BURNOUT: SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS EXPERIENCES WITH
CAREER DEMANDS

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Abstract

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study is to understand how special education (SPED) teachers make sense of their experiences as SPED teachers, how they view and understand factors that contribute to their career stress, as well as how they make sense of their relationships and experiences with other faculty, staff, and parents as well as how these relationships contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. Specifically, this study examines the influence of these experiences on teacher stress and burnout using the lens of the multidimensional burnout theory (Masloch, 1972) and the tenants of Bandura’s (2001) self-efficacy theory to understand the intricate relationship between the personal, behavioral, and environmental influences. The following questions were used to guide this research: How do special education teachers describe their experience of being a special education teacher? And how do various factors – structures, practices, expectations and relationships contribute to their sense of challenge and stress? The findings indicate that the participants experienced varying levels of stress throughout their special education careers and their ability to deal with these stressors influenced their decisions to remain a SPED teacher or consider leaving special education. The findings of this study may lend new meaning and understanding in supporting SPED teacher’s effectiveness, while conclusions drawn could be used to inform, create dialogue, and aide in the development of ways to mitigate stressors that impede special education teacher success. Finally, implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Stress, Burnout, Teachers, Special Education
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Empirical research reveals how teachers perceive their careers as rewarding (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). However, many teachers also report a high degree of stress, while displaying many symptoms of teacher burnout (Neves de Jesus & Lens, 2005; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). The high levels of reported stress leading to burnout have been associated with the elevated attrition rates of highly qualified education teachers (Kalassen & Chiu, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Stress has also been a contributing factor to attrition within the domain of special education (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Specifically, Teacher Stress (TS) has been attributed as the leading cause of special education teacher burnout within the United States (Kalassen & Chiu, 1010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Steinhardt, Smith, Jaggars, Faulk, & Gloria, 2011). Bakker and Demerouti, (2007) define teacher stress as “those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). As defined, it is no surprise the teacher stress is a leading cause of teacher attrition, teacher depression, and emotional exhaustion (Maslach, 1993; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

While a range of evaluations on teacher stress (TS) have been studied to demonstrate factors that lead to mainstream teacher attrition (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Mtika & Gates, 2011; Younge, Brindley, Pedder, & Hagger, 2004), there have been less studies focusing on factors that affect special education teacher’s stress, burnout, and attrition. Although, stress has been shown to be a critical factor in determining the causes of teacher attrition and teacher burnout in the mainstream classroom (Gonzalez, 1995; Kazdin, Mazurick & Bass, 1993; Rieg,
Paquette & Chen, 2007) there have been few, if any, studies focusing on how Special Education (SPED) career stressors influence special education teacher’s self-efficacy and burnout.

Most research on teacher job satisfaction, stress, and motivation to leave the teaching profession are based on survey methodologies, while little research is based on open interviews with larger samples of teachers (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Mtika & Gates, 2011; Younge, Brindley, Pedder, & Hagger, 2004). This is problematic because the teacher attrition rate follows a U-shaped curve, with the highest attrition rates observed early and late in teachers’ careers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Rinke, 2011) and therefore survey designs are not an appropriate tool to measure attrition rates. Therefore, it is important to gain more insight into how Special Education (SPED) teacher’s experiences affect their workplace stress. In this study, open-ended interviews of SPED teacher’s experiences at different stages in their careers was conducted using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study.

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to understand how Special Education (SPED) teachers make sense of their experiences as SPED teachers, how they view and understand factors that contribute to their career stress, how they make sense of their relationships and experiences as a SPED teacher, as well as how these experiences contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. Specifically, this study examined the influence of these experiences on teacher stress and burnout using the lens of the multidimensional burnout theory (Maslach, 1993) and the tenants of Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory to understand the robust relationship between the personal, behavioral, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1997).

The topic. Despite many career related stressors, many teachers manage to rise above these obstacles to become very effective educators. Teachers’ own personal motivations are
likely to play an important role in their teaching successes, milestones, and achievements (Langer, 2000). The traditional answer as to how teachers and educators succeed centers on their own education and administrative and collegial supports (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). In theory and empirical research, teacher success is supported by teachers who maintain high standards of excellence within their personal and professional lives (Ladson-Billings, 1990; Langer, 2000; Vandenbrink & Benschop, 2012). The focus of this research was on the emotional and social experiences of SPED teachers, how these experiences contribute to their career stress, how they make sense of their relationships and experiences and how their understanding of the experiences, contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. Typically, research conducted on SPED teachers is left out of the literature, moreover, no literature could be found on how career interactions and communication impact teacher stress and burnout. This study examined the issue of SPED educator’s experiences and the stress that these experiences might impose on special educator teacher burnout.

**Research problem.** The United States is nearing a crisis in special education due to the rising numbers of students identified as disabled. For this study, IDEA defines "child with a disability" as a child: "with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services." (IDEA amendments, 1997). Understanding this definition is important because it has a direct correlation to special education teacher shortages, and special education teacher attrition rates. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reports that of the 3,377,900 public school teachers who were teaching during
the 2011–12 school year, 84 percent remained at the same school ("stayers"), 8 percent moved to a different school ("movers"), and 8 percent left the profession ("leavers") during the following year. In 2012-13, of public school teachers with 1–3 years of experience, 80 percent stayed in their base-year school, 13 percent moved to another school, and 7 percent left teaching. About 51 percent of public school teachers who left teaching in 2012–13 reported that the manageability of their workload was better in their current position than in teaching. Additionally, 53 percent of public school leavers reported that their general work conditions were better in their current position than in teaching (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

In special education, the statistics are worse. According to U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 49 of the 50 U.S. states report a shortage of special education teachers/related service personnel, 12.3 percent of special education teachers leave the profession, which is nearly double the rate of general education teachers. Additionally, 82 percent of special educators across the nation report there are not enough professionals to meet the needs of students with disabilities, while 51 percent of all school districts and 90 percent of high-poverty schools report having difficulty recruiting highly qualified special education teachers. Furthermore, 98% of the nation’s school districts report special education teacher shortages, while the demand for special educators is expected to increase by 17% through 2018.

Since the Education for All Handicapped Child Act in 1975, which mandated children and youth ages 3–21 with disabilities be provided a free and appropriate public school education, the percentage of federally supported special education programs in public schools increased from 8.3 percent to 13.8 percent between the 1976–77 and the 2004–05 school years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).
Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This increase can be attributed to a rise in the percentage of students identified as having specific learning disabilities, which has risen from 1.8% in 1976-77 to 5.7% in 2004-05 school years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, the overall percentage of students being served in programs for those with disabilities decreased between 13.8% in 2004-05 to 12.9% in 2012-13 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, reported that the aforementioned changes in percentage patterns concerning specific conditions between the 2004-05 and 2012-13 school years could be attributed to various factors. For example, the percentage of children acknowledged as having other health impairments rose from 1.1 to 1.6 percent of total public school enrollment, the percentage with autism rose from 0.4 to 1.0 percent, and the percentage with developmental delay rose from 0.7% to 0.8% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, the percentage of children with specific learning disabilities has declined from 5.7% to 4.6% of total public school enrollment during this period (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Empirical research into these percent differences has identified a lack of special education teacher training, changes in legal definitions concerning disabilities, and increases in teacher retention based on workloads (Askey, 1999; Bain, 2012; Berry, Petrin, Gravelle & Farmer, 2011; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Pinborough-Zimmerman et al., 2012).

In 1999, Askey reported on a survey completed by the American Federation of Teachers (1999) showing that SPED is the area with the greatest shortage of teachers in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reports that
this deficiency is still valid today. The American Association for Employment in Education (AAEE) lists five areas of special education shortage as being in the fields of emotional/behavioral disorders, multi-categorical, severe/profound disabilities, learning disabilities, and mild/moderate disabilities (AAEE, 2000). Other areas of shortage in SPED education nationally ranked in the top 15, include: mental retardation (intellectual disability) (6th), visual impairment (9th), and hearing impairment (11th), dual certificate (special education and general education (13th), and early childhood special education (15th).

The causes of the SPED teacher shortages are varied, but include the following reasons: isolationism (Carroll et al, 2003), the volume and complexity of paperwork (Mehrenberg, 2013), and IEP’s (White and Mason, 2005), as well as the limited number of curricular and instructional resources (Kelley, 2004). In addition, many SPED teachers identify how a lack support from school administrators, parents decreased, and an absence of collaboration among general and special needs teachers (Donne & Lin, 2013) leads to stressors that influence teacher burnout. SPED teachers often leave special education within the first three years of teaching.

Relating the Discussion to the Audience

The shortage of SPED teachers and the fact that there is an increased levels of turnover concerning these teachers, an additional strain has been placed on this domain of general education, creating a dire need for quality teachers. Since the access to a free and appropriate public education is a right garneted under federal law, students with special needs are entitled to additional supports and services that allow them to experience education on an equal footing with their peers (Fossey, et al., 2017). The need for certified SPED teachers who are able to provide the required supports and services that are essential to these disabled students’ learning
are currently limited. This shortage as well as high rates of turnover, indicates that students with disabilities are not receiving their right to a free and appropriate public education (Krainz, 2013).

In conducting this study, the beneficiaries of the results were identified as educational administrators, special education administration, special education teachers, other special education domains, general education teachers, specialist teachers within inclusive and separate school settings, as well as parents and students. The results of this study may be used to inform best practices to improve special education teacher effectiveness and conditions that negatively influence the high turnover rates of SPED teachers. By doing so, special needs students will benefit from a more stable, productive and fulfilling learning experience.

Justification for the research topic and deficiencies in the evidence. Every year, schools in the United States hire more than 200,000 new teachers, of which approximately 12,000 are SPED teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Unfortunately, by the end of the first year more than 10% or at least 22,000 have moved within or left the profession, while 30% move or leave after three years and 45 percent move or leave after five years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Teacher attrition has held steady of the past fifteen years at 6% while SPED teacher attrition has remained at 12.5% during the same period. Nationally, the average financial cost per district associated with replacing teacher positions is approximately $11,000, which nationally equates to an estimated $5.8 billion dollars (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Of the $5.8 billion dollars, American schools spend $2.2 to $2.6 billion replacing teacher positions of teachers who have dropped out of the profession (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; McKinney, Berry, Dickerson, & Campbell-Whately, 2007).

To further exacerbate the teacher attrition problem, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) projects that between 2014 and 2024, there will be a need for more than 135,000 special
education teachers. This projection is represented by the growth and projected growth patterns between 2010 and 2020, which is determined to be 15.3% growth. Nationally, this will add an additional cost of 1.5 billion dollars to account for SPED teacher growth (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; McKinney, Berry, Dickerson, & Campbell-Whately, 2007). Currently, approximately 20% of the nation’s 3.2 million teachers are baby-boomers waiting to retire within the next two years, where 60,000 new teachers will be needed (Duncan, 2009).

The literature provides little information concerning how stress may be produced as a result of special education parental communications (Shean, 2006). The literature provides a focus from a parent’s point of view (Spann, Kohler, & Soenkesen, 2003), viewpoints from general educators and administrators (Fan & Chen, 2001, McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999), and from the special education teachers’ viewpoint of SPED students (Havey, 1999; Landam, Tankersly, & Kaufmann, 2003). Specific to education literature, information is limited to the social-emotional effect upon SPED teachers’ communicating with SPED parents (Calderon, 2000, Havey, 1999) and how special educators deal with the ever-present shadow of potential parental complaints or litigation as being higher than those of mainstream teachers because of additional legal requirements identified in the IDEA (2004) (Mueller, Singer & Draper, 2008).

Other concerns affect teacher morale (Brantlinger, 1997), self-esteem, and teacher job satisfaction (Goldberg & Kuriloff, 1991). The results of this study may prove helpful in understanding the feelings and emotions attributed to the duress during periodic communication exchanges with SPED parents that could drive teachers toward feelings of burnout. Findings from this study could prove useful to SPED administrators in designing programs to assist SPED
The purpose of this study was to seek an understanding of how special educators make sense of their experiences as a SPED teacher, how these experiences contribute to their career stress, how they make sense of their relationships and experiences with parents, and how their understanding of the experiences, contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. This study attempted to fill a void in the literature pertaining to special education research as most of the research on teacher stress focuses on the general education teacher and not on the special education teacher. Therefore, this study regarding SPED teacher stress and burnout will help to close this gap, while adding a new dimension to the literature by identifying factors that contribute to SPED teacher stress. In sum, there is at best limited empirical evidence regarding the experiences of SPED teachers and more specifically the effects of these experiences on SPED teacher careers. What evidence that does exist does not directly bear on the phenomena and therefore justifies the need for this study.

SPED teachers work with special needs students who often require additional support that general education teachers are not prepared or trained to confront. Physical demands on SPED teachers to lift, carry, move, feed and care for biological needs of their students are required, and at times, can be very exhausting. Understanding if the factors associated with these demands, result in SPED teacher stress and burnout, will provide valuable insight as to how these factors can be parlayed into corrective courses of action that assist in removing some of the obstacles that cause SPED teacher stress and burnout. Once identified, these stress factors will allow administrators to make appropriate changes to SPED teacher roles so that they can be more concentrated on student learning. This understanding could support the development of
improved resources for SPED students, SPED teachers, and others who have a vested interested in special needs students.

**Research Questions**

Given the high number of SPED teacher attrition rates, increasing numbers of reported SPED teacher burnout cases, increasing rates of special needs diagnosis’s, increasing career related demands on SPED teachers, and the lack of literature exploring how parental communications influence these areas, this study seeks to understand how SPED teachers make sense of their experiences as a special education teacher. The 2 research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do special education teachers describe their experience of being a special education teacher?
2. How do various factors – structures, practices, expectations and relationships contribute to their sense of challenge and stress?

Towards achieving this goal, the researcher intended to understand and make meaning various SPED teacher’s experiences to include communications with parents of special needs children. The study utilized SPED teachers from rural, urban, and suburban public schools as well as a special education cooperative in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. However, before the study could be conducted a reflection of the researcher’s positionality must be reviewed.

**Positionality**

Takacs (2002) wrote, “one’s positionality can bias one’s epistemology” (p. 168). The researcher’s understanding of her own knowledge and experiences can bias her thoughts and opinions about an experience. In general, people believe that their own thoughts and
understandings are universal truths. It is in acknowledging that our own knowledge is not a universal truth that we can open ourselves up to ideas and thoughts of others (Takacs, 2002). This may be explained through a designation of abnormality and inferiority that is oriented in positionality, which Briscoe (2005) identifies as an “othering.” Briscoe (2005) clarifies othering as the mechanism in which dominant groups causally represent non-dominant or minority groups as being inferior not normal others. In turn the majority (dominant) groups advance at the same their own social identities (Briscoe, 2005). Dominant groups include educators (Lerman, Vorndran, Addison & Kuhn 2004), researchers (Briscoe) and parents (Brookman-Frazee & Koegel, 2004; Kaiser, et al., 2000). The researcher’s understanding and reflection of Briscoe’s (2005) review of othering prompts a reflection of how othering can influence a desire to maintain the foremost position as well as influence how this researcher recognizes and considers others as subordinate positions.

This researcher has worked as an elementary and gifted and talented teacher in a large school district in Northern Virginia for seven years. The researcher has also worked as an educational technologist supporting advanced technology in districts in Central Massachusetts. It is the observations of the researcher, as a teacher inside a public elementary school, which first informed the possibility of examining SPED teacher stress and how it may contribute to SPED teacher burnout. Moreover, it was the researcher’s specific observations concerning a parental discourse concerning SPED student education and the intensity and force that several parents displayed in exchanges with their child’s SPED teacher that further encouraged the researcher’s interest in this study.

Understanding and acknowledging the researcher’s own personal beliefs (and potential biases) towards the way SPED teachers make meaning of their experiences are essential to this
study because the results could be influenced by the researcher’s inherent bias (Briscoe, 2005). The researcher has observed SPED teachers working within their classroom, outside of the classroom within the school, as well as communicating with the parents of SPED students. It is these observations that have lead the researcher to draw conclusions about their experiences, their communication exchanges, and the level of stress that may be generated by all participants. The conclusions that the researcher may have previously developed have not been proven accurate within the literature and therefore may be incorrect. The observations that the researcher has been party to, has led to an interest and inherent desire to understand the experiences of SPED teachers and how they understand how it effects their stress and burnout. The researchers experience as a teacher could bias the researcher’s examination of this phenomenon and the researcher will need to consider othering during this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to understand how SPED teachers make sense of their emotional and social experiences, how these experiences contribute to their career stress, and how their understanding of the experiences, contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. Specifically, this study examined the influence of these experiences on teacher stress and burnout to understand the robust relationship between the personal, behavioral, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1997). To guide the inquiry of this doctoral thesis study, two different but complementary theories will be used as the theoretical framework for this study: Maslach’s multidimensional burnout theory (1993) and Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (1977). Much of the study will focus on the experiences of SPED educators and how these teachers made meaning of these experiences.
**Multidimensional burnout theory.** The theory of multidimensional burnout is based on Friedenburger’s definition of burnout, which was first used by psychologist Fruedenberger (1997a; 1977b) to describe the high stress levels of individuals within helping professions (1977b). Fruedenberger defined burnout “as the exhaustion caused by excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources” (Freudenberger, 1977 p. 32). Maslach (1993) viewed Fruduenberger’s definition as unidimensional because it looked at only one aspect of burnout: depersonalization. In 1981, Maslach and Jackson expanded Freudenberger’s definition to include two other aspects of burnout: reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In 1993, Maslach authored an empirical study: Burnout: A multidimensional perspective, which used the expanded Freudenberger’s definition to explain work related burnout in the health care profession (Maslach, 1993). Today, it is referred to as the multidimensional burnout theory (Maslach, 1993). Additionally, Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996) developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual, which uses the three core components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment to statistically measure stress in the workplace (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

Emotional exhaustion is defined as a chronic state of physical and emotional weakening as a result of being overburdened by issues at work and home (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Increased feelings of emotional exhaustion occur as emotional resources are used up and workers feel that they are no longer able to give of themselves at a mental and emotional level (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Major sources of this exhaustion include work task overload, micromanagement, and personal conflict at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Workers who are in a state of emotional exhaustion where they have nothing else to contribute and feel used up (Freudenberger, 1977; Maslach, 1993). They lack the ability and resources to refill their
emotional voids (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). In addition, they feel that they lack the energy to face another day or another situation in the work environment (Freudenberger, 1977; Maslach, 1993; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). In a recent study by Wang, Hall and Rahimi (2015), this overload was found to contribute to a state of depersonalization (Wang, Hall & Rahimi, 2015).

Depersonalization is a condition in which a worker no longer sees their personal individual value and goal within a situation or even the individual’s contribution to their environment (Maslach, 1993). In the education environment, depersonalization may be described as cynical attitudes towards students and colleagues (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006). Depersonalization usually develops as a response to emotional exhaustion (Freudenberger, 1977; Maslach, 1993). It is a self-protective mechanism that allows the person to detach them self from an emotionally exhausting situation or relationship (Freudenberger, 1977; Maslach, 1978; Maslach, 1993). This emotional detachment, however, can eventually turn into dehumanization that represents the interpersonal dimension of burnout (Maslach, 1993).

The third aspect of multidimensional burnout theory is reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1993). This refers to a person’s tendency to assess oneself negatively (Maslach, 1993). Within education, this refers specifically to the educators’ view of their effectiveness as a teacher (Billingsley, 2004). This self-evaluation provokes feelings of dissatisfaction and unhappiness towards job-related accomplishments and performance (Billingsley, 2004; Maslach, 1978, 1993; Zalaquett & Wood, 1997). Additionally, this lowered sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) combined with the demands of the employment can be exacerbated by the perceived lack of support and the limitation of opportunities to develop professionally (Billingsley, 2004). To further understand how SPED teachers make meaning of their
experiences, this study also utilized Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (1977) to supplement the tenants of multidimensional burnout theory (Maslach, 1993). By doing so, it revealed how SPED teachers make meaning of their experiences in terms of their self-efficacy and ultimately make meaning of their feelings of worthiness as a teacher (Bandura, 1977).

**Self-efficacy theory.** Psychologist Albert Bandura defines self-efficacy as one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1977). An individual’s sense of self-efficacy plays a major role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges (Bandura, 1977). The theory of self-efficacy is based on Bandura’s social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning and social experience in personality development (Bandura, 1969, 1973; Luszczynska, & Schwarzer, 2005). The central idea within the social learning theory is that an individual’s actions and reactions, including social behaviors and cognitive processes are influenced by the actions or reactions observed by or created by an individual within a social context (Bandura, 1969, 1973, 1977). Perceived self-efficacy is defined as an individual’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce a certain level of performance that influence events and affects their lives (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, and motivate themselves to behave. These beliefs in turn, influence the four meditational processes: the cognitive, the motivational, the affective, and the selection processes (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Luszczynska, & Schwarzer, 2005).

Bandura's (1977) identifies the role of self-efficacy beliefs in human functioning as "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true" (Bandura, 1977, p. 2). Bandura (1977) identifies how belief and reality are seldom perfectly matched and individuals are typically guided by their beliefs
when they engage the world (Bandura, 1977). To that end, how people behave is better predicted by their beliefs of their capabilities than by what they can actually accomplish (Bandura, 1977), while their perceptions about their own self-efficacy are factors for determining what individuals accomplish (Bandura & Schunk, 1981).

As a consequence, people's accomplishments are often predicted by their self-efficacy beliefs rather than by their previous endeavors, knowledge, or skills (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). This directly offers an explanation as to why people's behaviors are sometimes separated from their actual capabilities (Bandura & Schunk, 1981) and why their behavior may differ widely even when they have similar knowledge and skills (Luszczynska, & Schwarzer, 2005). The literature offers multiple examples of how self-efficacy effects why people suffer frequent bouts of self-doubt about their capabilities (Hermann, 2002; Schechter, 2013; Hardy, Govorun, Schneller, Fazio & Arkin, 2015), as well as why individuals are confident about what they can accomplish (Agarwal, 2016; Purcell & Barrell, 2014), even though they have a moderate number of skills sets (Meyer, 2014; Stolovitch, Keeps & Rodrigue, 1995).

A strong sense of efficacy enhances personal accomplishment and produces a personal sense of well-being in many ways (Bandura, 2014; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). People with high self-efficacy promote a confidence in their capabilities to approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided (Klassen & Choi, 2010; Schechter, 2013). Elevated self-efficacy is also evident by a study convened by Ryan and Deci (2000) who found that such an efficacious outlook promotes inherent interest and deep commitment in activities.

Confidence in one's own self-efficacy is further supported in the literature in terms of individuals who set themselves challenging goals, while maintaining stronger commitments to completing the goals (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014; Tjosvold, 1998) as well as being
able to sustain their efforts even in the face of failure (Duckworth, Peterson, Mathews & Kelly, 2007; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Other studies on self-efficacy offer insight into how individuals who maintain their confidence in being able to complete a task, often quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke & Hall, 2003; Conley, 2016; Zimmerman, 1995). People with elevated levels of self-efficacy attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and a lack of focus to acquire the skills needed for a specific task (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Waschle, Allgaier, Lachner, Fink & Nuckles, 2014). In addition, researchers found that elevated levels of self-efficacy produce raised feelings of personal accomplishment (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca & Malone, 2006), reduces stress and lowers susceptibility to depression (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus & Davidson, 2013; Gold, Smith, Hopper, Herne, Tansey & Hulland, 2010).

By comparison, the literature also supports the idea that people who have lower self-efficacy doubt their capabilities (Klassen, Krawchuk & Rajani 2008; Vancouver & Kendall, 2006), avoid difficult tasks (Margolis & McCabe, 2006), and view tasks as intimidating, unattainable and daunting (Liem, Lau & Nie, 2008; Shim & Ryan, 2005). These individuals have weak commitment to the goals they pursue (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007) and when exposed to difficult tasks, they focus on their personal deficiencies (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), on the obstacles they will encounter (Yost, 2006), and adverse outcomes (Smith, Kass, Rotunda & Schneider, 2006). Persons with low self-efficacy reduce their efforts and give up quickly when they perceive a task as difficult (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006). More importantly it has been revealed that these individuals are slower to recover their sense of capability following failure or setbacks (Hoy & Spero, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Wang, Hall & Rashimi, 2015). Finally, researchers found that because these people view
insufficient performance as lacking ability (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Schunk, 1995; Zimmerman, 2002), the thought of failure perpetuates a loss of faith in their capabilities (Berryhill, Linney & Fromewick, 2009; Carless, 2012), and they easily fall victim to stress (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996; Judge & Bono, 2001) and depression (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000).

**Application of theoretical frameworks to the research problem.** A lack of self-efficacy can lead to burnout (Burke, Greenglass & Schwarzer, 1996; Rosenow, 2013) through the cyclical nature of failure (Friedman, 2003; Ward & McCotter, 2004), lack of self-confidence (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), and depression (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Once on this downhill spiral, individuals are unable to recover without an intervention (Ross, Romer & Horner, 2011). Emery and Vandenberg (2010) reported that is especially true within the helping professions (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). For this research study, understanding the role that multidimensional and self-efficacy theories play within the confines of this research phenomena and was critical in understanding how SPED teachers make meaning of their experiences as a SPED teacher.

The two theoretical frameworks used in this study were selected to comprehensively examine how SPED teachers make meaning of their experiences concerning their SPED teaching careers. The frameworks of this study help to understand the scope of the phenomena within the limits of self-efficacy and teacher burnout, while providing a rich and dynamic understanding of how SPED teachers make sense of their perceived teaching efficacy and feelings of stress and burnout. The main tenants of burnout: the concept of being a failure, physical and emotional exhaustion, and the feelings of dehumanization will be used in conjunction with the components of self-efficacy: an individual’s level of motivation, affective states, and perseverance will be
used to produce a holistic view of SPED teacher experiences. By gaining a rich and deep understanding of SPED teacher’s level of self-efficacy in terms of stress and burnout, greater insight and depth can be given to this study’s phenomena.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Although teachers perceive their careers as rewarding, many teachers report high degrees of job related stress, while displaying many symptoms of stress which leads to teacher burnout (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Neves de Jesus & Lens, 2005; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). The high levels of stress have been associated with elevated attrition rates concerning highly qualified teachers (Kalassen & Chiu, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). More so, stress has also been a contributing factor to attrition within the domain of Special Education (SPED) (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Teacher Stress (TS) has been recognized as the leading cause of special education teacher burnout within the United States (Kalassen & Chiu, 1010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Steinhardt, Smith, Jaggars, Faulk, & Gloria, 2011). Bakker and Demerouti, (2007) define teacher stress as “those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312 as cited by Kosir, Tement, Licardo, & Habe, 2015). As defined, it is no surprise the SPED teacher stress is the leading cause of teacher attrition, teacher depression, and emotional exhaustion (Maslach, 1993; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

To understand how the intricacies and complexities associated with the effects of stress is understood through SPED teacher’s experiences, a review of the literature must be conducted. The topics reviewed are: legal considerations, advocacy, public policy, teacher qualifications, parental-advocacy, stress factors and teacher burnout. These topics are selected because they represent the foundation of special education and are critical components needed to understand how special education teachers make meaning of their career experiences. This review begins
with a historic SPED Pedagogy regarding the legislative history of individuals with disabilities and how their rights are protected under federal law.

