

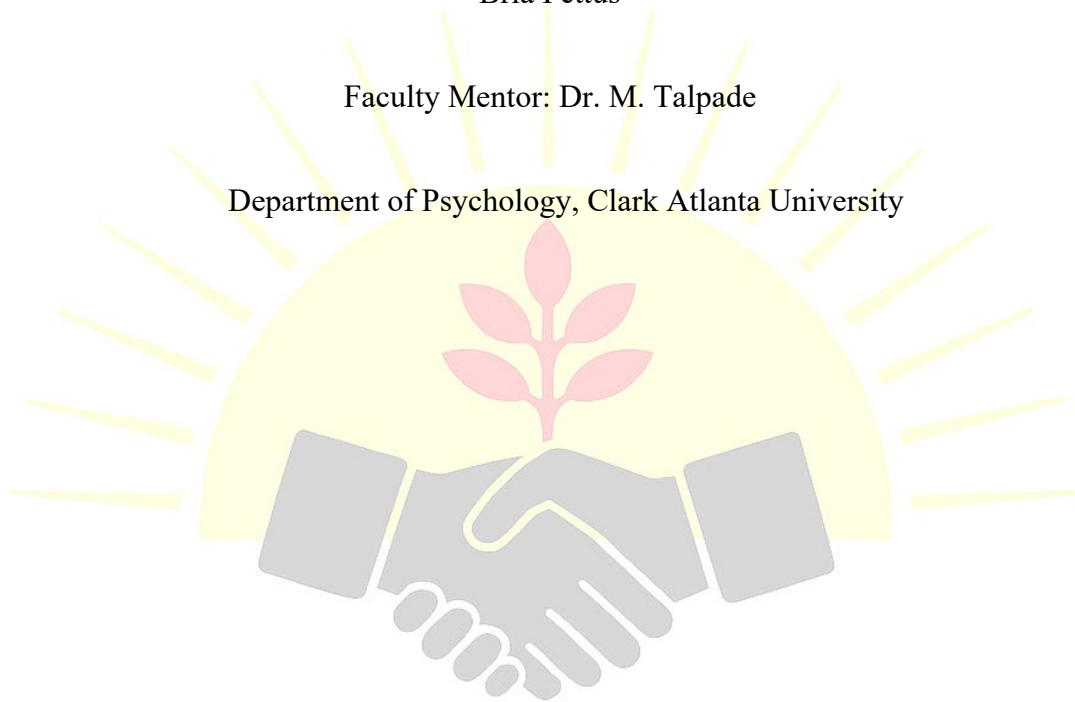
Educating with Purpose: Understanding the Lived Experience of Special Education

Educators

Bria Pettus

Faculty Mentor: Dr. M. Talpade

Department of Psychology, Clark Atlanta University



JOURNAL OF
FACULTY-STUDENT
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of special education educators across various regions of the United States. Past research on special education has highlighted issues related to teacher burnout, lack of support, and systemic inequities, but has often overlooked the voices of those most directly involved in the work. This phenomenological study answered the following research question: What are the lived experiences of special education educators? Participants were 5 current special education educators from diverse geographic regions and grade levels, representing varying levels of experience, race, and educational backgrounds. The data collection method included semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, lasting approximately 30 minutes each. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Validation strategies included peer review and rich, thick description to ensure credibility and validity. Results were coded into the following five themes: The Power of Relationships, Systemic and Institutional Barriers, Going Beyond the Role, Rooted in Purpose and Fulfillment, and Sustaining Well-Being. The findings indicated that special education educators regularly extend beyond their formal duties to advocate for their students and themselves, often navigating systems that provide limited resources or recognition. Despite these challenges, participants found meaning through student progress, relational connections, and their commitment to equitable education. The results of this study can offer insights into the lived realities and helping initiate positive change for teacher retention, policy development, and support frameworks in special education settings.

Keywords: special education, teacher experiences, burnout, well-being, phenomenology

Educating with Purpose: Understanding the Lived Experience of Special Education Educators

Working in special education comes with a unique set of challenges that can differ from what general education educators may experience. Special education educators must be solution oriented-- this ranges from creating individualized lesson plans, managing student behavior, working with different professionals/families, and keeping up with legal obligations. With recent legislation abolishing diversity, equity, and inclusion protections, special education educators are left vulnerable. Students who need these services/ protections are left without the necessary resources. Valuing diversity in all its forms and teaching people to be accepting is something that should be encouraged in our schools, offices, places of worship, and in our physical activity environments, not condemned (Block, 2024). We know little about what it's like to be a special education teacher. Without that understanding, it's hard to create/ protect policies and practices that actually support these teachers and help the students they work with.

