience have been with children who had disabilities occurring in either a pull-out segment for part of the school day, a self-contained class, or in an inclusive, co-taught class. Currently, I3 teaches only co-taught segments in an inclusion classroom.

Before entering the education field, I3 worked as a manager of a local law firm for 20 years. I3 explained the reason she sought to become a special education teacher was because of a friendship she had with a special educator. While working at the law firm, I3 would visit the students in her friend's class and over time, she began to feel a "calling" on her own life to become a special educator. Because of sense of feeling that "this was what she was really supposed to do", she went back to school to become a certified special education teacher so she could teach children with disability. During the interview, I3 explained that she left the position at the law firm primarily because of a sense of a calling on her life and that she believed that, "God has lead me to be here and that is why I am there" consistent with research by Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) suggesting one perform tasks related to a particular profession because of a summoning from a higher power.

During the interview, each interviewee was asked to describe a personal experience that led them to stay in special education. I3 explained that she had not experienced one particular incident that impacted her to remain in special education, but it was a culmination of the 19 years' worth of experience teaching children who had special needs that impacted her decision to stay in special education year after year.

When asked if she considered leaving special education, I3 answered, "Yes, but not seriously, I could be doing something else, but I think no matter what job you do, whether you're a plumber, a doctor, or what, you think you could be doing something different." I3 was also asked if she could repeat her teaching career over again, would she, to which she stated, "Yes, absolutely. I think I would", but indicated that she would have begun her teaching career earlier. But overall, she explained that she would not, "have traded anything for my experiences in special ed. I just keep working through it. Every year, even with this year being so hard I want to start again."

Like the other interviewees before her, I3 described various supports that impacted her decision to remain in special education. I3 described the faculty and the school's administrators as key to her continued success as a special educator, specifically when the principal celebrated her by recognizing the hard work she put forth as a teacher. Outside of school, I3 said that her relationship with her husband and other family members helped to deal with the stress of being a special education teacher and that as long as she had those two things, a supportive school administration and family support, then she was "good".

Asked about her perceptions of resiliency, I3 stated that she perceived herself to be resilient. I3 described this school year as being one that had many challenges,

specifically related to children with disabilities with behavioral issues. Although the behaviors were considered serious and disrupting to the learning environment, I3 stated she did not let the students' behaviors discourage her. She said, "I don't take things personally, I am kind of tough. It takes a lot to upset me", but also described herself as resilient to meet the needs of a stressful classroom situation because she enjoyed teaching and believed that, "It is more about doing what you like and I think I am doing what I am supposed to be doing." Characteristics described by I3, such as not taking challenging situations to heart, being tough and doing what she is called to do are all characteristics related to resiliency described in research by Doney (2012).

Another area that was discussed was the area of advocacy. I3 stated that she perceived herself to be an advocate for children with disabilities because she had to "explain to regular education teachers about the disabilities and how each child works in the regular ed." She also stated:

I also advocate and explain 'fair' isn't 'equal', I show them (regular education teachers) what or how the kids learn. I also advocate for the students to the parents. Sometimes I have to tell the parent what the student needs where they don't see it.

Finally, when asked about having a sense of obligation to the field of special education, I3 explained she does not feel obligated to anyone when it comes to teaching children with disabilities. She ended by stating, "I do this because I want to."

#### Interviewee 4 (I4).

As the youngest teacher who participated in one of the five interviews at 44-years-old, I4 was also the teacher with the fewest years of experience in education. She had taught for 10 years, with seven of those years being in special education. I4 taught in a high school, teaching only co-taught classes, although she has also taught a class for

children with severe to profound disabilities in a self-contained classroom. She completed a master's in special education degree and held dual certification in special education as well as middle grades content areas. Interviewee I4 described her reason for becoming a special education teacher was because she had just "always knew from the start" teaching children with disabilities was what she wanted to do as a career. A calling on her life led I4 to seek out special education, and after having been asked to be a substitute in a class for children with severe to profound physical and cognitive limitations, she stated:

I had prayed for God to show me what I was supposed to do, and one day the principal asked me to sub. Then, BAM, I have a teaching position! That doesn't just happen by chance. I feel like I am doing what the Lord wants me to.

She further explained, "I knew it when I got there. It was the students." She explained she had always thought of herself as a "helper" and wanted to help the students meet their needs.

When asked to describe a situation or incident that led her to stay in special education, I4 told of an experience she had with a student who had the severest form of emotional behavioral disorder (EBD) she had ever encountered. She went on to explain that the student was on probation, in middle school, and confined to home, wearing an ankle bracelet to track his whereabouts. I4 developed a close relationship with the student and began to tell him how much she believed in him, continually encouraging him despite the grim outlook on his life. By working closely with this student and monitoring his progress, the student went on to eventually graduate with a GED and joined the military. A few years later, the young man's mother brought a picture of the student to I4 to see his success. I4 explained experiences like the one she described motivated her to be a special education teacher. She said she continued in special education although she was certified

to teach other grades and subjects because she, “sees more than just the needs of the students, but more than that, I see a person” and made a connection as a special educator.

When asked if she would consider leaving special education, I4 answered:

No. Because I see the impact that I make and the growth that I have seen students from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I play a part in their growth and I see that and the differences I make, I don't want to leave. I know they need me. It goes back to the feeling, it's hard to explain. These children have needs more than the general. That's why, if I leave, I feel like they might not have someone who understands them. I feel like I am an important resource for not just the students but for the gen ed teacher, too.

Related to repeating her career in special education, I4 stated simply, “Yes, I would. I would not have changed it. Period.”