**History of Special Education**

The history of Special Education (SPED) goes back to ancient Greek time, when the Socratic methodology of education included all individuals (Baron & Stalker, 1996; Branson & Miller, 2002). More recently, the rights of individuals and the responsibilities of those who educate have been set forth through legislation outlining and mandating individuals with disabilities rights (Martin et al., 1996; Ortiz Rodriguez, 2009; Winzer, 1993). Prior to the latter half of the Twentieth Century, American public schools provided minimal services to students with disabilities (Reynolds, 1989; Yell, Rogers & Rogers, 1995). Prior to 1975, only one in five students with disabilities attended a public school (Chandler, 2003; Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001), while other individuals with disabilities were institutionalized in state run hospitals (Felte & Perry, 1995; Ridgeway & Zipple, 1990). Additionally, up to the 1970s, individual states enacted laws allowing Local Educational Agencies (LEA) to deny enrollment to any individual for whom the LEA considered to be uneducable (Agran, Alper & Wehmeyer, 2002; Vincent & Martin, 2003). Parental and social advocacy (Trainor, 2010; Riddell, Brown & Duffield, 1994) on behalf of the disabled individuals and students led to litigation (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996), legislative responses and laws (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996) guaranteeing the rights of all persons with a disability as well as right to a free and public education (IDEA, P.L. 194).

**Advocacy, public policy, and the legislative agenda.** The history of advocacy in special education began in the 1950s and 1960s, when various advocacy groups promoted equality in education for disabled individuals (Allen & Cowdery, 2009; Yell, Rogers & Rogers, 1998; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). The SPED advocacy movement aligned its movement with
those of the civil rights movement (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung, 2008) and focused on the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (347 U.S. 483 [1954]).

Glickstein (1975) summarized the spirit of the case by revealing how Brown identified how separate educational facilities for minorities were by their nature inherently unequal (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Glickstein, 1974). Brown v. Board of Education (347 U.S. 483 [1954]) affirmed that all Americans, regardless of their race, are entitled to a quality education forcing Congress to review inequality through a more equitable lens (Ashley, 2005). Glickstein (1975) further noted how this pivotal case provided the foundation for guaranteeing all individuals rights under the 14th Amendment of the constitution (Sage & Burrello, 1986; U.S. Const., amend. XIV, § 2).

Blanchett and Shealey (2005) reported how this decision provided the legal foundation for “challenging the constitutionality of excluding children with disabilities from public schooling opportunities” (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005, p. 213; Sage & Burrello, 1986).

Advocacy groups for the disabled capitalized upon the ruling in Brown to further define the legal educational rights of disabled students (Reynolds, Wang & Walberg, 1987; Sage & Burrello, 1986). Melnick (1995) proposed that the most influential special interest group acting on behalf of disabled students was the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). The CEC, according to Melnick (1995) is the driving force behind most of the litigation and lobbying successes at the state and federal levels (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995; Melnick, 1995). The CEC provided expert testimony for the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC), which is identified as one of most influential cases that led to the passage of the Education for the Handicapped Act of 1975 (EHA) (EHA: PL 94-142) in 1975 (Herr, 1972; Melnick, 1995; Weintraub & Abeson, 1972). The EHA is considered to be the first significant passage of
legislation on behalf of individuals and students with disabilities (Prasse, 2006) and sets the legal precedent for guaranteeing rights under federal law (EHA: PL 94-142).

**Legal Precedents for SPED**

The 1975 Education for the Handicapped Act (EHA – P. L. 94-142) was the first law to define the parameters of special and regular education. EHA guaranteed a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), while outlining requirements considered applicable for children with disabilities (EHA – P.L. 94-142). Additionally, EHA acknowledged the need for parental involvement and support concerning their children with disabilities ages 5-21 and prescribed the requirement for an Individual Education Plan (IEP) (EHA – P.L. 94-142). Finally, it required that SPED children be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) possible. In 1986, it was amended to include services younger children ages 0-5 with special needs (EHA – P.L. 94-142). In 1997, Part H was renamed Part C under Public Law 105-17 and delineated the need for family involvement centered services (EHA – P.L. 105-17). Madsen, (2009) identifies family-centered services as those services that “offer access to a wider range of service options, builds on family strengths, emphasizes family choice in all aspects of planning and care, engages families on their own turf, and offers flexible funding streams to simplify accessing resources” (Madsen, 2009, p. 113), while Bailey, Buysse, Edmondson & Smith (1992) identify family centered services as being outside the norm and limited by barriers.

An amendment to the law changed the name of EHA to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (EHA – P.L. 94-142). The most significant changes included provisions that extended eligibility rights to children with autism, while listing and defining services that could be included in a student’s IEP (EHA – P.L. 94-142). In 1997, the law was further amended to authorize services provided to a student within the IEP, while allowing
families to use devices and services provided at school in the home environment (IDEA Amendments of 1997, P.L. 105-17). In 2004, a supplemental amendment defined and designated some of the characteristics of student learners with disabilities (IDEA – P.L. 108-466), while identifying the responsibilities of educators who support students diagnosed with a disability (IDEA – P.L. 108-466).

Martin et al. (1996) found that the IDEA legislation (PL 94-142) is mistakenly to have been the first to create individual rights to publicly provided SPED programs and services for students with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996). In actuality, during the years between the mid-1960s and 1975, state legislatures (Stafford, 1978) and the U.S. Congress (Zettel & Ballard, 1978) undertook legislative action to bring about the provision of special education programs and services to public education (Willis, 1977). For example, during this period, forty-five states passed laws that required, compelled SPED programs, while some states even allocated funds for programs (Martin et al., 1996; Stafford, 1978; Willis, 1977; Zettel & Ballard, 1979). However, enforcement of the state laws was lacking (Martin et al., 1996), resulting in the majority of students with disabilities (Lerman & Sanderson, 1978) being refused enrollment in America’s public schools (Lerman & Sanderson, 1978; Levinson, 1977; Martin et al., 1996). This resulted in millions of disabled students failing to receive an appropriate public school education (Chandler, 2003; Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Martin et al., 1996).

Almost immediately after the passage of the EHA, parents, advocates, school officials, and scholars began to debate the meaning and subsequent application of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) (Handel, 1975; Ostrom & Ostrom, 1971; Palfrey, Mervis & Butler, 1978; Shanks, 1970; Weintraub & Abeson, 1972). These debates led to due process hearings and litigation (Burton & Hirshoren, 1979), in order to determine a common and unified interpretation
that would fully encompassing the legal parameters of FAPE (Burton & Hirshoren, 1979; Turnbuil, Strickland & Hammer, 1978; Yell & Drasgow, 2000). More so, within the literature, litigation is identified as being synonymous with IDEA (Kavale, 1979; Higgins & Barresi, 1979; Yell & Drasgow, 2000).

In fact, Katsiyannis et al. (2001) note how no other part of educational law has been litigated more than that of the handicapped or disabled (Katsiyannis & Herbst, 2004; Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996). Katsiyannis and Herbst (2004) identified that the reason for the excessive litigation centers on the fact that school personnel lacked knowledge about how the IDEA ‘97 amendment provided parents’ rights within the special education process (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Billingsley (2000) found that school personnel, who lacked knowledge about the law, were violating parental rights (Cope-Kasten, 2013; Weber, 2002). Furthermore, Katsiyannis and Herbst (2004) identified how a lack of understanding of the law resulted in adversarial relationships between parents of children diagnosed with a disability, and school personnel (Kotler, 2014).

The pedagogy of PL 94-142 extents over 35 years and continues to have far-reaching and life-changing consequences for children/students with disabilities and their families (Castro-Villarreal, Villarreal & Sullivan, 2016; Sailor & McCart, 2014). Throughout the years there have been many changes and amendments to the law (EHA – P.L. 94-142; EHA – P.L. 105-17; IDEA Amendments of 1997, P.L. 105-17; IDEA – P.L. 108-466) to clarify legal interpretations, definitions, and intents (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Scanlon, 2013). The most recent change took place in 2004, where IDEA was amended and renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)(IDEA – P.L. 108-466; Weber, 2006; Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). Under the most recent IDEIA requirements, Local Educational Agencies
(LEAs) are being held responsible for student assessment and the development and delivery of a FAPE to children/students with disabilities (Losinsky, Katsiyannis & Ryan, 2014; Seltzer, 2013). With this responsibility and with share decision making with parents (Losinsky, Katsiyannis & Ryan, 2014; CITE), Minorini & Sugarman, (1999) identified how further clarity must be brought through the courts to minimize disagreements and stress (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, Singer & Draper, 2008).

More often than not, Lake and Billingley (2000) found that disagreements and stress between LEA’s and parents, centers on the Individual Education Plan (IEP) (Daniel, 2000; Fish, 2008). Fish (2008) identifies how the legal requirements of the IEP process, although intended to create a team approach, actually places SPED teachers in a position where they as the driving force for the school may place them at odds with parents of students diagnosed with a disability (Lee-Tarver, 2006). Lee-Trver (2006) found that because IEP is a guiding legal document (Kamens, 2004) and because it includes a statement of the pupil’s present levels of educational performance (Smith, 1990) a measurable annual goal (Capizzi, 2008), a component of special education related services and supplementary aids (Bausch & Hasselbring, 2004), participation with non-disabled peers (Wolfe & Hall, 2003), modifications, (Allen, Smith, Test, Flowers & Wood, 20010, and transition services (Kohler & Field, 2003), it places an inordinate amount of stress on the SPED teacher (Littrell, Billingsley & Cross, 1994). A review of the literature found that the legal precedents as set forth in this section might be directly attributed to SPED teacher shortages because of increased career and teacher responsibilities (Boe & Cook, 2006).

**SPED teacher shortage in the U.S.** The SPED teacher shortage is not a recent development within the U.S. educational community. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, (1998; 2000), more than 30,000 special
education positions were filled each year in the United States. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education (2000) reported that many of these jobs were filled by uncertified personnel. This is represented by Boe and Cook (2006) who reported how the need for fully certified special education teachers doubled within a 7-year period from 2001. The Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (2008) reports that the national shortage of highly qualified SPED teachers is at 11.2%, which is 5.2% above mainstream teachers. In the most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Education (2015), 484,240 teachers, which represents 3.5% of the total population of educators filling special education positions. This represents an increase of 141.4% since 2000–2001. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) reports that 57% of all school districts have difficulty in recruiting highly qualified special education teachers who are fully certified and that there is a projected 6% annual growth index through 2024.

Data from Annual Reports to Congress by the U.S. Department of Education (2016) finds that special educators have an average caseload of nearly 17 students (Carlson et al., 2001). In 2010, 55% of students with a diagnosed disability are instructed in general education classrooms more than 80% of the school day, while mainstream education teachers report they lack the skills to effectively instruct these disabled students (Bain, 2012; Berry, Petrin, Gravelle & Farmer, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2012). In 2007, Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar and Misra found that alternative mainstream teacher programs have limited application to the education of students with disabilities, due to the lack of pedagogical focus (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007), while in 2009, the Government Accounting Office reported the teacher preparation programs for mainstream educators require minimal preparation in instructing students with disabilities (GAO, 2009).
**Special Education (SPED) teacher role and responsibilities.** SPED teachers are federally required to assume the responsibility of educating children diagnosed with a disability from preschool through twelfth grade and until the student reaches the age of 23 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990; 1997; 2004). The work is legally outlined through a required federal document called an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan). The IEP outlines the necessary supports, accommodations, benchmarks, and goals for an individual child (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990; 1997; 2004). IEP supports may encompass both academic and behavioral concerns. SPED teacher’s direct meetings with parents and staff regarding academic and behavioral plans, while making necessary adjustments to these plans throughout the IEP school year. SPED teachers also work with children diagnosed with mild to severe disabilities using specialized techniques suited for the individual child. These unique career demands coupled with specialized teaching qualifications impact SPED teacher attitudes that lead to teacher burnout (Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, & Carter, 2015).

**Professional career demands.** Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, and Carter (2015) reviewed the professional demands placed on SPED teachers as reported by Olivier and Williams (2005) finding that the demands on SPED teachers include specific challenges that general education teachers do not experience (Olivier & Williams, 2005; Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, & Carter, 2015). In their study, Olivier & Williams (2005) report that SPED teachers must teach multiple grades, levels, and ages, while meeting the various student physical, learning, social needs (Oliver & Williams, 2005). These individual physical, learning, and social needs were found to present unique challenges to the SPED teacher that far exceed those of a general education teacher, while adding additional work and responsibilities (Olivier & Williams, 2005).
Adding to career demands, Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, and Carter (2015) reported on how SPED teachers must be knowledgeable with the vast number and varying ranges of intellectual, physical, and communication disabilities. For example, Billingsley (2010) identified how SPED teachers must address these complex disabilities in a specific manner in order to be effective (Billingsley, 2010; Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002). With the complexities associated with special needs disabilities and the vast knowledge needed to address the demands placed on SPED teachers, many positions are often filled by individuals who are under-qualified and unable to handle the idiosyncrasies associated with a SPED teaching position (Billingsley 2010; Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, & Willig-Westat, 2002).

**SPED teacher qualifications.** Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, and Carter (2015) reviewed SPED teacher qualifications as reported by Billingsley (2010) and Carlson et al. (2002). In addition to being under qualified, the majority of SPED teachers are teaching multiple students with varying disabilities for whom they are not certified. This occurs because IDEA classifications are interpreted by individual school districts who are allowed to implement multi-categorical systems requiring certified SPED teachers to educate any student identified with a disability (Billingsley 2010; Carlson, et al., 2002; Wrightslaw, 2009). Wrightslaw (2009) and Billingsley (2010) identify how this leads to SPED teacher role and responsibility confusion because it requires the SPED teacher to provide services ranging from collaborative teaching to functional curriculum services (Swanson, 2008). To compound the issue, Albrecht, Johns, Mounsteven, and Orlorunda (2009) reported how in rural areas, the SPED teacher is the only such teacher, which is further complicated by a lack of financial and teacher resources (Albrecht, Johns, Mounsteven, & Orlorunda, 2009; Crawford, 2007; Romano & Chambliss, 2000). Empirical research has revealed that these types of issues negatively impact teacher attitudes.
Teacher attitudes. McGregor and Campbell (2001) identify how teacher attitudes are considered a moderating variable, which influences the classroom environment. Examining attitudes as a moderating variable is critical to understand how teacher attitudes impact the classroom environment, teacher/student relationships, and impacts teacher stress (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008; McGregor & Campbell, 2001). Horrocks, White, and Roberts (2008) found that teachers, through their attitudes, display many forms of control such as: acceptance, disapproval, enthusiasm, and rejection, all of which contribute to the successes or failures within the classroom (Horrocks, White & Roberts, 2008).

Triandis (1971) defines teacher attitudes as an individual’s intellectual and emotional assessments and behavioral intentions toward information or objects. As stated, Triandis (1971) identifies that the object of an attitude could be individuals, organizations, emotions, values, and so on. In terms of the cognitive component of the definition, Triandis (1971) identifies this as the individual’s beliefs, information, and knowledge about or towards a person, an object, or an idea. Within the definition, Triandis (1971) identifies the emotional component as being characterized as a person’s emotional reaction to the object or person, while the behavioral component pertains to how the person acts or intends to act toward the person or object. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that when educators have positive attitudes towards special education, it will allow for and encourage positive teaching experiences reinforcing a positive teaching attitude (Forlin, Tait, Carroll, & Jobling, 1999; Hobbs & Westing, 1998; Wilczenski, 1992, 1995).
**Teacher burnout.** The concept of burnout is a term typically used in the work environment to describe a person’s lack of desire to continue with that work (Billingsley, 2004). Freudenberger (1974) originally identified the concept and defined it as being fatigued and empty of physical and mental power, or as a state of being exhausted. Freudenberger (1974) identified one of the main causes of burnout as having an inflated desire to fulfill unrealistic expectations that are defined by what is expected by the individual’s concept of social norms or by the individual him/herself. The main tenants of burnout are identified as the idea of being a failure, physical and emotional exhaustion, and the feeling of being worn out or physically beaten (Freudenberger, 1974). Finally, Freudenberger (1974) identified how these components of burnout are a result of an excess of demands being placed on the individual’s energy and strength.

Teacher burnout in SPED brings its own unique array of dynamics associated with the onset of teacher burnout (Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, & Carter, 2015). Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, and Carter (2015) identified the components to include a lack of administrative support (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), excessive or volumes of paperwork (Billingsley, 2004), challenging student behaviors (Hastings & Brown, 2002), position overload (i.e., the experience of too many unique demands on one’s time and resources; Adera & Bullock, 2010), and expectation-reality mismatch, which occurs when expectations of teaching do not align with what the teacher experiences in the classroom (Zabel, Boomer, & King, 1984).

Unfortunately, these are only some of the factors that many SPED teachers must deal with on a daily basis. Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, and Carter (2015) report how many SPED teachers believe they do not have the support of administrators and do not have the resources needed to cope with their unique responsibilities (Kaff, 2004), while having to perform more
non-teaching tasks than mainstream teachers, such as: drafting Individual Education Plans (IEP), convening IEP meetings, meetings with parents and other mandated paperwork (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). Although these factors may be associated with SPED teacher burnout and because they align closely with daily work expectations, it is critical to understand how SPED teachers make sense of these experiences. In this study, the scope of the research is focused on how SPED teachers make sense of their emotional and social experiences, how these experiences contribute to their career stress, how they make sense of their relationships and experiences with parents, and how their understanding of the experiences, contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. By doing so, it may identify ways to alleviate SPED teacher burnout before it leads to negative outcomes.

**Stress**

Stress is defined differently based upon which field of science using it. For example, stress in physics has been defined as: the internal distribution of force per unit area (pressure) within a body reacting to applied forces which causes strain or deformation (Mori & Tanaka, 1973). In biology, stress has been defined as aggression toward an organism resulting in a response in an attempt to restore previous conditions (Moberg, 2000). In the field of psychology, Selye (1926) originally defined the term stress as the “sum of all nonspecific changes (within an organism) caused by function or damage” or, more simply, “the rate of wear and tear in the body” (as cited in Everly & Lating, 2012, p. 6). In 1974, Selye revised this definition as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand" (as cited in Everly & Lating, 2012, p. 14).

However, for the purposes of this study, stress will be defined using Siegrist and Peter (1994) definition as a “high imbalance, a combination of high effort and low reward at work, or a high over-commitment, an exhaustive work-related coping style indexing the inability to
unwind” (Siegrist & Peter, 1994, p.130). This definition was selected because it is specifically written to describe stress within the work environment and job content commonly referred to as occupational stress (Motowidlo, Packard & Manning, 1986; Siegrist & Peter, 1994). Since teaching has long been identified within the literature as an occupation (Lins, 1946; Steinmetz, 1932), it is necessary to understand the complexities of occupational stress (Motowidlo, Packard & Manning, 1986; Siegrist & Peter, 1994).

**Occupational stress.** Occupational stress is a complex, multidimensional process with multiple variables (Guglielmi & Tatlow, 1996; LaRocco & French, 1980; Manning, 1986; Motowidlo, Packard & Manning, 1986). Although there are diverse measures of occupational stress, psychological health, anxiety, and job satisfaction these terms have been used interchangeably even within the literature (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Guglielmi & Tatlow, 1996; LaRocco, House & French, 1980; Newton, 1989). Hart, Wearing, and Headey (1993) found that occupational stress cannot be expressed using a single variable and that other variables (Hart and Wearing, 1995) must be taken into consideration such as personality characteristics, coping processes, and positive and negative work experiences (Hart, Wearing, 1995; Hart, Wearing & Headley, 1993). In 1981, Rutenfranz, Knauth, and Angersbach suggested that occupational stress occurs when there is an interaction between an individual’s characteristics, environmental resources, and stress factors, which are any physical, mental or social factors related to the job environment (Rutenfranz, Knauth & Angersbach, 1981). Cooper (1998) determined that occupational stress occurs as a result of social arrangements that are resolute by the work environment and how work is organized for an individual worker.

Other occupational stress research identifies how stress in certain fields has a greater impact on a person’s health and ability to maintain a career (Oginska-Bulik, 2005; Siegrist,
One such identified field is the social services (i.e., child care workers, social workers, teachers, etc.) in which there is a great deal of interpersonal contact (Brownell, 1997; Johnson et al., 1981; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In the teaching profession, these factors vary greatly and include student behaviors (hostility towards the teacher, not paying attention during class, noisiness, lack of effort in class, coming to class unprepared, hyperactivity, breaking school rules, harming school property, hostility toward other students, and lack of interest in learning) (Geving, 2007), a lack of parental and administrative support (Blase, Blase, & Du, 2008; Lambert et al., 2006), and the lack of task management (Rosenholtz, 1989) when dealing with additional responsibilities outside the classroom (Brown, 2005). These tasks can include parent/teacher conferences, bus monitoring, hallway duty, staff meetings, bathroom duty, cafeteria supervision, and a plethora of other tasks assigned to teachers have different class sizes, different learning styles.

**Teacher stress.** Teaching provides personal satisfaction to many people, but it also brings stress from a variety of sources. Shann (1998) reports that surveys show that teacher satisfaction is dependent on factors including: demographic factors, experience, environment, teaching position, and level of stress. Chief among the sources of stress are instructional and administrative demands, poor working conditions, student disciplinary problems, and friction with parents, colleagues, and administrators (Kyriacou, 1987, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). More so, teachers’ occupational stress has also risen due to ongoing educational reform efforts that include high stakes testing resulting in greater evaluation pressures, greater scrutiny, and greater criticism of teacher performance (Lambert & McCarthy, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In 2001, Kyriacou (2001) identified that teacher stress is derived from experiencing negative emotions as a result of being a teacher (Kyriacou, 2001), while Nichols and Berliner
found the greater the levels of teacher stress, the lower self-efficacy the teacher has about their ability to teach.

As teacher stress continues or increases, teachers may develop feelings of low self-efficacy (Bandura & Adams, 1977). Self-efficacy is the belief that an individual has the confidence to control their internal motivation, behavior and environment (Bandura, 1987). A person identified as having low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1987) has lost their confidence in their ability to control parts of their environment and they feel they have limited control over their behavior (Maddux, 1995). Teachers who exhibit low self-efficacy, experience inferior teacher/student communication (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003), lower levels of educational effectiveness (Ashton, 1984) and higher levels of job stress (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). To further understand teacher self-efficacy, the sources that impact their self-efficacy must be reviewed.

As one of a number of ‘helping’ professions, teaching is considered a highly stressful profession (Johnson et al., 2005, Klaasen & Chiu, 2010). The burden placed on teachers include: an increasingly growing workload (Greenglass & Schwarzer, 1996), lack of administrative support (Russell et al., 1987), low salary, and limited social and career recognition (Murnane & Olsen, 1990) and increased interactions with parents. Although there have been a number of surveys and quantitative studies regarding teacher stress (Azramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Miller, Brownell & Smith, 1999), there have been few qualitative studies have focused on teacher experiences with stress (Blasé, 1982). Understanding one’s own experiences is important because as Kyriacou (1987) explained there are a vast range of symptoms of stress that teachers’ report including depression, exhaustion, feelings of incompetency, and failure. While symptoms are a result of stress, it is causes of
SPED teacher stress that are the focus of this study (Fimian & Santoro, 1983; Fore, Martin & Bender, 2002; Kyriacou, 1987).

The causes of teacher stress are well documented in the literature (Kyriacou, 1987, 2001; Lambert & McCarthy, 2006; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). These sources include instructional and administrative demands, poor working conditions, student disciplinary problems, friction with parents, colleagues, administrators (Kyriacou, 1987, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005) greater evaluation pressures, greater scrutiny, and greater criticism of teacher performance (Lambert & McCarthy, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). However, most of the studies concentrate on the teacher student relationships (Baker, 1999; Decker, Dona & Christenson, 2007; Hastings & Bham, 2003). For example, Travers & Cooper (1996), identify how teachers find great stress concerning the negotiation of the various pieces of interactions with pupils such as disciplinary problems, disrespect of the teacher’s authority and motivational issues. Other studies concentrated on how stress derives from managerial pressures and the demands of inspections and appraisals (Blasé, 1986; Brimblecomb, Ormstrom & Shaw, 1995; Harden, 1999). Travers and Cooper (1996) identified these as being personality conflicts and vulnerabilities of the individual (as cited in Kokkinos, 2007). Nowhere in education are these demands more prominent than within special education (Billingsley, 2004; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977; Nislin, Sajaniemi, Suohon, Sims, Hotulainen, Hyttinen & Hirvonen, 2015).

**SPED teacher stress.** Special education is among the most stress-laden professions in all of educational specialties (Brunsting, Sreckovic & Lane, 2014; FENG & Sass, 2013; Pepe & Addimando, 2013). As a result, SPED teachers are found to be more dissatisfied with their jobs than teachers in mainstream education (Platsidou, 2010; Stempien & Loeb, 2002). Research reveals that additional stressors specific to special education (Cook & Leffingwell, 1983;
Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff & Harniss, 2001) from “within and outside of the classroom are associated with teacher dissatisfaction” (Stempien & Loeb, 2002, p. 258). These additional stressors include greater paperwork demands (Mehrenberg, 2013), coordinating their schedules with those of the general education teachers (Takala, Pirittimaa & Tormanen, 2009), training paraprofessionals (Breton, 2010), collaborating with general education teachers (Takala, Pirittimaa & Tormanen, 2009), collecting data for everything a child does (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2009), providing evidence of student growth (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007), dealing with the variability of each students’ needs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Mehrenberg, 2013), and the demands placed of involved parents (Fish, 2008). These stressors are further impacted by emotional characteristics that are common between SPED teachers (Fish, 2008), such as possessing a high desire to help others (Muller, Schuler & Yates, 2008) and greater empathy for those they work with (Platsidou, 2010).

SPED teachers enter the profession possessing a strong desire to help children with disabilities (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Murray & Greeenberg, 2006) and by extension; their families (Hawkins, Doueck & Lishner, 1988). This desire to help students with disabilities leads them to form strong bonds with students (Alvord & Grados, 2005) and their families (Murray & Greenberg, 2006), which in turn allows them to create stronger bonds with students (Leung & Erich, 2002; Wang, Hall & Rahimi, 2015) and families (Harwell & Jackson, 2014; Murray, 2002). Murray and Greeenberg (2006) identified how this connection between special educators, students, and their families makes it difficult for the SPED teacher to leave their emotions (Zembylas, 2003) and stress in the classroom (Brownell, 1997). This is important because Brownell (1997) recognized that professionals who are in ‘helping’ careers often exhibit empathic, sympathetic, idealistic dedicated work behaviors. Brownell (1997) found that people
who are in these careers are more vulnerable to experience excessive stress (Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf & Spencer, 2001), while Billingsley (2004) reported how SPED teachers are most vulnerable to experiencing excessive stress, especially when having a student with significant emotional (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein & Sumi, 2005), physical (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burcen, 2000), and intellectual (Saloviita, Italinna & Leinonen, 2003) disabilities. The affects of stress in special education are not limited to the SPED teacher (Wagner et al., 2005), they also affect the parents of disabled students as well (Keller & Honig, 2004).

