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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Raeann Barnes

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

An Interpretive Phenomenological Investigation of the Meaning of Job Satisfaction Among Veteran Special Educators

by

Raeann Barnes

MA, M.Ed, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2007

BA, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

December 2016

Abstract

The attrition rate among special education teachers is ranked among the highest in the education profession. Retaining teachers early in their careers continues to be a concern due to increased job responsibilities, larger caseloads, challenging student behaviors, minimal support from colleagues, increased paperwork, and diminishing resources. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the meaning of satisfaction special education teachers made of their careers. The transactional model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) can help to explain how the occurrence of stressful events can impact an individual. A purposive sample of 9 tenured, certified special education teachers currently working in the field for at least 10 years were interviewed using individual, in-person, semistructured questions. Emergent themes and patterns were identified following the 6-step data analysis process for interpretive phenomenological analysis. The findings revealed two superordinate themes (a) effective practices and (b) making a difference. The participants in the study described strategies to minimize stress that included exercising, having quiet times, making time for leisure activities, being able to vent to coworkers, laughing and using humor, and spending time with pets. All of the participants in the study indicated a sense of commitment to the field of special education and their students. Participants articulated the importance of student success and acting as a helper for students to achieve their goals. The data from this study may be used to highlight career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction from veteran teachers contributing to the longevity for teachers in the special education profession and improving retention rates of teachers early in their careers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Working with children who have special needs can be a satisfying and rewarding career. Along with the rewards of the career, there can also be some challenges. Teaching can be stressful; there are demands placed on teachers that cause emotional and physical exhaustion, which contributes to teachers to leave the profession. Teachers who work in the special education field have been ranked among the highest risk for attrition in the profession (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2011; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Keigher, 2010). Many special education teachers will leave the field or transfer to other educational positions that do not involve working with students with special needs (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011). Compassion satisfaction can be described as a sense of accomplishment in a professional's work (Stamm, 2002). Satisfaction in work can be defined as employees' positive feelings about their jobs (Mueller & Kim, 2008). The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning making processes of veteran special education teachers who keep them rooted in the field, as well as how special educations teachers experienced satisfaction to sustain their careers and create compassion satisfaction.

Special education teachers are responsible for their students receiving an adequate education, regardless of the student's diagnosis, disability, challenging behaviors, or socioeconomic status. When children do not receive adequate academic instruction, it may hinder their future goals and lifetime potential. Laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) created increased pressures for special education teachers given the law's high stakes testing and raised teacher expectations for student

achievement (Keigher, 2010; Koller & Bertel, 2006). Goals to improve the education of students are admirable; however, these goals can create increased stress for teachers. Furthermore, when special education teachers experience increased amounts of stress, they have increased absences from work, experience burnout, and provide negative responses and reactions to their students (Berry et al., 2011; Wheeler & LaRocco, 2009).

Special education teachers work with a challenging and sensitive population. When teachers experience an increased amount of stress, it may not only affect the individual, but also others around them. Feng and Sass (2009) found that if special education teachers are experiencing large amounts of stress, they may fall short of providing quality services for students. Being able to remain calm is important for these teachers, as a percentage of students who receive special education services have emotional and behavioral disorders, presenting challenging behaviors that can cause extra stress for the special education teacher. Mills and Rose (2011) noted that some students can engage in self-injurious behaviors or be verbally and physically aggressive toward their peers and adults. Student misbehaviors and challenging behaviors can impede the student's learning and also impact the learning environment of their peers.

With the increased pressures and stress being placed on special education teachers, these individuals may experience burnout and leave the profession. Researchers (Berry et al., 2011; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010) have reported an increased attrition rate of special education teachers and the need to retain teachers in the field of special education. It has become a challenge for the special education field to retain special education teachers in the 21st century (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, & Waldron, 2006).

Despite the increased pressures and stress, special education teachers can still develop a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in their work, described as compassion satisfaction (Stamm, 2002). Compassion satisfaction can help buffer against stress and burnout (Stamm, 2010). Job satisfaction has been described as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (Locke, 1975, p.1304). Special education teachers who put forth effort and dedication may experience internal rewards and feelings of success. Compassion satisfaction may help to shift the focus from a negative outcome (strain and stress) to a more positive one (career fulfillment, success, and well-being).

In this study, I investigated the meaning making processes of elementary, middle, and high school veteran special education teachers related to career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction. The participants discussed and identified various strategies and interventions used to lessen their stress and increase satisfaction with their career. These factors may help to highlight potential features contributing to the longevity and retention rate for teachers in the special education profession because there is an increasing rate of attrition in the field (Berry et al., 2011; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Understanding strategies that could be applied to the day-to-day routines of special education teachers may allow organizations and individuals to take preventative measures to buffer against stress and constructively cope with stress. Additionally, useful strategies may allow special education teachers to gain more compassion satisfaction with their careers and identify career sustaining behaviors.

Background

Special education teachers have multiple responsibilities, work with sensitive populations, adopt multiple roles while at work, and often have large caseloads. Large caseloads and the increasing amount of paperwork have been two concerns reported by special education teachers (Albrecht, Johns, Mounsteven, & Olorunda, 2009; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). These responsibilities can create increased amounts of pressure for special education teachers to deliver individualized education for students with special needs.

The U.S. Department of Labor and Statistics (2015) reported that a continued demand for teachers in the special education field will stem from turnover, needing to replace teachers who have left the field. With increased demands and pressures of the job, special education teachers are leaving the profession, adding to the turnover and attrition rates of special education teachers. Teacher turnover can produce an inadvertent effect on student achievement and social development (Feng & Sass, 2009). Fetler (2007) asserted that teacher turnover can result in a diminished quality of services provided for students.

Teachers who remain in the special education field may have developed positive coping strategies to diminish work stressors. Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, and Danielson (2010) noted that teachers who have used coping strategies brought about by stressful situations and multiple student needs are more often empathetic, idealistic, and dedicated. Meaning making may be the result of positive coping strategies and can help to identify career-sustaining behaviors and wellness for special educators. According to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007), future qualitative studies about special education teachers may

reveal the richness of their unique experiences. In this research study, I addressed this gap in the literature by explicating the experiences of veteran special education teachers, as minimal research exists investigating the actual experience of special education teachers (Scruggs, Mastropieri, Margo, & McDuffie, 2007). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the meaning making processes of elementary, middle, and high school veteran special education teachers related to career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction.

Problem Statement

Due to the increased attrition rates, lack of awareness, and limited literature in the special education field, investigating and exploring career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction among special education teachers was warranted. Special education teachers are faced with increased job responsibilities, such as large student caseloads, challenging behaviors from students, minimal support from colleagues, increased paperwork, long working hours, and diminishing resources (Mills & Rose, 2011; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011). These responsibilities may be causing increased amounts of job-related stress for teachers and lead to a sense of decreased personal accomplishment, greater negative emotions, and increased fear and anxiety (Mills & Rose, 2011).

Understanding why special education teachers leave the field was not the primary focus of the research. Rather, the focus was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of veteran special education teachers who were satisfied with their job. The branch of psychology called positive psychology was first introduced by Seligman (2002), who focused on building the best qualities in an individual and focusing on their

strengths. People who are happier tend to be in better health, achieve more success, and are more socially engaged (Cohen, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Moreover, individuals who are happier at work have increased productivity and decreased job withdrawal (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). In this study, I revealed meaning making processes among veteran special education teachers in their day-to-day work life that informs their decisions to remain in the field of special education.

Purpose of the Study

There is a shortage of special education teachers with little to improve retention rates in the field (Berry et al., 2011). The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the unique meaning making processes of elementary, middle, and high school veteran special education teachers related to career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction. Minimal research has been dedicated to the actual experience of special education teachers (Scruggs et al., 2007). The positive aspects of career and compassion satisfaction may improve the longevity and retention rates of special education teachers in the field. Teachers who are entering the field of special education need to have supports and strategies to be able to remain rooted in this profession and advance in their careers (Billingsley, Griffin, Smith, Kamman, & Israel, 2009).

Research Questions

The central question of the research study was the following: What is the meaning of job satisfaction for veteran special education teachers in the Erie County School District? The research question was designed to elicit information regarding each

teacher's experience. Through the central research question, subquestions (below) were included within the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) design:

- How did the veteran special educators spend their day-to-day work life to stimulate staying?
- How did veteran special educators explain the influences that contribute to them staying in their career?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Stressful events can occur throughout a special education teacher's career and are rarely a static event. Stress is not limited to a one-time response, but rather an individual's continuous interaction with and adjustments to stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ragin, 2015). Special education teachers are faced with numerous stressors throughout their careers and need to learn how to effectively manage and make adjustments to overcome the stressor.

The transactional model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) can help to explain how the occurrence of stressful events can impact an individual. Stress is triggered by an external event; the individual will then appraise the event and decide if she or he is equipped to handle the stressor or not. When discussing the cognitive appraisal of a stressful event, there are three components involved: primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, and cognitive reappraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The primary appraisal involves an initial assessment of the event and potential harmfulness, the secondary appraisal is used to assess the individual's resources and how he or she will meet the stressful demand, and the cognitive reappraisal allows an individual to

reevaluate the events as it happens. An individual's coping strategies may allow him or her to effectively handle the stressor; however, if the individual is unsuccessful in her or his attempts to alleviate the stressor, he or she may become exhausted and elicit a stronger emotional reaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ragin 2015). The transactional model may help to highlight the relationship between stressors that are experienced by special education teachers, their appraisal of the stressor, and their individual reactions. Special education teachers' appraisals of their resources and demands are measures of stress (O'Donnell, Lambert, & McCarthy, 2008). For those special education teachers who are effectively managing with their stressors, positive factors may be identified to help diminish feelings of stress.

Coping styles can be described in two ways (Lazarus, 1991; Ragin 2015). The first is problem-focused, where an individual seeks information, generates solutions, and has a planned approach to resolving the issue. The second is an emotion-focused approach where an individual seeks comfort and support from others. Another factor involved with coping styles is the idea of engaged or disengaged coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Engaged coping creates a way to obtain a helpful solution to the issue, while disengaged coping functions to minimize emotional discomfort and stress. Because special education teachers face frequent challenges requiring engaged and effective coping strategies as they interact with students (Ramos, 2009), they must develop effective coping strategies to better manage job-related stress and its effects on their well-being (O'Donell et al., 2008).

Researchers who use positive psychology place an emphasis on human flourishing and optimal functioning. From Seligman's (2002) standpoint, the goals of positive psychology included cultivating and seeking fulfilling and meaningful lives, nurturing positive qualities, and enhancing everyday experiences. When teachers are able to develop a positive outlook, their work environment became less stressful (Critchley & Gibbs, 2012). It is crucial to understand special education teachers' meaning making processes or meaning of job satisfaction as they interact with students and job stressors to better comprehend how they have remained rooted in the field. Teachers who are experiencing stress can develop poor health, career dissatisfaction, burnout, and contemplate leaving the field (Gonzalez, Brown, & Slate, 2008; McCarthy, Lambert, Crowe, & McCarthy, 2010).

Nature of the Study

This study of job satisfaction was conducted using an IPA. IPA was incorporated to examine the lived experiences of special education teachers and their direct experiences that helped them develop career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction. Quantitative research would not provide a complete analysis of the participants' thick, rich descriptions of their lived experiences. A phenomenological approach was best for the collection and extraction of data from participants to capture the participants' feelings and thoughts, producing more credible data (Van Manen, 2014). Semistructured interviews assisted me to gain in-depth information and to collect data on the participants' recount of their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Participants who have been teaching 10 or more years comprised a purposive sample of individuals who are providing special education services to students. In addition, participants described themselves according to the operational definition of experiencing compassion satisfaction in their careers, which Stamm (2002) defined as the positive feelings or characteristics a professional can experience from caregiving. A sample size of six to 12 participants is typically recommended for saturation in a phenomenological study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). I audio-recorded and transcribed all of the interviews so I was able to engage with the data at each level rather than sending the recordings out to be transcribed by a third party. To explore the unique lived experiences of veteran special education teachers, I followed the six-step data analysis process for IPA as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) to interpret each set of interview data. These six steps involved reading and rereading, initial note taking, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next transcript, and looking for patterns across transcripts. I included participant excerpts to give the participants a voice and support the developed themes. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed through triangulation, member checks, and peer checks during the study.

Definitions

Compassion satisfaction: The positive feelings or characteristics a professional can experience from care giving (Stamm, 2002). This can also act as a buffer against stress and compassion fatigue.

Coping: Lazarus and Folkman (1984) referred to this as the cognitive and behavioral actions an individual uses to help manage situations that exceed their current resources. The coping process can begin when an individual is presented with something that threatens their goals.

Coping strategies: Actions taken by individuals to tolerate, manage, handle, contrive, content, deal with, or satisfy an event or situation (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Job satisfaction: Satisfaction in work can be defined as employees' positive feelings about their jobs (Mueller & Kim, 2008). Job satisfaction has been described "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (Locke, 1975, p. 1304).

Meaning making: The process of according meaning to personal life events, revealed in the telling of personal stories that show insight and demonstrate the capacity to integrate interpretations of important life events into an overall sense of self (Lawford & Ramey, 2015). Meaning making is frequently referred to as the expression of gaining insight or learning from an experience (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012).