Exploring the everyday experiences of special education teachers is vital because it gives us a clearer picture of what they go through—the good and the bad. It can show us the emotional and professional strain that comes with the career, but also the creativity and resilience these educators bring to their work. Special education educators are more susceptible to burnout as seen in (Aldeman, 2024) teachers report higher workloads than others, especially early in their careers. As a result, some state-level analyses have found that, compared to general education teachers, special education teachers are more likely both to move to other schools and to leave teaching. Knowing their perspectives can help create better support systems, training opportunities, and ways to keep teachers in this field. Ultimately, this can lead to better education for students with special needs. The purpose of this study is to explore their lived

experiences, intending to close the gap between ineffectual policies and what is actually needed to keep these invaluable educators in the classroom by answering the following questions: What is the lived experience of Educators in the special education department? What challenges arise in educating students who may exhibit learning challenges? In what ways is special education unique?

Literature Review

The Evolution of Special Education

Special education has evolved tremendously over the past several decades. What began as very exclusive, segregated, and shrouded has sprouted into an individualized, inclusive education experience for those with special needs. Legislation changes such as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) in 1990, established a federal entitlement to special education for eligible students with disabilities (Yell & Bradley, 2024). This law required that special needs students are granted free public education and led to the development of individualized learning plans. Educators have had to shift into teaching styles and present a level of passion to keep up with the evolution of special education. In Ault's (2025) reflective piece, the author revisits the influential work of Brown and colleagues, highlighting how their foundational ideas about including individuals with severe disabilities in socially rich, communicative learning environments remain relevant. Ault emphasizes that the socialization of students with disabilities must be prioritized intentionally and systemically within educational settings.

Special education educators play a critical role in ensuring that students with significant cognitive disabilities have meaningful access to the general education curriculum. However, their perceptions of this process greatly influence the extent to which inclusive practices are

effectively implemented. (Cole-man McCarthy, 2024) found that while educators acknowledge the importance of inclusion, they often encounter systemic barriers, including insufficient resources, inadequate training, and a lack of appropriate instructional support. These obstacles frequently result in the reliance on modified or alternative teaching methods, which can unintentionally limit students' exposure to grade-level content.

Challenges Faced by Special Education Educators

Learning environments must be curated for students' learning to be optimized; this is exceptionally important for students with special needs. Graves and Talpade (2024) study showed that positive energy helped to combat the negative impact of students feeling misunderstood within the classroom. For students with special needs learning experience to be optimized it is imperative that educators abide by certain requirements mandated, while also fostering positive environments.

Classroom structure plays a crucial role in student engagement and behavioral outcomes, particularly in special education settings. Research has consistently shown that smaller teacher student ratios contribute to more individualized support, improved classroom management, and better student outcomes (Frost et al., 2025). In a study examining the effects of varying teacher student ratios in a therapeutic day school setting, Frost et al. (2025) found that higher teacher student ratios (e.g., 2:4) resulted in greater student engagement and fewer behavioral interventions, whereas lower ratios (e.g., 5:4) were associated with reduced staff-student interactions and increased behavioral challenges. These findings suggest that special education classrooms benefit from staffing structures that allow for more personalized attention, reinforcing the need for policies that consider classroom composition and student needs when determining teacher allocation.

Lack of adequate special education training including disassociating from stereotypical assumptions of learning disabilities and special needs student's capabilities definitely can hinder an educator from reaching their students fully. In (Armenta, 2024) study found that educators who recognized that hyperactivity and impulsivity were neurological rather than behavioral issues were more likely to develop adaptive strategies, such as incorporating movement breaks or modifying instructional delivery, in contrast, those who lacked sufficient knowledge or training often felt frustrated, leading to negative teacher-student interactions and lower academic success rates for students with ADHD.

Resilience and Coping Strategies

The lived experiences of special education educators are shaped by the balance between professional demands and the support they receive. Teachers often describe resilience as a key factor in their ability to persist, but this resilience is not built in isolation—it is fostered through supportive leadership, professional learning communities, and positive peer relationships. Drew, et al. (2025) expand on this by establishing a clear link between resilience and teacher retention, proposing that resilience is not solely an individual trait but is also influenced by the support systems provided by schools. Their extended framework emphasizes that administrative support, professional development, and a positive school culture significantly strengthen special education educator's resilience and increase their likelihood of remaining in the field. High caseloads and professional burnout within the special education field aren't a new phenomenon. In Ault's (2025) analysis, the author revisits the influential work of Brown and colleagues, which presented foundational ideas for integrating individuals with severe disabilities into inclusive, socially communicative learning environments. This work emphasized the importance of community-based instruction and practical, engaging educational opportunities tailored to

students with significant needs. However, the lived experiences shared by participants in this study reflect the ongoing challenges in implementing these best practices—citing limited time, insufficient resources, and a lack of sustained support as persistent barriers.