**Parental stress.** Stress is common component of today’s modern family (Sewell, 2015) but in a family with special needs children, stress becomes a constant occurrence (Keller & Honig, 2004). Parenting a child with special needs brings with it many diverse challenges (Keller & Honig, 2004). These challenges include: behavioral issues (Neece, Green & Baker, 2012), sibling issues (Roper, Allred, Mandleco, Freeborn & Dyches, 2014), additional financial burdens (Vohra, Madhavan, Sambamoorthi & St. Peter, 2014), health issues (Jones, Hastings, Totsika, Keane & Rhule, 2014), as well as educational issues (Croft, 2013). All of these areas have been reviewed within the literature as causes of stress for the parents of special needs child (Keller & Honig, 2004; Jones, Hastings, Totsika, Keane & Rhule, 2014; Neece, Green & Baker, 2012; Roper, Allred, Mandleco, Freeborn & Dyches, 2014; Vohra, Madhavan, Sambamoorthi & St. Peter, 2014). Dyson (1997) identified how parents of children with disabilities experienced a disproportionately greater level of stress, than did those of children without disabilities. Gupta (2007) researched how parents with developmentally delayed children, self-reported significant higher levels of stress than parents of typically developing children based upon the increased parental burden (Cadman et al., 2012). Stuart and McGrew (2009) found that parents with
special needs children have increased parental burdens, which in turn add to higher family stress levels.

Parents of special needs children tend to rely more on extended family resources (Harper, Dyches, Harper, Roper & South, 2012) to help with their child and rely less on neighbors and friends (Stuart & McGrew, 2009). This reliance on the extended family (Stuart & McGrew, 2009) often reduced parental stress (Dardas & Ahmad, 2015), but in turn increased familial stress (Harper, Dyches, Harper, Roper & South, 2012) by placing increased stress on grandparents, aunts and uncles (Stuart & McGrew, 2009). More so, some of these parents have developed feelings of guilt due to the burden they placed on their extended families (Broomhead 2013). Burrell, Thompson and Sexton (1994) report how higher levels of stress in families with a special needs child, leads to an imbalance in the family structure. Boyd (2002) found how this type of imbalance could manifest behavioral problems in siblings (Orsmond & Seltzer, 2009), create marital discourse between parents (Trute, Hiebert-Murphy & Levine, 2007), and reduced parental self-efficacy (Fiman-Tov & Kaniel, 2011), while ultimately leading to burnout (Bakker, Demerouti & Dollard, 2008; Voydanoff, 2005).

**Occupational Burnout**

Today’s workforce deals with increasing pressures to balance their responsibilities between what is required at work and what is required at home (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2009; Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005). These pressures create tremendous strains on the individual (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010), personal relationships (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and the family (Dierdorff & Ellington, 2008). In all cases, these pressures and responsibilities lead to increased levels of stress (Rosenthal & Alter, 2012). Higher stress levels have been directly correlated with increased levels of burnout in today’s worker (Cropanzano,
Russell & Byrne, 2003). Although there is a casual affect between self-efficacy stress and burnout, the terms are not equivalent because stress is identified as having the properties of being “both pleasant and unpleasant” (D’Arienzo, 1981, p. 1). Therefore, it becomes necessary to define the term burnout.

Masloch, Jackson, and Leiter (1996) provide the best definition of burnout that is inclusive of other previous definitions of burnout and summarizes an individual’s physical and psychological reaction to high levels of long-term stress. Burnout is defined as “a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with other people in some capacity” (Masloch et al, 1996 p. 20). As defined, burnout is a type of psychological stress, which can happen for a number of reasons (Bakker, Van Der Zee, Lewig & Dollard, 2006; Pines & Keinan, 2005; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008), which also includes work related stress (Koehler & Koehler, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to define occupational burnout.

Cordes and Dougherty (1993) defined occupational burnout as a type of stress occurring primarily in professional contexts where interpersonal work demands lead to chronic emotional exhaustion (Bakker & Costa, 2014), depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Shih, Jiang, Klein & Wang, 2013). Emotional exhaustion is described by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001) as “a stage of burnout with symptoms such as: fatigue, job-related depression, psychosomatic complaints, and anxiety (Demerouti et al, 2001, p. 499). Emotional exhaustion also includes feelings of being overextended and exhausted by work (Wolfram, Bellingraph, Seuerhahn & Kudielka, 2013). Emotional exhaustion is demonstrated by both physical fatigue and a sense of feeling psychologically and emotionally empty (Lee & Ashford, 1990; Pines & Aronson, 1988).
Farber (1991) identifies how occupational burnout is a single pathway that incorporates the onset of stress (Roeser et al., 2013), the appearance of stress-induced occurrences (Ptacek, Stefano, Kuzelova, Raboch, Harsa & Kream, 2013), and the responses to a stress-induced event (Bono, Glomb, Shen, Kim & Koch, 2013). As stated, it becomes important to understand how personality traits impact how individuals view and manage stressful experiences (Kaplan, 1996; Anshel, 2000). Individuals employed in care-giving or helping occupations (Farber, 1991), such as teachers, healthcare workers, and ministers are more likely to feel emotionally exhausted as a result of their occupation (Wolfram, Bellingraph, Seuerhahn & Kudielka, 2013), than people employed in non-helping occupations (Clarke & Robertson, 2005). Higher levels of emotional exhaustion in these occupations lead to higher levels of burnout (Wolfram, Bellingraph, Seuerhahn & Kudielka, 2013). One such occupation with high levels of burnout is found within the teaching profession (Masloch & Jackson, 1981).

**Teacher burnout.** Masloch and Jackson (1981) describe burnout using other helping professions definitions because there is a similarity between the close contact between the worker (the teacher) and the person (the student) receiving the care. As explained by Masloch et al., 1996), burnout is explained as a combination of mental exhaustion, lack of self-fulfillment, and depersonalization. Teachers often experience all three of these symptoms of burnout (Chang, 2009; Masloch et al, 1996.), where they feel a sense of isolation, lack of competence, and personal failure in the school environment (Abramson et al, 1978; Miller & Norman, 1979). Abramson et al. (1978) identified when teachers develop high levels of stress, it leads to personal and professional burnout (Abramson et al, 1978). Miller and Norman (1979) found this to be especially true with first year teachers, newcomers to the school, and specialist teachers.
Hastings et al. (2004) reported the causes of increased stress in new and specialist teachers to be feelings of isolation due to their lack of experience within the school.

Other causes of burnout for teachers include role conflict and role ambiguity (Dworkin, 1986). Role conflict occurs when a teacher faces conflict on the job such as discrepancies between the meanings of what is a good teacher (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009), whereas role ambiguity occurs when a teacher considers the job responsibilities relating to teaching (Papastylianou, Kaila & Polychronopoulos, 2009). Role ambiguity often occurs during teacher and student discussions as well as parent and teacher communications. As part of these points of isolation for the teacher LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) redefined burnout as a role specific alienation within a helping career that has its focus on feelings of helplessness and meaningfulness. Teachers who struggle with their ability to reach and connect with students and parents begin to develop an isolationist attitude as a safeguard against stress, which in turn leads to burnout (Bullough & Baughmann, 1997; Troman & Woods, 2001).

Teachers may become isolated from their peers because they become classroom concentric (Schlichpe, Yssell & Merbler, 2005), which is a contributing a major cause of teacher burnout (Kokkinos, 2007). The isolation of teachers from other teachers is due in part to the layout of the classroom within the campus (Blood, Cohen & Blood, 2007) as well as increasing interaction time with students (Richards, 2012) resulting in little time for teachers to discuss classroom situations with their peers (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990). This sense of isolation may cause teachers to feel separated from the general population, which can cause both physical and mental exhaustion (LeCompton & Dworkin, 1991). In addition, many teachers feel frustration with administrators, who do not take the time to understand the difficulties teachers are feeling in their classrooms (Chang, 2009). Dworking (1986) reports that administrators have stepped back
from interactions as the teacher level to concern themselves with what they perceive as more important issues (Dworkin, 1986). Other frustrations for teachers include interactions with students, parents, the curriculum, resources, and planning time (Dworkin, 1986; Kutcy & Schulz, 2006; Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007). All of these factors contribute to teacher isolation, while limiting the ability of the teacher to discuss and resolve these issues (Kosir, Tennant, Licardo & Habe, 2015). For the SPED teacher, this sense of isolation can be exacerbated through stressors that are unique to special education.

**Special education teacher burnout.** Stress and burnout within special education have been recognized within the literature as a significant problem within the realm of education (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008; Kokkinos, 2007). As previously stated, burnout is defined as a specific reaction to stress; it is a coping mechanism that involves emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of the people served, and psychological isolation from the job (Cherniss, 1980; Maslach & Jackson, 1984), meaning that burnout occurs when situational stressors hinder one’s ability to experience in making meaning through their work (Pines, 1993). For SPED teachers, who are identified as having higher a commitment to the personal and academic growth of their students (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca & Malone, 2006), burnout happens when these educators feel laden by job demands (Bellingrath & Kudielka, 2008) believing that challenges within the work environment obstruct their ability to accomplish their goals (Ainscow, 2005). Research identifies the leading cause of special education teacher burnout and resignation are a these a lack of administrative support while working with challenging students and parents is a (Johnson, Gold, & Vickers, 1982; McKnab & Mehring, 1984; Thomas, 1984; Zabel & Zabel, 1982). In 1997, Wisniewski and Garguilo, expanded and further clarified the causes of special
education burnout as originating from within the organizational structure, professional interactions, professional training, and instructional arrangements.

In their review, Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) critiqued the existing literature regarding SPED teachers in an effort to identify stressors that lead to burnout. For example, organizational issues that lead to greater stress levels for SPED teachers included workload problems relating that to insufficient planning time to prepare for individual student needs, demands for accountability, and excessive paperwork (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Professional interactions with school personnel, parents and regular class teachers when attempting to bring about inclusion were identified as great sources of stress. A lack of appropriate professional training and difficulties in meeting the individual needs of a growing diverse special education population were also identified as great sources of stress. Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) report how these stressors contribute to feelings isolation for the special educator.

Isolation generally refers to an individual or a group who are physically, mentally, or emotionally separated from other individuals or groups (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibbs, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung, 2008). As SPED teachers begin to question their ability to perform and their commitment to teaching, they begin to separate themselves from other teachers (Cherniss, 1980). Using Wisniewski and Gargiulo (1997) critiqued as guide, burnout can be identified through an individual’s response to a chronic stressor within each category. For example, the organizational structure may put the special educator in a physically isolated environment when special education is remote location away from the general education population. More so, instructional arrangements for non-mainstreamed teachers are different for SPED teachers causing greater feelings of isolation (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Finally, professional interactions
and professional training may further separate the SPED teacher from general education teaching population, while the training requirements are different (Brownell, Ross, Colon & McCallum, 2005). An example of professional interactions includes interactions with parents, which has been identified as a source of stress for both the SPED teacher (Schlichte, Yssel & Merbler, 2005) and the parents (Hintermair, 2006).

Parental burnout. Esdaile and Greenwood (2003) report that parents raising children with special needs often experience greater parenting stress (i.e., stress that is developed from parental dysfunctional behaviors or from behavioral characteristics of the child) than the parents who are not raising special needs children (Esdaile & Greenwood, 2003). In 2006, Woolfson and Grant (2006) conducted a study to determine the impact of raising a child with a developmental disability on the parent. They found there were significantly higher levels of stress associated with raising a child with a developmental disability (Woolfson & Grant, 2006). More so, they found commonalities between parenting characteristics specific to disabled children and parental stress levels (Woolfson & Grant, 2006). Of particular interest, Woolfson and Grant (2006) found that parents of children with developmental disabilities often use an authoritative parenting style (i.e., setting firm, reasonable limits in a loving manner).

Baumrind (1966) originally identified four parenting styles and theorized that parents incorporate one of these styles to control behaviors and to socialize their children. These styles are identified as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and rejecting-neglectful (Baumrind, 1966, 1991, 2005). The authoritarian refers to a parenting style where the parent sets reasonable limits and enforces them in a firm, but loving manner (Baumrind, 1991). The parent engages in discourse with their child, explaining the rationale behind their rules as a response to their children's needs. According to Baumrind (2005), an authoritative parenting style is one in
which parents attempt to direct and control their children's behavior using a logical, rational, and directive manner. A permissive parenting style is identified where the parents engage in an accepting non-punitive manner toward their children (Baumrind, 1991). In this parental style, parents often avoid the use of control, set few limits, and place no external demands on their children (Baumrind, 2005). The final parenting approach identified by Baumrind (1966) is the rejecting-neglecting style. This style describes parents as being removed and disengaged from their children. The rejecting-neglecting parents never set limits and often ignore their responsibilities as parents (Baumrind, 1966). Identifying parental approaches to raising children is important because differences in styles lead to greater stress levels and may lead to parent burnout (Peer & Hillman, 2012; Weiss, 2002).

Parenting burnout is defined by Abidin (1995) as parental distress resulting from either the personal dysfunctional behaviors of the parent, as a result of the characteristics of the child, or as a result of the dysfunctional interaction between parent and child. Parent burnout has been extensively researched, while several factors have been found to be associated with increased levels of in the risk of parental induced stress symptoms (Egeland, Breitenbucher & Rosenberg, 1981; Secco et al., 2006; Sepa, Frodi, & Ludvigsson, 2004). Some risk factors associated with the parent include being a single parent (Mercer, 1995), lacking social support and confidence (Sepa, Frodi, & Ludvigsson, 2004), low socioeconomic status (Deater-Deckard, 2005), and parental depression (Secco et al., 2006). Egeland, Breitenbucher, and Rosenberg (1981) found that overly stressed parents were usually harsher when disciplining their children. As these parents continue to exhibit high stress levels the discipline levels can escalate (Egeland, Breitenbucher & Rosenberg, 1981). These combined and increasing stressors often lead to parents becoming frustrated with their situation causing them to back away from their parental
duties, resulting in parental burnout (Egeland, Breitenbucher & Rosenberg, 1981).

These stressors are intensified for parents of children with disabilities when reviewed in conjunction with the parenting style as well as having the added stressors identified with having a child with a disability (Egeland, Breitenbucher & Rosenberg, 1981; Secco et al., 2006). These combined factors greatly impact the family and challenge the parents' ability to effectively cope with their family situation (Jones, 1991; Reichman, Corman & Noonan, 2008). Children with disabilities typically require support and individualized attention that tax the family's physical, financial and emotional resources (Head & Abbeduto, 2007). Research also suggests that parents who experience burnout (emotional exhaustion, tension, anger) tend to withdraw from their children during interactions and tend to communicate less with their children than parents who did not report high levels of stress (Rowe, Pan, & Ayoub, 2005). This level of attention often leads to chronic parental stress and without intervention leads to parental burnout (Wisniewski, Lech & Garguilo, 1997).

**Summary**

Although SPED teachers find their careers rewarding, many SPED teachers report high degrees of job related stress, while displaying many symptoms of stress, which the literature indicated leads to teacher burnout (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Neves de Jesus & Lens, 2005; Stoebert & Rennert, 2008). Teacher burnout has been associated with elevated attrition rates, especially concerning highly qualified teachers (Kalassen & Chiu, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). More so, stress has also been a contributing factor to attrition within the domain of Special Education (SPED) (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Teacher Stress (TS) has been recognized as the leading cause of SPED teacher burnout within the United States (Kalassen & Chiu, 1010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Steinhardt, Smith, Jaggars, Faulk, & Gloria, 2011).
The purpose of this literature review was to understand the intricacies and complexities associated with the effects of stress on SPED teachers. The topics reviewed are: legal considerations, advocacy, public policy, teacher qualifications, parental-advocacy, stress factors, teacher burnout, and parental burnout. These topics are selected because they represent the foundation of special education and are critical components needed to understand how special education teachers make meaning of their career experiences. The review began with a historical view of Special Education regarding the legislative history of individuals with disabilities and how their rights are protected under federal law.

The researcher analyzed literature that provided insight into challenges faced by SPED teachers in their academic environments. The literature in this section presented evidence of sources of frustrations of SPED teachers with the school administration, lack of collegiality with general education teachers, and the added volume of paperwork that their general education colleagues do not experience. The literature available on SPED teacher stress and how SPED teachers deal with that stress, on a daily basis, remains limited. To date, much of the literature continues to focus on general education teacher stress. The researcher found that examining issues related to special education focused more from a student perspective rather than how the effects of stress impacts SPED teachers. The subsequent chapter details the research design applied in this study.
Chapter III: Research Design

Introduction

Although teaching is perceived as rewarding, many teachers report high degrees of job related stress, while displaying many symptoms of stress which leads to teacher burnout (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Neves de Jesus & Lens, 2005; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). These high levels of stress are associated with rising attrition rates (Kalassen & Chiu, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010) and been a contributing factor to attrition within the domain of Special Education (SPED) (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Teacher Stress (TS) has been recognized as the leading cause of special education teacher burnout within the United States (Kalassen & Chiu, 1010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Steinhardt, Smith, Jaggars, Faulk, & Gloria, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how SPED teachers make sense of their teaching experiences. These experiences included how they view and understand factors that contribute to their career stress, as well as how they make sense of their relationships and experiences with parents as well as how these relationships contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy.

This study examined SPED teacher experiences on teacher using the lens of the multidimensional burnout theory (Maslach, 1993) and the tenants of Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory to understand how stress influences the robust relationship between the personal, behavioral, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1997). An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to achieve this goal because it allows the researcher insight into the lived experiences of the SPED teacher through a rich dynamic explanation of the experience. While the focus of the study concentrated on SPED teacher’s interactions with students, parents, faculty and administrators, it is understanding how SPED teachers’ feelings, inner emotions, and
reactions to their experiences, in terms of stress and burnout, that were the essence of this study.

To support this research, the following questions was used as a guide:

1. How do special education teachers describe their experience of being a special education teacher?
2. How do various factors – structures, practices, expectations and relationships – contribute to their sense of challenge and stress?

**Research Design**

There are nine characteristics of qualitative research defined by Creswell (2009) that illuminate the goals for this research study: natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive data analysis, participant meanings, emergent design, theoretical lens, interpretive design, and a holistic account of participants lived experiences. Using an interpretive qualitative design allowed data to be gathered regarding the lived experiences of the participants to develop a large highly detailed volume of participant narratives (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This was important for this study because exploring how special education teachers make sense of their own lived experiences as SPED teachers in depth is key to identifying how these experiences cause stress and lead to burnout. This was important because how SPED teachers manage their experiences directly impacts stress related problems and burnout symptoms, which results in an inability to communicate the advantages or disadvantages of these experiences (Charlop-Christy, Carpenter, Le, LeBlanc & Kellet, 2002; Wetherby & Prutting, 1984). Understanding these experiences may help to identify the causes of SPED teacher stress and burnout and by extension may identify factors that may reduce stress, burnout and teacher attrition.
Research is generally conducted through a particular perspective, or paradigm that acts as a guide for the epistemological search for truth(s) (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This study was guided by an “interpretive constructionist” paradigm that explores how individuals perceive their world, interpret their experiences, and construct their own meaning and reality (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 15). This paradigm was used to assist in the exploration of making meaning based on the participants lived experiences as special education teachers. Using an IPA research tradition, participants were limited to public school and cooperative SPED teachers with in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts because they first must be a certified teacher as well as obtain additional training as a teacher of students with severe and/or moderate disabilities.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allows the researcher to capture the lived experiences of the individual through their own voice, using their perspectives and uniqueness of their own personal stories and lived experiences. For this qualitative study, it was the best research tradition for capturing the essence of how SPED teachers make meaning of their experiences where a quantitative method is incapable of capturing (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). An IPA study permits the researcher to explore the lived experiences of the research participants through in-depth interviews and a thorough analysis of the interview accounts. The analysis in an IPA study concerns itself with three theoretical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, all of which are supported within empirical research.

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2008), phenomenology is concerned with how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, hermeneutics focuses on each part of the experience as well as the whole, and idiography is a deep analysis of the data and how the phenomena is understood by individuals. With this as a guide, this study made an effort to
understand the lived experiences of these special educators, to share their voice, and to reflect on how they make meaning of the emotional, social, and physical characteristics of being a special educator, with particular attention given to discussions that focus on relationships with parents of special needs children. To accomplish this task and using the recommendations of Seidman (2006) and Smith et al (2009), one thorough in-depth interviews with each participant was conducted.

**Research Tradition**

Given that the focus of this study is on the lived experiences of special educators, a qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis was used for this study. According to Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2013), qualitative data are a well-known source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human behavior and processes. With qualitative data, one can preserve the chronology of a flow of events, determine the results of such events, and develop productive explanations (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013). The findings from a well-analyzed qualitative study, provides essence of meanings that cannot be derived from quantitative study that focuses on numbers.

Phenomenology is a research methodology that is specifically designed to study the human experience. The development of the modern IPA methodology finds its origins based on the methodology of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Ehrich, 2005; Groenewald, 2004; Hutton, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2010). According to Husserl (1970), the foundation of his transcendental phenomenological methodology was developed from his belief that all philosophy and knowledge should seek to uncover the meaning of different experiences in the human process (Giorgi, 1997). Husserl (1970) retained a desire to find a way for individuals to understand their own experiences with a particular phenomenon to
the point where they could identify the “essential qualities” of these experiences (Smith et al., 2009, p. 6).

Husserl’s (1970) transcendental phenomenological theory is closely connected to the concept of intentionality, which is the “orientation of the mind to its object” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 129). To further illustrate Husserl’s perspective on intentionality, Smith et al. (2009) asserted, “Experience of consciousness is always consciousness of something, seeing is seeing of something, remembering is remembering of something, judging is judging of something” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13). Therefore, placing meaning at the center of phenomenology. Smith et al. (2009) summarized Husserl’s belief that only through meaning does “consciousness present us with a world, an organized structure of things around us, including ourselves” (Smith, 2007, p. 190).

Husserl’s (1970) transcendental phenomenological design has led to variations developed by academics over time. Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, based his approach to phenomenology on what he learned from his teacher, but with a focus toward hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, rather than transcendentalism (Smith et al., 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2010). The interpretative approach differs from the transcendental philosophy of Husserl, in that it does not drive the researcher to completely defer beliefs, biases, and assumptions during the research process, but allows them to be identified as an activity known as bracketing (Smith et al., 2009). When using an interpretative approach to phenomenology, the researcher’s personal connections to the phenomenon being studied are an integral part of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology also included the perspective of ontology, the study or theory of the nature of being or existence (Smith et al., 2009). According to Annells
(1996), “Meaning lies in the individual’s transaction with a situation such that the situation constitutes the individual and the individual constitutes the situation” (Annells, 1996, p. 708). In terms of this study, the cyclical relationship between a person and their experiences identified how special educators make meaning of their work experiences. Epistemology, the study of concepts that distinguish between beliefs and opinions also known as the nature knowledge, plays a significant role in phenomenology and will be used to develop the research questions for this study. Hutton (2009) identifies how research questions for phenomenological studies should be directed toward meaning in an attempt to learn about people’s understandings, experiences, and sense–making activities (Hutton, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Finally, Biesta (2010) found that axiology, the study of human values also has a role in phenomenology by accepting subjectivity as a characteristic of qualitative research. According to Hutton (2009):

The value associated in the research process encompasses the individualistic perspective of relativism, holding that realities subsist in relation to various mental concepts and they are originated from individualistic perceptions and experiences and influenced by one’s social, cultural, specific, and local aspects of life and experience (Hutton, 2009, p. 1).

Although phenomenological researchers attempt, through bracketing and other reduction strategies, to set aside or minimize their own perspectives on the phenomenon being studied, it is unreasonable to think that the final interpretation of the data will be void of any influence from these perspectives (Hutton, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), “In IPA research, our attempts to understand other people’s relationships to the world are necessarily interpretative, and will focus upon their attempts to make meanings out of their activities and to the things happening to them” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 21). For this study, it was the lived
experiences of SPED teachers and their experiences with parents of special needs students that is of particular interest.

This study also used hermeneutics as a tool to focus on an individual’s interpretation and context of their experience. Hermeneutics was originally designed to interpret biblical texts, historical documents, and literary works (Smith et al., 2009). A hermeneutic circle will be employed in this study to understand both the part as well as the whole of the research phenomenon. Smith et al., (2009) identifies how “the meaning of a word will only be understood when viewed in the context of the sentence. And conversely, the meaning of a sentence can only be determined when reviewing the meaning of the collective words” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). For this study, hermeneutics was used to examine the relationship between how special educators make meaning of their work and the relationships they develop within the work context. IPA studies typically involve a case of the double hermeneutics, in that the researcher is attempting to make meaning of the participant making meaning of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Since double hermeneutics are at play in this research, it was important to minimize any adverse effects through reduction, bracketing, and field notations.

Participants, Recruitment, and Access

The participants for this research project were solicited using special education directors located in urban, suburban, and rural public school districts within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This selected group represents, as Smith et al., (2009) suggests, a small purposive, homogeneous group with maximum variations, for whom the “research question will be meaningful” (Smith et al., p. 49). The group included 6 special educators from public school districts in Worcester, Metrowest, and Berkshire Counties. This group fits within the confines of IPA studies where relatively small sample sizes are important.
Smith et al. (2009), identifies how IPA studies use an idiographic approach that focuses on understanding a particular phenomenon within a specific context, where meaning making is in-depth and extensive. In phenomenological studies, the intention of the participant selection process is to find individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and who are willing to share, with rich detail, their lived experience to the researcher (Polkinghorne, 1989). For this reason, criterion sampling along with snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were utilized to select SPED teacher participants for this study.

Taylor and Bogdan (1998) identified how difficult it becomes in determining how many participants an empirical qualitative study should include. Creswell (1994) wrote: “Phenomenological research involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning” (Creswell, 1994, p. 12). For this study, six SPED special teachers were selected using in-depth interviews to develop patterns of meaning because of the likelihood they will contribute valuable knowledge to the research (Creswell, 1998). As Seidman (1991) identified “The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (Seidman, 1991, p. 45). The selection of participants for this study relied upon the experiences of a small group of individuals who had been SPED teachers for several years. The exact number of participants was dependent upon how many participants from each group were willing to share their experiences to create a hermeneutic circle to allow for scientific understanding (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2009) suggests that in qualitative research, participants should be purposefully (as opposed to randomly) selected to provide the researcher a better understanding of the
problem and research question(s) under investigation. The selection of participants was based upon criterion-based and snowball sampling. In criterion sampling, participants are chosen based on criteria that are pre-determined by the researcher (Patton, 2002). “The point of criterion sampling is to be sure to understand cases that are likely to be information-rich because they may reveal major system weaknesses that become targets of opportunity for program or system improvement” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The criteria for participation were: occupation (SPED teacher), experience (one full year SPED teaching experience), and geographic area (teaching in a rural, urban, or suburban area).

To complement criterion sampling, snowball sampling was used in order to help ensure that the sample was suited to best help the researcher understand the problem of practice (Creswell, 2009). Patton (2002) suggests that snowball sampling is appropriate when the researcher seeks to recruit key participants from known participants. This technique is particularly helpful for identifying potential participants who may be more difficult to reach. The assumption is that members of certain populations often know one another and can likely provide names of other individuals who meet the criteria and may be willing to participate (Patton, 2002).

For this study, six special education directors, in three geographic regions of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were identified. The SPED directors were provided with the documentation of the study and asked to refer participants who met the criterion for participation. Once the SPED directors refer potential and willing participants, the researcher contacted each potential participant via telephone to provide background information on the study. The selected participants were provided with documentation outlining why they were
selected for the study, the sequence of interviews that were conducted, how the results would be reported, and what the researcher hopes to gain from the study (Creswell, 2009).