Stress: Energy used by an individual when a demand is placed on the mind, body, or individual's emotions outside of her or his control (Brown & Uehara, 2009; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Assumptions

Assumptions are believed but cannot be demonstrated to be true. I assumed that all of the participants in this study responded honestly and gave a truthful narration of

their feelings and first-hand experiences as a special education teacher. I also assumed that the special education teachers participating in the study would share similar job requirements. Honest accounts of the participants' feelings, thoughts, and experiences were crucial for a study on lived experiences of veteran special education teachers and counted on truthful accounts.

Scope and Delimitations

The study included nine special education teachers who were working in the special education field and who had reported experiencing job satisfaction and compassion satisfaction. A sample size of six to 12 participants is typically recommended for saturation in a phenomenological study (Guest et al., 2006). The participants were recruited for the study using purposive sampling. Interviews were used to gain in-depth information from participants regarding their lived experiences relating to career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction through semistructured interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were be audio-recorded. Data analysis and coding was done on an on-going basis while data were being collected.

The delimitations of this particular study included a small, purposive sample. Having a smaller sample limited the diversity of special education teachers. Special education teachers from different states may have different experiences or may be facing increased stressors at work, using different strategies, or have varying types of supports.

Limitations

A potential limitation of the study stemmed from self-reported data. Individuals typically attempt to refrain from portraying themselves in a negative light and try to

appear socially acceptable to others. In order to minimize this, I emphasized that all results would remain confidential.

A second limitation of the study was the potential for researcher bias. My bias from working with special education teachers in school districts could have potentially influenced this research project. I worked as a consultant for several school districts for the past 10 years, and this job involved working with and interacting on a weekly basis with special education teachers. I had witnessed special education teachers stay in the field until their retirement. Most of these teachers were a pleasure to work with and appeared knowledgeable and insightful when working with their students. I was able to learn from these veteran teachers to better my role as a consultant. On the other hand, I had witnessed special education teachers who grow to resent the field and either bid out or leave the field to escape special education.

I strove for credibility in the study, understanding and describing the phenomenon from the participants' eyes to reduce researcher bias. The participants are the only individuals who can legitimately judge the credibility of the study. Member checking was employed throughout the study; I used follow-up questions and probes to gain clarification and accurate representations of the participants' experiences, allowing the participants to correct errors or misinterpretations. Creswell's (2013) noted standard procedures to help improve verification included implementing member checks throughout the study. Member checks also allowed the participants to provide additional information.

Another limitation for this study was the potential influence of my values, as someone who has walked, figuratively, the "same or similar corridors" as the teachers. I was in frequent contact with my university chair and also maintained a journal to avoid researcher bias and foster reflexivity during the study. Reflexivity can be defined as explicit self-exploration and presentation of the researcher's underlying assumptions ascribed to various elements of the research (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). I did my best to set my own thoughts and values aside and remained open minded. I discussed potential biases with my chair to remain open minded. I was able to make regular entries into the journal during the research process, which often included reasoning for methodological decisions, and I was able to engage in reflection on my personal interests and values.

Significance

In this study, I revealed meaning making processes and how veteran special education teachers who were working with children who received special education services spend their day-to-day work lives to stimulate staying rooted in the field. As there is little in the literature examining meaning making processes among special education teachers, this study makes a unique contribution to the field. The aim of the study was to better understand the influences that inform special education teachers' happiness so they can stay on the job; this understanding can help retention. This awareness may also assist special education teachers who are just entering the field to better manage career stress and improve job satisfaction. In addition, this study expands the literature of meaning making with the addition of voices previously not heard.

Understanding the experience of job satisfaction in the profession is a significant factor and beneficial to help understand the meaning making processes of special education teachers to help stimulate staying in the field. Stress and unhealthy coping strategies not only impact a professional on an individual level, but also affects the individual's organization, surrounding environment, and public as well.

Summary

This study provided an in-depth analysis of veteran special education teachers' lived experiences when working with students who received special education services in the Erie School District in Pennsylvania. Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the profession of special education teachers, background, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. Additionally in this chapter, I presented the research questions that guided this study, the theoretical framework, the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions and limitations. In Chapter 2, I began with the discussion of the conceptual framework of stress and coping strategies as they apply to special education teachers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Due to the increased attrition rates, lack of awareness, and limited literature in the special education field, investigating and exploring career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction among special education teachers was warranted. Special education teachers are faced with increased job responsibilities, such as large student caseloads, challenging behaviors from students, minimal support from colleagues, increased paperwork, long working hours, and diminishing resources (Mills & Rose, 2011; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011). These responsibilities may be causing increased amounts of job-related stress for teachers and a sense of decreased personal accomplishment, greater negative emotions, and increased fear and anxiety (Mills & Rose, 2011). Understanding why special education teachers leave the field was not the primary focus of the research. Rather, the focus was on gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning making processes of veteran special education teachers who were satisfied with their job.

Special education teachers care for the unique needs of others. These unique student needs may include autism, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and other health impairments. Scull, Winkler, and Fordham (2011) reported that in 2009-10, about 6.5 million students or 13.1% of the nationwide student population were identified as a special education student. Working with a sensitive population may produce factors that can influence the special education teachers' level of stress including increased student populations, providing for the unique individual student needs, poor teacher training, increased amounts of paperwork, poor peer support, and insufficient support from

administration (Davis & Palladino, 2011). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described stress as an interaction amongst the professional and their surroundings when duties, tasks, or situations may be challenging; threaten their well-being; or surpass their current abilities. The special education teacher's daily roles and responsibilities can be enough to create a stressful work environment. According to McShane and Von Glinow (2005), teaching is considered a higher stress occupation compared to other professions.

This literature review provides an examination of factors that contribute to the increased feelings of stress, theories of stress, compassion satisfaction, preventive strategies, treatment for stress, costs to society, and results of unhealthy coping.

Literature Search Strategy

To comprehend the phenomenon of stress, job satisfaction, and compassion satisfaction, an exhaustive literature review was conducted. Multiple databases were used for the study, including ERIC, Education Research Complete, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, ProQuest, EBCSOhost, Academic Search Premier, and Sage Journals. Key words and phrases used in the search included *stress*, *job satisfaction*, *coping*, *coping strategies*, *compassion satisfaction*, *career stress*, *special education teachers*, *special education teacher retention*, *behavior management in special education*, *classroom management*, *special education students*, *positive psychology*, and *special education teacher attrition*. Only articles from the past 10 years were used. A literature review is necessary to shed light on some of the issues special education teachers face in their careers and to help readers comprehend how these issues relate to and play a role in the teachers' direct experiences.

Theoretical Foundation

A person's environment can influence the amount of stress he or she begins to feel. Theorists exploring stress and coping have noted a "particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangers his or her well-being'' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). When an individual deems a situation as exceeding his or her resources and coping strategies, he or she may begin to experience increased stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) noted that stress is an individual's continuous reaction to situations and events, including the individual's adjustments to the stress.

Transactional Theory

Stress and coping can be viewed from a transactional perspective, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Stress is triggered by an external stressor that an individual is unable to effectively cope with or lacks the appropriate resources to cope with. Transactional theory involves two main constructs: an individual's appraisal of the stressful situation and his or her coping strategies to deal with the stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). When a threat is present, it must also be present in conjunction with an individual's attributes and immediate environment that will react when exposed to the threat. The concept of a threat can lose meaning when applied to an individual who does not react (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Transaction places a focus on the interplay of certain variables. These variables may include environmental antecedents, person antecedents (self-esteem, commitments, values, sense of control, and mastery), appraisal

of stress (primary and secondary), and coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Provencher, 2007).

An individual's primary appraisal of stress and then his or her secondary appraisal of stress both contribute to the degree of stressfulness of a situation. Primary appraisal involves the direct stressfulness, while secondary appraisal involves an individual's evaluation of his or her options for coping with the stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). With regard to threatening or stressful situations, an individual may determine that he or she lacks successful coping strategies to appropriately manage the stressful situation, which may lead him or her to develop a stronger emotional reaction to the threat of the stressful situation. Figley (2002) identified coping strategies as either adaptive (successful) or maladaptive (unsuccessful). Adaptive coping strategies help an individual manage or relieve stress while maladaptive coping strategies are ineffective and typically unhealthy, which can lead an individual to disengage or avoid stressful situations, causing the situation to worsen.

Coping strategies can help to alleviate the threat or stressful situation. Successful coping strategies include problem-focused forms, emotion-focused forms, or meaning-based coping. Ragin (2015) described problem-focused coping to involve information-seeking to develop fact-based problem solving and active engagement, where there is little focus on emotion. Emotion-focused coping includes seeking solace or social support from others to provide comfort (Ragin, 2015). Familial and cultural orientations to sports and exercise, claimed Ragin (2015), can improve an individual's overall well-being. Meaning-based coping (such as when a person draws from his or her own beliefs, values,

and goals to sustain coping and well-being) can help an individual advance in personal growth and bring a new sense of purpose into his or her life after successful coping with a stressor over time (Provencher, 2007).

Transactional theorists address triggers of stress and a person's interpretation of a stressful situation. In the special education profession, teachers can be faced with a multitude of external stressors; each special education teacher may cope with these stressors in a fashion unique to him or herself. If an individual is engaged, he or she is more likely to cope successfully, whereas an individual who is disengaged would be less likely to successfully cope. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) claimed that not all potentially stressful situations are actually stressful; whether they are depends upon the individual's cognitive appraisal of the situation, his or her past experiences, confidence, and skills. Thus, some teachers may avoid feeling stressed by certain events, where other teachers may react with stress.

Successful coping strategies to reduce stress have been documented in other professions. Wilkerson (2009) reported that effective coping strategies can act as a buffer against burnout among school counselors. Nurses who use coping strategies are better equipped to successfully deal with stressful events (Moller & Rice 2006; & Provencher, 2007). Law enforcement officers who use adaptive coping strategies are more likely to effectively deal with work-related stress and carry out their day-to-day duties without experiencing problems (Haisch & Meyers, 2004). College students who use positive coping strategies experience a greater sense of well-being (Shiota, 2006).

When discussing stress in relation to the transactional model, special education teachers may not have the appropriate skills, confidence, or training to deal with stressful situations and thus become exhausted because they are unable to alleviate the stress. Therefore, when these teachers experience prolonged stress, they can have a higher risk of experiencing burnout or leaving the profession altogether.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables

Factors Contributing to Stress

Special education teachers must receive specialized education and training. Teachers who have not been properly educated and prepared may not be effective at recognizing or accommodating students with disabilities (Golder, Jones, & Quinn, 2009). Some special education teachers have had minimal or limited experience with individuals who have a disability or special needs because some university curriculums do not allow for meaningful real-life experiences (Golder et al., 2009; & Davis & Palladino, 2011). Special education teachers reported a lack of experience working directly with special education students to gain an authentic experience prior to their first employment as a concern (Golder et al., 2009). Wheeler and LaRocco (2009) and Davis and Palladino (2011) observed a dearth of such training for the preparation of teachers entering the special education profession. Davis and Palladino (2011) advocated that student teachers who are seeking a degree in special education need to experience direct exposure to a diverse student population and an array of student challenges to help prepare themselves for their profession.

Special education teachers have reported feeling ill-equipped and not having the skill set to effectively support or accommodate students with special needs (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011). Teachers need to be versed with multiple skill sets to effectively manage their classrooms and their students; being ill equipped may increase stress levels and lead to poor performances. Sprang, Whitt-Woosley, and Clark (2007) noted that knowledge and training can promote self-efficacy among individuals working with special populations. High self-efficacy has been demonstrated as a reliable interpreter of teacher behaviors (Kosko &Wilkins 2009). Teachers who possess higher self-efficacy are more self-confident with their capabilities and are able to more effectively teach students with disabilities.

Some students who have been classified as special education students may present with challenging behaviors. Challenging behaviors or student misbehavior can be defined as a disruption to the learning environment, challenging adult authority, encouraging others to misbehave, or interfering with the work of others (Levin & Nolan, 2007). Mills and Rose (2011) also included self-injurious behaviors and externalizing behaviors such as physical aggression toward others in their definition of challenging behaviors. Students who exhibit challenging behaviors may jeopardize the safety of themselves or others, or engage in behaviors that restrict and limit their ability to use ordinary school facilities (Cudre-Mauroux, 2011). When students are a danger to themselves or others, they must be supervised closely and kept away from potentially unsafe situations. Any of these behaviors can take time away from other students in the classroom, placing an increased strain on the special education teacher.

While working with students who display challenging behaviors, special education teachers may perceive a threat from the student; teachers may respond with negative feelings toward the student, or in some other inappropriate manner, if they feel they cannot successfully manage challenging situations (Cudre-Mauroux, 2011). Challenging behaviors can cause increased stress for special education teachers, leading to a sense of decreased personal accomplishment, greater negative emotions in staff, and increased fear and anxiety in staff (Mills & Rose, 2011). As the student's challenging behaviors increase, so do the burnout rate of the teacher providing direct service to the student (Mills & Rose, 2011; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011). Some students who are enrolled in special education exhibit inappropriate or aggressive behaviors. Teachers reported a lack of experience and little to no training regarding aggressive behaviors (Mills & Rose, 2011). Billingsley et al. (2009) similarly found that some new teachers in special education were ill-equipped and unable to appropriately handle complex behavioral problems.