With legislation being involved greatly to ensure the equity and protections of special education, this leads to added pressure on Special educators to meet lawful and ethical obligations. Yell and Bradley (2024) provide an in-depth examination of the legal challenges that have shaped the implementation of IDEA, they have contributed to the complexity of special education educators' roles, requiring them to navigate legal requirements while simultaneously providing quality instruction and emotional support to their students. This dual responsibility can contribute to feelings of burnout and stress, as teachers must balance legal compliance with their commitment to student success.

Educators who perceive inclusion as beneficial tend to find creative ways to modify instruction rather than relying solely on alternative curricula (Collins, 2024]). This aligns with research on teacher resilience, which suggests that educators who engage in continuous professional development and peer support networks experience lower stress levels and higher job satisfaction.

Research Question

Special education educators play a vital role in shaping the educational experiences of students with disabilities, yet their lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms remain unknown. Results from this study will not only contribute to the academic research on teacher resilience but also provide adequate recommendations for school administrators, policymakers, and teacher training programs to enhance educator well-being and student outcomes. This study

seeks to answer the following research question: What is the lived experience of educators in special education?

Qualitative Research Orientation

Given the nature of this research exploration, a qualitative research method is appropriate because of its ability to capture experiences, perspectives, and motivations. This type of research conduct could not be done numerically. The phenomenological approach was utilized to examine this study topic. The phenomenological approach is appropriate because of its descriptive manner, allowing individuals to orally illustrate their experiences from a subjective point of view. The use of this strategy grants others who may not have the same access to these lived experiences the ability to understand and empathize without preconceived assumptions.

Research Design

Role of Researcher

As the researcher, my goal is to accurately collect the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of this study's participants. It would be remiss of me to not acknowledge my personal biases, personal interests, and knowledge in the field of special education. My academic background in school psychology has shaped my belief in the importance of collaboration within educational systems, which may cause me to focus on relational or systemic challenges. Additionally, I enter this study with the assumption that special education educators experience greater hardships than their general education counterparts, and with a personal interest in addressing gaps in the existing literature on their experiences. These perspectives have the potential to influence how I interpret and represent participants' experiences. To maintain the trustworthiness and validity of the study, I used validation strategies such as rich thick descriptions, and peer review.

Sample Size

Five individuals participated in this study. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. Four participants were recruited through dedicated Reddit forums for special education professionals, ensuring relevance to the study's focus. One additional participant was referred by a professor, using snowball sampling to access further specialized experience. These methods allowed for the intentional selection of participants with rich insights into the lived experiences of special education educators.

Sample and Context

To provide context for interpreting the findings, brief demographic and professional information about each participant is located in table 1. Participants are identified using pseudonyms (P1–P5) to maintain confidentiality. Approximate ages were estimated based on participant disclosures or professional experience timelines, as exact ages were not formally collected. These characteristics offer insight into the diversity of backgrounds and experiences that shaped the participants' perspectives.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Characteristics

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age Range	Degree(s)	Current Enrollment	Years of SPED Experience	Region	Grade Level Served	Primary Student Population Served
P1	African American	Female	Early 20s	Bachelor's	Pursuing Master's	2	Southern U.S.	2nd grade	Intellectual and learning disabilities
P2	Caucasian	Male	Early 20s	Bachelor's	N/a	2	Southern U.S.	K-5	Dyslexia, ADHD, autism
P3	Caucasian	Female	50s	Master's	Pursuing Doctorate	8	Western U.S.	4th-8th	Intellectual delays, autism, physical impairments
P4	Caucasian	Male	50s	Doctorate	N/a	13	Northern U.S.	7th&8th	Learning disabilities, emotional support needs, autism
P5	Caucasian	Female	20s	Bachelor's	N/a	3	Western U.S.	Early Childhood	Developmental delays, autism

Ethical Considerations

Each participant received an informed consent form via email prior to the interview, which outlined the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. Consent forms were signed and returned before any data collection began. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Each interview consisted of six open-ended questions (see Appendix) designed to explore participants lived experiences as special education educators. With permission, all Zoom sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. To protect participant identities, pseudonyms were used, and all personal information was removed from the transcripts. This

study adhered to ethical research standards to ensure participant autonomy, confidentiality, and data integrity.