I4 described supports that were available to her, allowing her to feel able to continue on as a special education teacher. She explained that she had a good relationship with her building administrators, both the principal and the Local Education Agent representative (LEA), as well as a family that supported her. One piece of advice offered by her principal that I4 explained has been a sort of support to deal with stress, was to always make time for yourself, value your family, and leave work at work. I4 said that of all of the supports available to her, the most important was her principal. She stated that she felt a sense of confidence and value each time the principal provided her with compliments about a job well done. She also stated that she perceived the principal's feedback as valuable to her ability to perform her job as a teacher because it provided a feeling of confidence, “in knowing what I am doing is right.”

Asked about her personal perceptions about her own resiliency, I4 answered she saw herself as a resilient person. She explained that at the end of each day she reflected

on what she did during the day. Each day she conducted a self-analysis and provided feedback to herself about how she perceived the day to have gone. I4 stated she used this personal reflection as a tool to help her grow professionally, but also as a way to see how far she had come despite the challenges of the day. When discussing her personal resilience, I4 stated, “I have seen too much in teaching to have anything overcome me. My mindset is about overcoming whatever might go wrong. We can always recover and come back.” In this comment made by I4, she described a sense of being able to recover quickly from a difficult situation, and demonstrates positive reflective think typical of a resilient individual. Such ideas are consistent with the research of Arias (2016), specifically stating resilient individual typically are upbeat and recover quicker from stressful event.

During the interview, I4 was asked if she perceived herself to be an advocate for children with disabilities to which she excitedly responded, “Oh definitely!” She explained advocacy happened daily by providing a “voice” to her students and that in some situations, the degree to which she may have advocated may be greater depending on the disability of the child. For example, the children who had more significant disabilities may need advocacy for better access to the community, better life skills and educational settings, where a child with a less debilitating disability may need her to help them understand an assignment or their IEP, but despite the degree of disability, she still perceived herself as an advocate by stating, “They can say to me I don’t understand, and I can help them by intervening for them, so I can tell them how to say something for themselves.”

Finally, when asked about a sense of obligation to the field of special education, I4 declared, “Obligation means I have to, right? Yeah, no, I do this cause I want to, because I am called to do this.” By declaring she was called to the field of education, I4 speaks to one of her own personal resiliency characteristics supporting the research conducted by Eckert (2012), that explained the profession of educator requires the called to teach because of characteristics related to morality and integrity, not out of obligation

#### Interviewee 5 (I5).

Fifty- five year old, experienced special educator, I5, has always taught students with disabilities during her 12 year teaching career. She has taught at the same high school, teaching in a pull-out or co-taught class, for her entire career. Despite the fact that she holds a specialist’s degree in English Literature and could teach regular education classes, I5 stated she prefers to teach in special education. Interviewee I5 provided her reason for entering into special education was impacted because of a relationship she had with an uncle, who was intellectually disabled and mentally ill. I5 explained that she noticed it seemed as though her uncle did not have the same opportunities available to him as others in the community. This perceived injustice influenced I5 to become a special education teacher in hopes of having some positive influence over the students that she might teach in the future. When describing potential optimistic hopes of helping students, I5 described research findings of Deci and Ryan (2000), that stated one of the motivating factors for entering a career for people who are resilient, is the potential of helping others.

I5 explained she entered special education as a second career after previously working in the banking industry. She explained the position at the bank never seemed to

be fulfilling. I5 described an unhappiness that came from working at the bank and realized she had always wanted to be a teacher. When asked about a feeling of being “called” to teach special education, I5 explained she had always felt a calling on her life to help others, specifically those people who seemed marginalized supporting the research of Taylor (2013), that described a resilient educator as one who had moral and spiritual support in their career. She said, “I feel called because I have always been the kind of person who roots for the underdog. I like to help those who aren’t able to help themselves or those who really need help, maybe more than others.”

During the interview, each teacher was asked to describe an experience that impacted her decision to remain in special education. I5 recounted an experience that involved a female student who had cerebral palsy that affected the student’s ability to care for her own personal hygiene needs. Many days, I5’s assistance was sought to address the student’s toileting needs. Eventually, the student graduated from high school with a special education diploma and, while I5 was never the student’s teacher directly, the two formed a bond developed purely because of the compassion I5 showed the student. This relationship was evident when she stated, “I had an impact on her life, not so much as a teacher, but as a friend.” The perceived feeling of having helped someone who could not help themselves influenced I5’s decision to remain in special education.

After having been asked if she had ever considered leaving special education, I5 quickly and assuredly answered, “No. No, never.” Asked if she would repeat her 12 year teaching career, she stated that she would do it all over again, exactly as she has done it. However, she did say she has considered what it would have been like to teach in the

regular education setting commenting, if she were ever to teach regular education, she felt more prepared because of her teaching experiences in special education.

When questioned about supports available to her that might aid her in being able to continue in special education, I5 provided several factors. The supports were a school administrator, an LEA and other special education teachers. I5 described the interactions she had with the school's LEA as being positive, specifically when needing assistance at the district level. I5 stated she perceived the LEA as the only person who could advocate for her as a special education teacher to the school district. Relationships with other special education teachers were also noted as being important to I5 because it was these relationships that allowed I5 to perceive a feeling of connectedness with other educators. Finally, I5 explained that the most essential support she had was her school principal. I5 has had the same school administrator for the entire time she has taught and has developed a relationship with the principal based on what she described as "respect" for one another. The description provided by I5 of having administrative support, as well as the support of other educators, supported research by Gu and Day (2013) that explains resilient teachers build relationships with peers and administrators.