**Data Collection**

Qualitative data will be collected from six to eight individuals through in-depth, semi-structured, phenomenological based interviews (Appendix D) that contain open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006). In qualitative research, interviewing is very similar to a conversation, however it is structured using pre-written and pre-approved interview questions. The main or theme questions were followed by information seeking probes and follow up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this study, a single interview was utilized for each participant. Although there will be no time limit on the length of the interview, it is anticipated that the interviews could take up to 90 minutes. The initial portion of the interview focused on the purpose of the study, the researchers and the participant’s backgrounds. The purpose of this was to develop trust and rapport between the researcher and the participant, while being sensitive to the participant’s positionality. This is important as Kvale (1983) and Dempsey, Larkin and Murphy (2016) clearly outline how the use of sensitivity is needed to develop a connection with participants as part of the interview process. By engaging each participant in casual conversation and sharing of informal personal information, a rapport between participant will allow the participants to converse at a deeper level of understanding, while sharing intimate details into one’s involvement in the lived experience (Dempsey, Larkin & Murphy, 2016).

The second part of the interview focused on the participant’s life history and present day experiences as a SPED teacher. The goal of the interview was to have the participant think about their experiences as a SPED teacher while they started to make meaning of those experiences that have caused them stress. To do so, follow up questions and questions designed to clarify
meaning was used to help the participant reflect on and think about how they understand their experience. The third and final part of the interview was used for the participant to reflect on how they gave meaning to their experiences and add any new reflections and thoughts about how they understand the phenomena being study.

Prior to the all interviews, the researcher reminded the participants about the purpose of the study as well as informing them that they could terminate participation in the study at any point. After each interview, the participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions. Additionally, prior to each interview, the participants were told that the interviews would be recorded using a digital audio record, while an iPhone 6 with the rev.com application was used as a backup device. The interviewer told each participant that their privacy would be protected during all interviews, interview transcripts, and on any field notes. Interviews were conducted in secure settings by the researcher at a location convenient to the participant. In-person interviews took place at a time and private location convenient for the participant. The researcher conducted all other interviews via telephone in the secure settings of her work and home offices. For remote interviews, participants were asked to be in a location where they could maintain their privacy and their ability to concentrate without distractions.

At the end of the interview, the participants were informed that they may be contacted in the future to clarify points of interest or questions regarding answers to questions. All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder with an Apple iPhone 6 with the Rev.com application as a back-up device, using the voice encryption application. The audio recordings were then transferred to the researcher’s home computer (Apple Macbook Air) as an mp4 or wav file and then encrypted and password protected.
Data Storage

During the interviews, field notes were taken in the researcher’s field notebook and were locked in a filing cabinet in the researcher’s home office as a security measure. Written materials never disclosed any personal information of the participants, the location of any interview, or any affiliation to a specific school. All interviews were transcribed by rev.com and maintained on a password protect file system on the laptop itself. Copies of all records were also placed on a thumb drive and locked in the researcher’s office. The rev.com service is an online transcription service. All transcription editors were under nondisclosure agreements, while all files that were stored and transmitted used a 128-bit SSL encryption. Rev.com stored the encrypted files until request for deletion at the end of the process. After successful transcription, the original recordings will be maintained in a password protected file on the researcher’s home computer and any paper field notes had all identifying information redacted and will remain in the researcher’s locked file cabinet until this study is published. At the completion of this study all electronic material will be removed from the researcher’s laptop using government-grade data wiping technology.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the data analysis process, according to Creswell (2009), “involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses of the data, diving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and finally making meaning of the larger data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). Larkin et al. (2006) reported that data analysis in an IPA study is dissimilar to other types of qualitative studies in that an IPA study typically involves an extremely intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a relatively small number of participants. These word-for-word accounts are generally captured through semi-structured
interviews, focus groups, or diaries, and the analysis then focuses on the patterns of meaning from the participants.

This analysis is not intent on the “insider’s perspective” but an interpretation of the participant’s perspective of an event and what it means to them (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 13). In addition, Smith et al. (2009) identifies how IPA studies are centered on the human lived experience, with the goal of enabling an examination of that lived experience through self-expression of the participants rather than through “predefined category systems” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 33). For this study, a modified version of the Creswell’s (2013) data analysis spiral will be used to analyze data. The importance of this spiral, for this study, was that it allowed the researcher to move in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear process (Creswell, 2013). The data analysis spiral for phenomenology has six analytical circles that begin with text and end with an account or a narrative.

IPA studies are unique that when compared to other qualitative studies it does not attempt to size the findings within a given framework when performing data analysis. Smith et al. (2009) identifies how IPA studies concentrate on the lived human experience with a goal of facilitating a thorough examination of a specific lived experience through self-expression of the participant’s experience instead of through “predefined category systems” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 33). Smith et al. (2009) also recommends using diverse strategies because within IPA studies there is not one single method used exclusively for analyzing data. For this study, the researcher captured the data on a digital recorder as well as in the field notebook and organize it into computer files and folders. The audio data was transcribed by a transcription service called Rev.com. The interview transcripts were reviewed by the researcher; while additional notes and comments were entered directly on the transcription page. This included placing into the appropriate text units
(i.e. words, sentences, and paragraphs of the whole story). This allowed the researcher to organize the information from participants in a manner that could be easily located in large databases allowing for an organized detailed analysis processes.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith et al., 1999) was used in this study because it offered an emphasis on how the participants are making sense of their experiences as a SPED teacher. The IPA process was also chosen because it allowed the researcher to draw upon the basic principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In an effort to achieve the essence of experiences through information gathered during interviews, this research study identified portions of the language based data which allocated words and phrases or codes (Creswell, 2007) that “symbolically assign a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 3) to the language. Saldaña (2015) identifies how initial coding is the proper starting point because it provides analytical leads, which allow for further exploration. Charmaz (2006) identifies how coding is the essential link between collecting data, making sense of the data, and explaining meaning of data in a qualitative study.

In the First Cycle coding process, initial coding or “Open Coding” (Charmaz, 2006), was used to segment the data into identifiable individual parts, which allowed for the identification, examination, and comparison of similarities and differences (Charmaz, 2006). This allowed the data to be exposed to all conceivable theoretical directions based on the “readings of the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Initially, the audible recordings were listened to individually in their entirety. Then a reading of transcripts was conducted in conjunction with the audible recordings. This was conducted because, according to Smith, Flowers, Osborn, (1997), it allows the participant, not the interviewer to remain the focus of the study. Additionally, the procedure
allowed the researcher to identify, record, and bracket her initial responses to the participant’s experiences. The repetitive review of the data allowed the researcher to make connections and commonalities, while identifying any discrepancies within the narrative accounts of the participants. Saldaña (2015) identifies how this must be conducted quickly and spontaneously while concentrating on the “rich dynamics of data through line-by-line coding” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 103). This is described as ‘splitting’ (Saldaña, 2015, p. 103) the data using sentence-by-sentence coding, and paragraph-by-paragraph coding.

To accomplish this task, code was placed into parentheses, while questions marks were used so the data can be further explored during recoding efforts. During all coding and recoding cycles, an exploration for “processes – participant actions that have antecedents, causes, consequences, and a sense of temporality” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 103) was conducted. This allowed the researcher to determine whether the identified data needs further exploration during second cycle coding. Saldaña (2015) emphasizes that a search for the “properties and dimensions of categories – conceptual ideas that bring together similarly coded and related passages of data (Saldaña, 2015, p. 103) must be conducted so that to meaning can be inferred from the data. Lastly, a “reality check” or a personal debriefing, must be conducted by the researcher, during and after the initial decoding, to make certain that a written reflection of the process is maintained (Saldaña, 2015). This process was used to reflect on why there were varying ranges within the data.

Creswell (2007) cautions that when reviewing data, the researcher will likely transition between Creswell’s (2007) modification of Moustakas (1994) six steps of an IPA data analysis. During this first cycling process, the researcher must stay true to the IPA process by highlighting “significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how
the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). To highlight the significant statements, sentences, or quotes, in the data, the use of In Vivo coding or Process Coding was used only as an aid in the first cycle. Hence, the Initial Coding analysis best preserved the reliability of this study’s framework and methodology. For this study, member checking took place when the interviews were transcribed prior to any coding.

Once First Cycle coding was completed, pattern coding was used as the Second Cycle coding method. Pattern codes were used during the Second Cycle because according to Saldaña (2015), pattern codes identify descriptive or inferential codes that can detect an evolving “theme, configuration, or explanation” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 210). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), pattern coding as “a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 69). For this study, pattern coding offered the researcher a way to develop major themes from the data, while searching for causes and explanations of the lived experience within the data (Saldaña, 2015). Additionally, pattern coding was used to identify patterns of human relationships, especially those between SPED teachers, administrators, general education teachers and parents so that it is possible to detect theoretical constructs and processes from the data (Saldaña, 2015). For this study, coding took place after all six interviews were completed and the participants were given the opportunity to member check. This method was selected because it better ensured the accuracy of the initial coding by reducing the number of changes.

During the Second Cycle pattern coding, the researcher used a CAQDAS Computer Assistive Qualitative Data Analysis program to collect similarly coded passages to assess commonalities within the data while assigning them various pattern codes. For this process, the researcher used the NVIVO –CAQDAS analytical program to identify pattern coding to develop
a statement that describes a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of interrelationships or a theoretical construct from the data (Saldaña, 2015). Additionally, the program was used since “many codes – especially pattern codes – are captured using metaphors” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 212) to fuse large blocks of data into a single “trope” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 212). Finally, since Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that “pattern codes are hunches: Some pan out, but many do not” (Miles & Huberman, 1994; as cited by Saldaña, 2015, p. 212), the researcher identified as many pattern codes as possible during the Second Cycle.

The aforementioned First and Second Cycle coding methods were repeated for each participant’s interview. The upmost consideration was given to each individual transcript in an effort to comply with the third theoretical underpinning, Ideography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Ideography centers the focus on the particular instead of the collective (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Once First and Second Coding methods of all data sets were completed, the researcher searched for patterns of emergent themes, configurations, and/or explanations across each data set in an effort to identify data that is shared between interviews. The entirety of this process allowed the researcher to remain within the interpretative nature of an IPA study by presenting an in-depth analysis that identified the elements of an experience. The coding method ensured that each participant’s experience will remain unique and discernable from others, while supporting and strengthening the theoretical underpinnings of the IPA methodology.

**Reading and “memoing.”** After organizing the data, the researcher needed to get a holistic sense of the information as it appears in the database. According to Agar (1980, p. 103), the researcher should read the transcripts in their entirety several times as this will allow the researcher to immerse themselves into the totality of the lived experience of the participant before trying to get a sense of meaning from specific parts of the interviews (as cited by
Creswell, 2007, p. 183). The researcher then organized the interview data of into initial categories or major organizing ideas. Creswell (2007) identifies this as “horizontalization of the data” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Adding to these major ideas, the researcher reviewed the field notes and researcher comments on the transcripts to reflect on the participant’s perspectives as a whole while looking for multiple sources of evidence to support each organizing category. This reflection gave the researcher time to pause to glean the insider’s perspective (Larkin et al., 2006).

**Describing the data into codes and themes.** The next step lifts the researcher from reading and “memoing” the data to describing the data (Creswell, 2013). In this loop of the spiral, the researcher began to form codes of the data and provide an interpretation as part of the researcher’s own perspectives of the data. According to Creswell (1998) this interpretation should include the researcher’s epoche, where the research eliminates or clarifies their own experience with the phenomena. These codes were described within the context of the setting of the event because a detailed description played a central role in this phenomenological study. Therefore, a rich description of the essence of the phenomena added real meaning to the phenomenon.

**Classifying the data into codes and themes.** The fourth loop in the spiral takes the data coding and applies classification onto each code and theme. As part of the process of classifying, the researcher identified seven general themes (categories). These were represented as ‘families’ of information that aggregate codes to form a common idea (Creswell, 2007). These themes were considered similar to families with several sub-themes that can be considered offspring. This step included developing significant statements and grouping statements into meaning units (Creswell, 2007). This was an iterative process that reduced the themes into
manageable categories, which provided the foundation for the researcher to develop superordinate and subordinate themes for the narrative.

**Interpreting the data and themes.** The next loop in the spiral examined the codes and themes by making sense of the data. This was the interpretation step in qualitative analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this interpretation step as the “lessons learned” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 35). Interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting out the data beyond the codes and themes to understand the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2013). For the researcher, this meant that the interpretation was based on intuition, insights and clues that the researcher gleaned from the expressions used in participant interviews, participant body language, and facial expressions (Creswell, 2013). However, during this spiral it was important for the researcher to develop: a textual description of what happened; a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced, while developing the essence of the holistic experience (Creswell, 2013).

**Representing and visualizing the data.** The final loop in the spiral has researchers represent the data by packaging up what was found in the text. This meant that the researcher presented a narration of the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). This included pictures, figures or diagrams to provide a visual image of the data. Hypotheses, advanced propositions, and metaphors were also presented as literary devices to interrelate the causes of the phenomenon within its context. An important part of this phase was to provide the participants, the transcripts, and visual representations of their story for review and clarification.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to the recruitment of participants. Additionally, the researcher completed the “Protecting Human
Research Participants’ training course through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) prior to recruitment. All participants signed an informed consent, explaining the nature of the study and detailing their right to freely participate or not in the study. Additionally, participants were informed that he/she and their school would be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

An informed consent was provided to all participants prior to the start of their interview, as stated detailing participants guaranteed rights concerning confidentiality and right to decline participation in the study at any time. These signed forms were affixed to the interview questions (Appendix B). All interview questions were vetted through Northeastern University’s IRB and written in such a way that confidentiality was protected. Confidentiality included during the safeguarding of all non-reporting demographic information to include: socioeconomic status, school of attendance, individual names and other associated information to the particular school, and respondent answers. All data was published in aggregate form.

Anonymity of participants was protected by assigning a pseudonym to each participant in support of confidentiality. Pseudonyms replaced actual names and no personal information was used at any point during the study. For data protection, all data whether paper or electronic was protected using a digital encryption software package for electronic data and paper information and will remain locked in a safe at the researcher’s home office. This information will be destroyed after a reasonable period of time that will be determined by the publishing date. The respondents and guardians were advised that summary information could be disseminated within the professional community and there is no foreseeable way to trace information.

Trustworthiness

This research study was limited to a small group of SPED practitioners who work in public school districts within rural, suburban and urban areas of the Commonwealth of
Massachusetts. The purpose of this study was to provide a valid description of the facts as obtained from the participants lived experiences as SPED educators in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Validity in phenomenological research is identified by Creswell (2007) as a concept that is “well-grounded and well-supported” (Creswell, 2007, p. 215). Thus, this researcher employed several validity checks, which is identified by Creswell (2009) as the use of rich thick description in the findings, identifying and clarifying research bias and presenting any information that runs counter to the themes that are determined in the findings. To ensure, the researcher employed four validity approaches.

The four approaches that were used to safeguard validity and trustworthiness include the structure of the interviews, triangulation, member checking, and thickness/richness of descriptions. Seidman (2006) suggests the three-interview structure, which will allow the researcher time and opportunity to review the information provided in each interview for internal consistency of participant’s comments as well as clarify the participant’s experiences. This in turn, will help the researcher and participant develop bonds of trust. The second approach for validity is triangulation. This term was originally used in military navigation at sea where the sailors use three points on the horizon to determine the ship’s orientation. According to Denzin (1979), there are four points of triangulation: data sources, data collection methods, theories, and data from different investigators. Creswell and Miller (2010) explain that triangulation is a key approach of qualitative researchers to find validity through corroborating evidence that include: observations, interviews, and documents. Researchers sift through the data looking for common themes to develop the validity of an event through multiple sources rather one single point (Creswell & Miller, 2010).
The third approach, member checking, the validity process shifts to the participants rather than the researchers. Member checking is the process where the data and interpretations are taken back to the study participants so that they can confirm that the information and narrative are credible (Creswell & Miller, 2010). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is “crucial for establishing validity” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). A popular approach for member checking is to give the raw data (transcripts of field notes) to the participants to review the data for accuracy and meaning. The researcher will ask the participants if the themes are accurate and if the overall account is accurate. This is important because according to Creswell and Miller (2010) member checking allows the researcher to incorporate the participant comments in the narrative, which in turn allows the participants to add credibility to the study by reacting to both the data and the narrative. In this study, participants were given the transcribed interviews and field notes to review as a means of confirming trustworthiness of the interview process and the information gathered.

The fourth strategy for validity engages the researcher in the use of thick, rich descriptions, which according to Creswell (2007) ensures trustworthiness by allowing the reader to transport himself or herself into the story and allows the reader to transfer information into other settings because of the shared characteristics of the detailed information. This is important because by allowing the reader to make decisions about transferability, greater detailed information and shared characteristics can be obtained, offering greater understanding and validity. In this study, the researcher aimed to offer validity through a rich, thick description of the various aspects of the participant decisions to transfer information about their experiences (Creswell, 2007).
Limitations

The researcher’s approach to the topics of SPED teacher stress and SPED teacher burnout, particularly the methodological strategies allowed for the generalization of findings, while identifying common themes and indicators. However, the study was limited by its general application to a large scale SPED teacher population. Additionally, the findings were limited by their application to the general education teacher population because of the narrow scope limiting this study to SPED educators only. Due to the small-scale case study format, insight was gained into topics of stress that include disabilities, trust, culture, gender, ethnicity, fairness, and spirituality, however the group was similar in education, academic background, social economic status, living experiences, and how they managed the day-to-day responsibilities of being a SPED teacher. These commonalities also served as obstacles in gaining a deep and rich understanding into the phenomena.

Essentially, this study required the researcher to immerse herself into the data to make sense of the phenomena of stress and burnout on SPED teachers, while at the same time interpreting the data through the use of identified concepts and theories relative to the research problem. This method required the researcher to move between emic and etic perspectives, which according to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) “requires patience and openness to see the world through someone else’s eyes and the ability to control a temptation to priori impose conceptual categories” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 13), while both are subject to their own interpretations. Therefore, applying the findings outside the field of Special Education was difficult.
Summary

Chapter three provides an outline of the design process used for this phenomenological study to comprehend how special educator self-efficacy and multidimensional burnout theory work together to influence the stress levels of special educators as they develop relationships with special needs parents. Specifically, this methodology allowed for a deep and through examination of the richness of SPED teacher experiences within the frameworks of the multidimensional burnout theory (Maslach, 1993) and the tenants of Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory. Details about the research design and research tradition were fully explained regarding how participant recruitment and access and protection of human subjects was conducted. Finally, data collection, data storage, and data analysis were reviewed relating to trustworthiness and limitations of the study.
Chapter IV: Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how Special Education (SPED) teachers make sense of their experiences as SPED teachers, how they view and understand factors that contribute to their career stress, how they make sense of their relationships and experiences as SPED teachers, as well as how these experiences contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. The researcher explored the challenges, adaptability, and flexibility of behaviors that contributed to how the participants’ make sense of their experiences with career related stress. Their accounts were analyzed using the lens of the multidimensional burnout theory and self-efficacy. More specifically, the participants’ accounts were explored as part of a process that analyzed them within their work environment. Six participants were interviewed, each providing detailed accounts of their unique experiences as SPED teachers. Participants were state certified SPED teachers, two from a suburban educational cooperative, two urban SPED teachers, and two rural SPED teachers. Five were female teachers, Jeanne, Heather, Trish, Alyssa, and Wildred, while one male teacher; Sean participated (see Table 1).

An analysis of transcripts yielded two superordinate themes and six nested subthemes that captured the ways in which participants made sense of their experiences as special educators. The two superordinate themes resulted from equal or similar experiences made by all participants (see Table 2), while experiences share by at least half of the participants contributed to each of the subordinate themes. The superordinate themes and subordinate themes analyzed are presented in Table 2 and are discussed after a synopsis of each individual is presented to provide a contextual understanding of each of the participants. This synopsis is intended to give a more in-depth introduction to the participants who are presented using pseudonyms, experiences, and reflections along with quotations are included as supportive evidence.
Additionally, any names of third parties, their titles, age or locations mentioned by participants or used to converse or interpret participant’s conversations were changed or removed to protect privacy.

**Participants**

Six special education teachers participated in this study. The participants had between one and thirty-seven years of special education teaching experience in, whereas three had teaching experience in more than one institution (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Number of years teaching in a physical therapy program</th>
<th>Number of institutions in which participants have taught</th>
<th>Participant Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeanne</td>
<td>37 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildred</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricia</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Jeanne.** Jeanne has been a special educator for almost thirty-seven years. Currently, she teaches two special needs students in an early childhood education program. The students are diagnosed with cognitive, physical, learning, and visual impairments as well as suffering from brain injuries. Jeanne is the only teacher at her school who is certified in teaching the blind and visually impaired and therefore must assume these additional responsibilities in other classrooms. Often, she is asked to plan curriculum for visually impaired students outside of her school.
Jeanne is a five-foot tall energetic woman with a strong passion for helping special needs children. Growing up, she “was the youngest in the family.” When Jeanne became teenager, she was allowed the opportunity to work summers at a residential camp in upstate New York. The camp was designed for teenagers and young adults who had physical, emotional, and mental disabilities. It was this experience that instilled a desire in Jeanne to become a physical therapist. However, while attending a college in New York, she was advised that most physical therapists work in geriatrics and sports. Jeanne recalled stating: “well I don’t want to do that!” It was then that she learned about a degree program in special education. “At that time”, Jeanne recalled “you decided on a special education major where you had to choose a focus such as physical disabilities, mental disabilities, emotional disturbance, or learning disabilities.” Jeanne chose physical disabilities because that was the closest field to physical therapy. Jeanne completed a bachelor’s degree program, however she recalled the student teaching portion as “nothing valuable.”

Upon graduation, she obtained her first special education teaching job at a small public school in Rhode Island, where she “crashed and burned”, because she felt that she wasn’t prepared stating: “I didn’t know what I was doing.” Jeanne realized she needed more education to be better prepared for the special needs students she was teaching, so she applied for a Master’s degree program in severe special education. It was this second educational program that fully prepared Jeanne as a special needs teacher. Jeanne recalls: “Those teachers were fantastic. It was a state school again but, when I went into my first job at TEC (The Education Cooperative), I was prepared.” She added: “I felt that I knew what I was doing.” At TEC, Jeanne was the first certified teacher that they ever employed.
While comparing her two teaching experiences, Jeanne commented “they were like night and day.” The first teaching experiences was “similar to being dumped in a pool and not knowing how to swim.” She added passionately: “There was no mentor.” Jeanne said “I replaced a beloved teacher of 25 years who had retired and the other teachers didn’t reach out to help me. I was alone and it was frightening.” By contrast, her second teaching experience was fulfilling and rewarding. Here, she “had a really good mentor who took the time to help me plan my teaching assignments.” She also had a “wonderful supervisor who was very supportive and nurturing.” There were “other teachers in the school who were helpful” making sure that Jeanne knew that she had help if she needed it.

After a few years, Jeanne’s students had begun to age out of the program. “Aging out” is a term that refers to a Massachusetts’ and federal law where students who received special education services lose those services at midnight on their twenty-second birthday. At this point, they are eligible to qualify for an adult care program. So, when Jeanne’s students aged out, her supervisor suggested that she start a program for pre-school children. Jeanne “balked at the idea” because she had “limited experience with young children.” She recalls her supervisory saying: “We feel confident that you can do it” so that summer Jeanne took a course in assessing young children with significant disabilities. When she completed that program, she started a preschool program at TEC, which became “highly successful.” “It was a wonderful experience and I have never left.”

Wildred. Wildred is a middle-aged twenty-two-year veteran special education teacher at a kindergarten through 8th grade urban community school. She has lived in the community with her husband and two children since obtaining her teaching job. Wildred was fast to state: “My concentration is in autism. I’m certified in the state in multiple disabilities, K-12, but my autism
concentration is K through 8th grade.” When asked why she chose special education as her career, Wildred stated: “my nephew was a special needs student and I helped him when he was little and we worked well together. My momma said I had the gift and so I went to state college so I could get a job.” Wildred, like Jeanne, felt her undergraduate program was too basic and did not prepared her so she immediately went into a Master’s degree program in Special Education upon graduating. “I got scholarships to help me with the cost of my education and I worked at the college cooking in the kitchen to help with other expenses.” Wildred explained: “I am used to working hard for what I want!”

Although Wildred’s college experiences did prepare her for many of the teaching experiences she would encounter, but it didn’t really prepare her for teaching in a large urban city public school. In this regard, she stated: “City schools are kind different than most schools, I guess, in the fact that one in five children are diagnosed with some form of disability, so we’re pretty busy.” Over her career, Wildred stated that she has seen tremendous increases in the numbers of children diagnosed with different disabilities. “My education program in college didn’t really prepare me for all the types of disabilities I would see in the schools.” “At my school, I am like the Autism ‘specialist’ so I have been doing all my continuing education in autism, but that doesn’t mean that I just work with autism children.”

Wildred has a formal caseload of thirty-five students. As the special education teacher/coordinator she is responsible for working with 30 paraprofessionals who attend classes with students diagnosed with special needs. Wildred works with general education teachers and the paraprofessionals to make sure the curriculum is modified to meet the individual needs of each of the students assigned to her. She says that 80 percent of the students she works with have paraprofessionals to help them manage the curriculum throughout the school day. With
both the paraprofessionals and the general education teachers working together with Wildred, she commented: “The practices are more at the individual teacher level where teachers like me can find the best ways to enhance our children’s learning.”

When asked about her school day, Wildred stated: “I don’t know…it’s about getting through the day.” She added: “I run from one crisis to the next, to the next, and then there is the paperwork.” “My husband says that I just do too much paperwork! The other day he said we could start a fire with all this paperwork and we could heat our house for the whole winter.” Wildred believes that she spends about 40 percent of her day on paperwork including individual education plans (IEP’s). “It does take away from spending time with my students, family, and my husband.” Wildred often thinks about leaving special education, especially in the city, but feels that she would be breaking her commitment to her community. As a result, “I keep focusing on my day to day work, doing the best that I can.”

**Tricia.** Tricia is a tall, slender middle-aged single woman with red hair in her late fifties. She has a very calm demeanor and talks with a quiet calming almost monotone voice. Trisha’s route into special education came via the law. When she was in eighth grade, she explains “I loved watching Perry Mason and believed that I would enjoy a job as a lawyer.” Tricia went to college studying Political Science and went to law school where she graduated and went on to practice corporate law for 14 years. She worked at corporate law successfully and married about two years into her career. Everything was going great until her husband left her after twelve years of marriage. Tricia ended up going into severe depression and left her job. She believes it was her faith in god and work with a counselor that helped her realize that she wasn’t really happy as a lawyer causing her re-thought her career options. Then, one day Tricia saw an ad in
the paper for volunteer work at a church school for special needs children and because of her deep faith, she believes she was sent there as a sign guiding her to her next career.