Data Validation

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, this study employed two key validation strategies: peer review and rich thick descriptions. Peer review was used throughout the data analysis process by engaging with a research advisor and peers familiar with qualitative methods. Their feedback helped challenge assumptions, clarify emerging themes, and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than researcher bias.

Additionally, rich thick descriptions were used to convey participants' experiences in detailed, contextualized narratives that allow readers to fully understand the settings, backgrounds, and perspectives represented. Together, these methods helped ensure the study's findings were credible, meaningful, and reflective of participants lived experiences.

Results

To analyze the data, I used Atlas.Ti a qualitative data analysis software to code the transcriptions of the interviews. After transcribing each interview, I conducted an initial readthrough to familiarize myself with the content and highlight key phrases and recurring ideas. I then generated open codes based on patterns, repeated language, and concepts that directly reflected participants lived experiences. These codes were refined and grouped into broader themes. The themes presented below reflect both the commonalities and unique perspectives expressed throughout the interviews.

Themes

Power of Relationships

Four codes were combined to establish this theme. The codes were emotional safety for students, parental support/concerns, colleague collaboration/conflict, and administrative support/disconnect. Each participant highlighted how fostering relationships within the special education field was essential to cultivating positive outcomes. Forming an emotional safeguard for students led to positive experiences for P3 who stated “I’ve had a student after a rough week on a Friday come up, give me a hug and say I’m sorry. I’ll do better next week, the first time he did that it blew my mind, because I was not expecting it from him. But seeing them be able to feel safe in your classroom is huge.” P4 stated “I have three girls in my one block that are always like, can we come over to your room today? I’m like, of course. They just like hanging out, doing their work. It’s an environment that they can appreciate because it’s so enriched with books. It’s just a space that they know that they are safe, and in this world that’s what they need right now.”

Colleague relationships presented to have a powerful effect on cultivating an either positive or negative experience for special education educators. P4 stated “My co-teacher, and my peers are amazing. We have such a great team in seventh and eighth grade that if there’s anything ever going down, we can just say, hey, this is going down. What do we do? And we come together, and we fix it or we come up with the plan.” P5 stated “Peer support is insane. Like my team that I have, I mean, we just wouldn’t be able to do it if we didn’t have each other. I’m one of four special education preschool teachers at my school, and it is common that we are in the same class, that they have some of my kids for the day, that I have their kids for the day. We just support each other completely. So, the support there is amazing.” Healthy collaborative colleague support led to increased joy within the career. Colleague conflict experiences do arise

as seen in P2 stating “Especially when you start talking about different departments communicating to each other, so, you know, sped, talking to gen-ed, or even like in your case with the psychologists, you know, we have different ways of doing things, and then when we all have to get together, we have to make sure that we're on the same page. So, with that there's boundaries that kind of come in saying hey, you know, we needed to talk first before we agree to something I was unaware of.”

Administrative support was detailed tremendously by participants, highlighting the power it contributes to their feelings of visibility, respect, and ability to perform. P4 stated “My administration, my principal and assistant principal, are absolutely amazing. They have my back one hundred percent. I come to them with a concern, and it's handled. They are always on my side.” P5 commented “I will say that they've supported me when it comes to like issues with other staff. So, like, I had a staff member who didn't like me and had issues with me, and when we all had to sit down and talk, they definitely had my back.” P1 added “I made sure that I have a good rapport with dean of students, my principal, and my supervisor. Like I have to make sure that they know that I'm doing what I'm supposed to do at all times so that it's okay if I need to leave early to get to campus on time to get to class. That's okay. So that's what I do. I maintain an open communication.” Administrative disconnect led to negative experience seen in p3 stating “I wish the admin was more understanding about what they're asking us to do and would listen to the special ed teachers because they're the ones with the expertise.” P5 stated “Every school I've been at and having talked to other teachers too, I mean, it is just normal that they just have to make your job the hardest. Like your principal, and that's just baffling to me. They should be supportive. So, I would say, yeah, when it comes to like, the classroom and teaching, I received basically no support from admin.” P2 added “Admin I don't know if they fully understand what

our job is, to fully support us but they're open to problems that come up and trying to come up with a solution. So, in that way, I generally feel supported it but there are times where it's like, hey I need you, but I see kids in the afternoon. And it's like, well, you see my schedule. I had two Rs or whatever the case, you know, it just would be impossible.”