Having been asked about her perceptions related to personal resiliency, I5 stated she considers herself to be resilient. She stated, "I always try to persevere through different situations." I5 described characteristics about herself which related to resiliency stating she saw herself as loyal to the profession and compassionate but "tough". She also explained her own personal resiliency as being, "a person who keeps going, even when you don't want to" which is consistent with the definition of resiliency provided by Arias (2016). Other characteristics she described related to resiliency were the ability to not

take situations personally and the ability to remain flexible. This was evident when she commented, “You have to be extremely flexible, extremely flexible, because if you are not, you are not going to make it.”

Related to the area of advocacy, I5 stated she felt as though she was an advocate for students with disability in many ways. I5 explained she advocated for her students by teaching them about real-life experiences. She also explained that she believed she was an advocate for her students by helping each student to understand their own IEP and by helping them to make realistic plans for their own futures. By supporting her students in this way, I5 demonstrated characteristics of resiliency explained by Deci and Ryan (2000) who stated resilient people seek out ways to support others through providing care and support. I5 further described advocating for the students by simply listening to them talk about their personal lives and by being present in their “everyday lives.” During the interview I5 was asked if she felt a sense of obligation to the field of special education. She stated, “An obligation? Um...no. I think I do it because I want to, not because I have to.”

### Self-efficacy

During an examination of the five individual interviews, a theme related to teacher self-efficacy emerged. Each of the individual interviewees spoke about her own self-efficacy as it related to her personal experience in special education as a long-term career. During the interview, I1 spoke about her personal efficacy by stating that she believed she had a way of teaching children with disabilities that was:

...a unique way of connecting with students that are struggling, and looking for ways to encourage them. That helps with my stress. I go into clinical mode, I don't get drawn into the stressful situation. I watch regular

ed. teachers in stressful situations and when I practice what I know, I feel more validated, calmer. It is wonderful to sit by a kid who is losing his mind by showing them that you are listening, it is kind of empowering and not everyone can do that.

The description provided by I1 details characteristics of one who demonstrates self-efficacy when she stated she believed she had unique characteristics needed for teaching children with disabilities, which is supported by research conducted by Bandura (1977). Interviewee I2 explained self-efficacy as a feeling of confidence that developed over her teaching career. Originally entering the field of special education, I2 explained she did not have a basic understanding of the necessary skills to teach children with disability. During the interview, I2 went on to state that, for her, these skills have developed over time.

She stated:

After 25 years you become knowledgeable about what you are doing and your instinct becomes more fine-tuned. I think I have learned over time an innate sense of knowing what a child needs. But it has all evolved.

Similarly, I3 provided an account related to her person efficacy as a special educator by saying:

I still have parents that come and see us, they appreciate what I have done, the experience has just been a pleasure. I am happy with what I do, I think I am doing what I am supposed to be doing. Sometimes I feel frustrated, this year especially, I feel like, at the district level, I am expected to jump through hoops, but I keep on doing what I think is right for the students and keep going to my school administrators who would do anything they can to support me, support the students, and, at the end of the day, that is what it is all about.

Like the interviewees before her, I4 also made specific comments related to self-efficacy when asked about professional supports that aided her in remaining in special education when she stated she had a relationship with her building administrator in which

she believed he “trusted her to understand her area” and that he had “confidence” in her abilities. Characteristics like trustworthiness and confidence are related to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). I4 also stated she was “confident in” her own abilities as a special education teacher and gained a sense of satisfaction by sharing what she knows about special education and teaching students with disabilities with regular education teachers.

I4 further stated she felt a sense of competence by saying:

I feel like they value my input and knowledge. I feel like they appreciate me. They give me compliments which makes me feel valued, but then I feel important to the students, too. The feedback they give is important to help me feel confident in knowing what I am doing is right.

Finally, I5 also spoke about her own personal sense of self-efficacy when asked if she felt as though she had a special way of teaching children with disabilities by stating:

No, I really take care of the kids that are on my caseload. I think I just am able to multi task and get down to...um...I think I have a lot of patience and other people may not. I think I read between the lines for the students to help them. Ya’ know, in the first year or two I wasn’t, but now, yes.

The final comment made by I5, “in the first year or two I wasn’t, but now, yes” speaks directly to self-efficacy in that it described a sense of developing a skill over a period of time, one in which I5 did not believe she had, but explained as developing over her experience as a teacher. Also related to her personal self-efficacy as a special educator, I5 said that if she was not a special education teacher, she would likely teach regular education. She explained further that she believed her experiences as a special educator have better prepared her to be an effective teacher who is able to impact the lives of children regardless of whether the child has a disability or not.

### Summary of Question 3

After analyzing responses from the five interviews, the researcher discovered that, collectively, the interviewees' experiences related to being long-term special education teachers were similar. All of the interviewees spoke of a personal desire to help children or people who seemed somewhat marginalized. The teachers also all related to a sense of a calling on their lives to be a special educator. Each teacher also provided a significant experience or explained that it was a collection of experiences that impacted them to stay in the field of special education.

Similarly, these five provided common factors and supports impacting their decisions to remain in special education. When asked whether they would consider leaving special education, they each responded that they would not. No teacher stated they felt a sense of an obligation to the field of special education but, did state they performed the duties of the position out of a personal desire to do so. After collectively examining the responses of the five interviewees, the researcher uncovered common themes related to resiliency described by the five individual teachers that were significantly similar, despite various years of teaching children with disability, ranging from seven to 28 years. However, the examination of the interviews separately from the focus group, revealed one additional theme not related to the focus group responses. The additional theme was related to self-efficacy. All five teachers who participated in an individual interview discussed self-efficacy as it related to her own resiliency to continue in special education long term.

## Summary

The researcher conducted a qualitative study in order to answer research questions related to the perceptions of teachers' resiliency towards remaining in special education as a long term career choice. The research sought to find answers for the following questions:

1. What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice?
2. What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education?
3. How did special education teachers describe their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term?