Tricia enjoyed her work at the church school and loved helping the students. She found value and personal reward in the work. It was her supportive colleagues at the school who encourage her to take teaching courses to get certified in special education. She did so at the Masters level receiving a degree in Special Education. Once obtaining her degree, she began working at TEC and like Jeanne has remained there ever since. She initially taught third grade special needs students, but there was “a very difficult supervisor at the program.” Tricia says that this supervisor was very “cruel and demeaning and often reduced the teachers’ to tears.” The supervisor caused her confidence to wane and forced her into depression. At this point, Trisha decided that the best course of action was for her to become an assistant or co-teacher. “I decided that I couldn’t take the stress of being a teacher know that I was the sole person responsible for IEP’s, and MPS, and data collection, and all of the stressful things that came with being the lead teacher.” It was at this time that she learned she was diagnosed with Grave’s disease and hypothyroidism, both of which affected her health and stamina.

“Working as a co-teacher was one of the best things I did.” The co-teacher role immediately removed many of the teaching pressures that added to her stress. It allowed her to share the responsibilities with the lead-teacher, while allowing her to manage her time and her energy. However, because the salary of a co-teacher is much lower that a lead teacher, she was forced to augment her income by working as a respite aid during the school year, while forcing her to be a lead teacher during the six-week summer program at TEC. When commenting on this experience, Tricia stated “I can do this for six weeks. I can be responsible for the curriculum. I can be responsible for the data. I can do this.” This situation gave Tricia “time to develop my
confidence as a special needs teacher.” When the lead teacher took maternity leave, Tricia was asked to became the lead teacher and she accepted. Trisha’s final comments included “now I have developed the stamina for the job and I am able to multi-task as a special needs teacher.” Trisha has been teaching special needs children for twenty years.

**Heather.** Heather is a tall married young woman with an animated personality and no children. Heather has been a special needs teacher in an urban middle school for 12 years. She knew that she wanted to teach school since she was a little girl. “My mother was a teacher and my grandmother was a teacher.” Heather grew up in an upper-middleclass household knowing she too wanted to be a teacher. Heather attended a private school high school and a private college and feels that she has “lived a very privileged life.” Heather’s younger brother was diagnosed with autism when he was three years old and Heather has helped to take care of her brother all of her life. “It was my brother that encouraged me to focus on teaching special needs students as her career.” Heather received an under-graduate education degree in teaching K through 8th grade students and a Master’s degree in special education with a concentration in Autism. Following her graduation, Heather was offered a job as a SPED teacher in an urban school where she remains today.

Currently, Heather’s SPED position requires a caseload of thirty students to include five paraprofessionals who work with individual students on a fulltime basis. As Heather reflected on her first-year teaching, she said that she: “was surprised that I did not have an aide as all the teachers that I worked with during my student teaching had aide. But of course, those teachers were in a special education classroom.” Heather currently works as a specialist among the general education teachers. “Middle school special education is different in that it is not an exclusive special education classroom.” She added: “My job is focused on working with
students within a general education setting. Therefore: “I augment the standard curriculum for my student’s needs, I teach study skills, and I work with my students on preparing for MCAS testing.” MCAS is the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

The special education program that Heather is part of in her urban school district has six teachers in the middle school covering grades five through eight as well as specialists in mathematics and reading. Heather noted: “this is a group of educators who believe in the value of their jobs and enjoy working and collaborating together.” By comparison she found: “My friends who work in other districts often talk about the challenges working with general education teachers who don’t understand the extra work that a special educator has to do.” She added: “I am fortunate that all of my colleagues and the school leadership team are supportive of the work that the special education teachers are doing at our school.” Heather much like Wildred, also commented that there is little time to complete paperwork during school hours. “There is just not enough time at school to do paperwork. My husband use to get upset with all the time I had to spend doing paperwork at home. I was forced to make compromises.”

**Sean.** Sean is a single SPED teacher in a rural town in western Massachusetts. He has been a special education teacher for six years. Prior, Sean served his country as a Marine in the United States Marine Corps. Sean is proud of his service during the war in Iraq and is equally proud of his honorable discharge. Sean stated: “my experiences in the Marine Corp marines helped me to prioritize and organize and prioritize my life.” He identified that many of his experiences have allowed him to hone his communication and interpersonal skills. Sean added: “These are the reasons that I went into teaching.” Sean recalls his experience with transition from the Marine Corp:
When I was in the military, although my MOS was infantry, everybody always told me that I'd be an awesome teacher because I explained things well, and when I got out of the Marine Corps, I thought it was my calling, so I went ahead and I took some tests and realized that I had an aptitude for teaching. When I went back to school to get my teaching license, I had a course in special education and I was hooked at that point.

Currently, Sean teaches in a rural school district teaching special needs students who are 14 to 21 years old. Sean added: “the structure of the special education program in the district is somewhat inclusive.” Sean has his own classroom where he works with his students but some of his students often attend classes in the general education program. Sean is required to augment the curriculum for his students who are mainstreamed in the general education program. He currently works with 15 students with varying levels of disabilities and has two full-time paraprofessionals in his classroom. One of the paraprofessionals is a full-time one-on-one aide for an individual student. The other paraprofessional works full-time as an academic aide to the remaining students in the classroom. Sean much like Heather, found he was not prepared during his college experiences in working with paraprofessionals. Sean added: “The special needs program that I was in didn’t really talk about how to work with para’s. but as a leader in the military, I just used my military leadership training to manage working with them.” He added: “I treat them with respect and as a colleague and it works.”

**Alyssa.** Alyssa is a young single woman in her mid-twenties, from a small town in Western Massachusetts and is in her second year of teaching special education. She teaches in the same rural school district where she attended and received a waiver to teach her first year while she obtained her license from the state. Alyssa grew up in a lower middle-class family with several siblings, one of who is a sister with special needs. Alyssa has always been involved
in her sister’s needs and chose a career in special education because of her familiarity with the special needs community and as a way of giving of herself. Alyssa reflected about her experiences living with her sister as being positive. “She taught me a lot of wonderful things through the years and I want to give back and pay forward all of those wonderful things I experienced my students.” Alyssa believes that “teaching is a rewarding and honorable career.”

Alyssa attended a state school in Western Massachusetts and received a Master’s degree in Special Education. She worked her way through school by working in the school library and the bookstore and needed financial aid to cover the cost of classes. She related that her family “had always been poor and other people made fun of me because of my hand-me-down clothes and shoes.” Alyssa stated that her experiences growing up without much money made her a “stronger individual.” She stated she wants her students “to be strong no matter what happens” because she feels like she “owes them that.”

Much like Wildred and Heather, Alyssa has found that teaching has placed a burden on her home life. “After the first week, I was crying to my boyfriend about it and wondering if this was right for me.” Over the past year, things have gotten worse for me. “I called in sick one day because I had a fight with my boyfriend over all the time I was spending on school work.” She added: “I was just devastated. We were going to break up. Well, he did break up with me, for like a day. I just called in sick the next day.” When she returned to work the next day, “it was like everybody was looking at me with fire in their eyes, like, ‘How dare you take a day off?’” Alyssa stopped reflected and said: “Well, I'll never do that again, because I can't handle that.” Alyssa began to cry stating: “I don't feel like this is working for me, and I'm burned out.” She added: “Every day I go home, and I'm crying to my boyfriend. He's not happy. I'm never going to get married if I keep doing this to him.” She continued with a
nervous laugh, while crying at the same time while stating: “Plus my boyfriend's being a real pain. I don't feel like he's supportive when I talk to him about all the stuff that's going on in school. He just kind of rolls his eyes and drinks another beer.”

**Transcript Analysis**

An analysis of transcripts yielded two superordinate themes and six nested subthemes that captured the ways in which participants made sense of their experiences. These themes were formed through careful interpretation of the data that emerged within each individual transcript and the researcher’s observations of the participants during the interviews. All three superordinate themes surfaced from interview data that occurred within the transcripts and personal communications with the participants. In this chapter, superordinate and nested subthemes that emerged during cross participant analysis will be described and discussed. Verbatim quotations, researcher observations, descriptions of participants’ perceptions, and reflective thoughts are included as supporting evidence.

Pseudonyms have been used for all participants. Each section and subsection below will present the themes and conclude with a summative analysis. The superordinate and nested themes are as follows:

**Self-Worth**
- teacher identity
- teacher beliefs,
- teacher effectiveness

**Obstacles/Barriers**
- working conditions
- systematic challenges
- professional conflicts

**Self-Worth**

This first superordinate theme that emerged through analysis of the data, Self-worth, captures the participant’s sense of value or worth they experience as a SPED teacher. In response to questions about how being a SPED teacher makes them feel, or what factors influenced them as being a particular kind of person who selected special education as a career path, participants revealed desirable personal feelings that affected their ability to maintain a special education career path. Across transcripts, participants described their experiences in terms of their self-worth through a sense of familiarity, optimism and conversely uncertainty, while they described their confidence and effectiveness through their own experiences as being interdependent with others. Additionally, they related that both the home and school climates had the greatest impact concerning their beliefs and ability as an effective educator. With this said, three nested themes were therefore identified within this superordinate theme. These were: identity, beliefs, and effectiveness.

**Teacher identity.** To varying degrees, the participants reported that their experiences as a SPED teacher produced welcomed feelings concerning the distinguishing qualities that make them different from mainstream teachers. While some participants experienced initial reservations, other expressed feelings of comfort, while still others felt discouraged by a lack of support. Although the average teaching experience of the participant’s is about 16 years, almost all of the interviewees expresses feelings of being inept during their initial three years of teaching. It was the perception of this researcher that most of the participants struggled when it came to asking for help because they felt a need to achieve on their own. It was also this researcher’s sense that during the initial years, the participants struggled to find their place
within the school environment in terms of finding their identity as a SPED teacher. One example is demonstrated by Sean who described his feelings about himself as a teacher: “I see myself as a special education teacher through my experiences as a marine.”

This researcher identified that Sean identifies as a Marine first and as a SPED educator second. Sean spoke of how his time in the United States Marine Corps and used that to explain how he identifies and as a SPED teacher. Time and time again, Sean expressed his identity as a marine that shaped him as a SPED teacher. For example:

My expectations of myself are to be at 150%. If I learned anything in the Marine Corps, it's that you've got to give it all. The hardest part for me is when I look at people and they're not giving it their all and I feel like they're letting down the system, whether it's administrators or fellow teachers, but you know, it's not my place to judge them, but I definitely see how that impacts what goes on in the school.

Sean was quite aware of how his experiences in the Marine Corps affected his life and how he has used his training to adapt as a SPED teacher. “I'm trained through the Marine Corps to be an infantry man and through school to educate.” The researcher found that Sean’s honest reflection has served him well in the school environment, however Sean was very protective and guarded when it came to his identity as a SPED teacher.

Unlike Sean, Jeanne wore her emotions on her sleeve. Jeanne smiled with a half-smile of uncertainty stating: “It’s very demanding being a teacher.” Jeanne identifies her role as a SPED teacher through her “thirty-seven years of being in the field.” She added that she learned from her personal experiences and is continually worried about what is happening to her and teachers. As she looked away from the researcher she stated: “I'm worried about or my concern is about internal and external things that happen to teachers that affect their teaching and the stress that is
put on.” It is because of these concerns that Jeanne identifies herself as a “good but not a great special educator” (personal communication, January 11, 2017). Although Jeanne identifies through her experiences, Trisha identifies being a SPED teacher through her religious upbringing.

After losing her husband, house and her job as a lawyer, Trisha turned to her faith. Trisha’s eyes watered as she looked away and added: “But you never lose your faith…Thank God my parents instilled faith in me at such a young age that I knew that God loved me and I was going to be able to be okay.” Continuing she stated: “That was the most important thing that I never lost. What am I going to do? I don't know what I'm going to do.” She added: “And I looked in the newspaper and there was an article about St. Colletta's Day School, which is a special needs private school in Braintree. And I thought, you know…”Why don't I just go volunteer there?” Trisha smiled and said: “I went and the first student that I met, I basically fell in love with him.” Trisha smiled and added: “I thought, I absolutely loved it and I met such wonderful, supportive colleagues there, and they encouraged me to take courses and I got my certification.” Religion continues to be a driving force in how Trisha identifies as being a SPED teacher. “To this day, I use my faith to guide me in my everyday endeavors as a SPED teacher” (personal communication, January 11, 2017).

Initially when asked about how she identifies as being a teacher, Alyssa stated in a very low tone: “Well, I do what I do because I have a special needs sibling.” She added: “I've always taken care of her, and I always felt the need to make sure that I kind of give back from all the wonderful things that my sister has taught me throughout the years.” The researcher construed that Alyssa identifies being a SPED teacher through her family experiences. As a career choice, Alyssa commented in a tone that was almost void of inflection: “I just thought that it's a
rewarding career, and it's a career that's really honorable, I guess, and that you can give a voice to somebody that doesn't have a voice.” Alyssa who still lives at home with her sister and parents further commented: “Every day that I see my sister and my family, I am reminded of why I became a special education teacher and that in of itself drives me to work (personal communication, January 12, 2017).

Both Heather and Wildred, much like Alyssa, described their identity as a SPED teacher through their experiences with their family. Heather, similar to Alyssa, had a sibling diagnosed with special needs. With a very wide smile, Heather explains: “I love working with special needs students and feel that I am good at my job. My brother was diagnosed with autism when we he was three years old.” Continuing to smile, Heather added: “It is my brother who inspires me to stay in special education. This is who I am and who I was meant to be” (personal communication, January 10, 2017). Her ties to family became further evident when her voiced raised and she proudly stated: “My mother and my grandmother were also teachers. It runs in my blood.”

Although teaching does not run in Wildred’s family, her experiences with a special needs relative is a driving force in identifying as a special educator. When asked why she chose special education as her career, Wildred stated: “my nephew was a special needs student and I helped him when he was little and we worked well together. My momma said I had the gift.” Wildred leaned back in her chair and smiled and said: “we are still close, my nephew and me, I think about him every day, especially on those tough days” (personal communication, January 12, 2017). To varying degrees, the researcher found that the participants identified themselves through life experiences and through familial relationships, however the researcher identified that their beliefs about special education helped to shape their self-worth.
Teacher beliefs. Across the interviews there was varying degrees of confidence or faith in their own abilities in becoming a SPED teacher by all the participants. Across all participants, their belief or state of mind of their self-worth as a special educator was influenced externally. In almost all instances, these external influences were coworkers or family members. In each case, the researcher identified that the participants felt the need to provide evidence to prove their belief in terms of self-worth. For example, when asked about his belief in his ability as a teacher, Sean looked up and recalled:

When I was in the military, although my MOS was infantry, everybody always told me that I'd be an awesome teacher because I explained things well, and when I got out of the Marine Corps, I thought it was my calling, so I went ahead and I took some tests and realized that I had an aptitude for teaching. When I went back to school to get my teaching license, I had a course in special education and I was hooked at that point.

Although the researcher noted that Sean was very confident in his skills as a teacher, he too felt the need to justify his ability and beliefs as an educator. When asked if he thought he was liked at the school, Sean stopped, paused, and reflected before stating: “I think one of the reasons that I'm liked in the school is because I don't complain much.” The researcher noted that Sean became uncomfortable when speaking about his beliefs, however no one participant became more uncomfortable than Alyssa.

Alyssa spoke open and candidly about her beliefs and confidence as a SPED teacher. Although she was inspired by her sibling, during this her second year she is “concerned about her teaching skills.” It was apparent to the researcher that Alyssa, who often teared up during the interview was internally struggling with her beliefs in her ability to be an effective teacher. When asked about her beliefs in terms of herself worth as a teacher, Alyssa began to cry stating:
“This has been really hard for me. This has been my first real job. I haven't ever had a job before, other than volunteer work and stuff.” Alyssa wiped her eyes with a tissue and continued: “I'm finding it not to be, maybe it's different in other places, but I'm finding it to be very difficult.”

Much like Alyssa, both Wildred and Heather developed beliefs through their early exposure to special needs individuals through family members. Heather, whose brother is diagnosed with Autism found that her early exposure reinforced her belief as a SPED teacher. “I love working with special needs students and feel that I am good at my job.” Heather paused as her expression turned serious before stating: “My brother was diagnosed with Autism when he was three years old.” When asked about the influence that her brother had on her decision to become a SPED teacher, Heather reflected for moment as said: “I think he had everything to do with it. We are so close and he is inspirational.” She paused again and then continued: “Because of my brother, I feel like I just understand special needs. It is part of my life and I didn’t have to learn about it, I lived it. (personal communication, January 11, 2017).

Wildred also spoke about her early exposure to special needs individuals at an early age. “My nephew was a special needs student and I helped him when he was little and we worked well together.” When asked about the influence that her nephew had on her decision to become a SPED teacher, Wildred laughed and commented: “He had everything to do with it. (Personal communication, January 12, 2017). Wildred continued smiling stating: “When I was just a kid myself, I had to babysit him, sometimes I would just go over to his house just to hang with him. I guess he is the reason I am doing this. Funny, isn’t it?” (personal communication, January 12, 2017).
Although Trisha believes her track to become a special needs teacher was through a belief that her religion “guided” her to the career, the path full of personal strife, especially with her self-confidence. Unlike many of the other participants, Trisha was not exposed to special needs by a family member or early in her life. As a result, Trisha’s admitted that her confidence waned and she fell into depression during her first few years of teaching special needs students. In a very serious and monotone voice, Trisha stated:

You look at your students and you say, "All right, this student can identify coins but this one can't count beyond five, what do we do? How do we make this accessible to all of them so that they all can reach their goals?" The long and short of it was I ended up becoming depressed again and at that point I decided I was going to be an assistant, that I just couldn't take the stress of being a teacher knowing that I was the sole one responsible for IEPs, and MPS, and data collection, and all of the stressful things that came with being the lead teacher.

During this second bout of depression, Trisha discovered that she had a thyroid issue. When asked about who and what influenced her during this period, Trisha offered a slight smile and stated: “My faith and my students.” As Trisha reflected she offered a big smile and stated: “It was wonderful and I loved it because I still had the connection with the kids and that was the most important thing to me. I knew I was making a difference in those kid's lives and that was so wonderful.” Trisha added: “It's challenging in many respects but it's also extremely rewarding and that's what I'll find so good about it, that it's rewarding.”

**Teacher effectiveness.** At different times, though out the interviews, the participants commented on their effectiveness as a SPED teacher. The researcher identified how all of the participants viewed teacher effectiveness in terms of the quality of their teaching. Most of the
participants identified that the quality of their teaching could improve, while the researcher noted that one participant appeared to be satisfied with her current level of performance, while one other participant believed she was totally ineffective. However, the researcher also noted that across all of the interviews, the participants identified how the quality of their teaching impacts their students learning. Heather, exhibited the most confidence in her teacher effectiveness over all of the participants.

I believe that I am the force that keeps our students moving and growing in a middle school environment. Middle school can be a difficult place for these pre-teens moving into the teenage years. Working with students to expand their emotional and mental development, while their physical development is going wild is a difficult job. That is why I am a strong force to keep these students believing in themselves and helping them to grow.

When asked about how she developed herself as a “strong force, Heather became very serious and commented: “I have high expectations of myself. I am committed to my students.” Heather was asked how these high expectations make her effective as a teacher, Heather stated: “If I have high expectations of myself, the students understand and are more likely to have high expectations for themselves. High expectations lead to high results. (personal communication, January 12, 2017).

Throughout Sean’s interviews, the researcher noted that Sean spoke with confidence and at no point appeared to waiver in his beliefs in terms of his effectiveness as a teacher. Sean smiled and stated: “I think a lot of teachers try to be effective by following one specific method or another. I believe that each student is an individual and deserves individual learning.” When asked how this is effective, Sean stated: “when you gear the lesson to their learning style, they
can totally understand the objective.”  Sean stopped smiling, looked the researcher in the eye and stated: “This is what I do best.”  When asked about whole class learning, Sean replied: “This is a little more difficult.  You have to merge the individual learning styles while at the same time teaching for the desired outcomes.  When asked about his effectiveness in doing so, Sean laughed and stated: “I think am pretty good at what I do.”  When asked to describe an experience that exemplifies this, Sean offered the following:

We pick the topic in morning meeting, which gives the students time to think about it.  Then at lunch time we introduce the topic and each student gets a first round to 'talk about the subject.'  Since most of my students are verbal it gives them a chance to talk with their peers and I can make sure it is an appropriate conversation.  I remember the first time we talked at lunch, it excited the students and they started coming up with other topics.

When commenting on this as an effective teaching approach, Sean stated: “I felt like it was an effective way to stimulate conversation and socialization.  I use lunch as well as other opportunities during the day as teachable moments.”

When speaking of her effectiveness as a SPED teacher, Jeanne was humbler than Sean. The researcher noted that when Jeanne spoke about herself, her voice lower as if she did not what to appear to be arrogant or conceited.  Jeanne’s belief as an effective teacher resided in what was being done in the classroom.  “To be an effective teacher with a classroom like mine, it is really important as special educator to treat each student as an individual” (personal communication, January 13, 2017).  Jeanne added: “You must assess their strengths and weaknesses and start building out a curriculum and individual lessons, which play on those strengths.  It takes a lot of work to get it working to be most effective.”  When asked if she
thought she was effective, Jeanne smiled and stated: “finally after thirty-seven years of teaching, I have the year curriculum down to a science, but I am still working on how to identify student strengths and use them for learning (personal communication, January 13, 2017).

Trisha, like Jeanne, Sean, and Heather, found her effectiveness as an educator through student learning. Trisha stated: “It is all about student learning. I know I am effective when I see true student learning” (personal communication, January 11, 2017). Trisha added with a hint of pride: “You see the progress your student makes and you see the way their families, how their lives are enriched by the services that we provide to their son or daughter and it's wonderful.”

Of all the participants, the researcher found that Wildred was the least likely to speak about her effectiveness as an educator. Although she did speak about her effectiveness as a teacher through the students, she refrained to speak directly about her personal effectiveness. She stated: “To be effective, I like to make sure that my students can easily reach success on a first try. They are young and can easily become frustrated” (personal communication, January 14, 2017). She added: “I build on the success by adding a little bit of complexity on the next step and so on.” When asked the question about whether this is an effective approach, the researcher noted that the tone of her voice became irritated when she threw up her hands and stated: "I just do the best I can." At this point the researcher elected not to follow up with additional questions.

Alyssa, the youngest and least experienced teacher, struggled with her effectiveness as an educator. “I am not sure that I have experienced teacher effectiveness.” She added: “One distinguishing quality that effective teachers seem to have is, that in all their approaches to planning, designing and implementing instruction and assessment, their focus is on “student learning” to inform their own teaching.” When questioned further, Alyssa’s eyes teared as she
stated: “I don’t think that I have been an effective teacher.” She laughed with a nervous uncertainty while she continued to cry stating:

That doesn't mean that I can't be a good teacher, like in a mainstream classroom or something like that, or maybe in a different school. I've got to be honest, I started looking for a job. I was looking for another job. If I can make it through this year ... I don't even know if they're going to hire me back, but if I can just make it to the April school vacation, that's when all the jobs come up. I was planning on applying everywhere I could, maybe get another job somewhere else, and just use the lack of resources as a reason why.

When asked to explain her rational for leaving, Alyssa paused and it was apparent to the researcher that she was reflecting on her teaching experience as a whole because she began with her first days of teaching. She commented: “I was very excited to be placed with a mentor and to have an experienced paraprofessional” working with her. However, on her first day when Alyssa met with her mentor, she was advised that she (the mentor) “was going to have a busy classroom this year and that they could ‘meet only weekly’ during Alyssa’s break.” Further, the mentor told Alyssa she was “lucky because her aide was very experienced” and that Alyssa “could count on her for help.” When asked how this made her feel, Alyssa stated: I felt like the mentor didn’t or wasn’t going to have time for me” (personal communication, January 12, 2017). During the interview, Alyssa admitted that she continues to struggle to provide a curriculum for her students because she believes that the paraprofessional has been unhelpful in supporting her in developing a curriculum around the student’s IEP goals. Although the paraprofessional does not have a degree “she is very knowledgeable about special education and how to approach education
children.” However, she feels that her aide is “critical” of her, “is not willing to help” her, and “talks bad about me to other teachers.”

**Summary.** The participant’s accounts of their experiences relating to the superordinate theme of Self-worth indicate several important findings. Many of the participants identified as being a teacher through own life experiences both inside and outside of education. In all cases, there was varying degrees of confidence or faith in the participant’s ability in becoming a SPED teacher. Furthermore, also across all participants, their belief or state of mind of their self-worth as a special educator was influenced externally. This gap became more evident when the participants began speaking about their effectiveness as a SPED teacher. The researcher identified that all of the participants viewed teacher effectiveness in terms of the quality of their teaching. Most of the participants identified that the quality of their teaching could improve, while the researcher noted that one participant appeared to be satisfied with her current level of performance, while one other participant believed she was totally ineffective. However, the researcher also noted that across all of the interviews, the participants identified how the quality of their teaching impacts their students learning.

**Obstacles/Barriers**

The super-ordinate theme Obstacles/Barriers emerged through the discussions and became evident through the researcher observations. The topic was not a research question, however participants volunteered information regarding their working conditions, systematic challenges, conflicts, and professional development in terms of being obstacles or barriers to success as well potential sources of teacher stress. For the most part, the participants perceived themselves as good teachers who are actively involved in their students learning. Yet, all of the
teachers recalled varying feelings of anger and frustration with perceived obstacles that made their professional and personal lives more difficult.

The first subordinate theme, *working conditions* illustrates the participant’s proficiency to maintain student learning during, at times, even during adverse conditions. The second subordinate theme, *systematic challenges* captures the participant’s capacity to manage administrative requirements that are inherent to special educator teachers, which include: training requirements, re-certifications, and a lack of appropriate training. The third subordinate theme, *conflicts* refers to how participant’s make meaning when engaging in interactions with people other than their students. It must be noted that despite these barriers, the participants in all cases, demonstrated a tenacity to do what is best for their disabled students.

**Working Conditions.** Working conditions played an underlining role in the participant’s ability to manage extrinsic factors that may influence teacher effectiveness and students learning. Examples include classroom structure, lack of resource, and a lack of structured curriculum.

**Sean.** One example of working conditions that affect teacher effectiveness and student learning is demonstrated by Sean. Sean’s reflects on his working condition experiences through the school structure and the size of his classroom. “So my structure in the school is I have my own classroom and I augment my classroom in the mainstream classroom depending on what skill sets need to be worked on with the children.” Sean momentarily stopped, smiled and said: “The structure that I work in is a support environment where I may support the students or support the mainstream teachers in modifying the curriculum for the students.” He continued: I have currently 15 students in my classroom who are under my tutelage…I guess is the right word, where they have varying degrees of disability, from very severe disabilities to very moderate disabilities.” The structure I work in, in terms of the classroom itself and
the building, is very difficult. I don't have a regular-sized classroom. I have a modified classroom. I call it my closet because it's smaller than all the other classrooms. Granted I have fewer students at any given time, but it makes it difficult to do all the things that a mainstream teacher might do.

When asked how the smaller room makes him feel, Sean stated: “I can live with the smaller room, I am not complaining, but what they do not realize is all the accessories that come with my students. Standers, wheelchairs and whatnot” (personal communication, January 9, 2017). Sean added: “Not having the space is stressful. It is stressful for me and the students. I don’t think the administrators understand how much it affects the kids” (personal communication, January 9, 2017). The researcher noted that Sean stopped, looked up into the sky as if he was looking for the right words and said: “I can deal with the stress, if we, me and my aide had the physical resources we need to do our job. Things like newer computers, SmartBoards, individual iPads and apps for each student. They need this stuff to communicate” (personal communication, January 9, 2017).