Fostering parental relationships was also seen as vital within the field of special education. Positive results were shown in P5 stating “People sometimes will be like, oh, the parents are the hardest part, but honestly the families I work with are amazing.” P3 shared “It's extremely important to have a good relationship with your parents. because I have a small class. I just text them on my own phone and they know that they could text me if they have a question about what happened in school or if they want to text me over the weekend and let me know that their child is struggling during the weekend so that I have a better idea of what the behavior will be like when they come to school on Monday and it's nice to know that there are parents that do totally support what you are doing at school.” Parental concerns do arise which can potentially lead to misunderstandings and challenges with meeting students’ needs. P1 stated “I do think parents have the classroom in and around their finger, like things kind of run by what the parents say instead of the teacher's best interests. I think that has been my biggest struggle.” P3 added “Parents can get really in your face sometimes about things, and it's because they're concerned about their student, their child, they are the original expert because that is their kid. So, if they get upset about something, really listen to that and empathize with them and figure out how to work with them to do the best for their student while they're at school, create relationships with your parents.”

Systemic and Institutional Barriers

Three codes were combined to establish this theme. The codes were school policies, restrictions, and administrative challenges. Beyond interpersonal relationships, participants pointed to structural and systemic factors that made their roles more difficult. These institutional barriers included administrative decisions that overlooked special education needs, rigid policy expectations, and ongoing staffing and resource shortages. Such constraints often left educators feeling powerless and unsupported by the systems meant to assist them.

P5 stated “Every single year that I have been a teacher, I have had to basically fight and argue for staff, because if you just go to admin and are like, hey, I can't do my job because you know, our CVA says that I get two para educators, but I don't have any. Admin's just not going to help. It's written that I should have this. and I don't have it, and then I try to go to the union and they're like, well, they can't hire anyone, there's no one there. okay? Well, then I think maybe we should be paying them more. Like, there has to be a solution to get staff in my classroom.” P3 shared “This year I’m teaching fourth through eighth. It's usually third through fifth, but we're short a teacher and they haven’t even tried to hire one. The lower class had a fourth grader that was too high for her room, so she came over to us.” P1 added “Sometimes it feels like I am heard, but the problem is not as vast or greater than other things that they have going on. So, it might be important, but it just might not be important as something else right now.”

When asked about ways school district policies could be altered to progress the special education department’s ability to support students P1 stated “If you see that a student is already one or two grade levels behind in let's say reading, it's not beneficial to move them on without some kind of implementation over the summer or maybe some requirements, something where

they can support the student as best as possible to find better resources for them to feel a bit more comfortable when they get to their next step. I do know that some schools, at least my school, they do have a form of program, but it's not heavily pushed.” P3 stated “Create the ability for us to have a curriculum that fits our students. So, we don't have to spend so much time tweaking the general education curriculum. Allow academic programs to also do functional skills because general education kids, pick up stuff just by seeing it done. Our kids have to see it done, have it described, start one step at a time and continually progress step by step. Our kids don't process the same way as those that are not neurodivergent, and so we need this extra help and the extra time to teach the basic skills that general education kids just come by naturally.” P5 added “One of the ways that this school helps me and it's different from the other two schools I've been at, is we cannot do IEP meetings outside of the school day. Every other school I've been at, we were supposed to. It, was just normal for me to stay after work for several hours because like the IEP meeting starts at four, cause that's the only time everybody is available because when we're at work, we're at work. We have kids. the district I'm at now, that is not the norm.”

When participants were asked about national concerns regarding the direction of special education P4 stated “I think personally, right now with the state of our nation, I'm very concerned about the budget. I'm very concerned about the Department of Education. I'm very concerned about special education and how it's going to be affected. I'm super concerned that the way we're going, it's going to be only the very rich who are educated, and I don't believe in that. I believe in making sure that everyone knows their place and knows that they are an important part of the educational system and the world around us.” P3 shared “We need to keep our funding. And as far as I'm concerned, special education classes need more funding than General

education because we have to go different directions to try to get our kids to learn. So, we need different supplies. We need different ways to access what our kids do.”