After collecting, coding, and analyzing data using a comparative process, themes related to resiliency emerged from the data related to each of the research questions. When asked during the focus group and individual interviews to provide explanations for remaining in the field of special education, three major themes, one of which had three sub-categories, emerged from the data. One hundred percent of the teachers reported, "The students" as the most significant reason for returning to special education each year. Teachers also reported three sub-categories to this over-arching theme as reasons for continuing in special education. They were: 1. Wanting to help or make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities, 2. A connectedness with children with disabilities, and 3. Advocacy. The special education teachers also reported a sense of a calling over their lives as a second theme and a financial need as the third theme that emerged.

In addition to these three themes that impacted their decisions to stay, data revealed a theme of external supports that also influenced these teachers' long term careers in special education. One hundred percent of the teachers reported having positive

administrative support influenced their decisions to remain in special education, with sixty percent reporting supportive colleague relationships impacting their decisions. Fifty percent stated having a supportive family also impacted their decision to remain, and finally, forty percent reported the reason they choose to stay in special education was because they felt appreciated or valued for the work they did as a special educator.

For the second research question, teachers were asked to describe perceptions about their own resiliency that impacted their decisions to remain in special education. One hundred percent of the teachers provided responses, either during the focus group or individual interviews, which described themselves as having traits or characteristics of resiliency. However, when specifically asked if they saw themselves as resilient, only three stated with certainty, “yes”. Four teachers did not provide a clear yes or no response to the question, but did, however, describe themselves as having specific definitive characteristics of resiliency. Lastly, three teachers stated “no”, they did not see themselves as resilient people; further in the focus group or individual interview, however, they went on to provide traits of resiliency that influenced them to stay in special education long term.

Research question three looked at how special education teachers who had remained in the field experienced being a special education teacher. This question was answered by providing a narrative of the individual interview responses given by the teachers. Each teacher was asked a series of questions not asked to the teachers in the focus group. All of the teachers provided similar experiences with shared common factors and supports that impacted their decisions to remain in special education. During the interviews, the teachers spoke about having a sense of self-efficacy, which was previously

not mentioned in the focus group, as it related to their own resiliency to continue in special education.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

According to national statistics, the educational system in the United States is quickly approaching a teacher shortage, greatly impacted by the attrition of numerous special education teachers. Because of the impending teacher shortage, it is critical to examine teacher retention, especially in special education. Not only have the high rates of teacher turnover contributed to a shortage of qualified teachers being available to teach, but overall, the shortage of qualified teachers affects student performance.

Many research studies have focused on special educators who have left the field as well as their reasons for leaving, however, few studies examined the teachers who remain long term and their traits of resiliency. Research related to resiliency is primarily focused on general education teachers creating a gap in the research about special education teachers remaining in education as a long term career choice and their resilience to do so. Motivated by the gap in the research, this researcher sought to gain a better understanding of special education teacher resiliency by conducting a narrative inquiry of special education teachers who stayed in the field of special education for longer than seven years. In this chapter, the researcher presents a summary of the study, a discussion and implications of the information gathered, and further recommendations and limitations of research.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of special education teachers' resilience towards remaining in special education as a long term career choice. The researcher sought to answer the following:

1. What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice?
2. What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education?
3. How did special education teachers describe their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term?

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher conducted a qualitative study using a narrative research design utilizing a grounded theory approach. The research was conducted examining the reasons teachers remained in special education through various conceptual viewpoints related to resiliency. Resiliency was defined as the ability "to spring back or rebound and show the ability to gather up strength and resources to overcome adversity" in order to go through challenging situations by adapting, in order to have a significant quality of life (Arias, 2016, p.13).

Participants in the research study were from one public school district in West Georgia. To participate in the research, each participant was required to meet a set of criteria established by the researcher. After identifying the participants and having gained their consent to participate in the research study, the researcher first began the research process by distributing demographic questionnaires (see Appendix B). The researcher then conducted a separate focus group with five participants and utilized the responses provided by the focus group members to develop questions that would be asked

to five additional participants in individual interviews. The results of the questionnaires, focus group responses, and individual interviews were analyzed using a constant comparative process developing codes of themes that emerged from the participants' narrative responses.

### Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Analysis of the descriptive statistics collected showed all of the special education teachers who participated in this study were Caucasian females. They were all full time teachers, employed by one public school district in West Georgia. The teachers taught various classes at various academic levels, but all ten taught children with disabilities. The disabilities varied in type and classification. One-hundred percent of the teachers had taught for more than seven years, with the years of experience ranging from seven to 29.5 years in education. The findings for each research question will be discussed below and compared to related literature.

Research Question 1: What explanations did special education teachers provide for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice?

After analyzing data collected from the focus group members and individual interviewees related to research question 1, three themes, with one theme having three sub-categories, emerged. The themes and sub-categories were as follows:

1) The Students

- c.) Wanting to Help, Make a Change or Difference in the Lives of Children with Disabilities
- d.) A Connectedness with Children with Disabilities
- c.) Advocacy

- 2) A “Calling”
- 3) A Financial Need

### The students.

One-hundred of the participants, those in the focus group and each of the individual interviewees, stated “the students”, the children with disabilities, as the factor which contributed the greatest towards their remaining in special education as a long term career choice. Each participant stated they wanted to help children with disabilities, expressed a perception of connectedness to the students, or wanted to assist in advocacy for students with disabilities as being a major reason why they remained in the field of special education long term. These findings were similar to research by Deci and Ryan (2000), which explained that individuals who have characteristics of resiliency tend to feel connected to others by loving and caring for them. These responses were also related to research conducted by Henderson and Milstein (2003), who like Deci and Ryan (2000), described a characteristics of caring and personalization towards the students, which is also associated with an individual’s resiliency.