Collaborating with other teachers has also been claimed as causing job-related stress for special education teachers. In some general education workplaces, special education teachers report experiencing increased stress when dealing with teachers who were unsupportive. (Davis & Palladino, 2011). Similar results were found when examining the successful teamwork and cooperation between the teachers in general education and those in special education when attempting to include students who have special needs in the mainstream setting (Eccleston, 2010). A lack of effective communication and multiprofessional coordination can not only affect the student, but

also increase stress for the special education teacher (Davis & Palladino, 2011; Eccleston, 2010). The student identified with deficits should be appropriately mainstreamed, and the teachers from the two different teaching backgrounds must effectively collaborate with one another to ensure a positive outcome for the student.

Special education teachers may have a large student caseload. Plash and Piotrowski (2006) reported that larger student caseloads was one of the reasons that special education teachers gave for leaving the field. Some teachers had a total of 33 students in their caseload, spread across 13 different classrooms throughout the building (Kaff, 2004). Sprang et al. (2007) found that caseload percentage of high needs clients was investigated, with the outcome that the higher the needs of the client, the higher the levels of predicted stress and burnout. Caseload numbers will vary depending upon the school district, total students who are receiving special education services, and the student needs. Students who have a higher need require more time from the special education teacher, taking time away from other students.

With larger student caseloads and a lack of resources available to accommodate the special education students, teachers in special education are spending less time providing direct instruction and more time with other nonteaching duties (Kaff, 2004). Nonteaching duties also interfere with the special education teachers' direct contact time with their students. Paperwork is a daily duty of the special education teacher; some report struggling with the overwhelming amount of paperwork and its often changing requirements (Davis & Palladino, 2011). Green (2011) noted that workload issues such as paperwork were associated with lower levels of commitment and increased attrition in the

special education field. Due to federal and state mandates, paperwork and individualized education plans (IEPs) were increasingly complex and lengthy in nature (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

The involvement of parents with children enrolled in special education, or parents of nonenrolled children receiving services from special education, can contribute to the stress level of their child's special education teacher. Adera and Bullock (2010) noted that some parents exhibit a lack of parental involvement and do not cooperate with the school or hold their children accountable for their behaviors; instead they blame the teacher, making the teacher's job more challenging. On the other hand, there are "parents who are strong advocates for their children but have unreasonable expectations of special educators" (Kaff, 2004, p. 14). Unreasonable expectations from parents can increase the amounts of stress the special education teacher may already be experiencing and contribute to symptoms of compassion fatigue.

The stressors associated with the special education profession can lead to the burnout of teachers and increase the attrition rate of teachers. Burnout can be described as "a syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion produced by excessive demands on the energy, strength, and resources of the individual" (Banks & Necco, 1990, p. 187). Figley (2002) described burnout as "a result of frustration, powerlessness, and inability to achieve work goals" (p. 19). It can produce numbness and emotional exhaustion, which may lead to diminished job performance, detachment from others, absenteeism, depression, and a broad range of health problems (Zysberg, Orenshtein, Gimmon, &

Robinson, 2016). When professionals experience emotional overload due to prolonged stress or frustration, their ability to effectively perform their job may be at risk.

There does appear to be a lack of awareness on how to retain special education teachers and how to help them develop feelings of compassion satisfaction. Researchers Davis and Palladino (2011) investigated stress among secondary special education teachers as well as a need for awareness in the field. Transcript analysis of job stress and job requirements, teacher training, and social support among the six participants revealed five factors contributing to increased stress for the educators. This study found factors such as; limited administrative support, lack of supportive peer teachers, increased amounts of paperwork, changing paperwork requirements, and the inability to separate work from personal lives contributed to increased stress.

Compassion Satisfaction

Compassion satisfaction involves the helpful or positive characteristics of caregiving (Stamm, 2002). It can help to buffer symptoms and the experience of stress and add fuel to a professional's will to continue with their work during stressful situations presented at work. Compassion satisfaction can also be described "as the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well" (Stamm, 2010, p.5). Professionals who gain satisfaction from their work may be able to alleviate some of the stressful events experienced, which in turn may add some sense of meaning to their work. When teachers in special education are able to see students show achievement or demonstrate progress toward academic or behavioral goals, the special education teacher may feel a sense of success and pleasure from their work.

Minimal research exists on compassion satisfaction among professionals. Health care professionals find satisfaction and rewards from their work, leading to compassion satisfaction (Alkema, Linton, & Davies, 2008; Murry et al., 2009). Adding to that knowledge, Collins (2008) reported that social workers could experience compassion satisfaction despite a stressful and demanding work environment. Similar results were also found among mental health care professionals (Ray, Wong, White, & Heaslip, 2013). Compassion satisfaction impacts a professional's quality of life, found by researchers in other professions (Sprang et al., 2007).

Lawson and Myers (2011) described compassion satisfaction balancing out feelings of increased amounts of stress—as in when individuals can reinforce and detect satisfaction in their job. When special education teachers struggle to find satisfaction with their abilities to help others, they may find themselves unable to remain effective and vigorous in their work (Lawson & Myers, 2011). As a result of these many studies, compassion satisfaction has emerged as an important construct in predicting a professional's beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. This can also mitigate the on-going influences of daily career stressors.

Preventive Strategies

Not all special education teachers are negatively affected by their day-to-day stressors. While working with students who have been diagnosed with a disability, the special education teacher is presented with opportunities as well as the challenges. Gough (2007) claimed how "understanding the processes of loss, grieving, transformation and

growth are central to the work of all those involved in any part of the rehabilitation plan of services for individuals with disabilities" (p.16). The special education teacher should invest and understand their students' struggles and feelings in order to adequately help them. Along with understanding the student with special needs, special education teachers should support their needs in an appropriate fashion and remain nonjudgmental.

Self-efficacy

For individuals, such as special education teachers who work under increasing amounts of stress, an important trait to possess is high self-efficacy, defined as an individual's conviction that their behaviors or actions will produce expected results (Ragin, 2015). When an individual strongly believes they are able to complete a task, the probability of performing the task increases. Cicognani, Pietrantoni, Palestini, and Prati (2009) noted self-efficacy was an important factor in lowering distress levels. Special education teachers who possess a higher sense of self-efficacy have increased self-confidence about their capabilities when managing stressful situations, and appear to be better at managing students who exhibit challenging behaviors (Cudre-Mauroux, 2011).

Problem-solving and Active Coping

Problem-solving or active coping have been found to be effective strategies for individuals who experience stressful employment (Cicognani et al., 2009). Problem-solving or active coping involves generating solutions and taking on a problem-focused approach to find solutions; therefore the individual is engaged rather than disengaged from the problem, which is linked to lower stress levels (Cicognani et al., 2009).

Additionally, professionals can learn to self-monitor these behaviors and look for any changes to help them recognize early warning signs of compassion fatigue. Particular attention should be paid to changes in sleep patterns, increased emotional reactivity, loss of interest in preferred activities, and hypervigilance (Figley, 1995).

Professionals who work with individuals who exhibit challenging behaviors or professionals who are employed at stressful work environments need to be able to separate themselves from their work or disengage from the stressors of their job. Disengagement is the professional's ability to detach themselves from the on-going distress and challenges of their clients (Figley, 2002). Austin, Goble, Leier, and Bryne (2009) noted the importance of incorporating positive self-care practices to help maintain a healthy personal-professional balance. A professional must be able to *leave work at work* in order to enjoy their lives outside of their profession.

Health-enhancing Behaviors

There are individual health-enhancing behaviors that can help decrease stress and improve an individual's overall wellbeing. As a result of both qualitative and survey research, Brannon, Fiest, and Updegraff (2014) noted these behaviors to include; regular physical activity and fitness, balancing personal and professional lives, spiritual practice and support, meditation, positive social support, concrete professional boundaries and limits, and support from supervisors. Lawson and Myers (2011) found that when an individual has higher holistic wellness, she can avoid increased stress levels and maintain higher compassion satisfaction. Likewise, compassion satisfaction can be improved by

the promotion of self-care among individuals working with special populations (Alkema et al., 2008).

Humor

Having a sense of humor can be viewed as a positive personality predisposition. Figley (2002) documented that humor can be health enhancing and laughter can produce similar physical effects to exercise. Having a sense of humor can assist professionals to laugh at certain potentially stressful situations or at oneself. Coping humor can help professionals discern a funny side of the situation, which seems to filter out the negative information (Figley, 2002).

Professional Development

Organizations can provide staff development and trainings to increase the special education teachers' knowledge and skill set. As a result of going through staff development and training, special education staff who work with special education students reported decreased fear and anxiety, according to Mills and Rose (2011). After professional development, special education teachers noted increased competence in their abilities and for implementing needed interventions (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011). In discussing the benefits of professional development, Sprang et al. (2007) made the claim that improved knowledge and training can enhance compassion satisfaction, reduce incidents of compassion fatigue, and create a sense of peer support from colleagues.

Social Support

With increasing responsibilities, special education teachers do feel greater amounts of stress and strain. Wheeler and LaRocco (2009) reported that teachers working in the special education field rank among the “most difficult” professions in public education. Wheeler and LaRocco (2009) conducted a mix-methods study investigating social support as a buffer to work- related stress. The findings indicated that professional colleagues serve as a strong source of support during times of increased stress at work to ameliorate symptoms of stress. Having a strong social support network can act as a buffer and help to alleviate stress.

While professionals have a variety of healthy, positive coping strategies to deal with stress, it appears that some professionals choose to stifle their feelings of exhaustion and frustration, isolate themselves from others, engage in substance abuse, or exhibit emotional outbursts (Smith, 2009). These unhealthy coping strategies can produce negative outcomes for the professional, student, and the professional's organization.

Treatment for Stress

There are multiple factors involved in the treatment of work-related stress. Figley (2002) noted assessing and enhancing social support could help to reduce feelings of fatigue brought on by stress. Social support from friends and relatives produces a positive influence on a person’s health and well-being; for example, Ragin (2015) claimed that individuals who have strong support systems and receive support from others are overall able to achieve more positive outcomes in their lives and improve their coping processes. However, some relationships can put an additional strain on the already stress-invoked

individual, and should be addressed when necessary to decrease their stressful and toxic nature. Wheeler and LaRocco (2009) reported social and emotional support may help to buffer individuals from work-related stress and encourage increased well-being.

Professionals who work under stressful conditions, such as special education teachers, need to find some rewards from their career. This can be accomplished by focusing on ways they have helped or promoted growth in their students and by developing an emotional commitment to student success (McIntyre, 2010). Special education teachers can focus on the goals they have helped their students achieve and the progress made by their students not only academically but also socially. Professionals who are able to recognize increased rewards over the job hazards are not as likely to experience lowered productivity or burnout (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010).

Taking regularly scheduled vacations from work can help to reduce stress (Negash & Sahin, 2011). A professional must be able to separate their personal life from their work. Taking a vacation can assist with relaxation and help to decrease exhaustion and stress-related feelings from stressful employment.

Institutions and places of stressful employment can also help to alleviate work-related stress. Employees who deal with crises on a consistent basis may lose the focus of their original goals. O'Brien (2006) suggested regular team meetings to discuss goals and the institution's mission statement. Holding staff meetings on a regular basis can help staff to engage in self-evaluation practices and debrief stressful situations. Regularly scheduled staff meetings can encourage staff to speak openly about stress-invoking situations and gain social support from their colleagues.

Cognitive behavioral therapies and interventions seek to reduce or help patients manage their stress. De Vente, Kamphuis, Emmelkamp, and Blonk (2008) noted that coping skills, social skills training, and cognitive restructuring techniques assist patients to change their primary appraisals of stressful events or threats by improving their coping strategies. Relaxing and meditation help to reduce arousal and can improve the patient's overall wellbeing (De Vente et al. 2008).

Psychosocial treatments such as cognitive behavioral treatment (CBT) have been proven effective to help with stress, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and mood disorders. CBT focuses on the dysfunctional thought processes of patients and aims to restructure their thought patterns to create more functional and realistic thought patterns (Blonk, Brenninkmeijer, Lagerveld, & Houtman, 2006). CBT is known to help patients confront their fears, which can be difficult. Adler-Nevo and Manassis (2005) claim that CBT addresses thought patterns that may develop pathological emotions, which could then lead to a psychiatric disorder.

Summary and Conclusions

Professionals can experience a deleterious impact when working in stressful environments, which can lead to burnout or attrition (De Vente et al., 2008; Figley, 2002; Blonk et al., 2006). Dealing with stress and unhealthy coping strategies can have costs not only to the professional, but also for the individuals receiving services from the professional, as the professional may become less diligent in their work (Smith, 2009).