Jeanne. Unlike Sean, Jeanne found her room size and resources adequate. “After thirty-four years of working in a preschool, you accumulate all the things you need to teach. Granted my school is great about keeping up with technology.” Issues for Jeanne concerning working conditions were impacted by her position as the school’s vision impairment expert. “For whatever reason, the other part of my job is I'm the low vision… I'm the teacher of the visually impaired for all the kids in the school.” She adds: “I am responsible for scheduling the hours and the time to see them here and there.” The researcher noted that as she continued, she raised her hands in the air and stated: “Assess them. Last year I had seven, so it was a lot of additional work.” Continuing she said: “I remember last year...They vended me out to another town to do
evaluations, kids with low vision and at that time, I had seven kids in the class, and I had five
other kids in school with low vision.” At this point the researcher observed that Jeanne’s voice
raised in pitch when she said: “I can't do it. I can't. You have to find somebody else to do that
town stuff because I can't do it.” Jeanne continued:

I said I probably I could do the preschool kid, but I can't do the eighth-grader and I can't
do the sixth-grader because I know nothing about eighth-grade or sixth-grade curriculum
and how to adapt it for them and I'm if you ... I can't do it and nobody asked me if I
wanted to do that. Nobody asked me if I ... I was just told to do it and I can't do it and my
primary responsibility is to the kids in my class. My secondary is to the kids with low
vision but I can't. They don't get mad at me and I get a nice salary because I'm at the top
of the thing, and they're just trying to squeeze more work out of me.

When asked how all this made her feel, Jeanne stated: “I felt a little bit bad but then I said, but
what's the use complaining, if I can't do it?  When asked further on how this made her feel,
Jeanne became more emotional and teared up. She said in a raised voice and smile: “It stresses
me out. It is just like when they asked me to drive the wheelchair van.” Jeanne stopped gathered
her thoughts and added: “I had to get a 7D but I cannot drive those wheelchair buses. I'll drive
the minivan, but I have all this anxiety about it, you know, I can't reach the pedals and I am only
4 foot 10 inches tall.”

**Trisha.** Like Jeanne, Trisha found her room size, location, and resources to be sufficient.
“I was lucky to take over from a teacher who I co-taught with and all of those things were
already in place” (personal communication, January 11, 2017). However, Trish identified the
lack of curriculum as problematic. “That's one of the difficulties about being a special needs
teacher, in general, is there's no set curriculum. You develop the curriculum based on your
student's needs, and so it isn't like you can turn to something and say ...hand me the math [curriculum]book." When asked which working condition needed the most improvement, Trisha again like Jeanne, mentioned driving. “I knew that I would have to drive even though I do not like to, but it is the mandated driving for other classes that makes the working condition hard. I refuse to drive a wheelchair van into the city” (personal communication, January 11, 2017).

When asked about how these working conditions made her feel, Trisha responded: “I get stressed. Every time I need to drive somewhere or write an individualized curriculum I get so anxious.” Trisha stopped, smiled, and stated: “Because of my health issues I cannot afford to stress eat” (personal communication, January 11, 2017).

**Wildred.** Wildred much like Sean, reported on the working conditions at her school in terms of classroom size and the physical attributes of the building. The researcher noted that Wildred scrunched up her nose when she stated: “Well, we're an urban school, so we don't have a lot of funding or the funding that we all think we should have at any given time.” Wildred added: “The rooms for special education are also small, they look like they took one room and made a bunch of small rooms.” Wildred further commented on her building: “My school is old and tired. It is need of repairs but I guess there is no money for that. It is very cold in the winter and the ceilings have water marks all over them from leaks” (personal communication, January 10, 2017). When asked if she experienced any other working condition obstacles, Wildred said: “the curriculum.” The researcher noted that Wildred shook her head no when she stating: “I have a lot of children that are assigned to me. I have a docket of 35 children, so I'm pretty busy.” When asked about how the curriculum as a working condition related to the number of children, Wildred responded: “We have a standard curriculum but you have to individualize it with the regular classroom teacher. It is impossible to get it done right.” Continuing Wildred stated: “We
have a specialized learning center and resources that augment the curriculum. It is nice to have but I rarely use it, I just have no time.”

When asked about how the working conditions made her feel, Wildred stated: “In the beginning I was stress out.” The researcher found the Wildred leaded forward in her chair as if she was going to whisper a secret when she stated: “You know, after about four or five years I just kind of realized it is what it is and I kind of do my job based on whatever resources that we're given.” When asked what that means, Wildred stopped and reflected and smiled before stating: “I am a stress eater, I think I said that before, so I cannot allow myself to be stressed, so I block out the causes” (personal communication January 10, 2017).

**Heather.** Heather, unlike all of the other participants, did not address the physical working conditions at her school. However, the researcher noted that the school classroom conditions were small and cramped. The school was crowded and somewhat dark. Desks were clean but had marks and carvings in on them. There were a lot of chalk boards, while many of the classrooms had white boards. When asked directly about these observations, Heather stated: “That is the way it is, I choose not to become passionate over those things” (personal communication, January 12, 2017). When asked to identify working conditions that bothered her, Heather like all of the participants spoke of the curriculum in terms of creating specialized lessons. “Middle School SPED is the worst. These children need us to plan creative lessons for them, but all our non-instructional time is spent trying to get people to meetings and documenting everything we do.” When asked how this made her feel, Heather stated: “it is stressing me out, it is just too much.”

**Alyssa.** Alyssa, like Heather did not address the working conditions at her school. The researcher noted that the school although older and small in size was very clean, while noting
that whiteboards were placed over chalk boards. The researcher noted that all of the special education rooms had SmartBoards. When asked to comment on the researcher’s observations, Alyssa responded: “I am so stressed by so many other things that I just cannot think about these as well” (personal communication, January 9, 2017). When asked to think about a working condition that she has experienced, Alyssa said: “the curriculum. I was expecting to have all these curricula that I could plan lessons around, and there was nothing.” Alyssa paused and recalled: “When I asked for the curriculum, they said, ‘It's the IEP,’ which is fine, but they didn't teach me how to teach a curriculum off of the IEP at school. I have no idea what that means.” Alyssa leaned back in her chair for a second before leaning forward and stating:

Justice too much - It's just so much, I think we have to deal with so much more than the regular teachers. Plus, the regular teachers, they have a curriculum laid out. They have everything laid out. The district bought whatever they're going to use for reading and math, and they already have it laid out. It's so much easier than having to write a curriculum or develop a curriculum. Not only that, there's so much stress in the job as it is. I found that out afterwards, after I graduated and really got out teaching. There's so many other factors that they really don't teach you about in school, like dealing with parents, and diapers, and changing kids, and making sure that all the rules of the school are followed and all that stuff.

Summary. For all of the participants, varying working conditions influenced their effectiveness as a SPED teacher. These included building age, classroom size, driving wheelchair vans, and curriculum. In all cases, the participants identified the lack of curriculum as a major issue concerning working conditions. The lack of curriculum was followed by: the
age of the building, classroom size, and driving wheelchairs vans respectively. Table 2 identifies which working conditions is associated with which participant.

Table 2

*Working Conditions identified by each Participant*

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When asked how the working condition made the participant feel, all responded that these conditions, causes stress in their careers as well as their personal lives. In addition, it should be noted that across all of the transcripts, the participants indicated that a lack of a structured working curriculum was viewed as a working condition and not as a challenge of their positions.

**Systematic challenges.** The second subordinate theme, Systematic Challenges, differs from working conditions in that the participants actively determined obstacles through their experiences as SPED educators. These systematic challenges were viewed by the participants as barriers and included experiences concerning professional development, mandated reporting, mandated testing, data collection, the physical demands of lifting students, and federal and state mandates. In the data, all of the participants spoke of their experiences in terms of their varying
impact on their effectiveness as a SPED teacher as well as the impact these challenges had on student learning.

Sean. Sean represented systematic challenges in terms of student’s Individual Education Program (IEP), data collection, and the physical demands of lifting and moving students. In terms of the IEP, the researcher noted that Sean’s tone lower and he move forward on his chair when he stated: “It's a lot of paperwork in addition to the extra teaching that I have to do or the teaching I have to do. It's a lot of responsibility for paperwork and making sure that the paperwork is correct.” Sean added: “It's a legal binding document, and therefore, whatever goes into that document has to be backed up with data and information to make sure that those goals and objectives are being met.” Sean paused, shook his head no and continued: “So that means that a whole set of data collection procedures need to be put in place to make sure that the teachers and myself are meeting the goals and that the student's able to meet those goals themselves.”

When asked about how the IEP reporting requirements made him feel, Sean stated:
The stressful part of that is not that they're coming to me and this is their first IEP. The problem that I find is that these students or children, students let's call them, have been on IEPs for years, and I look at the goals and objectives, and I look at where my personal assessments for the students are, and I don't see them matching. So, then I have to wait a whole year, or until the next IEP comes up. I have to work on what's down on that paper, even though I know it's not in the best interest of the student because it's a legal and binding document. I have the ability to change it or modify it, and to be quite honest, the administration's not readily welcoming to modify an IEP in the middle of the IEP period,
which is a year, because it's time-consuming. It requires all the parties to get together, so I'm living with it.

Sean paused and then added:

Then while I'm doing that and modifying the IEP, you know, if somebody comes to me at 14 and they have this IEP written up and it doesn't agree to the curriculum now in the ninth grade, I'm stuck with it until I can change it, and that's a very frustrating thing for me. I'm sorry.

When asked if the IEP paperwork and process was frustrating Sean replied: “I wouldn't use the word frustrating as much as helplessness. I just feel like I can't…”  Sean paused midsentence and then continued:

If I got the student in the first two weeks and was able to assess him and was able to change the IEP, and it was a swipe of the pen, it would take a lot of stress off of me, but knowing that I have to work with what somebody else has already developed, that puts a lot of stress on me because in a lot of cases, not every case, but in a lot of cases, I just think that the IEPs are poorly written.

Sean stopped and without prompting added: “The problem with the IEPs is not that the students are trying to limit it, but you have to write a goal that the student's going to be able to achieve, and that's very difficult.”  He added: “It's easy to error on the side of caution than to go and set very high expectations for the student's goals and then the student not make them.”  Sean shrugged his shoulders and stated: “I mean, there is a provision that you didn't make the goal and you can rewrite it and go onto the next IEP period or the next year and continue with the goal until they achieve it.”  Sean concluded: “but most teachers, in my opinion, feel like that's a failure because you're supposed to set a goal that's supposed to be achieved.”
When asked to elaborate on his experiences with data collection Sean smiled and stated: “I have to analyze.” He added: “I have a pretty decent data collection system, but I have to do that on my own time. I have to analyze the data and actually apply the data to see if what we're doing is working or not working.” “For me, it is time consuming and getting it right puts a lot of pressure on me” (personal communication, January 9, 2017). As Sean continued, the researcher identified that Sean was speaking as if off a checklist: “I have to consult with my para.” He continued: “I have to consult with the mainstream teachers to see if this is happening, and any free moment that I have at school.” He added: “that's what I'm doing because I don't have that opportunity at night to pick up the phone and go call a mainstream math teacher and say, ‘Oh, by the way, how's Debbie doing? Or whatever.”

When asked how this made him feel, Sean replied: “It’s aggravating.” He summarized his feelings:

Not getting the financial support, not getting the papers that I need, not getting the data tracking programs that I need to use electronic data system. I'm using a pencil and a paper, and half the time it's already used paper, you know what I mean? I turn a sheet of paper over and I make my own chart and that's how I ... Then I'll go back at night and spend three hours putting all this data into this spreadsheet that I made in Excel, but the school's not providing me with those resources.

Without prompting, Sean stated: “Oh yeah and then there is the medical and physical parts of my job.” The researcher asked him to elaborate: “So you want to talk about stress and burnout, you've got kids that are on medication.” Again, Sean shook his head no and added: “You've got kids that have chronic diarrhea, and as their SPED teacher, I'm partly responsible for making sure that that child is going home in a better condition than he comes in, and I'm not a medically
trained person.” Sean smiled and added: “I'm trained through the Marine Corps to be an infantry man and through school to educate, and I'm not a medical person, but I find myself accepting part of that role because the nurse can't do everything.” Sean concluded: “So that creates an unbelievable amount of stress on me, myself, but it also affects all the other students in my class, which I have to accept that burden as well.” There are times when you just want to just throw your hands up and say, ”You know what? This is not worth it., but then I think about it and smarten up”

When asked if there were other challenges that he wanted to discuss, he stated: “Yeah, plus the physical demands on your body.” Sean continued: “Although I'm in relatively decent shape, it's tough lifting a 200-pound girl out of a wheelchair, and maybe you use a Hoyer to do that, but you don't use a Hoyer to readjust them in the wheelchair.” Sean paused, smiled, raised his left arm and pointed to his bicep and said: “It's all human strength, and quite frankly I'm the only one strong enough to be able to do it, so that responsibility falls on me.” After a short laugh, Sean continued: “it's about wheeling them out ... It's getting a van, wheeling them out, putting them in the van, making sure somebody else is there to watch them while you go get the next student to put them in the van.” He added: “You've got to chain them down, chain their wheelchairs down, not the kids obviously.” The researcher noted another short pause for laughter and then he said: “Then you've got to drive them. Then you undo what you just did. Then you have to redo it to come back and then you have to undo what you just did…so that in itself is physically demanding.”

At this point during the interview, the researcher asked Sean to summarized how he feels. Sean replied:
You have the stress that you don't have the financial supports that you have at school. You have the stress that you feel like when other teachers see you, that you're going to create more work for them. You have the stress that you're not doing enough for the students. You have the stress that the students may pass away. You have the stress that your students are sick and the parents aren't forthcoming as to why they're sick or what's going on and you're trying to reach out for them, and there's just so many factors affect you in a stressful way.

Heather. Much like Sean, Heather discussed systematic challenges in terms of the IEP, paperwork, data collection, and behaviors. When asked to comment on these challenges, Heather said: “Well I don’t want to bitch but I have 30 students in my caseload this year, and one full-time aide to help me.” She added: “Of those 30 students, eight of them have Behavior Improvement Plans (BIP), and three or four of them have some kind of quasi-major to major incident almost daily.” The researcher noted that Heather looked up as if to find her true feelings as she continued: “I'm so exhausted from working nights and weekends on interpreting psychological reports and writing the IEP's. Evenings and weekends are spent typing IEP's on our own time.” With a serious look in her eye, she added: “It bothers me greatly that every teacher at the 12-year mark with my educational degree is paid the same salary...this includes the PE teacher. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate PE teachers, but they don't do any paperwork at all!”

At this point of the interview, the researcher asked Heather to describe her experiences with data. Heather responded: “Data collection is huge in special education. I need to be able to validate everything I do and make sure it coincides with everything in the student’s IEP.” She added: “I don't have an aide so it is difficult for me to keep up for the volume of data that we
have for each student. I ask my colleagues in general education to help me with the data collection.” Heather smiled and said: “Sometimes they get to it but sometimes they don't.” The researcher found that Heather became serious as she added:

If I say a child is still struggling in a certain area, I need proof to back up my claim. I need the general education teachers on board with me as well because I have to ask them to collect data for the times I am not in the classroom with the student. I have to keep track of and monitor all this data, understand its implications for that child’s educations, and adjust instruction accordingly.

Unlike Sean, Heather added professional development as a challenge in that she identified it to be a temporary fix when it comes to data collection. Heather commented: “Well I have been out of school for a while, but we did have professional development training a few years ago about working more cohesively together for the benefit of the student. All of us attended.” She smiled and said: “You know it lasts for several weeks what we learn but then we go back to what we have always done.” When asked about how data collection made her feel, Heather responded: “Yeah there is a lot of stress because of the amount of paperwork and data that you need to manage. And sometimes it is stressful because I need to give tough news to the parents about their child.”

At this time in the interview, Heather was asked to describe how she feels about the challenges she just discussed. Heather paused reflected and said:

I have high expectations of myself. I am committed to my students, the school, and my family. I love being a special educator and I value the work that I do. Even with the stress that comes every day. I feel that my job is important and I want to do the best that I can for each of my students. I believe that I am the force that keeps our students
moving and growing in a middle school environment. Middle school can be a difficult place for these pre-teens moving into the teenage years. Working with students to expand their emotional and mental development, while their physical development is going wild is a difficult job. That is why I am a strong force to keep these students believing in themselves and helping them to grow.

The researcher asked about how these responsibilities have affected her, she said:

This is my 12th year teaching mild/moderate SPED, and I am definitely feeling the burn. I told my husband recently that I am on the one-year reevaluation plan: Every year, we will reevaluate our savings portfolio and see if we have made enough money for me to retire early. Extremely early. Sorry that is my passion coming out. I love my kids…but sometimes I feel that the state just shoves stuff down our throats. I don’t really understand if they even use the data I have been collecting.

*Trisha.* Trisha, like Sean identified challenges in terms of IEP’s and medical considerations, while identifying, as did Heather, professional development and behaviors as obstacles. When asked to discuss her experiences with these challenges, Trisha immediately spoke of the IEP. She stated:

I had a situation just this week and we have to report quarterly on our student's progress, but sometimes when you have an IEP meeting, so you've got a new IEP that's going to be ready for the next year. We don't go by September to June, our kid's IEPs could be up in July, they could be up in January, they could be up in February. They're all different, so this situation the student had an IEP meeting in October but the IEP had not been signed yet, so that meant that we're still working on the goals that he currently has. Well, this week, on January 10th, we were told that, "Oh, the IEP has finally been signed, so now
10 days from now when you do your quarterly reports for January, report on the new goals." Well, how can you? I said, "We haven't been working on them?" "We have no data. We haven't been working on the new goals." "Well, just figure it out basically, you know, just ..." But we're supposed to actually show, "On this particular objective, is he meeting objectives, is it lower than expected?" I said, "I would have to be lower than expected, but how is that fair when he hasn't been taught anything yet?" Then I say to myself, "Do I go to her supervisor? Do I go to the next level and say, this is what happened, this is how I responded to it, but I was told report on all the new goals. It is, it's essentially a whole different IEP. You're reporting on an entirely new IEP.

When asked about other challenges she experienced as a SPED teacher, Trisha replied: “One of the other things that comes with the territory is that you have to become re-certified essentially. Every five years. You have to have professional development points. I have to have 150 of them.” The researcher noticed that Trisha voice raised in pitch when she added: “I've got two certifications... So, I need to rack up 300 professional development points.” She smiled stating: “You do that, basically a lot of it in your own time by taking courses.

Without further prompting, Trisha continued:

We also have training, bloodborne pathogens and epilepsy ... Not epilepsy, but seizure disorders, so we go through that protocol every year just to make sure that if you are working with students you just know things to be aware of but there isn't any specific coursework that we did as educators that provided this type of information, you know. Trisha paused, reflected and added: “I mean, I did take behavior modification as one of my courses for my Master’s degree and I'm very glad I did because every student has some behavior issues that are just part of their makeup.”
When asked about other challenges Trisha has experienced as obstacles she must face, Trisha, like Sean discussed medical considerations. “I've had students with Fragile X syndrome, Down syndrome.” Trisha paused, smiled and said: “I had one student who had two genetic disorders that were so rare that at one point his family was enrolled in a program at Duke University and they were going to name the syndrome after this boy.” The researcher noticed Trisha’s eyes widened when she exclaimed: “That's how rare it is!” Trisha then identified how: “you're expected to know about each syndrome or anomaly, create curriculum, put together an educational plan for them, teach them, assess them, and report back all of that.” Without further prompting, Trisha added: “And then, a lot of my students have had complications, medical issues like epilepsy, diabetes. I mean, I used to say that at one point when I had a student with severe diabetes.” Trisha paused laughed and said: “I probably could get my nursing certificate by now, too, because I had to know so much about his blood sugar levels and when he needed to test it.” The researcher observed her smile fade as she further reflected: “The student who had the epilepsy, we could be in the gym and the nurse is elsewhere, and… I'm the one that's timing it, I'm the one that's making sure he's safe in the interim until the nurse arrives.”

When asked about how these challenges made her feel, Trisha was honestly forth coming with her feelings. She stated she had to step down in her role as a lead teacher and assume a co-teaching role.

I just couldn't take the stress of being a teacher knowing that I was the sole one responsible for IEPs, and MCAS-Alt, and data collection, and all of the stressful things that came with being the lead teacher. The long and short of it was I ended up becoming depressed again and at that point I decided I was going to be an assistant, that I just couldn't take the stress of being a teacher knowing that I was the sole one responsible for
IEPs, and MPS, and data collection, and all of the stressful things that came with being the lead teacher. It is, I mean, at this point the way I cope is ... I used to cope by eating but I've lost 30 pounds so I'm not doing that anymore but I do exercise, I try to get out and move. We're lucky we're right at the high school with the track and we've got a fitness center in the school, and so my kids are on the treadmill and I'm on the treadmill next to them.

Wildred. Unlike all the participants, Wildred identified paperwork as the single obstacle in her SPED teaching career. Wildred began:

A lot of paperwork, there's a lot of meetings that I have to attend, and there's meetings with students, there's meetings with the team, there's meetings with administration, there's evaluations, all of these things have to be done because the state mandates or the special education director mandates it, and it's just a lot of work and you just got to keep ticking the boxes, and that's what I do.

The researcher observed that Wildred paused, sat back in her chair, closed her eyes and continued: “I just kind of realized that I just needed to keep on going. I'm not the fastest moving person in the world but I do my job the best I can with what I got.” When asked about how much time she spent doing paperwork, Wildred responded: “Well, it depends on the week. If it's a good week I can spend probably 40% of my time in school and that includes after school on paperwork.” She smiled and added: “If it's a bad week I don't spend any time. I end doing it at home at night.” Wildred shook her head no and said: “My husband says that I just do too much, because paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. He says, "You're always coming home with paperwork." Wildred paused smiled and added: “He said, ‘We should start the fire with all the paperwork that we do and we could heat our house for a whole winter.'"
The researcher followed by asking Wildred how all the paperwork makes her feel and she replied: “In the beginning I just wanted to quit. Year one, year two, year three, year four, year five, I wanted to leave every year. I wanted to make it all right, it was so much work and so much stress.” Without prompting, she continued: “I was just so overwhelmed, so much stress, and I just wanted to leave.” She added: “I wanted to leave every year. I wanted to make it all right, but it was so much work and so much stress. I was just so overwhelmed, so much stress, and I just wanted to leave.” Again, Wildred paused before continuing: “When I got around eight years on…I realized that I just got to do what I got to do and that's it. That's where I am. I'm doing the best I can and that's more than most people do.” The researcher noted that Wildred leaned forward in the chair and stated: “It's just about getting through the day. It's like I run from one crisis to the next, to the next.”

When asked about how she felt about doing paperwork, Wildred responded: “It is stressful. All the students provide me stress.” The researcher noticed a change in her voice as she added:

I don't drink, thank the Lord, and I don't really go to the gym or anything like that, but I'm a good cook, you can tell by the size of me, I'm a good cook, and one of the things I do is I release my stress through my cooking. It's probably not healthy for me and my husband but I'm a good cook, my husband says I'm a good cook and that's how I deal with stress.

Jeanne. As with Wildred, Jeanne only mentioned one challenge, professional development that has resonated over her 37-year career. She began: “I never had, you know I didn’t get professional development in the early years.” Jeanne added: “I only sought professional development for vision issues that I could apply to the kids here so I am not up to speed on things that typical learners that have low vision. What kinds of adaptations for their
curriculum?” She smiled and stated: “I know about cortical vision impairment and how to make adaptations for that.” Without prompting, Jeanne continued: “Another thing that, professional development, there’s a lot of professional development but I think if we could just focus in and again. I think it’s my learning curve. It took me two years to learn how to do BoardMaker.” Jeanne grinned:

Now they are taking all our disks away! And we have to learn how to do BoardMaker online and it’s like it took me so long to get that piece and feel really comfortable with it and be able to use it effectively and now you have to use BoardMaker online and it is really “glitchy” and I don’t, I can’t figure out the glitches intuitively and so the technology thing, I feel like I need more mentoring. I need more support.

When asked how professional development made her feel, Jeanne responded: “It stresses me out. I am fearful of technology and it takes me so long to learn it. Then they change it and I have to learn it all over again.” Jeanne paused, looked down as if she was embarrassed by her feelings adding: “It angers me that they have to keep changing things because I know they will never give me the support I need because I am a slow learner with technology.” At this point the researcher noted that Jeanne threw he hands up in the air as if she was about to give up. Jeanne voice lowered as she added: “We do so much professional development, it seems someone at the state is sitting up there dream of more ways to make teaching more difficult. I am nervous and afraid that I will not be able to keep up.”

**Alyssa.** Alyssa like most of the participants identified IEP’s, data collection and professional development as personal challenges she faces as a SPED teacher. Alyssa identified professional development in terms of her college training as she is a new teacher. Alyssa began: “They had classroom management, but they don't really give you classroom management at the
severe level.” In speaking of her college preparation, she added: “They give you classroom management on how you could incorporate a special or a scaffolded lesson for a child with special needs or whatever, but they don't really give you the breakdown on how you run a classroom.” The researcher noted that Alyssa smiled for one of the few times during the interview when she stated: “Maybe they don't do that for mainstream education, too, but they just don't. Maybe I missed it. Maybe I was out to lunch during that.” Continuing with her college training: “They talk about paras a lot, and everybody kind of laughs when they talk about them, but how to manage them and stuff, not really. They could be your greatest asset, or your worst enemy.”

When asked about how this made her feel, Alyssa’s eyes watered and tears rolled down her cheek as she said:

After the first week, I was crying to my boyfriend about it, and wondering if this was right for me. It just felt like I was going to school and not doing anything. I was expecting to have all these curricula that I could plan lessons around, and there was nothing. When I asked for the curriculum, they said, "It's the IEP," which is fine, but they didn't teach me how to teach a curriculum off of the IEP at school. I have no idea what that means. My mentor's like, "Just use the IEP, the goals in the IEP." When I read the goals in the IEP, they're so poorly written, it's like, "He should do this 70% of the time out of three out of five opportunities," I don't even know what that means. How do you do the math to figure out the data on that? I don't get it. I don't get how to do a curriculum off of that. I'm sure that they have a way of doing it, but nobody's helping me out with it.

At this time, the researcher allowed Alyssa to continue: “They went over the IEP in college, and how to write a good IEP, and I got A’s in college. Then, when I read the real-life IEPs, they're
so different.” She continued: “In school, they say, ‘Given this, given an iPad, Johnny will add 2+2 using the iPad with 75% accuracy.’ Alyssa pointed to her head and said: ‘That makes sense to me. Here, it's like, ‘He'll use the iPad. He'll do this. He'll do it three out of five times.’ I don't know what that means. I don't even know how to…how do you even do that?” It was apparent to the researcher that Alyssa was becoming more emotional and frustrated as she said: “They don't tell you what the program is or anything. It's just like, "Given an assisted technology device, the student will engage in lessons 50% of the time. Well, what does that mean? That he looks at the iPad, or that he manipulates the iPad?” Alyssa concluded with: “I guess maybe that's something I could think about. Maybe that's something I can do now, now that I think about it.”