### Wanting to help or make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities.

Of the 10 participants, three stated they had a specific need to help people, not necessarily people with disabilities, but individuals in general. Each explained they believed personality traits that they held provided them the ability to be a helper to others, specifically those with the need to be helped, like children with disability. According to Henderson and Milstein (2003), people with characteristics of resiliency are more tuned in to helping people by being care providers. By providing reports that they liked the opportunity to teach children with disabilities because the children present more of an

academic or social challenge, these teachers responded with findings supported by the research of Polidore suggesting people who are resilient are typically more likely to see challenging and adverse circumstances in a more positive optimistic way (Taylor, 2013).

#### A connectedness with children with disabilities.

Twenty percent of the teachers provided a sense of “connectedness” to children with disability as a reason for remaining in special education. These responses related to the research conducted by Deci and Ryan (2000) in their Self-Determination Theory, which explains people seeking to attain personal goals and stratify psychological needs, but without relatedness to others, experience detrimental consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although only 20% of the teachers reported feeling connected to their students as a reason for remaining in education, and while that percentage may seem slightly insignificant, the researcher included this information because of the way that the teachers used the term “connectedness” specifically as it related to Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory when describing their relationships with their students.

#### Advocacy.

Half of the teachers stated a reason they remained in special education was because they perceived themselves as advocating for children with disabilities. The responses provided by FG4, I2, I3, I4 and I5, directly related to research conducted by Stephens and Fish (2010) that states special education teachers who teach children with disability tend to have higher sense of compassion towards children who are diagnosed with a disability. According to Fish’s research, teachers who choose to work with children with disabilities typically do so because of an internal need to advocate for

children with disabilities in hopes of making a positive impact to the child's life. This was consistent with the findings in this study.

#### A calling.

Of the 10 participants, 60% percent declared that they felt a calling or a summoning over their lives to be special education teachers. Taylor's (2013) research explained that resilient people typically have personality traits that allow the person to enter into a particular profession because of a moral or religious reason. Likewise, Polidore discussed teachers who felt as though they had a faith or religion that they could fall back on to for reassurance in the times of stress or difficulties, allowing teachers to push through the challenging situations, contributing to their traits of resiliency (Taylor, 2013). Two of the six specifically related their teaching positions to doing the work of God. Such remarks speak to the research of Duffy and Sedlacek (2007), and the research of Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2012), who explain some individuals enter into particular professions solely based on a summoning from a divine being. Also, the work of Eckert (2012) suggested people are often led into specific professions like teaching because of religious affiliation, faith-based, or spiritual beliefs.

#### An economic reason.

Forty percent of the participants provided the reason for remaining in special education as an economic reason. Providing the reason for staying in special education as a financial need was in direct opposition of the findings of research conducted by Deci and Ryan (2008), Herzberg, and Billingsley (2004), all of which explained that simply having basic needs met is not a compelling enough of a reason to continue a task. However, the research of Taylor (2013) and Castro, Kelly, and Shih (2010), found one of

the significant reasons for teachers leaving the profession was due to poor pay rates. Additionally, research by Stephens and Fish (2010), reported teachers leave teaching even after having been provided monetary rewards and additional yearly stipends. Likewise, Billingsley (2004) cites economic factors related to low pay as reasons teachers typically leave the field rather than stay long term. For forty percent of the teachers participating in this study, economics played a role in their decision to remain in the field.

### Supports Which Impacted the Teachers to Stay

Also related to research question one, were the responses related to additional factors that influenced teachers' decisions to remain in special education long term. The teachers provided factors that gave them additional support to enable them to continue to teach despite having to face daily challenges. Four categories of external supports emerged as follows:

- 1) Positive Administrative Support
- 2) Positive Colleague Support
- 3) Family Support
- 4) Appreciation or Feeling of Value

### Positive administrative support.

Of all of the participants, 100% stated one of the most significant factors impacting their decisions to remain in special education was the support of an administrator to meet the daily demands of being a special education teacher. They spoke of an administrator at their school who seemed to understand the work of a special educator. Half specifically mentioned feeling valued or supported by their school administrator as contributing to their remaining in special education This explanation is

also found in the research of Castro, Kelly, and Shih (2010) and Major (2012), who provided one reason for leaving special education was because teachers do not feel supported by their school's administrator. DeMik (2008) and Prather-Jones (2011) also stated teachers who have supportive administrators tend to remain in the field, but those who feel unsupported eventually leave.

#### Positive colleague support.

Sixty percent of the participants reported that, in addition to having supportive administrators at the school, they also had positive colleague interactions and relationships that provided support needed to continue in the field of special education long term. Positive colleague interactions described by the participants in the study supported the research of Prather-Jones (2011), who stated collegial support provided additional support to teachers in the profession. Prather-Jones (2011) explained a lack of support from their peers made teachers feel isolated and alone, impacting teachers' to decisions to leave education.

#### Family support.

Of the ten participants, half described relationships with their families as a support that helped them cope with the stress of being a special education teacher. Although 50 % of the participants responded that the relationships with their families helped them to deal with the stress of being a special educator, research by Major (2012) and Swanson (2011), contradicts these sentiments indicating that, in fact, the stress of being a special education teacher typically negatively affects a teacher's relationships with family members due to long work hours, time away from family, and over-all stress.