State level policies also have the ability to help or hinder special education educators from meeting their student’s needs. P4 stated “the PDE Pennsylvania Department of Education says we can only have a certain amount of our population be diagnosed as special needs. Otherwise, they come in and they audit us to see what's going on. Well, in our elementary schools in my district, there are students that are needing to be identified and we have been told that we cannot evaluate because it would affect our numbers and put us over where we would be re-audited, and I don't believe in that. I believe in helping the students and getting the student services they need to be successful.” P3 stated “The state requires that they follow the state guidelines. But with the general education curriculum, it's very hard for them to access the knowledge because it is over their heads. Of course we're going to get bad grades. So, it reflects on the school, it reflects on us. It's bizarre if you want us to get better grades, give us something that our kids can access instead of just expecting them to be able to do very level work.” P5 added “It makes me wish that I could go work at a private school that just has things worked out because public schools do not. Like it just feels like it's chaos all the time.”

Going Beyond the Role

Three codes were combined to establish this theme. The codes were advocacy, feeling misunderstood, and clarification needs. This theme reflects how special education educators often stretch beyond their formal job descriptions to meet the diverse needs of their students and advocate for themselves in systems that may overlook them. Their willingness to go the extra mile was driven by a deep sense of responsibility, care, and an understanding that their students often require more than what traditional structures provide. Many participants described going

beyond their assigned duties to ensure their students' success P1 shared "I had a student come in. He hated school. I have done everything in my power to make sure that he thinks school is fun... So, I reached out to his parents and I was like, 'Hey, if I could just have your kid till four o'clock where we have our own little book club...' He absolutely loved it, and I feel like I did something right. I didn't fix the whole problem, but I did elevate him a little bit more, whether it's through affirmations or consistent practice." P4 described a similar experience of going beyond formal expectations for a student who wasn't on his caseload: "It was something that I had to do for this young girl. She is now in ninth grade, she's come out of her shell... And my administrator said, 'That's because of you, Doc.' The overwhelming feeling that I had a part in that student's success, it's unspeakable. I can't believe I actually had that much of an impact." P3 also reflected on the emotional rewards of going above and beyond: "They come in and they're really hesitant at first... and I love seeing them blossom... They learn that they can do it even if it's tough because they just keep on trying."

In addition to advocating for their students, many participants also described the responsibility to advocate for themselves. Whether to clarify misunderstood responsibilities, push back against unrealistic expectations, or gain access to basic supports necessary for doing their jobs effectively. P1 shared "There's a heavy bias on what a special education student is and what the role of a special educator is... We have our hands in a lot of pots all the time." She emphasized the complexity of the position, adding, "I do think special education teachers end up doing more than what a general education teacher has to do. Not only am I being a teacher, but I'm being a doctor, a lawyer, and a case manager. All at once while still teaching full lessons to an entire room." P3 emphasized their frustrations sharing "There's a huge difference in hanging out with special ed teachers and actually working with the special education population. It's

totally different.” She recalled a specific incident where a colleague insisted a student could read based on surface-level observations, to which she responded, “No, he doesn’t. He never will read. That’s his disability... Yes, he presents like a general education kid because he’s very street savvy, but he does not read. He knows he doesn’t read, and he knows he never will. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t try.” She expressed deep frustration over being second-guessed, especially by someone with less classroom experience: “Being told a student can do something when you know they can’t is very frustrating... There is somebody in our district... and she always seems to think she knows better than me, even though I’ve been in education longer than she’s probably been alive.” P5 shared sentiments regarding the importance of early childhood special education and expressed frustration that it is often devalued by administrators. “I think most admin view it as irrelevant, which is weird because early intervention matters and three years old is early intervention.” She added that her work is often misunderstood, saying, “People think we’re babysitters... but guess what? You change diapers in special education. That’s what you do.”

Sustaining Well-Being

Four codes were combined to establish this theme. The codes were work/life balance, self-care strategies, burnout prevention, and boundaries. Given the emotional demands and pressures faced by special education educators, many participants emphasized the importance of maintaining their well-being in order to continue supporting their students effectively. Several educators discussed the toll of their work and the intentional steps they take to care for themselves mentally, emotionally, and physically often without formal support from their schools or districts. P2 shared “I try not to do too much work on the weekends, I start the

Monday off good, so I try not to like bury myself right away... outside of special education managing stress is probably just doing something physical, so riding my bike or playing pickleball or just walking, something to kind of take my mind off of things for a little bit.” P1 reflected on their strategies to manage stress stating “I personally go to therapy I don't want to say just for a piece of mind, but to be proactive, not because something is going on, but in the case of anything going on, I want to make sure that I have somebody that I can talk to.” P3 reflected on “Not over-burning yourself with extra work. giving yourself time on the weekends to just kick back and relax. I go in early, but I don't stay late anymore. That always helps. I try to do as much at school as I can.”