After a short break, Alyssa was asked how these challenges impacted her. She began: “I think their expectations of me are really high. I feel like I got this job, I was really happy to get it. I got it before I graduated.” The researcher noted that Alyssa smiled for the second time when adding: “I felt like they had a lot of faith in me, and I had good ideas.” However, in a more serious tone, she continued: “Then they just kind of threw me in there. It was like throwing a kid in a pool. You'll learn how to swim, or you'll drown. I'm drowning right now.” Again, Alyssa began to tear up as she added: “There's so much stress in this job right now. It's like, I'm just not happy any more. I remember the day I got hired. I was on top of the world.” Alyssa again shook her head no and said: “Now I feel like I've been under the mountain for 18 months. It's so hard. It's not what I expected. It's not what I expected at all.” She concluded:

I do have one friend. She got a special education job, but she's not like me. She's not in a special “ed” classroom. She's in a middle school, and she's got like 30 kids or something. She just kind of meets with them. They're not severe or anything. Her experience is totally different than mine. She just feels like she's overworked and everything, where I
feel like I'm burned out. I've gone beyond the stress and the frustration. I have so much frustration. I'm burning out and I'm only in my second year of teaching. I'm looking elsewhere because of it. It's too hard. I'm in my mid-20s and I'm already burned out in a career that's supposed to last 40 years.

**Summary.** The second subordinate theme, Systematic Challenges, differs from working conditions in that the participants actively determined obstacles through their experiences as SPED educators. These systematic challenges were viewed by the participants as barriers and included experiences concerning professional development, mandated reporting, mandated testing, data collection, the physical demands of lifting students, and federal and state mandates. In the data, most of the participants spoke of their experiences with IEP’s and professional development as producing the greatest barriers to effective student learning, while producing the greatest amounts of stress. In terms of their varying impact on their effectiveness as a SPED teacher as well as the impact these challenges had on student learning. These challenges were followed closely by data collection, behavioral, medical and physical challenges respectively. Table 3 identifies which of these challenges were identified through the data in terms of frequency.
Table 3

*Systematic Challenges identified by each Participants*

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In all cases, when asked how the systematic challenges made the participant feel, all responded that they cause great stress and heightened emotions in both their careers and personal lives and that is causes stress in their lives. In addition, it should be noted that across all of the transcripts, the participants indicated these challenges created conflict, both professionally and personally in their lives.

**Professional conflicts.** The final subordinate theme, *conflicts* describes the participant’s experiences with other than student relationships. The participant’s experiences with these relationships are centered around family, colleagues, administrators, mentors, and parents. Despite these barriers, the participants in all cases, demonstrated a desire to maintain positive professional and personal relationships. Sean, exemplifies how these conflicts influence his career as a SPED teacher.

**Sean.** Sean was very forthcoming about parental engagements, whether in person or through electronic means: Sean began:
There's two real things that stress me out, and that's communication with parents who are not engaged and you're sending notes home and they're not responding, or there's a language barrier or whatever the reasons, parents who are overly engaged and are a nightmare because...The worst parent in the world is an educated parent who's emotional and who flies off the handle.

Sean continued without prompting: “I had one parent, both her children were disabled, therefore, the guilt level that she carried.”

Sean paused and the researcher notice that Sean frowned as he continued: The only thing she could do, she was actually a nurse, and the only thing she could do was provide that kind of service to her two children because that's all she had to give, and she lived with this guilt of having both of her children with cerebral palsy and all the issues that go along with it. She was just a train wreck.

Sean smiled and said: “It took me to the very end to get her where I could have a conversation with her and her not be emotional about it. It took everything in my being not to want to punch her in the face.” Sean quickly added: “I don't want to say that. It wasn't just me. It was the school administrators, it was the school nurse, it was the para that was with me.” Sean added: “Those communications with parents.” Again, he shook his head no and said: “They can be the best thing in the world or they can be the worst thing in the world. Send the same note home to both parents and one goes, "Oh, this is great," and the other one goes, "What are you doing? What are you thinking?" Sean concluded: “So stressors…parents by far!”

Heather. Heather identified professional conflicts concerning colleagues, parents and administrators. Heather spoke fondly of her special education team but identified how relationships with mainstream teachers can be taxing. “The special education team is very close
and work together to really help our students. Our relationships with the general education team are good at times and bad at times.” She smiled and added: “They don’t like the extra work load that we place on them because of the data collection that we need.” Heather stopped smiling and added: “We do have a cross team meeting every month but sometimes it becomes a gripe system. But they do their best to help us out.” Heather had similar feelings about her interactions with school administrators. When asked to comment on these relationships Heather responded:

I adore the kids, and I love teaching, but for God's sake, if they want me to be a full-time clerk, too, they will either need to get me some more help (even if it means one of the fat cats making 6 figures at the District level has to lose a job), or find somebody younger and with more energy to do my job. I simply cannot be a full-time teacher AND a full-time paper-pusher. I am deep-battered and FRIED.

Another time-consuming teacher activity that infringes on her personal time is the time spent on parental communication, which often has is conducted in the evening hours. Heather explained “Parents of special needs children in our school are very concerned about assessments and the stress it put on their children.” In this role, she becomes an advisor. “Parents’ have talked to me about the stress that both the parents and their children feel when the MCAS testing starts.” She added: “Students’ often have behavioral issues that appear especially when testing begins.” She explains: “I have students who are wonderful to work with during the school year and then suddenly act-out during the weeks of MCAS testing. Relieving these stressors for students and parents are a very time-consuming process.” When asked how these conflicts made her feel, Heather stated: “Mad, sad, upset, and in all cases stressed.” Heather frowned as she continued: “Yeah there is a lot of stress because of the amount of paperwork and data that you
need to manage. And sometimes it is stressful because I need to give tough news to the parents about their child.”

Like Heather, Jeanne identified parents as a source of professional conflict in her career. Jeanne related the following experience as one such example:

I got these twins. They were both totally blind. They lived in a town that refused to send them to Perkins. They were both totally blind and ambulatory. They wanted the twins to go to Perkins and the town said absolutely not because here's a TVI, a teacher of the visually impaired. The town told her ‘She has the same training as the teachers there and this is the way it'll be and take us to court,’ basically. But I am the teacher of the visually impaired and I set the whole room up for them so that they could learn how to ambulate and know where they are and I made the materials for them and I brailed all the children's books that we were using. I said, "I'm not the enemy. I'm just doing the best that I can. I'm not the enemy." She would sit, she sat in the class and for six months with her in the rocking chair with her blue-tooth or whatever talking and listening and I would be trying to teach her kids how to get around the classroom. She would stick her foot out and they trip over her foot and then she would say, "That stupid teacher. She just, she can't even keep my kids safe." Then, when that didn't work and then she wanted ... Everything that she wanted I did and then she finally started filing 51A against me.

When asked how this made her feel, it was apparent that Jeanne was upset by this mother when she replied: “They're still babies and...but...she was such a...she was so mean to me! How could a mother trip her own child?” The researcher redirected Jeannie to how this experience made her feel. Jeanne said: “That made me angry, upset, it took a long time to get over her.” Jeanne
smiled and lowered her voice as she added: “You know any interaction with a parent in person or email is stressful. You never know how they are going to react.”

**Wildred.** Wildred, like Heather found interacting with parents and colleagues produces conflict for her in her career. Wildred spoke of parental interactions through her students: “Most of the kids don't want to talk about home life. They really don't. I don't ask anymore, because you ask and you just don't know.” The researcher noted that Wildred’s voice lowered as if she was telling a secret: “I do my job but if the kid's all bruised up or whatever I make the report, but I don't ask.” Wildred shook her head no as she added: “I only know what the kids tell me in that case, because you call the parents and they never call you back. You send notes home and they never respond.” Wildred continued: “You notify all the people you're supposed to notify and you never hear anything back, so I don't know, I don't know what's going on.” When ask how this makes her feel, she responded: “This is a bit scary and very frustrating for me. I worry about these kids and their home life.”

When ask about any other things that frustrate her, Wildred leaned back in her chair, smiled, began to laugh and said: “I not going there, but I will tell you about pull outs.” She continued: “In my school, they do a lot of pulls outs, where they pull out the child for that time. We're more concentrating on the inclusion aspect of it.” With frustration in her voice, she added: “They may pull out of art or music or something like that so that they can have that specialist time. We work with the teachers.” She leaned forward in her chair stating: “We got some good teachers but they're overworked too. You know, everybody's got a lot of work to do, just a lot of work.” When asked about her relationships with colleagues, Wildred again smiled and said: you are not going to let that go. Let’s just say that some are really good and others very stressful.”
**Trisha.** Trisha, like Heather, was concentrated in two areas of conflict: management and colleagues. The researcher noted that Trisha became very animated and used a serious tone when she described the following: “I was teaching third grade special needs students and I loved the kids and I loved the parents but unfortunately it's when MCAST first started and I had a very difficult supervisor.” She added: “There were many of us in the collaborative who were reduced to tears on a regular basis by this woman. She was just extremely difficult to please.” When asked why it was difficult to please her, Trisha responded: “You would write goals and she'd chop them up and then you try to put together a portfolio and with MCAS, so you have to just make it up out of whole cloth.” Trisha shook her head no, continuing: “That's one of the difficulties about being a special needs teacher, in general, is there's no set curriculum.” She explained: “The long and short of it was I ended up becoming depressed again and at that point I decided I was going to be an assistant.” When asked how it made her feel, Trisha stated: “Angry, because it short-changes the student, confused by the lack of leadership, and frustrated that I could not do anything.”

Trisha paused, reflected and continued without prompting:

I know it can be difficult. I think, sometimes I feel I don't want to go to my supervisor because I don't want it to look like I can't handle it myself, and so that can be tricky but I'd give an example, the supervisor that I have is, I would say like early 40's maybe, and she's very proficient when it comes to technology. If I ask for help with something it becomes, "You just need to learn this." She's all, "You just need to. You need to figure it out." "You just figure it out. Just figure it out." Then you become reluctant to go to her with other issues because you feel like you're going to get that same response. Then,
you're also reluctant to go above them to the next level because you feel that's going to
damage the relationship you have with that supervisor. And that's very tricky.

Trisha stopped, the researcher noted that she looked up to the ceiling as if to recall another experience, and then stated: “I had a situation just this week and we have to report quarterly on our student's progress but sometimes when you have an IEP meeting, so you've got a new IEP that's going to be ready for the next.” She clarified:

We don't go by September to June, our kid's IEPs could be up in July, they could be up in January, they could be up in February. They're all different, so this situation the student had an IEP meeting in October but the IEP had not been signed yet, so that meant that we're still working on the goals that he currently has.

When asked how this made her feel, she stated: “Once again, it is the student who suffers from this lack of proper management.” She added: “And they don't get management training. They don't learn how to manage and motivate people.” She continued:

They just move up and then they're reflecting, "Well, I did it when I was in that room while I had that job ..." because this supervisor is one who was a classroom teacher for 15 years, or whatever, before she got into administration and they take courses to become certified to become administrators but I suspect it is that case.

Trisha added: “That often times we'll get emails that say, "Well, when I was teaching, this is how I did it," and it helped only for you but these are ... Sort of kids as I have…They’re older they have changed.” Trisha laughed shook her head no and said: “Yeah right!”

When asked about other conflicts, Trisha who was still smiling commented: Do you mean colleagues?” The researcher smiled and Trish began to speak. “It's been extremely challenging to help them manage the turnover in staff that we've had, but I've also had the
experience that someone, a colleague will say to me, "Well, you can't really trust…” Trish further reflected stating: “And that's really not good because you've got to work very closely together. You have to feel that you have a place where you can have mutual respect.” When asked how this made her feel, Trisha said: “It just creates a bad working environment. Staff really should be concentrating on doing their job instead of spreading gossip.” Trisha smiled and added: “This is a what happens when there is no first level leadership. As I said earlier, a lack of leadership stresses us all out.”

Alyssa. Alyssa discussed conflicts as an obstacle for effective teaching in terms of colleagues, mentors, and parents. She began: “There's so much stress in the job as it is. I found that out afterwards, after I graduated and really got out teaching.” The researcher noted that she wiped a tear from her eye as she said: “There's so many other factors that they really don't teach you about in school, like dealing with parents, and diapers, and changing kids, and making sure that all the rules of the school are followed and all that stuff.” When asked how this made her feel, she simple said: “Under-prepared and sad.”

When asked about other conflicts she experienced, Alyssa quickly added: “Collaboration, mentoring, the aide, and of the parents.” On teacher collaboration, Alyssa was asked how she gets along with non-SPED teachers. She said:

Yeah, with those (Mainstream) teachers, I do. Usually what they do is, like the day before, we Monday, we're going to be reading whatever. “Hop on Pop," let's just say. Then, I know what's coming, so I can plan something really quick for that. "Okay, we're going to go down. We're there for 45 minutes for our session. This is what we're going to do." A lot of them, inclusion teachers, they teach the younger grades, so they're really patient. They're really patient with me, too. I definitely see a difference in the patience,
and the stress level seems different. They have inclusion three days a week. On Friday, they usually tell me and that is great.

Alyssa, for the third and last time in the interview, just smiled.

At this time, the researcher asked Alyssa how she gets along with the SPED teachers at the school. The smile left her face as she began: “My mentor is now trying to help. She's met with me a couple times, but it's always after school. It's never to guide me in my lessons during school.” She continued: “I get the feeling like I have a morning meeting with my kids, and the aide that's in the classroom's just like, I can tell she's just not on my game. She's not on my side.” She paused for a moment: “I feel like I just am by myself. I need somebody to come in during the class and during the time to help me.” Alyssa tilted her head as if she was perplexed and said: “I made that request of my mentor, and she said she'd get back to me, but that was two months ago, and I haven't heard anything since, and I know she's really busy.” When asked how this makes her feel she responded: “Like a failure!” She thought for a moment moved closer to the researcher and said: “My aide could have helped with that.”

The researcher asked Alyssa to go on. “It’s stressful. The aide that's in the classroom's just like, I can tell she's just not on my game. She's not on my side. I feel like I just am by myself.” Alyssa leaned back in her chair declaring: “I need somebody to come in during the class and during the time to help me.” She added: “I made that request of my mentor, and she said she'd get back to me, but that was two months ago, and I haven't heard anything since, and I know she's really busy.” When asked how this made her feel, Alyssa responded: “I don't know what I'm supposed to do, because she's my mentor. I don't know if I should go to the principal, or go to the SPED director or what.” Alyssa stopped, tilted her head and thought for a moment before adding: “I'm not saying my mentor's bad, I'm just saying that I think she's got stress out
too. I hear her every once in a while, getting snippy with other people.” Again, she tilted her head but in the other direction and said: “Maybe we need to have as much compassion as we have to have with our students, maybe we need to have that with new people that are coming into the job.” She concluded by adding: “We need to support them in a way that we support our kids.”

At this point, the researcher redirected Alyssa to her comment that parents can cause conflict. “Like I said, the parents are supportive, but they go through my aide. The sadness is just seeing these kids every day. Day after day, they come in. They're sick. The parents send them to school sick.” She paused, thought and added: “You know you can't push them on a day that they're sick, or the nurse is not in. I have a nurse in my class half-time. I share with the teacher beside me, the nurse.” She further explained: “She jumps in between both classes, but it's just sad that, it's tough to be always up all the time. For me, it's really tough because of all the stuff I've talked about, you know?” Again, tears came to Alyssa’s eyes as she declared: “Sometimes I feel like I'm just doing, I'm not doing as good a job as I could, because these people, these children, they really need to be happy. People around them need to be happy and not sad.” Alyssa concluded: “I just feel like I'm getting drug down. I'm not doing what I should be doing for them, but I love what I'm doing. This is the fight that I have in my mind. I wish somebody would help me.”

Summary. For all of the participants, varying professional conflicts influenced their effectiveness as a SPED teacher. These also produced high levels of emotions from the participants. The areas included conflicts with: colleagues, management, parents, all forms of personal communications, mentors and professional collaboration. For the participants, parents and colleagues were identified as the two greatest forms of personal conflicts experienced by the
participants. These were followed by general communication, administrative and collaborative interactions respectively. Table 4 identifies which of these challenges were identified through the data:

Table 4.

*Personal conflicts for the Participants*

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<td>Collaboration</td>
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In all cases, when asked how interpersonal relationships produce conflicts made the participant feel, all responded that they caused additional stress in their professional and personal lives. In addition, it should be noted that across all of the transcripts, the participants indicated these challenges created both internal and external conflicts, both professionally and personally in their lives.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore how Special Education (SPED) teacher make sense of their experiences as SPED teacher, how they view and understand factors that contribute to their career stress, how they make sense of their relationships and experiences as a SPED teacher, as well as how these experiences contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. The researcher examined the interview data, which reflected a true introspective reflection of how stress influences SPED teacher’s effectiveness. First and foremost, the data produced
perspectives that informed how the participants made meaning of their experiences concerning self-worth and obstacles and barriers that they have experienced.

In all cases, these experiences revealed how these participants identified factors that influence the SPED careers. A reoccurring theme relating to stress appears throughout all of the data analyzed. This reoccurring theme first appeared with the participant’s experiences concerning their self-worth. Through this lens, participants were able to honestly reflect about how they themselves use identify with their career choice, and more importantly, their effectiveness as a teacher. This insight allowed these participants to speak candidly about their own perceived shortcomings, feelings of inferiority, and abilities to cope as teacher, while at the same time shedding light on their abilities, determination, and accomplishments as a SPED teacher.

The participants described the emotional hardships, frustrations, and obstacles they faced on a daily basis as SPED teachers. These factors often led to feelings of limited self-worth, uncertainty, and at times, hopelessness. However, in no instance, except one, did the researcher determine that these factors could inhibit the participant’s determination to continue a career as a SPED educator. The participants shared similar experiences regarding obstacles and barriers they encountered, while table 5. below identify these feelings in a comparative chart.
Table 5

*Participant identified Obstacles and Barriers*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sean</th>
<th>Jeanne</th>
<th>Tricia</th>
<th>Wildred</th>
<th>Heather</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
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<td>Stress</td>
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<td>Burnout</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Worried</td>
<td>Exhausted</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>Bothered</td>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>Timid</td>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>Scary</td>
<td>Deep Battered and Fried</td>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burden</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Mad</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just not worth it</td>
<td>Afraid</td>
<td>Confused</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Failure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Upset</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Upset</td>
<td>Down</td>
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</table>

For these participants, except for one, the barriers and obstacles only serve as a reminder of their determination to overcome adversities, especially when it comes to their career. Based on the data collected, it cannot be determined if Alyssa can overcome these emotions.

The data also indicated frustrations and emotional barriers the participants experienced, affect their recognition of their self-worth. Most importantly, it should be noted that overcoming these obstacles, produced feelings of self-worth and effectiveness as a SPED teacher. The in-depth reflection of these experiences offered by the participants revealed their commitment and determination to succeed as a SPED teacher. As such, the participants were able to demonstrate the value of teaching in their student’s lives as well as their present and future concerns.

As will be discussed in Chapter Five, several understandings can be concluded from these findings. The accounts of the participants indicate a clear need to develop a system where self-efficacy can be nurtured and developed to support SPED teachers. The varying degrees of emotions and frustration express by the participants also supports this claim. The presence of a
lack of encouragement and collegiality, indicates that a greater societal emphasis must be placed on collaboration. As evidenced by the participants, a positive influence is needed to evolve social, emotional, and psychological understandings of SPED teacher’s status’ in the world. Finally, the participants reflective, honest, and introspective examination of their own experiences demonstrates an unselfish conviction to advance the special education community on behalf of the students they teach.

The subsequent chapter discusses the research findings and offers recommendations for further research.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how Special Education (SPED) teachers make sense of their experiences as SPED teachers, how they view and understand factors that contribute to their career stress, how they make sense of their relationships and experiences as SPED teachers, as well as how these experiences contribute to their feelings of stress and self-efficacy. Specifically, the researcher explored the challenges, adaptability, and flexibility of experiences that contributed to how the participants’ make sense of their experiences, especially with career related stress. Their accounts were analyzed using the lens of the multidimensional burnout theory and self-efficacy perspective. More specifically, the participants’ accounts were explored as part of a process that analyzed them within their work environment.

The following questions were used to guide this research: How do Special Education (SPED) teachers describe their experience of being a SPED teacher; and How do various factors-structures, practices, expectations, and relationships contribute to their sense of challenges and stress? With these questions as a guide and in an effort to understand how SPED teachers make sense of their experiences of the various factors-structures, practices, expectations, and relationships, this study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research methodology. An IPA study was selected because it highlights the diversity of SPED teacher’s accounts by revealing central themes that emerge from the participants’ talk (Jarrett et al., 1999). The analysis conducted assists in the process of meaning-making that are embedded in multiple contexts including the teacher’s social and cultural environments (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006). This is important because participants’ meaning reflects the embodiment of cognitive teacher self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010) that subsequently exemplifies their understanding and impact of career related stress.
As evidenced in the literature review, there is limited data available regarding the intricacies and complexities associated with the effects of stress on SPED teachers, which illustrates a gap in the research base and provides a rationale for study. Thus, the findings of this study are intended at expanding the current research base regarding SPED teacher’s experiences and career related stress. The participants for this study were six special education teachers with eighteen months to thirty-seven years teaching experience. Additionally, the teachers represented urban, suburban, and rural schools within Massachusetts. The participants differed in gender, socioeconomic backgrounds, education, and generational status. The investigation revealed two major themes that aligned the participant’s experiences, challenges, and impediments, towards their special education careers as factors in a fundamental process that led to their understanding factors that influence their careers.

Constructed from the data collected in the participant interviews, two super-ordinate themes, and six subordinate themes developed in response to the research questions. The super-ordinate themes include: Self-worth and Barriers/Obstacles. Sub-ordinate themes to Self-Worth included: Teacher identity, Teacher beliefs, and Teacher effectiveness. The corresponding subordinate themes for Barriers/Obstacles were Working conditions, Systematic challenges, and Professional conflicts.

The following sections represent a topic based elaboration of the research findings relevant to the participant’s experiences as Special Education (SPED) teachers. The findings for each superordinate and sub-ordinate themes are reviewed in relation with the current literature. Once established, the thematic findings were presented in the conclusion of this study. The final section offers recommendations for the problems of practice that represent thematic applications and recommendations for further research.
Thematic Findings

**Self-worth.** Kelchtermans (2005) identified that teachers’ emotions have to be understood in relation to the vulnerability that constitutes a structural condition of the teaching job. Closely linked to this condition is the central role played by teachers’ “self-understanding” or their dynamic sense of identity, in teachers’ actions. Huitt (2009) defined “self” as a conscious reflection of one's own identity separate from “other.” Further, he found that the terms in identifying self are self-concept and self-esteem (Huitt, 2004). Purkey (1992) defines self-concept as "the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence" (Purkey, 1992, p. 2) whereas he defines self-esteem as the “affective or emotional aspect of self” referring to how we feel about or how we value our “self-worth” (Purkey, 1992, p. 2). Pelham and Swann (1989) identified three factors that contribute to people's global self-worth as an individual’s inclination to experience positive and negative affective states, their specific self-views, and the way they posit their self-views. Finally, Judge and Bono, (2001) reported how self-esteem and self-worth directly relate to emotional stability, job satisfaction, and job performance.

Through the experiences of the participants, the data revealed that the participant’s positive personal experiences concerning their self-worth, increased their positive personal feelings towards their effectiveness as a SPED teacher, while negative personal experiences decreased their feelings of competency as a SPED teacher. The data concerning positive and negative feelings emerged from the research questions inquiring about how the participants viewed and understood factors that contribute to their career stress and their feelings of stress concerning their self-efficacy. The participants reflected upon these experiences and discussed their understandings of their own self-worth in terms of their effectiveness as a teacher. This
process brought about the subordinate themes: *teacher identity, teacher beliefs, and teacher effectiveness*.

**Teacher identity.** Sachs (2005) defines teacher identity as: "a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society" (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) identified how identity is an ongoing process and therefore is dynamic, rather than stable, while being a constantly revolving phenomenon. Further, they found that identity involves a teacher’s self and a context of the characteristics the teacher identifies as an effective teacher (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

In response to teacher identity, a review of the data detected how the participant’s responses to questions, described their teaching experiences with a sense of dependence, in their everyday lives, concerning their identity, while they described their need and reliance through their own experiences as an unusable tool to assess their own identity as an effective teacher. Additionally, they related how teacher identity had its greatest impact concerning their daily communications and their ability to socialize within the teaching environments. From the onset, the data revealed how the participants identified the need to recall experiences using produced welcomed feelings concerning the distinguishing qualities that make them different from mainstream teachers. While some participants experienced initial reservations, others expressed feelings of comfort, while still others felt discouraged by a lack of support. This is important because Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) identified how supportive antecedents of teacher self-efficacy beliefs of novice and experienced teachers beyond individual relationships, affects their own teaching beliefs about their career choice.
In the data collected, the participants reported that their experiences as a SPED teacher produced favorable feelings concerning the unique qualities that make them different from mainstream teachers. While some participants experienced initial reservations, that data identified how others expressed feelings of comfort, while still others felt discouraged by a lack of initial support. Although the average teaching experience of the participant’s is about 16 years, almost all of the interviewees expresses feelings of being inept during their initial three years of teaching. This conclusion corroborates the findings of Hoy and Spero, (2005) who identified that some of the most powerful influences on the development of teacher efficacy are mastery experiences during the initial year. Previous research has also found that some aspects of efficacy increase during the first years of teaching, while other dimensions of efficacy may decline, as is the case in this study (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy, 1998).

Throughout the data, none of the participants, except for one, reporting asking for help or assistance concerning their achievement as a SPED teacher. This lack of inquiry is supported in the literature by Allinder (1994) who found that both teaching and self-efficacy appear to be related to how teacher perceive their role in terms of weakness. Additionally, the data represents how during the initial years, the participants struggled to find their place with the school environment. This too is supported through empirical research, especially when teachers felt they were being stressed by the teaching environment (Gulwadi, 2006). Since Tajfel and Fraser (1978) originally reported that expectations originate from and influence a person’s beliefs, knowledge, and experience, while affecting their behavior, it only makes sense that teacher expectations can either positively or negatively affect their self-worth and self-efficacy (Hastings & Brown, 2002). Finally, the data reviewed how the participants identified themselves through life experiences and through familial relationships, while shaping their self-worth in choosing
Special Education (SPED) as a career path. Liu, Kardos, Kauffam, Preske, and Johnson, (2000) identified how teaching disappointments and hardships are influential in why new teachers leave the profession even though life experiences and familial relationships shaped their decisions to select SPED as a career path.

**Teacher beliefs.** The data revealed that throughout the interviews, there were varying degrees of confidence and faith demonstrated the participants concerning their own ability and skill as a SPED teacher. In all cases across the data, external factors were identified as the most important influences in their decision to become a SPED teacher. These influences were identified by the participants to include: family, friends and colleagues. Such decisions, are supported in the literature by Watt and Richardson (2007) who found that there were intrinsic rewards, in choosing a SPED teacher career, where extrinsic factors influenced the decision-making-process. In addition to these supportive findings, the data revealed that the participants identified an internal need to evidence or prove their own beliefs in order to be an effective teacher. This need is also supported in the literature by Allinder (1994), who posited that teachers who exhibit enthusiasm for teaching, are more committed to their profession, and likely exert a positive influence on students' achievements and their own sense of efficacy (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006).