### Appreciation or feeling of value.

Forty percent of the participants provided a reason for remaining a special education teacher was a feeling that they had been valued or appreciated because of the impact they had made in the lives of children with disabilities. These findings related to the research of London and Noe (1997) in their Career Motivation Theory that identifies the need to be recognized as a characteristic of resiliency. Like London and Noe (1997), Deci and Ryan (2000) and Henderson and Milstein (2003) all suggest feeling valued for work done is a characteristic of resiliency.

Research Question 2: What perceptions did special education teachers have about their own personal resiliency to stay in the field of special education?

### Resiliency

During the research process, participants were asked about their perceptions of resiliency during the focus group and individual interviews. One-hundred percent of the teachers reported characteristics and traits of resiliency which contributed to their longevity as a special education teacher, although six participants did not use the term ‘resiliency’ specifically. Whether a focus group member or individual interviewee, each participant was provided with the definition of resiliency as the “successful adaptation to stressful, challenging life events in the face of significant adversity or the ability to ‘bounce back’ from adversity, uncertainty, or conflict” (Agnihotri, Krush, Trainor, & Krishnakumar, 2014). When asked to consider their personal resiliency, 40% stated, “yes”, they considered themselves as resilient and went on further to describe characteristics of resiliency they perceived themselves to have. Some of the traits they

described themselves as having were a stick-to-it-iveness, never quitting, and being optimistic.

Additional comments were related to characteristics such as being an agent of change, feeling empowered to make a difference, having a sense of humor, and an overall positive outlook. Responses such as these align to the findings of London and Noe (1997) and Deci and Ryan (2000) showing that people who are resilient want to be seen as doing work perceived as important and are typically competent, but remain optimistic. Deci and Ryan (2000) and Arias (2013) both stated typically, people who are resilient tend to remain positive in challenging situations. Other participants described characteristics of resiliency as being a reflective thinker, “tough” or thick skinned. Such comments related to the Deci and Ryan (2000) research which found people who are resilient are less likely to be negatively affected by adversity. Additional traits described were the ability to persevere through different situations, flexibility, loyalty, compassion and not taking situations too personally. Research by Deci and Ryan (2000) and Stephens and Fish (2010) also suggested educators who stay in special education were likely to report a higher sense of compassion for children with disabilities.

Of the 10 participants, three used similar terms related to describing resiliency when asked about their perceptions of resiliency, but not the term ‘resilient’ itself. Each of their responses did, however, were associated with the definition of resiliency and its characteristics. These teachers made comments related to following a task through to completion, specifically when it related to students and their progress, and also described themselves as stubborn. Responses as such also relate to the work of Deci and Ryan (2000) explaining, resilient people are likely to report feeling more connected with others

and seek out opportunities to connect and care for others. Additional comments made by these three teachers were related to having a sense of competency and efficacy in their own teaching abilities. Both terms, competency and efficacy, have been terms that strongly relate to resiliency. The research of Stephens and Fish (2010) found special education teachers who remained committed to teaching students with disabilities typically had a greater sense of competence and self-efficacy in their personal abilities to teach impacting their decisions to remain in special education long term.

Lastly, of the 10, three teachers clearly stated, “No” they did not perceive themselves to be resilient. While they stated they did not see themselves as resilient, and their response to other questions did not strongly suggest characteristics of resiliency, they did, ultimately relate to resiliency. One teacher stated she continued in teaching even though it felt difficult. The other said she continued because of a supportive staff she worked with daily. The third stated she continued because she hoped she was making a difference in the lives of children with disability. Such comments are characteristics of resiliency as stated in the research by Gu and Day (2013) that identifies characteristics of resiliency as having working relationships with ‘significant others’ such as peers and administrators. Stephens and Fish (2010) also stated teachers who feel as though they make a difference in the lives of their students typically report a higher sense of job satisfaction and, therefore, continue in the profession long term. While these teachers’ responses may have been subtle and indirect concepts, each comment was connected to resiliency as reported in the research by Henderson and Milstein (1996), Doney (2012), and Muller, Dodd, and Fiala (2014).

Research Question 3: How did special education teachers describe their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term?

After closely scrutinizing the responses provided by the five teachers who participated in the individual interviews, this researcher discovered that the experiences relayed by the interviewees were almost identical to one another. Every teacher communicated their personal need to help a child with a disability to be successful. All of the teachers explained they felt a sense of a calling, either directly by God or through a connection to personal faith, to be a special educator. Barring none, each teacher also was able to relay a significant experience or a collection of experiences that impacted them to remain in special education as a long term career choice.

Likewise, each of the five interviewees stated that there were common factors and supports that significantly impacted their decisions to remain in special education. None of the five ever considered leaving special education. All stated they were committed to remain in special education. While none stated they felt significantly obligated to remain in special education, they did say that they continued to teach because of a personal desire to so. After reviewing the responses as a whole, the researcher uncovered common related themes that associate to resiliency. The characteristics and traits described by the five teachers were notably alike, even though the teachers have taught in different settings, taught children with differing degrees of disability, and had varying years of experience, from seven to 28 years. Additionally, after reviewing the interviewees' responses separately from those of the focus group members, the researcher noticed an additional theme not evident in the responses of the focus group responses. The additional theme was related to self-efficacy. All teachers who participated in individual

interviews described terms such as competency, confidence in one's skill as a teacher, or feeling a sense of self-efficacy as it related to her ability to continue in the field long term. Resilience and competence were both identified as important factors in these teachers remaining in the field of special education as a long-term career choice.