Teacher turnover continues to be an increasing concern in the special education field and impacts society. Adera and Bullock (2010) conducted a study using electronic

monitoring and focus groups to examine discontent and dissatisfaction resulting from stress among 400 special education teachers. The findings revealed job-stressors within the classroom (varying skills and ability levels among students, challenging student behaviors, and inconsistencies in school expectations) and outside of the classroom (ambiguous roles and responsibilities, poor parent involvement, and poor collaboration)—all prime determinants of teacher dissatisfaction. These factors do influence the retention rate of special education teachers (Adera & Bullock, 2010). Additional research has determined teacher turnover rates are occurring in higher proportions among special education teachers due to the increased stressors (Berry et al., 2011; Billingsley et al., 2009).

The ability to demonstrate dedication and compassion when working with sensitive populations, such as students who receive special education services, is a key component of the job. Special education teachers often have direct contact and exposure to students who present with challenging behaviors, have increased job responsibilities, work long hours, have a lack of available resources, and face increased pressures for student achievement (Mills & Rose, 2011; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011; Koller & Bertel, 2006). Therefore, when a special education teacher does experience increased amounts of stress, their quality of care and services to the students may diminish or deteriorate (Feng & Sass, 2009).

Experiencing stress can impact an individual's overall health and well-being. Lazarus (2006) explored work stress and health outcomes among special education

teachers. This investigative study found that increased workloads and interpersonal conflicts were prominent sources of stress for the participants and increased their consideration of leaving the profession. These stressors may produce negative outcomes for a professional's health status (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010; Zysberg et al., 2016). Lazarus (2006) further highlighted the importance of organizations to develop policies aimed at reducing interpersonal conflicts and teacher workload in order to retain special education teachers.

Stress and unhealthy coping strategies not only impact a professional on an individual level, but also affects the individual's organization, surrounding environment, and public as well. Smith (2009) investigated workplace factors such as chronic absenteeism, high turnover rates, friction between employees, and tension between administration and staff as a result of increased amounts of stress. Austin et al. (2009) reported increased stress to the social environment in which the professional lives, which can also manifest within the healthcare system. Individuals suffering from increased amounts of stress may seek professional assistance from physicians, mental health or counseling professionals, and other professionals within the health care system. When a professional is experiencing increased amounts of stress for extended periods of time, they need to seek assistance.

It was important to understand special education teachers' processes beyond helping to fill the literature gap to examine meaning making processes that contribute to them staying on the job so those in the field can take appropriate steps to increase

retention. It was also beneficial to investigate career-sustaining behaviors to help identify effective strategies to help manage feelings of stress and increase feelings of job satisfaction. There appears to be a critical gap in the literature, which is why the focus of my research was on what stimulated special education teachers to remain rooted in their careers. In the next chapter, the research methodology is described.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this study, I investigated the meaning making processes of veteran special education teachers related to career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction. Scholars who explored the lived experiences of these professions suggest that these experiences are underinvestigated (Sprang et al., 2007) and that little research has been dedicated to the actual experience of special education teachers (Billingsley et al., 2009; Scruggs et al., 2007). Future qualitative studies investigating the work lives of special education teachers may reveal unique experiences that help increase feelings of job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). There is an abundance of literature on the shortage of teachers in the field of special education; however, little exists on how to improve retention rates (Berry et al., 2011). Stress can impact an individual's overall wellness leading to burnout and attrition in the field if not addressed and treated effectively.

Special education teachers play a role in the field of special education. While working with children who have special needs can be a satisfying and rewarding career, there can also be some challenges. Teaching can be challenging; there are demands placed on teachers that cause emotional and physical exhaustion, which cause teachers to leave the profession. Teachers who work in the special education field have been ranked among the highest risk for attrition in the profession (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). Many special education teachers will leave the field or transfer to other educational positions that do not involve working with students with special needs.

In this chapter, I discuss the research design and rationale for the study, my role as the researcher, the methodology I used, and issues of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main points.

Research Design and Rationale

1. RQ1- Qualitative: What is the meaning of job satisfaction for veteran special education teachers in the Erie County School District?"

Subquestions

- How did the veteran special educators spend their day-to-day work life to stimulate staying?
- How did veteran special educators explain the influences that contribute to them staying in their career?

To accomplish the goals of my study, a phenomenological design was best. Polkinghorne (2005) noted, "A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness" (p. 138). I explored individual lived experiences through semistructured interviews with a small purposive sample. The goal for conducting these interviews was to determine the meaning of job satisfaction that promote longevity and retention in the field as articulated directly by veteran special education teachers. The semistructured interviews can reveal participants' explanations and encourage them to describe their personal experiences. IPA is a phenomenological approach that can be used as a tool to better understand the phenomenon of the participant's lived experiences that several individuals share (Van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology places an emphasis on the intentional experience and

perception of the individual (Vagle, 2014). The participants in this study were able to reflect on personal issues and reconstruct actual events relating to their unique stressors. Phenomenology places an emphasis on deep, lived meanings of individuals' experiences (Van Manen, 2014). IPA was appropriate for this study because I knew the participants would be engaged with experiences in their lives and would reflect on the significance of what occurred (Smith et al., 2009).

By using IPA, I was able to understand the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. The purpose of this qualitative study was to give voice to the unique experiences that inform job satisfaction among special education teachers. I did a qualitative study to understand the phenomenon of experiences and personal issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and complex circumstances that have lacked exploration (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Therefore, qualitative methods were chosen for this particular study because this methodology matched the research purpose for exploring in-depth the phenomenon of meaning making.

Role of the Researcher

I prepared semistructured questions (see Appendix C) for the participants, so the same questions were presented to each participant. The interview began with building a connection with participants to invite an open exchange. I started each interview with a broad question relating to typical job requirements and daily duties to informally get the conversation going. After a brief amount of time getting to know the participant and setting the tone, I introduced questions related to career sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction to encourage the participants to elaborate.

Researcher empathy can affect the interview in a positive fashion by showing an interest in the interview content and the emotion being expressed (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). When interacting with the participants, I strove to be viewed as a peer instead of a doctoral student to develop some common ground between us. I have worked for the past 9 years with children who receive special education services, providing me with direct experience within the school system. I was open to sharing some of my experiences in the same field, like attempting to empathize with the participants' feelings of stress and for their daily job expectations overall. This approach can help to establish trust, as trust can be built from sharing background information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

I had no known previous personal or professional relationships with any of the participants prior to the study. I remained open-minded throughout the course of the research study and refrained from sharing opinions to avoid any biases. There were no evident ethical concerns involved in the study.

Methodology

Participants

An essential criterion for the study is to select research participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Vagel, 2014). Therefore, participants were selected purposely in order to grant access to a particular perspective (Smith et al., 2009). I employed purposive sampling to recruit nine veteran special education teachers who had experienced both stressful circumstances and compassion satisfaction, and who are currently providing special education services to students. I contacted the special education director in Erie County, Pennsylvania, who was willing to assist with

participant recruitment. At my request, the director reached potential participants for the study with a letter of invitation from me, providing details about the study (see Appendix A). The special education director did not influence or coerce potential participants for the study. Prescreening questions were presented by me to a larger group of special education teachers and a purposive sample was used to select participants based on the feedback of the larger group. The prescreening questions or inclusion criteria for participation in the study included having participants agree they (a) were a tenured, certified special education teacher, (b) were currently working in the special education field with at least 10 years teaching experience in the field, (c) believe they have experienced stressful work situations, and (d) self-identify the use of positive strategies during stressful conditions (see Appendix B).

To gain access to the potential participants for the study, I presented the special education director of the school district with the task of handing out research invitations to teachers who would likely align to teachers who would likely meet the criteria. These individuals could then contact me if they were willing to participate in the study. The potential participants could contact me directly or I could contact the participant through snowball recruiting. Snowball recruiting can be defined as informants referring the researcher to other informants, which can enrich the sampling cluster and provide access to new participants (Noy, 2008). I screened all potential participants using a participant prescreening (see Appendix B) to determine if they met the criteria for the study.

Upon receiving a call from a potential participant, I conducted the following tasks. I used the participant prescreener (see Appendix B) to screen the potential

participants in the study and maintain the recruitment goals of the study. If the caller did not meet the prescreening criteria, I thanked his or her for his or her time and ended the call. If the caller did meet the prescreening criteria, I scheduled an interview date and time. The participant could choose to have the interview conducted at his or her school or in the local community. A telephone is not a preferred way to conduct in-depth interviews as it is difficult to engage in small talk, participants may want to get to the point quickly, and the researcher is not able to see the participant's nonverbal communication (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

A sample size of six to 12 participants is typically recommended for saturation in a phenomenological study (Guest et al., 2006); therefore, I chose nine teachers for the study. All participants were informed of the nature of the study and asked to provide informed consent—thereby making a commitment to the interview. Data collection aimed at eliciting detailed stories, feelings, and thoughts from participants have been best achieved through semistructured, one-to-one interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

Instrumentation

I was able to examine the lived experience of the special education teachers, particularly in relation to unique career stressors, compassion satisfaction, and buffers or preventive measures from stress through the use of self-developed, open-ended questions (see Appendix C) based on the literature and concerns in the field of special education. These questions were presented to the participants during face-to-face, semistructured interviews. Using a semistructured interview format, I was able to encourage participants to talk at length, providing a detailed account of their experiences. Smith et al. (2009)

recommended using semistructured interviews for a detailed account from participants. All of the interviews were audiotaped for accuracy and later transcribed by me.

The semistructured interviews were conducted face-to-face. Van Manen (2014) indicated that a phenomenological methodology involves face-to-face interviewing to better comprehend the narrative shared by the participant. A flexible interview protocol was used to cover aspects of the participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In the protocol, I addressed the participants' length of time teaching, daily job duties, paperwork requirements, professional development opportunities, case load size, peer support, administrative support, symptoms related to stress, preventive measures and buffers, and overall job satisfaction (see Appendix C).

The interview protocol acted as a guide to prepare for the possible content of the interview. The interview process needs to be disciplined so the researcher does not gather unmanageable or skimpy material (Van Manen, 2014). Having a prepared interview protocol fit with the loose agenda I set, and I was able to anticipate possible sensitive topics and help frame the questions in suitable open forms. Smith et al. (2009) noted that the aim of the schedule is to facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participants which will enable the participant to talk at length and provide detailed accounts.

I used follow-up questions during the interview. The interview was partially focused on the participants' concerns and, therefore, I needed to follow up on matters as they arose (Smith et al., 2009). I also used questions such as "what was that like for you?" or "tell me more about that" during responses to questions to invite participants to provide further clarification and depth or when it seemed that information was missing. I

used probes to have the participants provide examples to clarify his or her points. The frequency of prompts depended upon how forthcoming the participants were.

All of the interviews were audio taped for accuracy and later transcribed by me. Participants knew in advance that conversations would be recorded and that I would take notes throughout the course of the interview. The participants were also informed that all information linking their names with comments would be kept confidential.

Procedures

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate meaning making, examining the in-depth experience among special education teachers. Data were collected using self-developed, open-ended questions based on the literature. These questions were presented to the participants during face-to-face, semistructured interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes up to 90 minutes. I audio recorded all interviews after gaining permission from each participant.

Once each potential participant had been determined eligible to participate in the study using the participant prescreener (see Appendix B) to maintain the recruitment goals of the study, a face-to-face interview was scheduled at a location of the participant's choosing. I collected all data during the face-to-face interviews. The interviews occurred during October 2014 and April 2015. Each participant was assigned a code for identification prior to the start of each interview to maintain confidentiality.

A flexible protocol was used to cover important aspects of the participants' experiences (see Appendix C). Once all open-ended questions had been addressed on the interview protocol, I then asked all participants if there was any other information they

would like to share about their experience. Following completion of each interview, I thanked each participant for his or her time and for sharing their personal experiences with me.

Member checking is a research process that also allows the participants to provide additional information (Creswell, 2013). Once the data analysis process was completed, I invited the participants to member check to review their interview transcripts and my interpretations of the data. I received feedback from three of the participants: two via e-mail and one via phone. Two of the participants were pleased with their transcript and requested no changes be made. I then made adjustments to the transcripts after receiving feedback from the participants. Thus, three of the participants responded, and two agreed with their transcripts and interpretations. One participant had discussed a legal matter and requested that this be omitted from the study. After receiving the request from the participant, I made adjustments to the transcript.

Data Analysis

The semistructured interview questions were created to collect data for the study based on the theoretical framework and recent research outlined in Chapter 2. The subquestions included special education teacher retention factors outlined in previous research (Berry et al., 2011; Billings et al., 2009: Prather-Jones, 2011).

I transcribed the interviews paying close attention to what each participant said, developing a working idea of important themes and concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I followed the IPA structure, guiding myself in a forward moving spiral or hermeneutic circle that operates at various levels to understand the whole. I needed to look at the parts,

and to understand the parts I must look at the whole (Smith et al., 2009). To explore the unique lived experiences of veteran special education teachers, I followed the six-step data analysis process for IPA described by Smith et al. (2009) to interpret each set of interview data. The steps I followed were reading and rereading, initial note taking, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next transcript, and looking for patterns across transcripts. There were no discrepant cases in the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness can be verified in qualitative research. Creswell (2013) designed eight standard procedures for verification: prolonged engagement, triangulation, negative case analysis, member checks, peer checks, thick rich descriptions, clarifying researcher bias, and external audits. Reflexivity was added to the list of strategies by Barusch et al. (2011). Researchers are advised to use at least two verification procedures (Barusch et al., 2011; Creswell, 2013); in the present study, I implemented four of the procedures, described below.