A commonality shared between participants was the need for boundaries in order to protect their mental health. With lack of resources, and educator shortages plaguing the special education field self-advocacy was found to be imperative in sustaining well-being. P1 advised “Don’t be afraid to say no... this profession is going to teach you how to say no.” She shared how limited planning time often forces her to choose between attending meetings and protecting her lunch or after-school hours, adding, “Just like you get to have your lunch, I need to have mine too.” She also reflected on the pressure to conform to veteran teachers’ expectations and how that led to feelings of imposter syndrome early in her career. Over time, she learned to let her work and intentions speak for themselves, concluding, “You don’t have to prove anything. The work you do and your degree will speak for you.” P3 shared “I've learned not to say yes to everything. Can you do this? Can you do that? No. I cannot. Mostly for you know, your own mental health because it's hard being a special ed teacher. My district requires 15 hours of committee work after school. Instead of being on a ton of committees like I have in the past, I'm only involved in two and they're both special ed related. P4 similarly reflected on past patterns

“In previous years, like every day during summer school, I was at the school preparing for things for fall and so this is the first summer I'm going to take off completely and not do that. I think it's just going to rev me up for this fall because I won't have been in teaching mode all summer. So, it will give me a new breath of fresh air to let's go in and do this because I'll have actually had time to get that air.”

Negative experiences resulting from a lack of boundaries or self-advocacy was seen in P5 sharing “I feel like my first year, it was I don't know when a couple months in, I came in so starry eyed excited and man did those kids kick my butt...I haven't had anything like that since, I don't know why I got that classroom in my very first year of teaching, but they were so challenging. I had no support for the first few months, so I honestly feel like I burned out then, I was like crying all the time, I was looking for other jobs, I was questioning if I could even do this work.” P2 similarly mentioned the desire for more support as well sharing “It would help if they were able to bring somebody else in or maybe bring the responsibilities of excess paperwork to somebody else but due to policies that's not allowed. So, we're kind of hindered in that way.”

Rooted in Purpose and Fulfillment

Four codes were combined to establish this theme. The codes were connection, passion drivers, empathy, and involvement. Each of the participants showed a deep purpose and fulfillment that they've gained through their career in special education. Despite the challenges, and shortcomings they face day to day sentiments such as “I have a kiddo that I keep his picture on my desk. His picture's on my phone. It's one of the things that special educators have to deal with. That is ours in the world. He passed away...while I had him. We're not supposed to have favorites, but he was my buddy. He was my sweetheart...my angel” shared by P3.

When participants were asked about their intrinsic motivations for working within special education, each mentioned a memorable student success story that keeps them going. P5 shared “I have a little buddy he is diagnosed with autism...He wasn't really attending to anything so you're never really sure if he's understanding what we're saying? One of his goals was to match identical pictures. I couldn't even get him to do any. One day I watched him take a sign from one part of the class. He peeled it off the wall and I was like, I'm going to see what he's doing with that. He took it over to a smaller version of the sign, and I was like, he's matching! So, it's been really cool to just see him do things!” P2 shared “I can think of one student in particular they got identified as being dyslexic...we started working on the program we use for it and long story short, they gained more confidence in their reading towards the end of the year, I did see a change.”

Participants also mentioned their pride for the flexibility and range of what special education has to offer. P1 stated “I love the flexibility of a sped teacher. No one's questioning why me and my class are outside on the playground in a circle learning our math...they just know she's a special ed teacher she's doing what she knows is best for her students. So, I like to walk around in my rainbow flag and my happy face because me and my kids are having a bomb day.” P4 mentioned “They say if you love your job, you never work a day in your life. I go in and have fun...my students know I'm the crazy teacher. They know that I'm going to wear some crazy clothes... I'm that teacher that is just going to have fun, and they love it. It's that connection.” P5 shared “I just have a massive heart for kids, specifically kids that I think will be misunderstood by other adults. You can have kids that have a physical disability, you can also have kids that truly just have like a speech delay...you have these wide varieties of kids in preschool rooms, I just love it. I knew that I could definitely do this.