### Limitations

Despite the contributions to literature about the resiliency of special educators to remain in the field of special education made by this research study, limitations to the study existed. One limitation of the study involved the participants. Because the researcher chose to utilize a convenience sampling method, the researcher was limited to using only those participants who returned the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) and met the criteria for participation in the study. This sampling method resulted in all participants being Caucasian women. Therefore, the perceptions about resiliency as it related to a shared experience was only examined for one demographic group, Caucasian female special educators. Another limitation related to the participants was that the research was only conducted using special educators from one school district. Of the 10 participants, only one teacher had been employed by another school district. Because all participants were from one region with similar experiences, the likelihood of the results being transferable were narrowed. The final limitation was related to how the individual interviews were conducted. By conducting all the interviews by telephone, the researcher noted a loss of personal interaction that may have inhibited the depth of their story.

## Implications for Practice

When considering the implications for practice this research may provide, the researcher suggests examining teachers' characteristics of resiliency in order better understand their potential for remaining in the field of special education as a long term career choice. Based on the findings from this research, teachers who have remained in the field for seven years or longer tended to demonstrate character traits related to resiliency, making it likely they will remain in the field of special education. By having a better understanding of which teachers are resilient, and which are not, school district administrators could generalize that teachers who have such characteristics will likely remain in education. School administrators and district personnel concerned with teacher retention could also question teachers within their district to ascertain the degree to which teachers see themselves as resilient as well as what factors have impacted their decisions to remain in special education as a way to gather information about the teachers' needs for additional support. For example, the teachers in this study responded that supportive administrators and colleague relationships impacted their decisions to remain in special education. If school and district administrators knew of this need for support, and the potential it has for impacting a teacher's decision to remain in special education, then school districts could provide support to school administrators as well as professional development to other educators related to teambuilding. The researcher also believes that this information could be helpful to preservice teachers who are enrolled in teacher preparation programs. Sharing this information with preservice teachers in the

field of special education may promote a sense of personal awareness about their own resiliency prior to obtaining a teaching position. Overall, this researcher believes an awareness of the characteristics of resiliency by preservice and experienced educators, and by school and district administrators, could likely lead to improved retention of special education teachers.

### Recommendations for Future Research

While valuable information was found to better understand the resiliency of special education teachers towards remaining in special education, the researcher felt it is necessary to take in to consideration the limitations of the study when making recommendations for future research. In order to gain an even more extensive understanding of motivational factors that impact special education teachers' decisions to remain in the profession, the researcher suggests:

1. Replicate this study using a larger pool of participants from several school districts within one region.
2. Replicate this study using a larger pool of participants from multiple school districts across different states.
3. Conduct a study limiting the conceptual framework to one theorist's conceptualizations about motivational factors of special education teachers who continue in the profession as a long-term career choice.
4. Conduct individual interviews face-to-face so as to best establish a relationship between the researcher and the interviewee.
5. Conduct the qualitative investigation during the interview by first asking the interviewee to freely discuss their experiences in special education.

6. Conduct a qualitative investigation about characteristics of resiliency including teachers who are in the earlier stages of their careers.

### Conclusion

In this study, the researcher investigated the explanations special education teachers provided for staying in the field of special education as a long-term career choice and their perceptions about personal resiliency that impacted their decisions to do so. The researcher also examined how teachers described their personal experiences about remaining in the field long term. The researcher conducted a qualitative narrative study using questionnaires, a focus group, and individual interviews to gather information about special education teachers' perceptions of their own personal resiliency and experiences related to being a special education teacher of seven or more years. The findings indicate teachers who have remained in the field described themselves using terms related to resiliency and shared common experiences as special education teachers. Understanding and addressing characteristics and traits of resiliency held by educators, could influence long-term retention of special education teachers essentially decreasing the shortage of teachers in the teaching profession.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Participation Response

\_\_\_\_\_ **Yes**, I would like to volunteer to participate in the research study about special education teacher resiliency. If “yes”, please provide contact information.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Telephone Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Alternate Telephone Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email address:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ **No**, I would NOT like to volunteer to participate in the research study about special education teacher resiliency. If “no” please do not provide contact information.

## Appendix B

### Demographic Questionnaire

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email address(es): 1.) \_\_\_\_\_  
2.) \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone number(s): 1.) \_\_\_\_\_  
2.) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age range?  
 21-24 years old  
 25-34 years old  
 35-44 years old  
 45-54 years old  
 55-64 years old
3. Gender?  
 Male  
 Female

4. Race?

**African American**

**Caucasian**

**Hispanic/Latino**

**Asian/Pacific Islander**

**Native American**

**Other**

5. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

**Bachelor's**

**Master's**

**Specialist's Degree**

**Doctorate**

6. How many years have you been in the teaching profession?

7. How many years have you taught children with disabilities?

**0 to 6 years**

**7 to 9 years**

**10 to 15 years**

**16 to 20 years**

**21 to 29 years**

**30 + years**

8. What grade level do you teach?

**Early Childhood**

**Elementary**

**Middle School**

**High School**

9. Are you currently highly qualified in an area of special education?

**yes**

**no**

10. Do you hold certification in areas other than special education?

**yes**

**no**

If 'yes' to question number 10, what areas other than special education do you currently hold professional certification?

11. What type of setting do you teach in?

**self-contained**

**inclusion**

**pull-out for short segments**

**itinerant**

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Questions

1. Provide an account of your background in education.
2. What lead you to enter the field of special education?
3. What makes you want to be in (or stay) in special education?
4. Do you consider yourself to be a resilient person?
5. What gives you the resilience to stay in special education?

## Appendix D

### Individual Interview Questions

1. What explanations can you provide for staying in the field of special education?
2. Why did you enter special education?
3. Some special education teachers in the focus group said they entered special education because of a “calling”. Do you feel a “calling” to be in special education? Explain.
4. Do you have any relatives/friends with disability whose relationship may have impacted your decision to enter special education?
5. Can you elaborate about the relationship?
6. Describe personal experiences which led you to stay in special education.
7. Have you ever considered leaving special education?