The first procedure I used for trustworthiness was the use of member checks with each participant. During the interviews, I used follow-up questions and probes to gain clarification and accurate representations of the participants' experiences, allowing the participants to correct errors or misinterpretations. Member checks also allowed the participants to provide additional information. During the face-to-face interviews, participants were able to verify information. The participants were also e-mailed a copy of their interview transcript to review for errors and clarification.

Peer checks were incorporated into the study. I was in frequent contact with my dissertation chair to discuss and evaluate the research process and gain objective feedback. Through peer checks I was able to become aware of my posture toward the data, and in the process, uncover my biases. Measures to foster reflexivity and avoid researcher bias were taken through the use of a journal. Reflexivity can be defined as explicit self-exploration and presentation of the researcher's underlying assumptions ascribed to various elements of the research (Barusch et al., 2011). I was able to make regular entries in the journal during the research process, which aided in keeping my reflections "fresh." The entries included specific reasoning for methodological decisions as well as reflection on my personal interests and values related to the study.

Rich descriptions were also implemented in the study to demonstrate sufficient details from the participants. Richness comes from hearing descriptions of the initial concern while also discovering several new important themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This can be evoked by encouraging the participant to elaborate on their experience while the researcher quietly and intently listens (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The detailed descriptions can help readers compare and relate to similarities and differences among the special education teachers' experiences, and in addition, provide a realistic discussion of the current findings. Follow-up questions were used to help participants elaborate on their experiences: "could you please tell me more," "how did that make you feel," and "could you be more specific."

Ethical Procedures

Ethical considerations in the study were addressed through multiple avenues. A crucial starting point for the study was the avoidance of harm since the participants were discussing sensitive issues (Smith et al., 2009). Each of the participants in the study was informed of the study's purpose, what to expect during the interviews, and how the present data will be used. Each participant was given information on the meaning of informed consent, and each signed this prior to the interview, indicating acknowledgement and acceptance. Privacy was crucial for all participants; therefore, pseudonyms were assigned for each participant throughout the analysis, summary, and presentation phase of the study. Confidentiality and privacy were ensured during descriptions of the participants' experiences with job related stress, career-sustaining behaviors, and jobs satisfaction accurately.

Confidential information derived from the study was protected using an encrypted file folder and codes to shield the identity of the participants. All of the transcripts and audiotapes were kept in a locked box, and after seven years, the tapes will be destroyed. An additional encrypted copy of the transcripts was kept on a storage drive for backup. I was the only researcher with access to the data.

I do not believe any harm was done to any of the participants involved in this study. As a result of the study, some participants may have been able to better identify their effective coping strategies and share these with others who may be experiencing stressful work situations. However, reflecting on personal experiences may prove to be emotional or difficult for some participants and I was well prepared to effectively deal

with this by stopping the interview, allowing for silence, and/or providing empathy and consolation. This did not occur with any of the participants in the study. In the event a participant required additional support after discussing any upsetting experiences, I would have provided access to this support (Smith et al., 2009). This also did not occur during the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed how IPA was used as the phenomenological approach to better understand the participant's lived experiences. Semistructured, one-to-one interviews were conducted with nine participants and audio-taped to gather data. To interpret the data, I followed the six-step data analysis process for IPA. Trustworthiness was verified through the use of member checks, peer checks, reflexivity, and rich descriptions. Confidentiality and privacy were ensured during the study. Chapter 4 will discuss the participant demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Understanding special education teachers' processes beyond helping to fill the literature gap to examine meaning making processes that contribute to them staying on the job so those in the field can take appropriate steps to increase retention is crucial. It was also beneficial to investigate career sustaining behaviors to help identify effective strategies to help manage feelings of stress and increase feelings of job satisfaction. More specifically, I wished to know how veteran special education teachers spent their day-to-day work life to stimulate staying and how did veteran special education teachers explained the influences that contributed to them staying.

In Chapter 4, I will present my data collection from nine special education teachers. An overview of the data collection and data analysis procedures are discussed. The results are conveyed and include participant excerpts.

Demographics

Demographic information is presented in both graphic and narrative format. Data were collected from a total of nine participants for the study. Table 1 lists the demographic information for each of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic Data

	Gender	Age	Years of Experience	Assignment
Participant 1	F	56	29	Learning Support
Participant 2	F	59	32	Autism Support
Participate 3	F	52	19	Autism Support
Participate 4	F	53	29	Learning Support
Participant 5	M	36	10	Learning/ Emotional Support
Participant 6	F	38	13	Learning Support
Participate 7	F	35	11	Learning Support
Participate 8	F	58	28	Emotional Support
Participant 9	F	36	13	Resource

The ages of the nine participants ranged from 35-59. Their length of experience in the special education field ranged from 10-32 years. Of the nine, one was male, and the remaining eight were female; all were Caucasian. The participants were occupying various teaching assignments throughout the special education field, including autism support, learning support, emotional support, and resource teaching. These assignments ranged from elementary, middle, and high school. They were all certified special education teacher, and employed by the state of Pennsylvania within rural and urban school districts.

Data Collection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. I had proposed to have 12 participants, and nine participants were interested in participating in the study. A sample size of six to 12 participants is typically recommended for saturation in a phenomenological study (Guest et al., 2006). The special education director handed out invitation letters to special education teachers in the school district. The special education teachers contacted me directly. When I was directly contacted by potential participants, the prescreener was used to screen the potential participants to maintain the recruitment goals of the study. The criteria for participation in the study included tenured, certified special education teachers currently working in the special education field with at least 10 years teaching experience in the field who believed that he or she has experienced stressful work situations, and who self-identified the use of positive strategies during stressful conditions. There were four participants who did not meet the prescreening criteria. They were all thanked for their time and interest in the study. Snowball recruiting was also used. Snowball recruiting can be defined as informants referring the researcher to other informants, which can enrich the sampling cluster and provide access to new participants (Noy, 2008). I had asked people who contacted me if they would be willing to have other potential participants who may meet the prescreening criteria to also contact me for the study. Once a potential participant had met the prescreening criteria, I scheduled an interview date and time at a location the participant chose. I met with eight participants in their classrooms during after school hours and one participant at Panera Bread.

Each interview began with a review of the consent form and a signature from the participant. All participants agreed to be audiotaped during the interview. The interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. All participants appeared to comprehend the interview process and understood that they were able to stop the interview at any time they felt it necessary.

After the consent forms were signed I interviewed each of the participants at a location they had chosen where they felt most comfortable. Initially, when participants contacted me, each was asked the prescreening questions to determine if they met criteria for the study. Once all of the criteria had been met, each participant was asked if he or she would be willing to participate in an audio-taped interview. At the start of each interview, I reviewed the consent form with each participant and was granted their permission to audio-tape the interview. I explained the interview process and informed the participants that they may take a break or stop the interview at any time.

Each participant was asked the nine semistructured questions from the interview protocol. I also used nonverbal prompting, such as smiling and head nodding. Verbal prompting, such as "could you tell me more" or "what do you mean" were used during the interviews to gather additional information. Once each interview had been completed, I expressed my gratitude for their time and insight.

Data Analysis

This section provides a description of the steps for the IPA method. IPA engages the researcher in a forward moving spiral referred to as the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher follows the pathway of the hermeneutic circle at various levels

to understand the whole I need to look at the parts and to understand the parts I must look at the whole. The researcher reads, reflects, and takes notes on each of the interviews (parts) to determine their fit with the sum of all of the interviews (the whole). The researcher then reads, reflects, and takes notes on the whole to determine its fit with each part. While reading, reflecting, and note taking, the researcher is immersed in the data and is given the opportunity to interpret and reinterpret the data (Vagel, 2014). I was able to share their voice on the unique experiences that inform job satisfaction among veteran special education teachers. I used IPA to understand and articulate the depth and richness of the participants' experiences. The IPA process of analysis is iterative to allow back and forth thought and creative assessment (Smith et al., 2009).

To explore the unique lived experiences of veteran special education teachers, I followed the six-step data analysis process for IPA as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) to interpret each set of interview data.

1. Reading and rereading: The initial step when conducting IPA research revolves around close reading and rereading verbatim transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). I immersed myself in the data to develop a sense of the content and potential meanings. I was able to relive the whole interview experience, which also helped to develop an encompassing understanding of the data as a whole.
2. Initial note taking: During this step, I made notes of my thoughts, reflections, and observations that came to light while reading the transcripts or listening to the audio recordings. This process took place

from May to July 2015 and, according to Smith et al. (2009), "is the most detailed and time consuming" (p. 83). Smith et al. recommended three categories for exploratory commenting while note taking: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual.

- Descriptive comments highlight what each participant actually said and highlight the face value.
- Linguistic comments focus on ways in which the content and the meaning were presented: tone, sarcasm, humor, emotion, pauses, metaphors, repetitions, and so on.
- Conceptual comments highlight elements in the participant's experience. These comments were assessed in more depth to open up a range of provisional meanings. The reflection, trial-and-error, and refinement of ideas are developed something is missing here.

3. Developing emergent themes: Analyzing exploratory comments to organize ideas and develop emergent themes was conducted. This involved the participant's narrative and at the same time encompassed my notes and interpretation from the two previous steps. The focus was on capturing what was crucial from the text. This step represented a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle;, as I focused on the parts rather than the whole and later moved toward the forward spiral bringing the parts back to the whole for contextual analysis. The notes were transformed into higher level expressions or phrases reflecting connections within and across different interviews, while retaining their details as well.

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes: I chronologically mapped the emergent themes from Step 3. All themes were typed in chronological order into a list. Some of the themes acted as magnets, allowing other themes to be pulled toward them. These themes were clustered and others were discarded as I refined my interpretation of the most prominent elements of the participant's experience. Each cluster of themes was given a name and designated as a superordinate theme that demonstrated a relationship between them. The subordinate themes that emerged from step three are listed under each superordinate theme. Smith et al. (2009) recommended transcript excerpts that assisted in the development of themes be included to help others comprehend and evaluate my interpretations of the participants' experiences. This can be found throughout the results section. During Stage 4 of the analysis, I kept an open mind, and I continued to document comments and emerging ideas.

5. Moving to the next transcript: With each new transcript being analyzed, Steps 1 through 4 were conducted systematically to allow for new themes to emerge. "Here it is important to treat the next case on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 100). I strove to be open-minded and not influenced by what I had already discovered from previous interview data.

6. Looking for patterns across transcripts: In the final step, I mapped the superordinate themes by looking for patterns across all interviews. I moved to a more theoretical level as I recognized themes. Each theme was evaluated for its fit with the whole data set, and the whole data set was evaluated for ways it may have highlighted or reshaped themes. The superordinate themes encompassed higher order concepts shared by most, if not all participants. Superordinate themes were not developed based solely on their frequency, but in the richness of the original data. I looked for similar experiences and meanings across the data, searched for unique experiences, and interpreted those as integral to the phenomenon. The participant excerpts that support superordinate themes and allow others to examine my interpretations are included in the results section of this chapter.

Once the six steps of the data analysis process were completed, I invited the participants to review their interview transcripts and my interpretations of the data as part of the member checking process as recommended by Barusch et al. (2011) and Creswell (2013). I received feedback from three of the participants: two via e-mail and one via phone. Two of the participants were pleased with their transcript and requested no changes be made. One participant had discussed being involved in a legal matter and requested that be omitted from the study. I then made adjustments to the transcripts after receiving feedback from the participants.

Following the development of each superordinate theme, I reread each hard copy transcript and designated a color code for each of the superordinate themes. The superordinate themes are illustrated with examples described by each participant. As a result, the transcript excerpts that assisted in the development of themes are included in the results section of this chapter to help others comprehend and evaluate my interpretations of the participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Interpretive phenomenology is concerned with the discovery of a significance of a phenomenon through trustworthy interpretation to produce credible results (Smith et al., 2009). The trustworthy interpretation is the basis for perceiving and developing the phenomenon in new, more holistic ways. Trustworthiness can be verified in qualitative research. Creswell (2013) designed eight standard procedures for verification. These procedures can be identified as prolonged engagement, triangulation, negative case analysis, member checks, peer checks, thick rich descriptions, clarifying researcher bias, and external audits. Reflexivity was added by Barusch et al. (2011) to the list of strategies. Using at least two verification procedures are suggested in a research study (Barusch et al., 2011; Creswell, 2013). In the present study, I implemented four of the procedures described below.

The first procedure I used for trustworthiness was the use of member checks with each participant. During the interviews, I used follow-up questions and probes to gain clarification and accurate representations of the participants' experiences, allowing the participants to correct errors or misinterpretations. Member checks also allowed the

participants to provide additional information. During the face-to-face interviews, participants were able to verify information. The participants were also e-mailed a copy of their interview transcript to review for errors and clarification.

Peer checks were incorporated into the study. I was in contact with the university chair to discuss and evaluate the research process and gain objective feedback. Through peer checks, I was be able to become aware of my posture toward the data and uncover taken for granted biases. Measures to foster reflexivity and avoid researcher bias were taken through the use of a journal. Reflexivity can be defined as explicit self-exploration and presentation of the researcher's underlying assumptions ascribed to various elements of the research (Barusch et al., 2011). I was able to make regular entries into the journal during the research process. The entries included reasoning for methodological decisions, and I engaged in reflection on my personal interests and values.