Discussion

The essence of this phenomenological study is that special education educators navigate a profession shaped by fostering meaningful relationships, confronting systemic challenges, and sustaining their well-being — all while remaining grounded in a deep sense of purpose. Their contributions extend beyond instructional duties, reflecting a daily commitment to these five core themes. The findings of this study align with existing literature that highlights the importance of emotional resilience and support systems in special education teacher retention. Participants in this study emphasized the need to sustain their well-being through boundary setting, advocacy, and self-care, which mirrors (Drew et al., 2025) extended framework on special education teacher resilience. Their research suggests that retention is closely tied to teachers' ability to adapt, find purpose, and access meaningful support within their environments—factors that were also evident in the lived experiences shared by participants in this study. The interplay between systemic challenges and personal resilience underscores the ongoing need for policies and school cultures that actively support special education professionals. This study highlights the complexity, emotional depth, and resilience required of special education educators. Through their voices, it becomes clear that their work extends far beyond instructional duties. These findings emphasize the urgent need for increased institutional support, targeted professional development, and policy reform that recognizes and values the multifaceted nature of special education roles. Future research should continue to explore the lived experiences of educators across diverse settings and roles, particularly with regard to how identity, school context, and leadership practices shape their work. Ultimately, by centering the perspectives of those doing the work, we can begin to build more equitable and sustainable systems of support for special education professionals.

References

- Aldeman, C. (2024). Where are all the special educators? Schools employ more special education teachers than ever. So why is there a shortage? *Education Next*, 24(4), 11+. <https://www.educationnext.org/where-are-all-the-special-educators-teacher-shortage/>
- Armenta, M. (2025). *The lived experience of educators who teach students who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): A phenomenological study* [Doctoral dissertation, ProQuest Information & Learning]. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 86(3–A).
- Ault, M. J. (2025). Brown et al. (1983): How these early lessons still resonate with me. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 50(1), 12–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15407969251315428>
- Block, M. E. (2024). What is DEI? *Palaestra*, 38(3), 4. <https://js.sagamorepub.com/index.php/palaestra/issue/view/1119>
- Coleman-McCarthy, Q. (2025). *Special education teachers' perceptions of access to the general education curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities and how it informs their teaching practices* [Doctoral dissertation, ProQuest Information & Learning]. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 86(6–A).
- Collins, N. D. (2025). *Perceptions of special education teachers' motivation to remain in the field* [Doctoral dissertation, ProQuest Information & Learning]. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 86(4–A).
- Drew, S. V., Liu, Y., & Nicoll-Senft, J. (2025). Examining the relationship between special education teacher (SET) retention and resilience: An extended framework. *Teaching and*

Teacher Education, 156, 104917. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104917>

Frost, B. N., Walker, S. F., Perez, B. C., Camacho, S. A., & Andzik, N. R. (2025). The effects of varying teacher-student ratios in a special education classroom. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-025-01044-1>

Glaves, T., & Talpade, M. (2024). An exploration of the types of educational environments deemed optimal for learning. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences*, 5(6). <https://doi.org/10.56734/ijahss.v5n6a5>

Yell, M. L., & Bradley, M. R. (2024). Why we have special education law: Legal challenges to the IDEA. *Exceptionality*, 32(2), 109–122.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2024.2301820>

Appendix

The purpose of this screening questionnaire is to determine eligibility for participation in this research study on the experiences of special education educators. Your responses will remain confidential. Below are icebreakers and a series of questions relating to work experience in the special education field.

Ice-Breaker Questions:

1. How are you feeling today?
2. What is your educational background?
3. What is your dream vacation?

Screening Questions:

1. Are you currently employed as a special education teacher or educator?

- Yes
- No, but I have been before
- No, but I am in a career field centered around students with special needs
- No

2. **How many years of experience do you have working in special education?**

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-7 years
- 8 or more years

3. **What grade level(s) do you primarily work with? (Check all that apply)**

- Early Childhood (Pre-K)
- Elementary (K-5)
- Middle School (6-8)
- High School (9-12)
- Other (please specify): _____

4. **What types of disabilities do the students you work with have? (Check all that apply)**

- Learning Disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia)
- Intellectual Disabilities
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Emotional/Behavioral Disorders
- Physical Disabilities
- Other (please specify): _____

Are you willing to participate in an interview or survey discussing your experiences as a special education educator?

- Yes
- No

**Interview Questions:**

1. What does it mean to you to be an educator to students with special needs?

Probing: How did you discover a passion for this field of work?

2. Can you describe a typical day in your career? What's your favorite part of the day?

3. What are the biggest challenges you face as a special education educator?

Probing: In what ways do school policies support or hinder your ability to meet students' needs?

4. What types of support (e.g., administrative, peer, professional development) do you receive?

5. What strategies help you manage stress and avoid burnout?

Probing: Have you considered leaving the field? If so, what factors influenced that thought?

6. Can you share a meaningful success story from your teaching experience?

Probing: What advice would you give to new educators entering this field?