In the data collected, all of the participants at one time or another, identified SPED teaching as a rewarding career choice. The data collected substantiated Weiss (1999) who examined the relationships between perceived workplace conditions and morale, career choice commitment, and planned retention strategies. It was concluded that a school culture that supports collaboration and teacher participation in decision-making was most strongly related to higher morale, stronger commitment to teaching, and intentions to remain in the profession
Novice teachers often enter the profession with high hopes about the kind of impact that they will be able to have on students’ lives, but often encounter a painful “reality shock” when they learn that it may be more difficult than they had realized to have the hoped-for results with students (Weinstein, 1988). This may lead novice teachers to ‘‘recalibrate’’ the meaning of good teaching, lowering their standards in a self-protective move to avoid the painful self-assessment of failure (Tschannen–Moran & Hoy, 2007, p. 946).

**Teacher effectiveness.** At different times, throughout the interviews, the data revealed that the participants commented on their effectiveness as a SPED teacher in terms of their quality of teaching, their satisfaction of their teaching outcomes, and how their teaching impacted student learning. There are many interpreted definitions of effective teaching, however, for the purposes of this study, effective teaching is defined by Pajares (2004) as a teacher’s confidence to affect students' performance concerning the epistemological beliefs about causes of teachers' performance about perceptions of self and feelings of self-worth about their ability to perform specific tasks. However, it should also be noted that Pajares (2004), cautions that there are educational beliefs about individual subjects or domains that may negatively affect teacher effectiveness.

Within the data, the researcher identified how all of the participants viewed teacher effectiveness in terms of the quality of their teaching. This is supported in the literature by Darling-Hammond (2000) who identified how SPED teacher effectiveness is a direct result of their quality of instruction. This is important because as Billingsley (2004) reported teacher quality and retention in special education influences high attrition rates, while positive work
conditions and supports are key to SPED teacher success. Whilst most of the participants identified that the quality of their teaching could improve, the data review identified that one participant appeared to be satisfied with her current level of performance, while one other participant believed she was totally ineffective. These findings are important because as identified by Trendall (1989), personal factors are contributors to stress and limit the effectiveness of the teacher.

Despite similar descriptors used to justify personal expectations, it was apparent to the researcher, through the inflection of each participant’s voice, the body language exhibited, and the demeanor of each individual, that each participant had different levels of satisfaction concerning their teaching outcomes. Throughout the data, the participants identified how their own teaching beliefs and job performance were directly related to student outcomes and achievement. As identified by Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, and Malone (2006), this is important because expectations about how their personal teaching beliefs impact job satisfaction and student academic achievement. For the SPED teacher participants, this was an extremely important component of their effectiveness. This belief is identified through the literature by Freeman and Alkin (2000) who identified there is an efficacy of integration that reveals special needs children require comparable measure of academic achievement and social competence, both of which are reliant on teacher effectiveness.

Since special education child development is concerned with the advancement of skills (motor, language, and social) and involves the advancement of cognition, intelligence, reasoning, and personality, the special education teacher’s self-efficacy about how their teaching impacts student learning is critical to their student’s academic achievement. This concept was identified throughout all the data, where each of the participants identified how they believed that their
effectiveness as a SPED teacher was mostly influenced by student learning. This belief is well
grounded in the literate and is best exemplified by Tshannen-Moran and Barr (2010), who
identified that teacher’s collective efficacy has a greater impact on student achievement “over
and above the educational impact of their homes and communities” (Tshannen-Moran & Barr,
2010, p. 189). In addition, Goddard, Goddard, Hoy and Hoy (2000) verified how collective
teacher efficacy has a greater impact on both individual and collective student learning.
However, as Thornton, McKissick, Spooner, Lo, and Anderson (2015) concluded there remains a
void of evidence concerning collaborative instructional practices that lead to improved student
learning. The subsequent theme identified in this study is related to the participant’s experiences
with identified barriers and obstacles to effective teaching.

Barriers/Obstacles. Research reveals that barriers/obstacles specific to special
education (Cook & Leffingwell, 1983; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff & Harniss, 2001) come from
“within and outside of the classroom and are associated with teacher dissatisfaction” (Stempien
& Loeb, 2002, p. 258). These additional barriers include greater paperwork demands
(Mehrenberg, 2013), collaboration with general education teachers (Takala, Pirttimaa &
Tormanen, 2009), collaboration with paraprofessionals (Breton, 2010), data collection (Vannest
& Hagan-Burke, 2009), providing evidence-based instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007), dealing
with the variability of physical, emotional, and behavioral students’ needs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007;
Mehrenberg, 2013), the physical classroom environment (Dunlap, Dane, Lochman & Wells,
2004), and the demands placed of involved parents (Fish, 2008).

The super-ordinate theme Obstacles/Barriers emerged through the discussions and they
were mentioned throughout various points within the data by all the participants. Although the
topic was not a research question, the participants volunteered informational experiences that
naturally developed these barriers to form three subordinate themes: working conditions, systematic challenges, and professional conflicts. The first subordinate theme, *working conditions* illustrates the participant’s proficiency to maintain student learning during, at times, even during adverse conditions. The second subordinate theme, *systematic challenges* captures the participant’s capacity to manage administrative requirements that are inherent to special educator teachers, which include: training requirements, re-certifications, and a lack of appropriate training. The third subordinate theme, *professional conflicts* refers to how participant’s make meaning when engaging in interactions with people other than their students. It must be noted that despite these barriers, the participants in all cases, demonstrated a tenacity to do what is best for their disabled students.

In addition to identifying the parameters, it is also important to identify how these themes impact the SPED teacher participant’s personal and professional lives. The data review identified that although the obstacles produced different feelings and emotions from the participants, stress was the one common thread that was identified by all the participants as being the most destructive. This is important because as Boshoff, Gibbs, Phillips, Wiles, and Porter (2016) found, obstacles cause stress especially when the individual’s experience varying levels of resistance when struggling to overcome these challenging barriers. Even with the identified stressors, the participants, for the most part, perceived themselves as good teachers who are actively involved in their students learning even though the obstacle/barrier stressors made their professional and personal lives more difficult.

*Working conditions.* For all of the participants, varying working conditions influenced their effectiveness as a SPED teacher. The participants identified how working conditions played an underlining role in the participant’s ability to manage extrinsic factors that may
influence teacher effectiveness and students learning. Examples identified include classroom management structure, lack of managerial resources, and a lack of a structured curriculum. Across the data, all the participants identified how classroom working conditions, which include classroom management are causes of stress in their careers. This is important because as Aloe, Amo, and Shanahan (2014) identified how classroom management, coupled with self-efficacy, leads to teacher stress and ultimately teacher burnout.

In addition to classroom managements, the data revealed through the participant’s experiences, how a lack of resources and a structured curriculum also provide a great source of stress. In terms of resources, the participants who work in the urban and rural schools found a lack of teaching resources a challenge that causes stress. This is supported in the literature by Loeb, Darling-Hammond, and Luczak (2009) who found that poor working conditions that include large class sizers, facilities problems, multitrack school and a lack of curriculum are strong indicators of teacher stress and turnover. This is important because as identified in the data, some of the participants recognized building age, classroom size, driving wheelchair vans, and curriculum as work related obstacles that produce additional stressors in their lives.

Finally, the analysis of the data demonstrated how a lack of a structured curriculum also created adverse working conditions for some of the participants. Unique to special education in Massachusetts, there is not an individualized “Special Needs” curriculum to be used as a teaching platform. The issue of IEP regulating curriculum changes, as identified by all the participants, is that the Massachusetts Core Curriculum must be adapted to meet the individual learning needs of the students. It is the responsibility of the SPED teacher to develop or adjust the curriculum so specialized learning can take place. In the literature, Kam, Greenberg, and Kusche (2004) identified how adjustment to curriculum of school age children with special needs
presents problems for both the student and the teacher. This is important because as demonstrated by McCormick, Ayers, Beechey (2006), changes to curriculum cause occupational stress to both the personal and educational domains.

**Systematic challenges.** Within the data, the participants identified a clear relationship between systematic career challenges and stress. Systematic challenges identified through the data include obstacles the participant’s experienced concerning professional development, mandated reporting, mandated testing, data collection, the physical demands of lifting students, and federal and state mandates. These concerns were previously validated in the literature by Moracco, D’Arienzo, and Danford (1983) who identify how perceived occupation stressors concerning role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, produce greater amounts of stress that will be experienced by the individual. In this study, this is important because all of the participants spoke of their experiences in terms of these systematic challenges and the varying impact the related stressors to each category had on their effectiveness as a SPED teacher.

The review of the data identified varying work experiences presented challenges that influenced the participant’s perceived effectiveness as a SPED teacher. These challenges produced great emotions from all of the participants. The three most significant challenges that impacted the participants included the Individualized Education Program (IEP), data collection and professional development. The IEP, more than any other challenge, produced the most emotional responses across the participants. This is not surprising because as identified by Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane (2014), who just recently completed 33-year longitudinal study concerning teacher burnout and the effects of the IEP, found that teachers who are stressed by IEP related requirements, become disengaged emotionally, resulting in student’s not meeting
their IEP goals. This is important, because all the participants, except the most senior teacher of 37 years indicated how the IEP cause great anxiety and stress.

Along with meeting the IEP, each of the participants identified how data collection, as a means of validating student achievement and their own perceived teacher effectiveness. The data review demonstrated how the mandated need to collect data as indicators of student achievement and teacher effectiveness produced negatively feelings by the participants because of the volume and the importance of accuracy during analysis. These emotions are substantiated in the literature by Buese (2007), who examined state and federal mandates requiring data collection, finding that role expectations increased and intensified, while creating greater stressors concerning relationships, pedagogy, and professional well-being. For this study, this is important because the participants identified how professional development is centered on students IEP’s and data collection. Interestingly, Hopkins, Hoffman, and Moss (1997) found how professional development requirements added stress to teacher’s professional lives.

**Professional conflicts.** The final subordinate theme, *Professional conflicts* describes the participant’s experiences with other than student relationships. The data revealed that the participant’s experiences with relationships are centered around family, colleagues, administrators, mentors, and parents. In reviewing the data, it was identified how these relationships negatively impacted the participants in terms of creating additional stress. As identified, it should be noted that although participants identified these professional conflicts as sources of stress, in no instance did any of the participants speak of the conflicts in terms of resolution. Conflict resolution is identified by Lake and Billingsley (2000) as a vital component of relieving stress and strengthening relationships in the work environment. Conversely, all of the participants identified how the varying role ambiguity and role conflict added further internal
stressors. Crane and Iwanicki (1986) signified how increases in role ambiguity create increases in role stress especially for special education teachers. For this study, these role ambiguities denote how special education teachers today, still face challenges associated from not having a clearly defined role and as such produces more stress.

The review of the data identified varying experiences concerning professional conflicts that influenced the participant’s level of stress. These conflicts produced great emotions from all of the participants, while parents and colleagues presented the two most identified obstacles that impacted the participants. Stoeber and Rennert (2007) report how interactions between teachers and student’s parents create stress, not only for the teacher, but for the student as well. They found that communications between parents and teachers are inhibited through the student who is acting as a self-invested third party who may distort information (Stoeber & Rennert, 2007). This is important because as identified in the data, parental communications were regarded by the participants as the greatest form of interpersonal and professional conflict.

The second most recognized form of interpersonal and professional conflict was identified by the participants as originating from relationships with colleagues. The data revealed how the participants identified how positive interactions with colleagues produced helpful results that lowered stress, while negative interactions with colleagues were harmful, producing more stress. This phenomenon is known as “social support” which is defined by Russell, Altmaier, and Van Velzen (1987) as a resource that provides positive supportive social relationships. This is important because social supports help aide SPED teachers in dealing with stress (Russell, Altmaier & Van Velzen, 1987). Finally, Stoeber and Rennert (2007) identified how teachers have a desire for positive personal relationships with colleagues rather than a competitive one when identifying teaching success. As in this study, these relationships were
identified as important because the data reviewed acknowledges how all of the interviewed teachers, except one valued their interpersonal relationships with colleagues even though they may create further stress for them.

Throughout the superordinate theme, *Obstacles/barriers*, the participant’s experiences revealed how they identified factors that influence their SPED careers. The analyzed data produced stress as a reoccurring outcome identified throughout all factors in the subordinate themes. This outcome first appeared with the participant’s experiences concerning their self-worth. Through this lens, participants were able to honestly reflect on their career choice, and more importantly, their effectiveness as a teacher. This insight allowed these participants to speak candidly about their own perceived shortcomings, feelings of inferiority, and abilities to cope as teacher, while at the same time identifying positive insights into their abilities, determination, and accomplishments as a SPED teacher.

Through both superordinate themes, the participants described the emotional hardships, frustrations, and obstacles they faced on a daily basis as SPED teachers. These factors often led to feelings of limited self-worth, uncertainty, and at times, hopelessness. However, in no instance, except one, did the researcher determine that these factors could inhibit the participant’s determination to continue a career as a SPED educator. For these participants, except for one, the barriers and obstacles only serve as a reminder of their determination to overcome adversities, especially when it come to their SPED teaching career. Based on the analyzed data collected, it cannot be determined if the one participant can overcome these emotions.

Finally, within the literature there is a call for a paradigm shift to address stress in in SPED teacher careers (Puckett, Mathur & Zamora, 2017). Puckett, Mathur, and Zamora (2017)
report how there is a need to implement innovative teacher stress coping strategies that include mindful training to reduce occupational stress. Since the data in this research supports the need to address not only SPED teacher stressors, but their willingness to explore research options, it becomes all the more important that they be involved in any developed solutions to factors that may mitigate stress in their careers (Puckett, Mathur & Zamora, 2017).

**Conclusion**

This study was guided by the following questions: How do Special Education (SPED) teachers describe their experience of being a SPED teacher; and How much do various factors-structures, practices, expectations, and relationships contribute to their sense of challenges and stress? Through these questions, this study sought to explore how the challenges, adaptability, and flexibility of the participant’s experiences contributed to how the participants’ make sense of their experiences, especially with career related stress. Their accounts were analyzed using the lens of the multidimensional burnout theory and self-efficacy perspective. More specifically, the participants’ accounts were explored as part of a process that analyzed them within their work environment. The researcher applied a qualitative interpretative analysis (IPA) research design which interpreted the participants’ various perceptions of experiences as Special Education (SPED) teachers.

Consistent with the literature review section of this study, several key findings that remained constant in terms of teacher self-worth and how obstacles and barriers cause teacher related stress were identified. The meaningful and rich data gained from how the participants made meaning of their experiences as SPED teachers in this study corroborates the literature with reference to selection of careers, beliefs that influence self-worth and teacher effectiveness, barriers and obstacles to effective teaching, as well as the personal value SPED teachers place on
factors associated with working conditions, systematic challenges, and professional conflicts (Brunsting, Sreckovic & Lane, 2014; Buese, 2007; Puckett, Mathur & Zamora, 2017; Stoeber & Rennert, 2007). In addition, the data generated in this study reveal several unique findings that contributed valuable new research to the existing literature.

The research presented new data that expands upon the existing literature by identifying that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors create stress in SPED teacher’s careers, while indicating how the teachers interviewed, for the most part, possess a heightened sense of self-preservation through the meaning and value they place on their accomplishments as a SPED teacher. Furthermore, this study established a greater understanding of how SPED teacher experiences related to their self-efficacy as a SPED teacher. Specifically, data indicates that most SPED teachers value the role they play in student learning and achievement. Moreover, it was found that SPED teachers value their relationships with colleagues even though these relationships may produce stress or conflict in their everyday lives. The new and unique findings generated through this study have various implications for practice and future research, which are discussed below.

**Limitations of the Findings**

This study offers findings that bring a distinctive influence to the literature that examines factors of SPED teacher stress that lead to teacher burnout. In addition, it provides a unique view into how this topic connects self-worth to obstacles/barriers to effective teaching using the thread of student learning outcomes. However, the study has its limitations, which are acknowledged and explained below, while these finding influence the implications for the practice. Finally, recommendations for future research are discussed as next steps for enhancing the problem of practice.
There are some factors that may resemble themselves as potential issues for this study that must be considered. First, the study is limited based on participant size, gender and geographical location. The participants of the study were primarily female and include only one male teacher. Adding more male teachers into the study may change the parameters as well as the results, while offering the concept that male teachers may or may not deal with stress differently than female teachers, therefore offering a different uniqueness to the study, while having a significant bearing on the results.

Additionally, the findings, the participants, and the subsequent data is limited to the State of Massachusetts. These identified limitations, impede the ability of the findings in a broader application. Furthermore, the findings are also limited by assumed generalizations that needed to be drawn as a result of the limited parameters of the study. Finally, it is possible that the limited the number of perspectives that were identified could in of themselves not be representative of the populist as a whole. However, based on the in-depth exposure of the participant’s experiences, it is believed that a replication of the study would provide the same insights concerning future research.

Other limitations of this study included the participants themselves. The participants, who have an average of 16 years of experience in the teaching profession have overcome or have been able to deal with stressors that may have been influenced teacher burnout. Only one of the participants of the study indicated that she was in her first two years of teaching and as such may have not developed the appropriated stress-coping mechanisms. It must be noted that indications from the data demonstrated that this teacher is struggling and as such, stress was identified as the primary cause. Given that teachers who leave the profession tend to leave within the first five years, it would be important to conduct a similar study with a less experienced group of teachers
in order to determine if stress levels are even higher and if so, how that would affect or influence the study (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Finally, other limitations of the recommendations for practice include a lack of empirical evidence for participative, bottom-up interventions as a means of solving the retention problem for special education teachers. This lack of evidence may stem from the fact that there is a distal relationship between SPED teacher empowerment efforts and the personal decision of the special educators to remain in their position. Further investigation is needed concerning the relationship between the individual SPED teachers and their approach to leadership and the personal motivation or satisfaction that SPED teacher place on their careers.

**Implications for Practice**

There are a number of recommendations for practice based on this research study’s findings. Generally, quantitative studies serve as a resource for practitioners and policy makers because of current-timed issues and an abundant volume data on a highlighted subject. Qualitative approaches may be better suited for research in school environments because their purposeful designs allow for the focus to be on contextual aspects, while the use of insightful, meaningful descriptions of experiences are used to capture these dynamics in data form (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The fundamental strengths of qualitative research have allowed this researcher to explore lived experiences of SPED teachers in a way that highlights the significance of meaning through a detailed narrative, while leading to insightful and deep themes. Entrenched within these themes was the concept that effective especial education teaching is complicated by how much emphasis place on their self-worth as a SPED teacher as well as obstacles and barriers that are presented through their work environment, all of which cause stress in their personal and professional lives. Triangulation of the data from all of the
sources revealed three recommendations to successfully implement strategies to deal with stress and burnout. These three recommendations are: 1. Personal development, 2. Professional development, and 3. Collaboration.

**Personal development.** SPED teachers may alleviate some of the stress caused by role overload by setting realistic expectations for themselves (Greer & Greer, 1992; Shaw, Bensky, & Dixon, 1981). As part of their preservice education, special education teachers are instructed on how to meet and identify the individual needs of students and develop expectations that translates into the ability to solve all problems (Greer & Greer, 1992). This expectation, although commendable, it is not always possible, particularly for beginning teachers as identified in this study with Alyssa. Attempting perfection, especially early in your career, is unrealistic. It is impossible to complete all aspects of an overwhelming job with perfection, so setting attainable priorities is a must. First, SPED teachers must begin by making distinctions between their jobs and their personal lives.

There are a host of sociological factors that affect many school-age children and consequently affect the SPED teachers who are faced with educating these students. These factors are present as a complex array of problems. The critical issue therefore becomes being able to show empathy for students without allowing those problems to consume the SPED Teacher. Greer and Greer (1992) found that "Teachers who become closely involved and preoccupied with the personal and family problems of their students may increase their vulnerability to burnout" (Greer & Greer, 1992, p. 170). Therefore, when necessary, SPED teachers need to leave their thoughts and emotions in the classroom. As demonstrated by the data in this study, repeated discussions about frustrations without solutions will not only heightened them, but will lead to additional stress and ultimately SPED teacher burnout.
Subsequently, SPED teachers need to increase their autonomy and demonstrate greater professional discretion.

The data in this study demonstrated how relying on others for support can be both, beneficial and detrimental to SPED teacher effectiveness and student learning. Relying on administrative personnel to provide recognition for hard work is most unrealistic. Accordingly, SPED teachers need to find alternative avenues of reinforcement, such as through individual student successes, colleagues, friends, and/or family. However, as the data demonstrated in this study, using a single source of reinforcement may be an ineffective means of positive reinforcement. SPED teachers need to find multiple sources of reinforcement that are not only interpersonally driven but data driven as well. Moreover, SPED teacher must understand that although their teaching environment may appear to be inflexible, in reality many of the rules are truly guidelines that are open to interpretation. Thus, SPED teachers may evaluate and determine changes necessary to reduce stress and improve their effectiveness.

The third component of personal development includes increasing one’s own self-efficacy. As demonstrated in the Literature Review chapter of this study, SPED Teachers who have a heightened sense of self-efficacy, that is, confidence in their aptitude to teach and manage special needs students, may be less susceptible to stress because they believe they have to the tools to do their jobs (Bandura, 1993). Time and time again throughout this study, the participants demonstrated their resolve by understanding how their own self-worth as an effective SPED teacher helped to relieve stress. One such tool identified in this study, is the SPED teacher’s ability to implement best practices in their classroom which allows for an increase in teacher self-efficacy, resulting in effective teaching and student learning (Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Guskey, 1985).
Professional development. Excellent administrators retain special education teachers by empowering them staff via providing support, addressing role-related and restrictive conditions, while, enabling professional development. Evidence from this study underscores the importance of exploring the strategies used by veteran special education teachers to assimilate into dual culture workplaces. In addition, educational researchers should further explore the conditions that foster the enthusiasm and commitment of veteran teachers to a life-long career in special education. Finally, more research is needed to explore the mechanisms that foster and maintain dual culture workplaces, elucidate successful supports and strategies for novice special education teachers, and fully explore the novice special education teacher experience. As indicated in this study and the literature, there are indicators that SPED teachers are not properly trained to manage stress (Guskey, 2003). Without proper training or coping mechanisms, eventually, job-related stress may escalate to the level of burnout, which will negatively impact student learning.

However, with effective coping resources, SPED teachers, as demonstrated through the data in this study, can build a resilience to stress, which in turn allows for the optimization of job performance, while promoting a healthy learning environment. Therefore, professional development must include recent stress research and its implications for the learning environment, while demonstrating evidence-based resilience-building strategies that prevent burnout, promote wellness, and void stress during the teaching school day. This research should:

1. Identify the warning signs of educator burnout and its consequences.
2. Implement evidence-based strategies to build their resilience to educator burnout and increase their social-emotional competence.
4. Improve student and adult relationships that support a healthy learning environment.
It is evident by this study that many SPED teachers experience varying levels of stress, but as also identified in this study, they have not been formally trained on how to combat the negative effects of job-related stress in either their professional or private lives. There are different coping strategies that could be employed to deal with SPED teacher job-related stress and all of these avenues should be explored. Schools should offer SPED teachers professional development lessons that focus on managing the daily stressors that negatively impact SPED teachers.

**Model of Collaboration.** Finally, it would be useful to create a model for encouraging collaboration between special education teachers, special educator directors, and general education teachers that addresses the need for deeper reflection, as well as stress education and mindfulness as effective stress management tools. The model should be adaptable to various academic and professional teaching levels and should include a number of interventions that include the following: a) exercises that foster self-reflection, and self-awareness; b) ample opportunities for further education and training regarding stress, and stress management techniques; c) a professional environment that encourages and nurtures collegiality and a community of respect and, d) consideration of the use of mentors for all new teachers from year one through year five of their teaching career.

When preparing for this type of collaborative initiative, a fundamental consideration must include personal development and continuing support for the end users: SPED teachers. Providing SPED teachers with time to become familiar with the coping techniques in both their private and professional lives appropriately will permit for a greater chance of reducing stress. In addition, since the data in this research supports not only SPED teacher concerns, but their willingness to explore research-based options, it becomes all the more important that these SPED
teachers be involved in the research, development, and testing processes of any future coping strategies. Administrators, developers, and researchers of coping strategies, in the future, should be more inclusive of diversity in their strategies to allow for collaboration.

The collaboration must be implemented throughout all aspects of the coping strategies in order to be effective. As a finding from this research, it would be recommended that one of the most useful aspects to this type of collaboration would be to integrate home use as a component of stress reduction. This application would be useful in helping the research and design aspect of stress reduction with home use, which could include an immediate family component. The recommended collaboration would allow SPED teachers to demonstrate their ability to actually deal with stress in both the home and professional settings. Moreover, it could be implemented on an on-going basis to constantly reinforce its value, while new and unforeseen stressors present themselves in the future.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study identify various paths for future research. This researcher’s work highlights several issues not previously reported in the literature and could serve as a motivation for further qualitative work. It would be beneficial to continue exploring ways that stress affects SPED teachers not only in their professional environment but in their personal lives as well. SPED teachers, administrators, mentors, and parents and educators would all benefit from studies that look at how stress integrates into the teaching profession, especially into the daily activities of SPED teachers. These examinations of stress integration should include platforms not identified in this study. Such platforms could include such topics as SPED teacher’s personal lives, co-teaching initiative and mentoring practices.
Further research investigating the relevance of this topic to mainstream teachers, school counselors, and administrators in all areas of education would continue to illuminate the prevalence of this issue in the field of education, while possibly reinforcing the findings of this study. Additional research examining the disconnect between the fields of special education and general education at the academic and professional levels, in addition to an analysis of effective ways to address this gap and foster collaborative educational environments, will also serve to enhance the information gleaned from this study. Although highlighted as a subtheme in this study, further follow-up in the field of stress can be conducted, in an effort to determine the effects on teachers’ perceptions of self-efficacy, confidence, and job satisfaction has on special needs children.

As our society is moving towards a more inclusive and accepting culture, current methodologies towards the development SPED educators must also change. Understanding how stress affects SPED teachers and their decision to remain a SPED teacher is an important component of advancing teaching expertise and effectiveness as well as student learning. Advancements and achievements in stress management must be all inclusive to address all potential sources of stress, while each and every one warrant further research and analysis. It is suggested that future studies investigate other methods, programs and applications that are effective in developing new stress-coping techniques, while finding new inventive applications for existing strategies.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Please consider that I am new to U.S. Education. Please explain your role of special educator. What do you do? Why?

2. Can you tell me what it is like to be a Special Education (SPED) teacher?
   a. Structures
   b. Practices
   c. Expectations
   d. Relationships

3. What stories can you share with me about the experiences as a SPED teacher that describe the joy of your job, the sadness of your job, the obstacles or frustrations of your job?

4. As a SPED teacher are there identifiable external stressors in your job. Can you give me an example of some stressful experiences that you have had as a SPED teacher and how you relieved your stress?

5. As a SPED teacher, have you ever considered leaving your teaching position? Can you share a story of this experience?

6. If you were able to eliminate stressors in your life, would it change how you view yourself as a special educator?

7. I have a scenario that I would like you to consider and then share your thoughts about what you would do and why. In this scenario if you could change the job of special education teacher what would you change and why?