Rich descriptions were also implemented in the study to demonstrate sufficient details from the participants. Richness comes from hearing descriptions of the initial concern while also discovering several new important themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This was evoked by encouraging the participant to elaborate on his or her experience while the researcher quietly and intently listens (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The detailed descriptions can help readers compare and relate to similarities and differences among the special education teachers' experiences and in addition provide a realistic discussion of the current findings.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of veteran special educators, in particular, what they identify as predominantly rewarding aspects of their career that have kept them rooted in the field. More specifically, how did veteran special education teachers spend their day-to-day work life to stimulate staying? And, how did veteran special education teachers explain the influences that contributed to them staying? Two superordinate themes and six subordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the participant transcripts. The subordinate themes are presented in Table 2 and the superordinate themes are presented in Table 3 above. In the following section I explain the two superordinate themes supported by participant excerpts from their transcripts.

Table 2 represents the frequency with which a subordinate theme was supported by each participant. To develop my emerging themes into subordinate themes I focused on capturing crucial pieces from the participant's narrative, paying more attention to the parts rather than the whole.

Table 2

Frequency with which a subordinate theme was supported

Numerous daily duties/ roles	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
• Teaching	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Supporting students/ "go-to"	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Attending meetings	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
• Paperwork	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Planning	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X

• Adaptations and modifications	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Managing behaviors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Collaboration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
• Helping families	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X

Stressors	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
• Paperwork	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
• Meetings	X				X	X			X
• Appeasing parents	X	X	X		X	X		X	
• Poor communication	X	X	X	X			X	X	
• Seeing minimal progress			X	X	X				X
• Meeting all student needs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Disruptive student behaviors		X	X	X	X			X	

Strategies for stress	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
• Exercise	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
• Quiet time/ quiet drive		X		X	X		X		X
• leisure activities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Vent to coworkers	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Laugh	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
• Pets		X						X	X

Overcoming challenges	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
• Supportive supervisor	X	X	X					X	
• Honesty	X	X	X		X		X	X	X

• Effective communication	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
• Time management	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Good rapport with coworkers	X	X		X	X		X	X	X
• Make it fun		X	X	X					X
• Stay organized	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
• Stay positive		X	X		X	X	X	X	X
• "Let it go"	X	X		X		X		X	X
• Learn from experience	X	X	X	X	X				

Student success	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
• Improved behaviors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Success in the regular education classroom	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Meeting goals	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Carryover and learning		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
• Students feeling happy and safe		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Improved student confidence and self-esteem	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Graduation	X				X	X	X	X	
• Success after high school	X				X	X		X	

Being a helper	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
• Celebrate growth (even little growth)	X	X	X	X				X	X
• "All students can learn"	X	X	X	X		X		X	X

• Teach skills for success		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Meeting student needs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Making it work for each student	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
• Having fun	X	X	X	X					X
• Be a positive role model	X	X			X		X	X	X
• Community involvement		X	X		X		X		X
• Positive rapport with parents	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
• Compassion	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
• Love the kids		X	X						X
• Find their good	X	X	X	X				X	X
• Students can "count on me"	X	X		X	X		X		X

Table 3 shows how the superordinate themes were generated based upon the participants' key words and phrases that clustered into the subordinate themes in Table 2. I looked for patterns across the transcripts. The superordinate themes encompassed higher order concepts shared by most, if not all participants. The superordinate themes were not developed based solely on their frequency but in the richness of the original data.

Table 3

Master list of superordinate themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Effective practices	Numerous daily duties/ roles Teaching Supporting students/ "go-to" Attending meetings Paperwork Planning Adaptations and modifications Managing behaviors

	Collaboration Helping families Strategies for stress Exercise Quiet time/ quiet drive Leisure activities Vent to coworkers Laugh Pets Overcoming challenges Supportive supervisor Honesty Effective communication Time management Good rapport with coworkers Make it fun Stay organized Stay positive "Let it go" Learn from experience
Making a difference	Student success Improved behaviors Success in the regular education Meeting goals Carryover and learning Students feeling happy and safe Improved student confidence and self-esteem Graduation Success after high school Being a helper Celebrate growth (even little growth) "All students can learn" Having fun Positive rapport with parents Compassion Love the kids Students can "count on me"

Effective Practices

Special education teachers are required to fulfill many tasks and duties throughout their workday. Some of their required tasks may be challenging and even stressful at times. The special education teachers developed effective strategies to overcome these challenges in order to be successful in their careers. The first superordinate theme captures the effective practices of special education teachers: how they have managed their stress and overcame challenges in their day-to-day work life.

Numerous Daily Duties/ Roles

Special education teachers are required to complete multiple duties throughout their work day. Some of these duties include working with challenging students, paperwork, and working with parents. Special education teachers can serve multiple roles for their students during their typical day-to-day work life. Participant 9 shared:

> I feel like my role with these students is of course their teacher because they need to learn the academics, but a lot of times, the students that come in here I also feel like a mom to them and a therapist to them and just kind of everything because a lot of them come from low income homes, not all of them.

Special education teachers show compassion and support for their students. Some students seem to view their special education teachers as their "go-to" or safe person, which participant 5 described in this way:

> What I find, the thing that I find both rewarding and amusing is the students who, and especially students who fight you the hardest and say the most rotten things to

> you and treat you the poorest, seem to continue to come back and I am kind of the go-to person when they are crisis or need help with their work.

Participant 7 agreed, stating "even though the student was so defiant, she needed that extra push and that structure and someone basically saying "I'm here for you, I've got your back." I think a lot of times kids don't have that at home."

Special education teachers are also faced with the responsibility of working with the students' parents who are acting as a helper. Participant 3 expressed:

> I think by impacting families and letting families know that there are things we can do to help our child to be where they can be, to be the most successful and also to, a big part of what we do here is the community acceptance, acceptance by peers, the building of champions and making partnerships and being in the community where people tend to look out for our kids, recognize our kids and a part of the community is amazing.

Participant 9 felt similarly:

> It's just so many things outside of academics that you end up having to do for these students but I think that's what, I mean you feel like you've actually helped the people, not just in learning but their families and them. I think that happens a lot in special ed where you end up helping families and not just students.

Strategies for Stress

There are numerous strategies to manage stress outside of the work environment. Seven of the participants reported exercise and physical activity as an effective strategy for stress. Participant 1 stated "I work out, I think working out is very important and I

think also you need to have things to have things that you enjoy in your life other than your job." For participant 3, it's yoga:, "I have yoga, I do my yoga. I don't really need too much more." Participant 5 reported "If I have a really bad day I may go to the gym after school or workout at my house. That seems to help."

Having quiet time can also be an effective strategy noted by participants. Participant 2 stated:

> Usually I leave, my classroom is very noisy, my ride home is about half an hour. I do not, it's quiet, I don't listen to the radio, I just enjoy the solitude and by the time I get home I am usually able to breathe and relax.

Participant 9 noted:

> Usually when I get home I just try to somehow find half an hour of just quiet… when you are a teacher you have all of these little people who think the world revolves around them, you're faced the whole entire day being asked a thousand questions, you're solving problems, you're picking your battles, you're trying to break up this fight over here all while trying to teach reading and math, so that half an hour or so of just quiet you need.

Participants made note of making time for fun and leisure activities, especially after experiencing a stressful day. Participant 1 stated:

> I think you need to have things that you enjoy in your life other than your job. I don't care if it's art, music, a book, you enjoy making a martini, I don't care what it is, you have to have other pleasures in your life that surround you much more than your work does.

Participant 5 stated “I have a 35 minute drive and I listen to my podcast that I’m engaged in and usually by the time I get home I’m fine.” Participant 7 added:

> At home I do a lot of fun activities with my family and staying active, coaching baseball. I volunteer time. Just as long as you keep your body going and you keep yourself active and your mind activated and making sure that you’re exercising, making sure that you get your endorphins going it makes it easier.

Talking to coworkers and being able to vent was expressed as an effective strategy to release stress by participants. Participant 1 reported:

> I have the mouth of a trucker, it doesn’t mean I don’t like my job, it doesn’t mean I don’t like the kids in front of me, I’m just venting. So just take it for what it’s worth, people need to vent, I’m not jaded, it’s like the ER. People say your career is like a marriage, you’re not getting a divorce because you’re having a bad day.

Participant 6 reported:

> I do have a small core group of friends that work with me and we tend to vent about issues or things that are going on. They aren’t special education teachers so it’s kind of nice to have that. They just listen because they don’t know how to respond.

Participant 8 added:

> I talk a lot to the guidance counselor and school psychologist when they are here, not because I had a bad day but because I want to debrief about the kids so you’re not harboring all of this stuff all of the time.

Humor and having fun was reported to be helpful on stressful days by participants. Participant 3 stated "I like to laugh. I like to have fun and I think if you're not having fun you're not doing your job." Participant 8 noted "A lot of times we do have a lot of laughing in here because you can't take it all too seriously… we do laugh throughout the day about things because it'll eat you alive."

Overcoming Challenges

Not all veteran special education teachers are negatively affected by their day-to-day stressors. The participants in the study discussed ways to overcome challenges they have been presented with. Having a supportive supervisor and administration was discussed by participants as being helpful. Participant 4 stated:

> In our district I feel like they do empower us to, you know it's not a cookie cutter type of thing so we are able to get out there and kind some cool stuff to benefit the kids and I feel like our district does that.

Participant 2 added:

> As far as administration and those kinds of things go, I think if you really believe in what you're doing and you believe in the kids, that you have to be willing sometimes to fight for those things and a good supervisor will support you.

Participants in the study discussed several ways to effectively resolve problems that come up during their school day and try to resolve issues as quickly as possible, as participant 1 explained:

> First of all I try to make sure I get ahead of it as fast as possible so kind of be a control freak about it. I like to have things resolved before the day is over, if it's

> not resolved I want a meeting date for when we will have it resolved. I guess I don't have avoidance behaviors on those things.

In response to this topic, participant 5 added:

> Well you obviously learn time management skills and myself personally I do a lot of work at home, I take about an average of an hour at night to do the things at home that I can get done to be able to come in and be engaged with the students. Then it's kind of like any other job, you just find a way to get it done.

Participants reported being confident in their abilities and being able to follow-through. Participant 7 stated, "You need to be ready to be dedicated. And you need to follow-through with whatever you're doing." She added, "I just need to make sure that I'm taking care of myself and your confidence is high because sometimes it can be a struggle and I wouldn't say self-image, it's making the right decisions." As if they were in conversation with each other, participant 1 added:

> I also think you need to learn to swallow your ego because I think a lot of people are willing to sell their dignity to save their ego and I think it's a fast road for disaster and I think you just get caught up and embarrassed, you don't need to.

Staying positive was an important factor during the school day for some participants. "I try to stay as organized as possible," shared participant 6, "and I try to stay as positive as possible."

Being flexible and adapting to change is one characteristic noted by several participants in the study. Participant 6 stated, "Just be flexible, be as flexible as possible." Participant 7 reported, "As a learning support teacher they need to be ready to go at all

times—be flexible, things are ever changing, the day will not ever be the same, if you plan something, be ready for it to change." Participant 9 stated:

> You have to be flexible, you can't be a teacher of any kind and not be flexible. If you are a person who is very OCD and have to have things exactly your way it just doesn't work with education anymore, there are too many people involved; you have to deal with the parents and you have to deal with administration and you deal with teachers and aides and constant changing schedules and you have to be flexible.

Learning that you cannot do everything and "letting it go" was a common theme among participants. Participant 8 exclaimed, "Sometimes you just have to let it go and you just have to think I am doing what I can do, I can't do it all." Participant 3 expressed, "I just do the best I can for the children." Participant 4 reported "I leaned a long time ago that I am not going to fix every single problem that there is so I cannot own every single problem that there is. Some things just have to be let go". Participant 1 stated "You cannot save everyone, but you always try to. It doesn't mean that you fall short. It's just somewhere down the road it's going to be someone else's turn to save the one you missed, you do your best." Participant 7 noted:

> Am I doing all that I can while I'm here to make sure I'm helping these kids to make a difference in their lives because we are huge, this might be one year for a teacher but this could be a lifetime of advice, of impact on a kid.

Participant 9 reported "You just can't get it all done and it's not all going to get done in one day."

Making a Difference

The nine participants in the study showed dedication and compassion when working with their special education students. They all strived to make a positive impact on their students' lives.

Student Success

The participants in the study made note of student success providing satisfaction in their careers. Participant 1 stated "When a student has the "light bulb go on" and you can see the student when you're instructing when they are connecting.". Participant 4 noted:

> Gosh, I think that any time you see any kind of growth in your students, that's what makes it all worthwhile. Sometimes in learning support the growth is a lot slower than what you get to see in the regular classroom but I think that we celebrate it a whole lot more in the LS classroom.

Participant 7 also noted:

> The biggest satisfaction that I get is from the students. Students make my day. I love working with each one of them as soon as they meet their goal or they start improving, they didn't get something and now it clicks.