8. What led you to stay in special education?
9. Can you describe any significant experiences with students with disabilities which may have lead you to stay in special education?

Demographic information during the focus group revealed special education teachers work in different environments with children who have various disabilities.

10. Describe the students that you work with.
11. What draws you to work with students with disabilities verses typically developing students?
12. Describe the various settings in which you have worked?
13. Which setting suites you the best and why?
14. What perceptions do you as a special education teachers have about your own resiliency to stay in the field of special education?
15. Would you consider yourself a resilient person when it relates to you willingness to remain in special education?
16. What characteristics of resiliency do you perceive yourself to have?  
If you had to repeat your entire teaching career in special education over again, would you? What would you change?
17. What supports do you have in place to address stress?
18. What ways do you deal with your own personal stress?
19. What do you perceive to be the most important supports to have in place as a special education teacher?
20. Why are these supports important for you?

21. How would you describe your personal experience as a special education teachers who has remained in the field?
22. Do you feel an obligation to teaching special education?
23. Do you perceive yourself to have a way of reaching students that no one else does?
24. Do you consider yourself an advocate for students with disabilities?
25. In what ways do you advocate for them?

## Appendix E

### Participation Acceptance Email

February, 2016

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Dear XXXXXXXXXXXX,

This email is to notify you that you have met the determined criteria to participate in the research study being conducted on the resiliency of special education teachers who have remained in the field for seven years or longer. I will be in contact with you to establish a time and date to participate in either the focus group or interviews.

Sincerely,

India Bruton Eubanks, M,Ed., Ed.S.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Columbus State University

## Appendix F

### Participants Follow-up Email

February, 2017

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXX

Dear XXXXXXXXX,

This email is to follow-up to a request which was sent to you last week. I am continuing to seek volunteers to participate in a research study I am conducting related to resiliency of special education teachers who have remained in the field for 7 years or longer. Please complete the attached response by indicating your interest in participation. If you are interested in participating, please complete the attached informed consent and provide contact information expressing a desire to participate.

Sincerely,

India Bruton Eubanks, M.Ed., Ed.S.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Columbus State University

## Appendix G



### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by India Bruton Eubanks, a doctoral student in the College of Education and Health Profession at Columbus State University. Advised by Dr. Pamela Lemoine, Assistant Professor, at Columbus State University.

#### **I. Purpose:**

The purpose of this project is to investigate the components of resiliency that enable a special education teachers to remain in the field of special education for seven years or longer.

#### **II. Procedures:**

After signing this consent form, you will receive an emailed questionnaire asking 12 questions about demographics and established criteria for participation from the researcher.

The researcher will contact the participants by email as to whether they met the criteria for participation in the study. Those volunteers who meet the criteria will be notified by the researcher to establish a time to conduct the focus group or individual interview.

The first five participants who met the criteria will be emailed about participating in the focus group. The five member focus group will be made up of special education teachers who have taught in special education for seven years or longer. The focus group will take approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted face to face at a location not affiliated with the school district. Participants will be reminded all responses collected during the focus group will be confidential. The focus group will be recorded using an electronic tablet which belongs to the researcher. All recordings will be stored electronically and password protected by a password known by the researcher only. The participants who are members of the focus group will not participate any further in the study. The responses provided during the focus group will be used to construct the questions asked during the personal interviews.

The next five participants who met the criteria will be contacted by the researcher through email to participate in interviews. Using information collected during the focus group, the researcher will ask no more than 10 questions about resiliency and professional experience as a special education teacher who has taught seven years or longer. Each interview will last approximately one hour. Interviews may be conducted either face to face or by telephone. Interviews conducted by telephone will be through the use of the researcher's personal cell phone. The face to face interviews will take place at a location mutually convenient for the interviewee and the researcher, but not affiliated with the school district. All data collected will be password protected by a password known only to the researcher.

All data collected from the questionnaires, focus group and individual interviews will be reviewed, transcribed, read, reread, coded and identified for common and uncommon themes.

**III. Possible Risks or Discomforts:**

The researcher is employed as a special education teacher in the school district in which the research project will be conducted. In order to avoid a potential conflict of interest, the special education teachers who are employed at the same school as the researcher will not be asked to participate in the study. No information about any teachers at the researcher's school site will be collected or recorded. The researcher does not hold an evaluative position over any other teachers in the district who may be potential participants. All questionnaire responses, focus group and interview data will be kept confidential.

**IV. Potential Benefits:**

The benefits of this study include identifying factors which positively impact a special education teacher's decision to remain committed to the field of special education by investigating their personal experiences and components of resiliency as special educators who have taught for seven years or longer. The acquired data may also be useful in building various supports and future resources for special education teachers.

**V. Costs and Compensation:**

No compensation will be provided to any of the participants in this study.

**VI. Confidentiality:**

All data collected will be kept locked and secured key in the researcher's home office in a locked cabinet. The researcher is the only person who has access to the cabinet. Recordings of the focus group and individual interviews will be stored on an electronic tablet with a password known only to the researcher. The data will remain stored for one year and will be destroyed/deleted by the researcher.

**VII. Withdrawal:**

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and your withdrawal will not involve penalty or loss of benefits.

For additional information about this research project, you may contact the Principal Investigator, India Bruton Eubanks at 706-315-7499 or [eubanks\\_india@columbusstate.edu](mailto:eubanks_india@columbusstate.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Columbus State University Institutional Review Board at [irb@columbusstate.edu](mailto:irb@columbusstate.edu).

I have read this informed consent form. If I had any questions, they have been answered. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research project. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research project. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.