Some students who receive special education services have low self-esteem. Participants in the study tried to improve their confidence and self-esteem. Participant 5 stated:

> Typically I deal with students who have very low self-esteem, I deal with students who have very poor academic achievement and when I can get their behavior to a

> point where it's manageable and they can stay in the regular education class, even head out to general education classrooms and be functional and then it's incredibly satisfying.

Student behavior can improve over time and students can be successful in their school environments with positive support from special education teachers. Participant 2 expressed:

> I would have to say I had a student who when he entered the classroom was literally like the Tasmanian devil and he left like Pooh Bear… the behaviors, teaching a child to be able to self-regulate and to say what a feeling is and say why they are having this feeling and to be able to help to come up with a plan to make that a better thing rather than throwing a temper tantrum or tearing out their work or being destructive or self-harming.

Participant 4 spoke similarly: "I think that behavior issues are always really, really tough and I think that when you see a student make improvement in the area of his behavior and attitude and social skills that that's really big." Participant 8 stated, "when they start behaving like other students and their typical peers, showing the expected behaviors I'd say that's the most rewarding thing because that's what you're going for."

The participants made note of providing a safe and happy environment for students. Participant 4 stated:

> The other thing that gives me a lot of satisfaction is when I walk into a classroom to pick up a learning support student many of the regular classroom students say

> "take me, take me" so that's kind of a feel good time that I know that the kids like coming to learning support, it's a safe place and they like it.

Participant 8 stated:

> The biggest thing I think that keeps me going is that I feel that I give them the best six hours of their day and if they can feel they are in a safe, calm, predictable environment where they are treated well and consistency is the key. I think that's the biggest contribution I can make in their life.

Participant 9 noted "they just have no consistency at home and they enjoy coming to school…. you can tell when they come into the room that they feel happy and they feel safe."

When students graduate from high school it can be a celebration and a success. Participant 5 stated:

> I have had a few past students who I thought would not be able to make it out of high school when I saw them in 7th and 8th grade; they have now graduated and one went off to college and one works as a mechanic.

Participant 7 stated:

> "My mission as a special education teacher is to help improve these students lives so that they can be successful after they graduate from high school so they can feel a sense of success like I have and know that they are worth something and to try to boost their self-image and self-esteem and to let them know that there is someone there who has their back.

Being a Helper

Participant 4 stated "I think that any time you see any kind of growth in your students, that's what makes it all worthwhile." Some of the growth and success students in special education experience are not always academic. Participant 3 stated "I like when I see progress, even small amounts of progress, even just sitting in your seat and being able to raise your hand, that's what I like."

Students enrolled in special education classes may learn in a different fashion as compared to their regular education peers but they are capable of learning. Participant 2 stated "I believe that every person, very student, no matter what age or disability is capable of learning. The whole idea of special education is to learn on your level." Participant 6 added:

> Every child can learn but we have to give them the opportunity to do that. They might not learn like everyone else, but we need to as teachers be open minded and realize that they are still learning even though they are not learning in the amount of time that someone else is learning.

All participants shared that they enjoyed their careers and were having fun. Participant 3 stated "I like to laugh. I like to have fun and I think if you're not having fun you're not doing your job," Participant 7 reported:

> Learning something new or participating in activities or some type of project that's going on in class and they are having fun with it and it's a different learning style and they get it and they didn't get it before and it makes you feel really good.

Their work involves creating and maintaining a relationship with students' parents. Some of the participants made note of positive relationships and feelings from parents. Participant 2 noted:

> It's just the kids, it's the families, it's the whole ball of wax. When you have the same kids for a number of years in a row, they and their families become an extension of your family. You tend to keep in touch, they tend to keep in touch, it's rather nice.

Participant 3 added:

> I got a letter once from a mom that had a child that was very needy, high incident child and at the end of the year he was reading on grade level, he was able to attend, he was able to wait, he had decreased his anger. The note I got from the parent was heartfelt, she said he never would have succeed without me or my staff.

Participant 7 noted "Success is a parent thanking me or acknowledging that they have seen a change in their kid and they appreciate and value the work that I do with their child".

In order to work with students who have special needs, compassion is a must. Participant 4 stated:

> They are so challenged in their life and because of their disabilities and if I can make a difference and hear a kid bully laugh during the day because of me that has a sucky life; that's what makes me come back every day.

Participant 9 reported:

> Just by being with the kids and by listening to their stories and their problems and their troubles. Like I said they come in in the morning and something really bad has happened at home, they know they can come in and tell me and I am not going to judge them or pick on their parents or say bad things. I am just going to listen and tell them things are going to get better.

An obvious factor expressed by participants was the importance of treating all of their students with love and respect. Participant 8 noted:

> I really just love the kids, the special kids. I have always loved the kids and I know I'm probably strange because it's not that easy to do something like that…I think I can make a positive impact with some of these kids and be a good force for them.

Participant 9 stated "just to love all of the kids and know that they are all special and they are all different and you have to see the good qualities in all of them or you might go crazy."

Six of the participants made note that their students "count on" them. Participant 9 stated:

> Seeing the kids makes gains and feeling safe here at school. I mean you can tell if they have had a really bad morning and they get here you can give them a hug and have them calm down and they are okay while they are here at school.

Participant 5 reported:

> When something good happens at home, I am someone that they want to come brag to, when something poor happens at home, I am the person they come

looking for when they need someone to talk to. If a student needs a sweatshirt, a student will usually come to me and I usually have a sweatshirt or coat for them. If it's in the morning and they missed breakfast and they are hungry, I can find them some food too. If their parents don't have any money for pens, pencils, books they will come to me to look to me to find them, find those things. For people who live primarily in poverty, it's kind of a big deal. And they don't always know how to say thank you. But it shows them that I am providing a place they can trust and be safe.

Summary

In this chapter I discussed the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and presented the results of the central research question: What is the meaning of job satisfaction for veteran special education teachers in the Erie County School District? Two subquestions embedded in the central research question were: How did the veteran special educators spend their day-to-day work life to stimulate staying? and How do veteran special educators explain the influences that contribute to them staying in their career? Two superordinate themes that answered these questions were identified: effective practices and making a difference. These two superordinate themes represent the most salient experiences for veteran special education teachers and the most rewarding experiences and satisfaction they receive from their work with special education students.

In this chapter, I shared the findings of the study, identifying two superordinate themes. Participant quotes amplified (the content), bringing their authentic voices

forward. In the following chapter, themes will be discussed and interpreted; limitations, recommendations for future study, and this study's significance will be discussed as well.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine the unique, lived experiences of veteran special educators, in particular, what they identified as predominately rewarding aspects of their career that have kept them rooted in the field. I explored how veteran special education teachers spent their day-to-day work life to stimulate staying and how veteran special education teachers explained the influences that contributed to them staying. Minimal research has been dedicated to the actual experience of special education teachers (Scruggs et al., 2007). There is an abundance of literature on the shortage of teachers in the field of special education; however, little exists on how to improve retention rates (Billingsley et al., 2009). The positive aspects of the career along with compassion satisfaction may improve the longevity and retention rates of special education teachers in the field.

Interpretations and Findings

The findings from this interpretive phenomenological study of meaning making by veteran special education teachers emerged from the lived experiences described by the nine participants. I identified two themes as a result of data analysis: effective practices and making a difference.

Effective Practices

Participants in the study described effective practices when faced with numerous daily duties and roles, when experiencing stress, or how to overcome challenges. Having

multiple daily duties as a special education teacher had been documented to contribute to increased feelings of stress (Davis & Palladino, 2011).

The participants in the study described strategies to minimize stress. These strategies included exercise, quiet time, taking part and making time for leisure activities, being able to vent to coworkers, laughing and humor, and spending time with pets. Although there are no studies dedicated to the investigation of effective coping strategies among special education teachers, successful coping strategies to reduce stress have been documented in other professions. Wilkerson (2009) reported that effective coping strategies can act as a buffer against burnout among school counselors. Nurses who used coping strategies are better equipped to successfully deal with stressful events (Moller & Rice 2006; Provencher, 2007). When individuals are able to manage their stress and use effective coping strategies, there has been a clear link to lowered stress levels (Cicognani et al. 2009). When faced with stressful situations, the participants in this study used their effective coping strategies to minimize the stressor and continue to find enjoyment in their profession. Having quiet time was mentioned by several participants which was not documented in previous studies.

Participants articulated health enhancing behaviors they use as an aid in lowering stress. These behaviors included exercise and physical fitness and time for leisure activities. Lawson and Myers (2011) found that when an individual has higher holistic wellness, he or she can avoid increased stress levels. Likewise, Alkema et al. (2008) found that an individual's overall satisfaction can be improved by the promotion of self-care among individuals working with special populations. Laughter and humor were also

key findings described by participants. Figley (2002) documented that humor can be health enhancing, and laughter can produce similar physical effects to exercise. Harr (2013) claimed that humor can provide an instant relief from stress and assist in reducing tension in a stressful situation. Laughter can be a healthy means to temporarily escape a negative situation. All of the participants except for one discussed the importance of laughter and humor to reduce stress.

Venting to coworkers and enjoying good rapport with coworkers was also volunteered by participants to help lower stress. Wheeler and LaRocco (2009) noted that professional colleagues were a source of support during times of increased stress at work to ameliorate symptoms of stress. Jones, Youngs, and Frank (2013) shared similar results that support from colleagues was a predictor of retention among special education teachers. Having a social support network can act as a buffer and help to alleviate stress.

A commonality found in the study was an emphasis by participants to overcome challenges and take care of getting things accomplished. Strategies to overcome challenges included having a supportive supervisor, being honest, effective communication, good time management, having good rapport with coworkers, making the job fun, staying organized, staying positive, learning to "let it go," and learning from experience.

Compassion satisfaction has been described in two ways—as the pleasure a person receives from helping others and a person's ability to contribute to the well-being of others (Stamm 2005). Compassion satisfaction can be developed through self-care, the ability to control stress, and emphasizing a positive attitude toward others (Harr, 2013;

Radley & Figley, 2007). The participants in the study highlighted effective strategies to decrease feelings of stress and personal health-enhancing or self-care practices when faced with stressful situations. Compassion satisfaction can help to buffer symptoms and the experience of stress and add fuel to a professional's will to continue with their work during stressful situations presented at work (Stamm, 2010). I was surprised by the passion and energy the teachers displayed when discussing all of the stressors they encounter, the smiles on their faces that showed that even though the stressors were sometimes viewed as overwhelming, these teachers each had positive attitudes.

Making a Difference

All of the participants in the study indicated a sense of commitment both to the field of special education and their students. Meister and Ahrens (2011) documented similar results while researching factors that influenced teacher resiliency, articulating "the positive effects of teachers' impact on the lives of students" (p. 770). Johnson (2009) noted that teacher support was a factor in student learning and motivation. These teachers described their personal experiences working with special education students with love and compassion. McIntyre (2010) referred to this as emotional commitment and a desire for helping students succeed. Participants' feelings of satisfaction were bolstered by their knowledge of the success of their students. Student success included improved behaviors, students being successful in the regular education classroom, students meeting their goals, carryover and learning, students feeling safe and happy, improved student confidence and self-esteem, graduation from high school, and student success after high school.

Participants shared a commonality of acting as a helper to students. They noted their ability to remember the good in all of their students—even those with sometimes challenging behaviors. "Acting as a helper" includes a celebration of growth (even little growth), a motto that "all students can learn," remembering to have fun, building a positive rapport with parents, compassion for the kids, loving the kids, and ensuring that students can "count on me."

The participants noted that their students could count on them for support. O'Brien (2010) highlighted that in order for teachers to make a difference, they need to make sure their students knew they are cared about. Philipp and Thanheise (2010) reaffirmed this by documenting the positive effect of an individualized relationship between a student and a teacher. Some of the participants in the study conveyed that their students needed help meeting basic needs, such as food or safety. Other students sought emotional support and a caring person to listen to them, more than tangibles.

All participants shared a sense of satisfaction from their careers. Stamm (2010) described compassion satisfaction to be "the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well" (p. 12). Professionals who gain satisfaction for their work may be able to alleviate some of the stressful events experienced, which added some sense of meaning to their work. The participants highlighted the triumphs of their students and helping students to achieve their goals, big or small. They were able to see students show achievement or demonstrate progress toward academic or behavioral goals and felt a sense of success and pleasure from those events.

Because there has been scant research dedicated to the actual experience of special education teachers (Billings et al., 2009; Scruggs et al., 2007), this study contributes to the field by explicating the experiences of veteran special education teachers. Minimal information exists on ways to improve retention rates in the special education field (Berry et al., 2011). In this study, I examined the unique, lived experiences of nine veteran special education teachers currently working in the field. The participants elaborated on the rewarding aspects of their careers and how they felt compassion satisfaction. In addition to this scholarly contribution, the study adds to the practice of teaching with suggestions from the veteran special education teachers regarding the strategies they employed to keep them rooted in the field. As noted earlier, there has not been research dedicated to compassion satisfaction among veteran special education teachers.

At the beginning of this dissertation, I shared that I have been working in the special education field for about 10 years. I have seen teachers come and go over the years and I wondered what kept some teachers wanting to come back to work each day and maintained their feelings of satisfaction in their work. In this study, I was able to offer a unique insight by going directly to the source, the special education teacher. The voice of each participant was heard using their comments and perspectives that kept them teaching in special education. A key trait when working in special education is the ability to let things go and have a fresh start every day, as there are students who exhibit challenging behaviors and can be difficult to work with. I was surprised when the

participants were able to look past the behaviors and see something positive in the students.

Theoretical Framework

The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) informed my meaning making during the analysis process. As the environment produces stressors, an individual can find ways to manage and deal with these stressors, hence coping. Transactional theory involves two main constructs: an individual's appraisal of the stressful situation and his or her coping strategies to deal with the stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). These researchers found that during the coping process, an individual can master, reduce, or learn to tolerate varying stressors by their appraisal of the situation and their coping strategies.

The participants in the study discussed encountering numerous stressors during their daily duties and roles in the special education field. McCarthy et al. (2010) documented effective coping strategies among teachers to help buffer job-related stress. The participants also noted their effective coping strategies to help decrease and eliminate feelings of stress.

Positive psychology was first introduced to the field by Seligman (2002), who focused on building the best qualities and strengths in an individual. The participants in this study found their careers to be rewarding and felt a sense of satisfaction. When teachers are able to develop a positive outlook, their work environment becomes less stressful (Critchley & Gibbs, 2012). The participants in the study mentioned maintaining a positive outlook and feeling excited about their careers. People who are happier tend to

be in better health, achieve more success, and are more socially engaged (Cohen, 2006; Seligman et al., 2005.)

Limitations of the Study

All studies have limitations of some sort (Simon & Goes, 2013). A limitation of this study stems from self-reported data. Individuals typically attempt to refrain from portraying themselves in a negative light and try to appear socially acceptable to others. In order to minimize this, I ensured all of the participants that their results would remain confidential.

A second limitation of the study was the potential for researcher bias. My bias from working with special education teachers in school districts could have potentially influenced this research project. I worked as a consultant for several school districts for the past 10 years in a position that involved working with and interacting on a weekly basis with special education teachers. I strove for credibility in the study, understanding and describing the phenomenon from the participants' eye to reduce researcher bias. The participants are the only individuals who can legitimately judge the credibility of the study. I employed well-known procedures described by Creswell (2013) to improve verification, implementing peer checks throughout the study. I was in frequent contact with my university chair and also developed and kept a journal to manage researcher bias and foster reflexivity during the study. Using an interpretive phenomenological design the researcher is engaged in the discovery of a significance of a phenomenon through trustworthy interpretation to produce credible results (Smith et al., 2009). The trustworthy interpretation is the basis for perceiving and developing the phenomenon in new, more

holistic ways. Trustworthiness can be verified in qualitative research. Creswell (2013) designed eight standard procedures for verification. Reflexivity was added by Barusch et al. (2011) to the list of strategies. Using at least two verification procedures are suggested in a research study (Barusch et al., 2011; Creswell, 2013). In the present study, I implemented four of these procedures: member checks, peer checks, reflexivity, and rich descriptions.

Recommendations

Most previous research has focused on the shortage of teachers in the special education field rather than identifying career-sustaining behaviors. This study made a meaningful contribution to the literature gap. Paquette and Rieg (2016) discussed effective practices utilized by veteran special education teachers to keep them rooted in the field. Paquette and Rieg (2016) included similar coping strategies involving exercise, time management, down time, and relationships but did not make mention of laughter or humor in their study. In addition, minimal research has been dedicated to the actual experience of special education teachers (Billingsley et al., 2009; Scruggs et al., 2007). This study contributed to filling the gap by examining the unique, lived experiences of nine veteran special education teachers and what they found predominately rewarding about their careers. Recommendations for future research include:

1. Analyzing career-sustaining behaviors of tenured special education teachers in other demographic areas of the state of Pennsylvania and also outside the United States. Teachers working in urban and hard-to-staff schools may offer additional insight on how

they have remained rooted in the field. School districts can vary so exploring different districts may provide a different perspective on the data.

2. Analyzing career-sustaining behaviors among a more diverse population. All teachers who participated in the study were Caucasian and of the nine participants, only one participant was a male. A more diverse population would provide a cultural perspective on career-sustaining behaviors and factors contributing to job satisfaction.

3. Since minimal research has been dedicated to career-sustaining behaviors and factors contributing to job satisfaction among special education teachers, future studies may help to highlight additional positive characteristics, supports, and strategies used by special education teachers to help keep them rooted in the field.

4. Additional research should be conducted exploring compassion satisfaction among veteran special education teachers since no previous studies have done so. A replication of the current study with additional special education teachers may be beneficial to explore how they have developed compassion satisfaction in their careers.

Implications

With this study, authentic teacher voices are now heard conveying crucial insights into their rootedness and satisfaction. From an earlier discussion (Chapter 2), attrition rates in teaching are ranked the highest among special education teachers and there is a continuous need to fill teacher positions (Berry et al., 2011; Butler, 2008; Thorton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). More specifically, the findings of this study could lead to district improved retention rates and foster longevity among special education teachers in the district.

Individual

Teachers are well trained during their college career; however, college courses can only explain so much and experience prepares them for the other required duties (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011). Veteran special education teachers could mentor new teachers or provide professional development for newer teachers. Veteran special education teachers such as the participants in this study could help their school districts develop strategies to manage required daily duties and roles for new teachers.

Support from coworkers is experienced as essential as well as a source of stress relief, according to participants in this study and in previous studies (Murawski & Lochner, 2011; Scruggs et al., 2007). School districts should remain cognizant of this and provide opportunities for collaboration between teachers. Wheeler and LaRocco (2009) conducted a mix-methods study investigating social support as a buffer to work-related stress. The findings from that study included that professional colleagues were a strong source of support during times of increased stress at work to ameliorate symptoms of stress. The participants in this current study discussed the importance of venting to coworkers and enjoying good rapport with coworkers helped to lower feelings of stress. Having a strong social support network can act as a buffer and help to alleviate stress.

District

School improvement and professional development for special education teachers could focus on a teaching philosophy or teacher attitudes and beliefs. Mills and Rose (2011) reported staff working with special education students who experienced decreased fear and anxiety as a result of staff trainings. Berry et al. (2011) reported that teachers

desired additional training when working with students who exhibited challenging behaviors. After professional development, special education teachers noted increased competence in their abilities and implementation of interventions for students (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2011). Sprang et al. (2007) suggested that improved knowledge and training can enhance compassion satisfaction and reduced incidents of compassion fatigue. Districts could provide regular trainings for special education teachers to boost their confidence and teach them new strategies to use with students.

Professional development may provide special education teachers with additional avenues to explore their attitudes and personal beliefs to broaden their notion of the teaching profession. Sprang et al. (2007) further discussed the benefits of professional development creating a sense of peer support from colleagues. The professional development could include more career counseling to address personal and emotional needs. Districts may benefit from a wellness program to help employees keep their physical and mental health up or professional development seminars to remind teachers of the benefits of self-care and wellbeing.

Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, and Keeling (2009) discussed the importance of treating teachers as individuals, as this could contribute to teacher retention in the field. Approaching professional development from a career counseling perspective provides opportunities for each teacher's needs to be respected.

Theoretical

The transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) guided this study. Problem-solving or active coping have been found to be

effective coping strategies for individuals who experience stressful employment (Cicognani et al. 2009). The participants in this study described numerous strategies and methods to effectively cope with stressors. Including information about the benefits of effective coping and ways to de-stress during workshops or professional development may be beneficial for special education teachers. In addition to effective coping strategies, the participants in the study also made note of health-enhancing behaviors helping to buffer stress. Lawson and Myers (2011) found when an individual has higher holistic wellness they can avoid increased stress levels and maintain higher compassion satisfaction. Likewise, Alkema et al. (2008) found that compassion satisfaction can be improved by the promotion of self-care among individuals working with special populations. Providing a wellness program to promote health-enhancing behaviors for employees may be implemented by the school district. This could also increase awareness about healthy lifestyle habits and behaviors.

Conclusion

In Pennsylvania and across the United States, there is a need to retain special education teachers in the field. Minimal research has been dedicated to the actual experience of special education teachers (Billings et al., 2009; Scruggs et al., 2007). The purpose of this study was to examine the unique, lived experiences of veteran special educators, in particular, what they identified as predominately rewarding aspects of their career that have kept them rooted in the field. Feng and Sass (2009) highlighted the outcome of students with disabilities demonstrating more success when educated by teachers who were more competent and experienced in their field.

The findings from this interpretive phenomenological study of meaning making by veteran special education teachers emerged from the lived experiences described by the nine participants. Two themes were made evident through the data analysis: effective practices and making a difference. The participants in the study described specific strategies to minimize stress. These strategies included: quiet time, being able to vent to coworkers, laughing and humor, and spending time with pets. Other strategies to minimize stress included health-enhancing behaviors such as exercise and physical fitness and time for leisure activities.

Among the findings there was an emphasis by participants to overcome challenges and get things taken care of. Strategies to overcome challenges included; having a supportive supervisor, being honest, effective communication, good time management, having good rapport with coworkers, making the job fun, staying organized, staying positive, learning to "let it go," and learning from experience.

All of the participants in the study indicated a strong sense of commitment to the field of special education and their students, as participants described their personal experiences working with special education students with love and compassion. Student success included improved behaviors, students being successful in the regular education classroom, students meetings their goals, carryover and learning, students feeling safe and happy, improved student confidence and self-esteem, graduation from high school, and students being successful after high school.

Participants described acting as a helper to include a celebration of growth (even little growth), a motto that "all students can learn," remembering to have fun, building a

positive rapport with parents, compassion for the kids, love the kids, and ensuring that students can "count on me." O'Brien (2010) highlighted that in order for teachers to make a difference, they needed to make sure their students knew they were cared about.

All participants in the study experienced compassion satisfaction. Stamm (2010) described compassion satisfaction to alleviate stress and add fuel to a professional's will to continue with their work during stressful situations. The participants highlighted the triumphs of their students and emphasized student success providing them with a sense of success and pleasure from their work. Compassion satisfaction can be developed through self-care, coping strategies, and emphasizing a positive attitude toward others. These self-care practices were documented by the participants in the study as effective strategies to relieve stress.

These lived experiences of veteran special education teachers cannot be taught in a classroom or in a single professional development training. However, it may be advantageous for new special education teachers entering the field to take note of the documented strategies and effective practices from veteran special education teachers. Also, school districts may benefit from recognizing the need for professional develop trainings and teacher mentors for new special education teachers.

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Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

Hello:

My name is Raeann Barnes, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Through this letter, I am inviting you to be part of a study that will be developed in cooperation with the Erie School District. With this study, I would like to know more about your personal and unique experiences as a special education teacher, more specifically in regards to your career-sustaining behaviors, positive strategies, and compassion satisfaction you find in your work. You may find this study interesting because you may develop a deeper understanding of career-sustaining behaviors and job satisfaction that may help to highlight potential features contributing to the longevity for teachers in the special education profession and may improve retention rates of teachers early in their careers. This may also provide additional insight as to how special education teachers gain compassion satisfaction with their careers. In addition, this study may help school administrators to develop increased awareness and preventive measures to help decrease feelings of stress and increase retention rates in the field.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Therefore, you are free to refuse to participate. If you agree to participate and later change your mind, you can leave the study. Your decision to participate in the study will not affect your relationships with individuals or your current employer. On the other hand, if you decide to participate in the study, you will meet with the researcher to share your experiences in the field. A face-to-face interview will be conducted at a location of your choosing: either a community location or your school building where you teach. The interview will be audio-recorded per your permission and kept strictly confidential. This means that only the researcher will see your answers. Your name will never be written in the interviews. The interview will take about one hour and thirty minutes.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time in which we can talk. My telephone number is (XXX) XXX-XXXX. I thank you for your time and hope that you will participate in this study.

Raeann Barnes, M.Ed
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix B: Prescreening Questions

1. Are you a tenured special education teacher?
2. How long have you worked in the special education field?
3. What student population do you serve?
4. Have you very felt bogged down by work-related stress?
5. Do you believe you utilize positive strategies when experiencing work-related stress?
6. Have you experienced feelings of success related to work?
7. Do you believe you can make a difference through your work?
8. Do you feel satisfaction from being able to help students?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Job requirements

1. Could you please tell me what you do in your current job?

   Possible prompts: describe typical day-to-day duties, responsibilities, or caseloads.

Career-sustaining behaviors

2. Describe an experience that gives you feelings of satisfaction by work.

3. Describe how you feel about your role in providing special education services to students.

   Possible prompts: What makes you feel successful in your attempts to help students? Describe a time when you felt you had a positive impact on your students.

4. Describe some of the biggest challenges you've faced in the special education field.

   Possible prompts: How did you overcome these challenges?

5. Describe what you do when you experience stress or have a “bad” day.

   Possible prompts: What are some of your positive strategies or ways to "de-stress"?

Compassion satisfaction

6. What are your beliefs about teaching and mission as a special education teacher?

7. Describe some success stories working with special education students.

8. Describe what you find most rewarding about your job/ what makes you want to come to work every day.

   Possible prompts: What aspects of your employment are most satisfying? How do you feel you can make a difference?

9. What have we not discussed that you feel is important for others to know?